

Paper Partners: A Peer-Led Talk-Aloud Academic Writing Program for Students Whose First Language of Academic Study is Not English

Andrea Vechter and Christopher Brierley

This article examines the Paper Partners program at Ryerson University, Toronto. This peer-mentoring program was developed to support the academic writing skills of students whose first language of academic study was not English. The program integrated a team of student-facilitators, a talk-aloud co-editing process, and a reflective feedback component. The article looks at (a) the process of developing a campus-wide program using a team of student-facilitators specially trained to support English academic writing skills; (b) program assessment based on feedback received from student-writers and facilitators; and (c) the contribution of the program to the language-learning experience. The article concludes with encouragement for postsecondary institutions to develop peer-led language-learning opportunities on campus to create and celebrate a truly international learning community.

Cet article porte sur le programme de mentorat par les pairs, Paper Partners, de Ryerson University à Toronto. Ce programme, développé pour appuyer les habiletés en rédaction académique des étudiants dont la langue dominante en études académiques n'est pas l'anglais, consiste en une équipe d'étudiants moniteurs, un processus de co-révision à voix haute et une rétroaction réflexive. L'article traite de trois éléments: (a) le développement d'un programme à l'échelle du campus et basé sur une équipe d'étudiants moniteurs spécialement formés pour appuyer les habiletés en rédaction académique en anglais; (b) l'évaluation du programme par la rétroaction de la part d'étudiants écrivains et d'étudiants moniteurs; et (c) la contribution du programme à l'expérience de l'apprentissage de la langue. Les auteurs terminent l'article en encourageant les établissements post-secondaires à favoriser des occasions d'apprentissage de langue menées par les pairs pour développer et célébrer une communauté d'apprentissage véritablement internationale.

Introduction

The learning process is a win-win relationship where everyone benefits. Now I know that learning something new starts with sharing your knowledge with somebody else. For example, while I helped students learn something new about English, I myself learned about language teaching techniques, different countries and places. (Student-Facilitator 4, 2005-2006)¹

Despite successfully meeting the English-language proficiency entry requirements of Canadian English-medium universities, many students whose first language of academic study is not English can still benefit from English-language support. The elements of language measured by scores on standardized proficiency tests rarely include the ability to use English effectively as a learning tool in a particular socio-academic culture. Faculty and learning strategists in Canadian universities wrestle with the challenges that students face in trying to cope linguistically, academically, culturally, and socially in the complex learning environment of a university.

Anecdotally, students and faculty report that the greatest progress in English-language development is often made when students have an opportunity to work one-on-one with an experienced academic who is also an experienced language teacher. However, due to the large numbers of students in Canadian universities whose first language of academic study is not English, it is rare for a university, no matter how large its faculty, to be able to meet the demand for this kind of language support. However, without it, the retention of this group in the university community is at risk.

In this article we look at a program developed by the English Language Support Unit (ELS) at Ryerson University to offer writing support to students whose first language of academic study is not English. The program goals were (a) to support the development of English-language academic skills by student-writers, (b) to provide an opportunity to reflect on the experience from the facilitators' perspective, and (c) to leave a legacy of the experience for future student-facilitators.

We describe the set-up of the program and offer an assessment of the extent to which the program achieved its goals. The assessment tools include feedback from student-writers and reflections of student-facilitators, and a set of best practices produced by the student-facilitators at the end of the academic year.

Background Information

The Paper Partners program grew out of the need for a fledgling English-language support unit (ELS) with just two full-time staff to provide English-language support services to undergraduate and graduate students across a

wide range of faculties and programs at Ryerson University in downtown Toronto.

Ryerson's student demographic reflects that of the city of Toronto. It is a rich mix of languages, ethnicities, and cultures. For example, some Ryerson students have recently arrived in Canada after completing their pre-university education in another language. Some have completed their high school or pre-university education out of the country in English-medium pre-university programs. Some have completed high school or university abroad, followed by pre-university English-language programs in Canada. Others have been in Canada for a number of years, but as documented in Cummins' (1979) research, even language-learners who are quite proficient in their day-to-day language skills may still need time to develop their cognitive academic language proficiency. As a case in point, although all Ryerson's students have met the English-language entry requirements of the University, many are still referred to ELS for English-language writing and speaking support, with a focus on producing longer pieces of academic work.

