



EFFECTS OF PEER (GROUP) DISCUSSIONS ON L2 WRITING OF STUDENTS WITH AND WITHOUT LEARNING DIFFICULTIES (LD): IMPLICATIONS FOR TEACHING OF WRITING IN PAKISTAN

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ABSTRACT

Although a limited number of studies have been undertaken to support the argument that peer(Group) discussion facilitates L2 writing of students with and without learning difficulties(LD), few studies have provided statistical proof for this. The present study was designed to compare the written work of two groups of Pakistani students, in order to identify the differences in writing outcomes achieved with different teaching methods: conducting peer(Group) discussions with the Experimental Group (EG) and teacher-dominance with the Control Group (CG). By comparing the two groups written products and analyzing the sample writings and questionnaire results, the study suggests that peer (Group) discussion facilitates students writing better than traditional classes, in terms of content, readership and thinking patterns.

Keywords: teaching of writing; peer (Group) discussion; English writing ability

1. The Major Problems in L2 Students Writing

Teaching of writing in English is a difficult assignment in the Pakistani L2 classroom. The present situation of the teaching of writing is unsatisfactory. Conventional product oriented approaches of teaching of writing have failed to motivate students. Most of the students think that they write only for teachers' approval and getting through the exam. A review of students' written work has revealed widespread and serious deficits in writing skills. Many student compositions are lacking in ideas and coherence, and also show lapses in clarity and organization. Most papers adhere to writer-based prose, without due consideration of the reader, and most students adopt Pakistani thinking pattern when writing in English (Hassan 2000).

As a remedy to this undesirable situation in L2 writing of students with and without learning difficulties (LD), this paper proposes expanded use of peer (Group) discussion in the writing classroom. Peer (Group) discussion, as a form of collaborative learning is an old and well-received method in language learning and has proved effective in various kinds of skill learning.

2. The Benefits of Peer (Group) discussion in L2 writing of students with and without learning difficulties (LD)

2.1 Correct reflection of the nature of writing

Just as speaking, writing is a social artifact and a tool for communication. Peer (Group) discussion can facilitate students writing by correctly focusing and reflecting the nature and purpose of writing.

Based on a comparison of oral speech, inner speech and writing, Vygotsky (1962) claims that writing is the more abstract and demanding activity. He thinks that we first experience and learn 'the skill and partnership of conversation' in the external arena of direct social exchange



with other people and develop “oral speech”. Then we learn to displace that “skill and partnership” by playing silently, in imagination, the parts of all the participants in the conversation with ourselves, and thus develop “inner speech”. Writing (or “written speech” as he calls it) follows on and presupposes the existence of inner speech (the act of writing implying a translation from inner speech). In other words, Vygotsky thinks that writing is a process one learns through social interactions that subsequently become internalized.

Bruffee (1984), drawing on the work of Vygotsky, theorizes that collaborative learning is particularly effective in writing instruction because talking gives students an opportunity to internalize language that can later be re-externalized in writing. He stresses that the teacher s assignment must include engaging students in conversation among themselves at as many points as possible in both the writing and the reading process, and that teachers should contrive to ensure that students converse about what they read and write in a manner similar to the way we would like them to eventually read and write. Bruffee believes that the way students talk with each other on a subject determines how they will later think and write on the same subject. He thinks that organizing group work around a carefully designed assignment makes students aware that writing is a social artifact, like the thought that produces it

Lefevre (1987:33) argues strongly for the communicative purpose of writing. He writes, “Invention is, I think, best understood as occurring when individuals interact dialectically with socio culture in a distinctive way to generate something.” The act of writing is not successful until it communicates, until it becomes a part of a specific communal activity.

Because writing lacks an interlocutor, being addressed to an absent or an imaginary person or to no one in particular, written communication is more difficult and requires more conscious work than does speaking. Peer (Group) discussion makes this kind of communication more smooth and effective because it brings readers in front of the writer. ‘In conversation, every sentence is prompted by a motive. Desire or need leads to request, question to answer, bewilderment to explanation (Vygotsky 1962). Thus, the writer can make his or her message easier to understand, successfully meeting the primary goal of communication.