Generally speaking, this student population needs support both with the production of accurate syntactic forms and with the management of the elements of style particular to an academic register such as addressing a question, developing a thesis statement, organizing an argument, giving evidence, and presenting a strong conclusion.

The structure of the Paper Partners program resulted from a review of the literature on conversational interaction and language-learning, interviews with students about their language-learning needs and preferred learning styles, and consultations with colleagues at Ryerson and other Ontario universities who work with a similar student demographic.

Studies in sociocultural language-learning theory were particularly helpful to the development of the program. Lantolf (1994, 2006), for example, saw second-language learning as a profound cognitive process in which meaning and language are simultaneously co-created in context. Research by Ellis (1999) and Long (1996) reinforced this sociocultural view and explored the process of interpersonal interaction itself as a learning process. Swain's (2000) work on pushed or negotiated comprehensible output, along with studies by Swain and Lapkin (1998, 2001) and De Guerrero and Villamil (2000), lend support to the notion that peer dialogue helps all participants to clarify their understandings of grammar and to improve their linguistic choices. Finally, the work of Storch (2001) and Tang and Tithecott (1999) on peer-peer dialogue and language-learning made useful reference to the practical aspects of managing a peer-led revision process such as how to use a read-aloud process, provide feedback, focus on the meta-language of negotiation, and stimulate reflection on learning.

The Paper Partners Program

Facilitators' Training

This peer-led program was anchored by a team of student-facilitators funded through the Ontario Workstudy Program. Suitable applicants were interviewed individually. Seven undergraduate students were selected for training as student-facilitators in the program. They were not required to be native speakers of English, nor were they required to have had any language-teaching experience. They were, however, required to demonstrate intellectual enthusiasm, international awareness, and good English-speaking and academic writing skills. A sample of their academic written work was reviewed as part of the selection process.

Successful candidates attended a series of training sessions delivered by the ELS staff. Discussions included (a) an introduction to the goals of the program, as well as the importance of language skills for student retention; (b) recent articles on language learning and teaching; (c) the creation of and practice with the *Talk Aloud Protocol* (see Table 1), a script and process for negotiating meaning in a piece of written work; and (d) the notion of reflective practice, the professional-development process of learning from the analysis of one's own teaching practice.

As the program goals necessitated exploring the experience from the facilitators' as well as the language-learners' perspectives, facilitators were encouraged to discuss their teaching experiences with each other. They were also encouraged to revise the protocol as they became more experienced so as to make it work better for them. It was also explained that as part of the reflective learning-teaching process, the production of written reflections on the Paper Partners' experience was required throughout the academic year, as well as the creation of a final set of best practices to guide future teams of student-facilitators.

A Typical Paper Partner Session

The Paper Partners sessions are one hour in length. Each session is facilitated by a student-facilitator using the team-generated talk-aloud protocol. Two student-facilitators are scheduled per hour.

After a brief explanation of the process and a few preliminary questions about the purpose of an assignment, the facilitator and student-writer select a section of a paper to discuss in their one-hour appointment. The student-writer then starts to read the text aloud to the facilitator. The facilitator reads along silently. As the student-writer reads, the facilitator listens and stops the writer whenever he or she hears something that catches his or her attention. At these points, the dialogue, prompted by the cues of the protocol, helps to clarify both the writer's intentions and the language he or she needs to express them. At times the facilitator corrects language forms.

Table 1
Sample Talk Aloud Protocol Cues (Developed by ELS Staff
and Student-Facilitators)

Warm-Up

- What course is this assignment for?
- What is the purpose of the assignment?
- Let's take a look at the question.
- What stage of writing are you at?
- Have you already revised your work?
- What are your concerns specifically that you would like to address today?