2.2 Contribution of ideas to the enrichment of content

Student writers face two major intellectual assignments: the need (1) to generate idea sin language and then (2) to construct those ideas into a written structure adapted to the needs of a reader and the goals of the writers peer (Group) discussion is beneficial to the whole process of writing in that it helps students enrich ideas and organize them in an order convenient for readers to understand.

First, peer (Group) discussion is helpful in the “prewriting” stage, when students are exploring subjects they may write about later. As students talk, they discover things: they need to justify a certain point; there are weak spots in the argument; the problem is more interesting than they anticipated at first. They ask each other questions, suggest objections or alternative approaches, or maybe look puzzled, which is enough for the speaker/writer to realize that he or he has major work to do.

Second, at the stage of “writing”, students may continue to discover additional resources and content; they engage in peer teaching. Through peer (Group) discussion, students can increase their experience in thinking out the content of a composition. They gain exposure to various points of view that they might not have considered before the discussion. Most students will cherish these differing opinions and perspectives, and many will address them in their subsequent writings.



In addition, in cases where papers are to be graded, peer (Group) discussion allows the teacher and students to handle problems of content before the paper is graded. More than explicit instruction about writing students need the opportunity to explore their subjects before and after they are developed into essays and peer (Group) discussion can meet this requirement.

As Hairston (1992) argues, in a collaborative classroom, students work together to develop their ideas and test them out on each other. In this low risk environment, students can discuss and examine their experiences, their assumptions, their values and their questions, make choices, and then discover more about others and themselves through those choices.

2.3 Benefiting students in strengthening readership

Peer (Group) discussion helps students develop a sense of audience and realize a transition from writer-based to reader—based prose. Since writing is a social act, the existence of a readership is an essential precondition, and readers should be part of the writing process. The presence of the reader can become the greatest stimulus for the writer to communicate willfully and with a clear direction. As a teaching tool, peer(Group) discussion provides an opportunity for the writer to reify their audience, not only as readers but as listeners as well, and to engage in a creative dialogue.

Flower and Hayes (1981) argue that inexperienced writers are less able to conceptualize a rhetorical problem than experienced writers, mainly because experienced writers spend more time thinking about how to accommodate potential readers and how to represent themselves in a text. That means that experienced writers unconsciously consider readers, while inexperienced writers find this difficult, and consequently their papers are often writer—based

McCrimmon (1970) argues that young writers especially need the corrective influence of audience feedback, whether from a teacher or peer group. But the criticism is most helpful when it is constructive and best of all, when both the writer and his critics can engage in a free discussion of the consequences of making one choice over another in relation to the whole context of the paper. Through peer (Group) discussions inexperienced writers can realize their readers, that is, the implied readers become concrete and real. By alternately taking the roles of reader and writer, students begin to see the complementary relationship of these roles a piece of “writing” is really a piece of “reading” —that is, we write “reading”. Through this kind of experience, students will internalize the perspective of the reader and bring it to bear when writing. Therefore, with a reader s perspective in their mind, students can produce reader-based instead of writer-based prose.

After studying an open class of writing, Kelly (1984) claimed that every writer and speaker needs an audience beyond the teacher, that every writer and speaker will benefit from receiving multiple responses. Everybody needs to be seen and heard by the group of which they are members, needs to feel that they are identifiable and worthwhile members of that group.

2.4 Helping Pakistani students in shifting to an acceptable thinking pattern

Researchers for example (Zhao 1995; Gao 2000; Wang &Liu, 2001; Ma 2002; Hinkel 1999 and Kaplan 2001) have stressed the differences between western and Asian thinking patterns, and the impact of these differences on writing. Western thinking patterns are often linear, and so native English speakers will often first establish the theme and then develop their argument in a logical way: preview first and details second, or abstraction first and concreteness second or generalization first and analysis second.



Unlike this common English pattern, which (especially in scientific literature) requires a clear theme at the beginning, Pakistani writers may choose any place in their articles they think of as suitable? There are four common Pakistani thinking patterns. The first is similar to the most common English pattern with the thesis pointed out at the beginning. In the second type, the thesis is pointed out in the body: the author first addresses a certain problem, comes to a conclusion after analyzing the problem, and finally expands the conclusion further. In the third compositional pattern the thesis is pointed out at the end providing readers with the impression of reaching the conclusion naturally after a series of arguments. And the fourth is the implied type, which contains no explicit opinion in the article; the readers are expected to be able to identify the thesis from the context on their own

Pakistani writers who adhere to the last three types of compositional pattern in their English writing will often fail to produce a successful scientific paper or traditional essay. Consequently, their writings may not seem acceptable in some native speakers' eyes. Peer (Group) discussion can help Pakistani writers shift from the indirect, circular pattern to a more direct pattern featuring a clearly stated opinion. When students read their papers featuring Pakistani writing patterns to other group members, they may be challenged by the listeners and forced to make their theme and organization as clear as possible.

3. Review of the Related Studies

Some studies of the effects of talking on writing have focused on peer review groups. Researchers have claimed that beginning students use peer review to enlarge their capacities to understand about writing as well as learning how to write. Through peer review, students exercised their meta- cognitive capacities (Gere & Abbott 1985).

Some researchers have conducted studies of peer review and peer(Group) discussion in the L2 classroom and observed that L2 students developed a sense of confidence and self—worth, generated more related content, developed a sense of audience, and organized their essays more logically (Edelsky 1982; Zamel 1983; Ammon 1985; Hildenbrand 1985).

In Pakistani teachers strongly advocate the use of peer (Group) discussion in the writing classroom. The researcher knows his colleagues who use communicative methods in writing classroom, and specifically use of discussion to motivate students and to encourage them to practice more. The researcher claims on the basis of his personal knowledge that using peer(Group) discussions in prewriting and revision stages is the best way to test the coherence of a piece of writing with a process method in the teaching of writing. The researcher supports the findings of Shis (1998) who developed an analytic framework of a recursive discourse to account for the effects of spoken discourse in the students written texts. She observed that peer (Group) discussion provided a social context for students to probe one another's opinions and cooperate closely with one another.

4. The Present Research

4.1 Research questions

The studies reviewed above have all examined various effects of talking on writing. However, these studies all either studied the relationship at the stage of revision (albeit under experimental conditions) or simply provided a descriptive analysis of the writing process without concrete statistical proof supporting the use of the method in an L2 classroom and none of the studies has ever accounted statistically for the differences of thinking patterns in L2 students writing.



Therefore, it is necessary to study the effect of peer(Group) discussion on students writing through analysis of their written products at each stage of the writing process.

1. whether peer(Group) discussion is beneficial for L2 students, and if so, to what extent and which aspects it helps, and
2. to what extent peer(Group) discussion is superior to the traditional way of teaching and whether this is demonstrated in the students written products.

4.2 Study design

The study participants included two intact classes of intermediate students at a Higher Secondary School in Lahore, Pakistan, randomly chosen from six classes at the same level. One of these was randomly designated the experimental group (EG) and the other the control group (CG). The experimental class had 22 students, of which two were male. The control class had 23 students, of which two were also male.

The study lasted for three successive weeks, with two periods of 50 minutes (one session) each weeks For the first two periods (the first session), both classes were asked to write spontaneously on the same topic; for the third and fourth periods (the second session), students were asked to rewrite their original papers; and for the last two periods (the third session), students re—wrote the papers for the second time - The key difference was that, in the third and the fifth periods, the EG was taught using peer(Group) discussion but the CG was taught how to write according to traditional methods. The activity that I used in the experimental class met the criteria that Omiaggio (1986) suggests in designing composition assignments at advanced level (see Appendix).

The topic given to the two groups was “What is your opinion about corporal punishment in classroom?” This topic was chosen from a list of possible topics that interested students, and which had been suggested by a foreign teacher who had conducted a related survey.

4.3 The experimental group

In the first session, students were asked to individually write a first draft on the set topic within 50 minutes (one period). In the second session, they talked about their drafts in the first period. To inspire students about how to start a discussion, what to discuss, and the purposes of each discussion activity each group was provided with a list of specific discussion questions on content, organization and audiences Once students were engaged in the discussion, the researcher circulated the class and joined each group for some time, listening, observing and giving some suggestions, and in some cases asking questions related to their discussions or essays to help them think in greater depth and more reasonably. When the group members had decided that their discussions were finished (about 30-40 minutes), they began to individually write their second drafts.

At the beginning of the third session, the researcher directed the students to focus on sentences diction and mistakes in gram mar, tense, and so forth. But it was also stressed that changes in content were welcome during this sessions. The students’ papers also showed this freedom —some students wrote final drafts featuring entirely different arguments from the first twos. After a discussion of about 40 minutes, the students wrote their final drafts

4.4 The control group

For the control class, the researcher adopted the traditional way of teaching, that is, a series of teacher—dominated lectures on specific points to be illustrated by two students’ papers



as samples. Students in this class were required to write an essay on the same topic as that of the experimental group.

After the first class, the researcher evaluated students' essays and identified some major problems in their writing. Then a typical essay was used as a sample to illustrate common weak points for the next session. At the beginning of the second session, the researcher first distributed copies of the sample without any corrections and a piece of paper on which were listed the same questions as those given to the experimental class. Then the researcher explained the questions and, an analysis of the sample, outlined the major problems in the students writing. During the second session, the content, organization and audience of the sample essay were analyzed in the first period. After analyzing the sample, the researcher asked the students to examine their own essays for similar flaws. For the next period, the researcher asked students to write their second drafts with special attention to these three aspects (content organization and audience)

For the third session, the researcher selected another student essay for illustration, this time a second draft that had typical problems in sentence structure, diction and grammar. After analyzing the sample essay, students were asked to rewrite their papers again and hand in their final drafts.

5. Findings and Discussion

5.1 Data collection

The total number of effective papers collected for this study was 105, which consisted of three drafts each from 17 students in the EG and three drafts each from 18 students in the CG. Of the 18 students from the control class, two students papers were randomly chosen as sample writings and discussed by the teacher in class; these were excluded from the sample and therefore, a total of 16 papers from the control group were assessed.

Two groups of data were collected during this study: (1) the mean scores of the first and final drafts of both groups; (2) the number of the first and third drafts of both groups related to specific aspects. For the first group of data, three experienced teachers of English writing were asked to individually grade the first and third drafts using the departmental grading standards for English 101, by assigning a number grade ranging from 1 (low) to 6 (high) to each paper. The mean of the grades given by the three teachers was then collected. For the second group of data, the researcher compared and contrasted the papers of the EG and CG in terms of the improvement in the aspects of sense of readership, shift of thinking pattern, and content.

Students in the EG also completed a questionnaire and a close examination of the papers of the EG was carried out at the end of the last session, both in order to gain some qualitative insights into the teaching method.

5.2 Mean analysis

For the first group of data, mean analysis was used to analyze the raw scores (see Table 1).

Table 1. Mean of Draft 1 &3 of EG &CG

	EG	CG
Draft 1	3.44	3.34
Draft 3	4.65	4.25

In the light of Table 1, we may draw the conclusion that both kinds of instruction had an effect on student achievement. The first set of data (3.44-4.65) shows that the experimental group improved by 1.21. This number is significant as the whole scale of grading is 6. The second set of data (3.34-4.25) shows that the traditional group also improved significantly —0.91. From



the third set of data (4. 65— 4.25), it may be concluded that peer(Group) discussions were more effective than the traditional teaching methodology, because the students papers show a higher net increase of 0.4 in the experimental group than the control group.

5.3 Specific differences between the EG and the CG

The researcher compiled a chart to show the differences between the EG and CG in three aspects — readership, thinking pattern and contents.

As to readership, the researcher decided on two criteria: (1) whether the writer mentioned or commented on the different opinions that readers might have, and (2) whether the tone of the essay was friendly. If the writer gave consideration to different viewpoints and the article sounded friendly, the article would be rated as reader-eased; otherwise, it would be rated as after—eased. As to the thinking pattern adopted by the students in writing, the criterion was to assess whether the development of the argument was linear, that is to say, whether the theme was put forward at the beginning, followed by analysis of detail or concrete expansion. Essays containing linear argument were regarded as following the most common English thinking pattern; otherwise, articles were assumed to be retaining Pakistani thinking patterns. As to the content aspect, the researcher set three sub-categories as criteria (1) purpose whether or not the writer showed a strong sense of persuasion; (2) numbers of reasons (calculated repetitively, but not in type) in Drafts 1 and 3; and (3) clarity of reasons given. Besides noting the number of reasons, the researcher also probed the quality of the reasons, that is, whether or not the writer presented the reasons in a logical manners. If the reasons were put forward logically, they were regarded as clearly presented. To test the effect of different teaching methods, it was presupposed that no students had developed reasons before each treatment (peer(Group) discussions, traditional illustrated lecture) in order to find out how many students made improvement in reasoning in Draft 3.

Table 2. Comparison of specific aspects in Draft 1 & 3 of EG and CG

Aspects		EG		CG	
		Draft 1	Draft 3	Draft 1	Draft 3
Readership	Writer based	13/17	5/17	13/16	8/16
	Reader based	4/17	12/17	3/16	8/16
Thinking pattern	Pakistani	12/17	1/17	12/16	3/16
	Western	5/17	16/17	4/16	13/16
Content	Purpose	10/17	14/17	9/16	14/16
	Reasons No.	22/17	38/17	18/16	39/16
	Reason clarity	0/17	17/17	0/16	12/16

In Draft 1, the two groups showed no significant differences in readership (Writer based: EG s 13 vs. CG s13), thinking pattern (Chinese: EG s 12 vs. CG s 12),and content (purpose: EG S 10 vs. CG s 9; number of reasons: EG s 22 vs. CG s 18;reason clarity:0 vs. 0) These pairs of figures confirmed the claim that the mean analysis reached: there was no significant difference between the EG and CG before the treatment.

From the numbers derived from both group s Draft 3, an increase could be seen in the gap of difference between the two groups in every assessed aspect. In the EG, 8 (12-4) students improved on readership in Draft 3, while 5 (8) students in the CG did the same. Thus the EG showed better improvement in realizing audience than did the CG. As for the thinking pattern adopted, in the EG all but one student adopted the common western thinking pattern in Draft 3,in contrast to only 13 of the 16 students in the CG. In terms of content, 5 more students in the EG (1540) had a sense of purpose in their Draft 3;5 students in the CG (14-9) did the same. As to the



number of reasons given in the essays, 16 more reasons (38-22) appeared in third drafts of the EG and 11 more (39-18) in those of the CG which means that after treatment, 5 more reasons appeared in the EG than in the CG. All the students of the EG further explained their reasons in Draft 3 while only 12 of the 16 students of the CG did so, which means that 4 students in the CG did nothing to improve the quality of their reasoning in their third drafts

The numbers listed in the chart serve to complement the results of the mean analysis: the students of the EG did a better job of writing their essays in terms readership, suitability of thinking pattern, and improved content than the CG. The CG made changes, too, but these changes (whether global or local) were not as significant or positive as those made by the EG.

5.4 Examination of three sample papers from the EG

Since this study's interest was in the recognizable changes in the EG before and after the treatment the researcher decided to examine the EG students essays from Draft 1 and Draft 3. Three papers each from the EG s Draft 1 and Draft 3 were selected randomly, to examine the three aspects: content readership, and thinking pattern. The three student writers are designated S1, S2, and S3 for the convenience of discussion

All three students made improvements in content Draft 3 in comparison to their Draft 1. In Draft 1, S1 did not provide a definite opinion on the issue, and had no theme at all. In Draft 3, he provided three reasons to support his opinion, using with a clear organization: "Firstly, physical punishment makes the students dull and drab" / "Secondly, physical punishment creates a gulf between student and teacher" / "Thirdly, physical punishment hurts the self-respect of the student." He also elaborated the three points and gave full consideration to potential disagreement in his readership. S2 did not give more reasons in his Draft 3, but he did further develop and rearrange the original reasons given in Draft 1. He also changed his narrative Draft 1 into a persuasive Draft 3 by identifying different opinions, such as "students may start hating their teachers in their future lives, but there are also chances that the situation may change in mature, future life" (errors uncorrected). S3s final draft also showed significant revision, in that he shifted from narrating his own experience to argument from a more objective angle.

On aspect of readership, all three students also made progress. In Draft 1, the three writers all adopted a strong, or even unfriendly, tone, which could alienate some readers. For instance, Ali used many words such as "absurd", "lost their mind", "irrational" to express his strong disagreement with those who might have different opinions. He also used words and sentences that closed the door to negotiation with others, such as "absolutely", "always", "Then why do they waste their time and lives 'and "How foolish they are! "Nevertheless, in Draft 3, this strong attitude became milder and there were not so many coarse expressions. The tone of S3 s Draft 1 was also quite strong, which could be seen obviously in the second arguing paragraph of the three—paragraph essay. The paragraph consisted of nine complete sentences of which "should" appeared in five and a "can t" in another, which made her essay sound more commanding than persuasive. The writer did significantly improve her draft 3 by extending one argument into three argumentative paragraphs; it was interesting that he did not use such words as "should" and "can t" at all this time. While peer(Group) discussion may not solely explain the progress this writer made, it cannot be denied that the writer paid more attention to tone and readership and did not use strong words in her third draft.

All the three writers adopted Pakistani thinking patterns in Draft 1, that is, none of them related to the theme directly; instead, they mentioned various points of views on the issue without giving their own. Ali s introductory paragraph was as follows,



S1: *I am asked about, what is your opinion about physical punishment in classroom? The topic is of my interest because it is related to our current issue in Pakistan. But in my opinion, not all questions need definite answers. As to this one, Ill say to you — teachers are not mad, students do not respect their teachers if they have no fear (errors uncorrected)*

The first paragraph of S2s Draft 1 read:

S2: *Writing about physical punishment, it is a good topic. I think rests of my class fellows have different views on it. I am neutral about this idea. I think it not only has advantages but has disadvantages. (Errors uncorrected)*

S3s Draft 1 began this way:

S3: *Nowadays in many schools this is a popular subject. There is discussion on whether the students be given physical punishment or not. Different peoples have different points. (Errors uncorrected)*

It was good to see that each of the three improved his first paragraph in Draft 3 by stating his own ideas on the issues Ali's new first paragraph read: *What is your opinion about corporal punishment in classroom? I think it depends upon the situation but the teachers must not use physical punishment for students.*

S2 began his essay in Draft 3 this way: *keeping in view my topic I think teachers should not give physical punishment to students. I strongly support my opinion that I have said here. The teachers have so many ways to teach the students besides giving them physical punishment.*

Although the paragraph contained a sentence redundant in meaning (“*I strongly support my opinion that I have said here*”), and an unclear meaning, it had one advantage over that in Draft 1, —at least it contained the writer's viewpoint on the issue to be discussed. S3 made a more evident improvement:

What is your opinion about corporal punishment in classrooms? I think it is not good, because we already have abilities to deal with things by ourselves, punishment can deviate us.

The writer invited the reader directly into the essay by addressing the reader as “you” and by answering his own question he provided her own idea on the issues.

5.5 Questionnaire

Both comparison of the papers from the EG and CG and close examination of the samples from the EG show that the EG achieved better results than the CG. However, this reflects only the evaluators opinion; how did the students who participated in the experiment respond to peer(Group) discussion? Taking student responses to the method into account can only make the study's conclusion more convincing. At the end of the experiment, 19 responses to the questionnaire were received from the EG.

An overwhelming majority of students held a positive attitude towards peer(Group) discussion. When asked whether they preferred a writing class with or without peer(Group) discussion, 13 students preferred peer(Group) discussion; three liked a combination of the two methods, and the remaining three preferred a traditional teaching method. The three students who held negative attitudes toward peer(Group) discussion seemed to share the same notion about writing. They thought that a good piece of writing should be devoid of grammatical mistakes, and the main assignment of both teachers and students in a writing class is to correct those mistakes and present a completely mistake-free draft. Yet, they also admitted the improvement they had made in their third drafts. Moreover, all three reported that they were curious and eager to share their ideas with other group members



The other three students who preferred a combined teaching methodology all claimed that they had benefited greatly from peer(Group) discussions. They also admitted that their writing had improved in content organization, and so on

The questionnaire shows that students felt motivated and interested in engaging in the process of oral communication (17 of 19), which in turn helped their written communication. (All of the 19 students admitted that peer(Group) discussion helped improve several aspects of their writing.)

6. Implications for Teaching

The findings of this study suggest that the students benefited from peer(Group) discussion: they were more aware of their readers and focused more on the holistic content of their papers rather than the specific grammatical mistakes on the sentence or word level. Besides, peer(Group) discussion was of special significance for Pakistani students in helping them shift to a thinking pattern more commonly acceptable to English speakers.

This study proves that peer(Group) discussion can be used as a productive method in the L2 writing of students with and without learning difficulties(LD) classroom, as it can help students solve many problems they encounter in the process of writing. The results of the study effectively dispel the misgivings of teachers who stick to traditional teaching methods and regard themselves as the sole authorities able to evaluate students papers, as well as those who think that students do not have the ability to help one another improve their writing products, whether on the general effect of the essay or on specific, sentence and word level problems such as grammar and syntax.

All in all, peer(Group) discussion can improve the writers processing of writing — prewriting, writing and revision —and help the student at each stage, by changing what is unconscious to what is conscious and what is intangible to what is tangible. Through peer(Group) discussion, writing becomes teachable and learnable and students come to understand their own writing processes. Therefore, peer(Group) discussion can be effectively incorporated into any program of writing instruction.

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Appendix

Criteria Used in Designing Composition Assignments at the Advanced Level

1. Is the assignment realistic? Will the composition assignment ask students to do something similar to what they would have to do in the real world outside of the classroom? Is the writing assignment a "natural" use of writing? Does it pertain some consideration of mode (description, narration, exposition, argumentation), aim (expressive, persuasive, literary), and function (transactional, expressive, poetic)?
 2. Is the assignment appropriate? Is the composition topic geared to the students' interests, ages, educational and cultural backgrounds, and other student factors?
 3. Is the assignment understandable? For students at the Advanced Level, the assignment should not involve too much listening or reading prior to writing, especially if done in class, unless the integration of several skills is the purpose of the activity. The assignment should not be so complicated that students have difficulty understanding what they are to do before they begin to write.
 4. Is the assignment personal? Jacobs et al. do not suggest that all writing assignments include personal data, but they do say that the topic should be familiar to students and that students should be invited to give their own perception of it. The assignment should be motivating, since "an unmotivated communicator is a poor source of information".
 5. Is the assignment feasible? The amount of time the assignment will take and the level of complication of the writing assignment should be congruent with the characteristics of student writers with and without learning difficulties at the Advanced Level.
- Is the assignment reliable? The composition assignment and/or test should elicit a representative sample of student writing. Different compositions should tap different modes of expression, so that student writers are not limited to simple narration or description, but are also practicing Superior-level skills (hypothesizing, supporting opinion, writing expressively, and the like) in preparation for moving to that level as their skills develop.