Elements of Grammar and Style

- Please read this paragraph/sentence to me
- Is this the thesis statement? Perhaps it needs to be clearer, or maybe even in a different place. What do you think?
- This sentence is a bit long. I am starting to get confused. Can you shorten or rephrase it?
- This verb doesn't agree with the subject. The subject here is plural so the verb has to be as well. Let's just keep that in mind to see if it happens again.
- This sounds a bit awkward. It breaks the flow. Maybe try it as a statement instead of a question, what do you think?
- This paragraph doesn't really fit here. I think it relates better to what you were saying before. Maybe it'd fit better somewhere else.
- This doesn't really prove your point. What did you want to say? Let's try to make it clearer.
- Is this sentence(s) a paraphrase or a direct quote? If it is a quote, it should have quotation marks.
- Have you referenced all your sources? What style of reference has your Professor asked you to follow?
- The conclusion really isn't strong enough. Try working on it a bit more to really bring everything together. What do you want the reader to learn from the paper?

Aural and Visual Elements

- That doesn't sound right.
- That sounds a bit awkward. Can you re-phrase it?
- This looks odd. I think you need a comma or something here.

Follow-Up

- OK. Revise this section tonight and let's talk again tomorrow.
 - It might be good to review these grammar points; they've come up a few times.
 - I think it would be a good idea to make an appointment with a member of the Unit staff to work on some things in greater depth.
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Pre-program interviews with Writing Centre colleagues in Toronto and Ottawa had elicited enthusiastic support for teaching approaches that required students to read their work aloud (M. Dowler, personal communication, 2004; R. Ross, personal communication, 2004); in their practical experience, sharing the creative process in this way produces successful results. For example, as the student-writer reads his or her work to a peer, both become engaged in the revision process. The reader and listener are

quickly able to identify elements of language that do not look or sound quite right, which leads to creating a better piece of work together.

After each session, student-writers complete voluntary anonymous feedback forms and facilitators complete their records of the session. The feedback forms ask writers to comment on the effectiveness of the session as a language-learning experience. The facilitators' records summarize the writers' issues, with examples of specific problem areas; note any follow-up assigned; and include observations of interest on the overall teaching-learning experience.

Assessment Tools

Feedback From Student-Writers

Twenty feedback forms from individual student-writers were collected in the initial term of the program. The strengths of the sessions as learning experiences were mentioned in every case. The writers perceived that they had learned language. They enjoyed the relaxed learning-teaching process. They also valued the supportive relationships that they had formed with the student-facilitators. Some even mentioned that they had told their friends about the program and had referred them to the ELS Unit. Sample comments from the feedback forms are provided in Table 2.

Student-Facilitators' Written Reflections (Required)

The facilitators' reflections revealed several interesting themes. All facilitators mentioned that the experience had stimulated them to think deeply about learning and teaching in general, as well as about language-learning and teaching. They had in particular gained insight into the relationship between diverse linguistic or cultural perspectives and learning. They had also made highly valued friendships over the course of the program.

Table 2
Sample Student-Writers' Feedback Comments

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- I liked the support provided—they tell me where I made a mistake and the way to fix it.
 - They help me understand how to make a good argument and help me realize my own mistakes by reading aloud.
 - They work with me and let me find my mistakes.
 - The fellow students who are helping us seem to expect some weird language stuff. The one who helped me was very patient and we developed some good ideas. So thanks for establishing the program. Students will benefit from it.
 - I'm improving my English in a relaxed, casual way.
 - My friends and I will do our best for you because we benefit from this program and thus have the responsibility to help maintaining and improving it.
 - My final mark is 31.5 out of 35, so I am very happy. Thanks a lot for your help.
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Initially the student-facilitators were nervous; they felt unqualified to give advice to other students, especially when it involved teaching *grammar*. However, as time went on and their confidence grew, they realized that what they contributed to the experience did not primarily lie in correcting grammar. They saw their role as that of identifying and discussing the elements of a student-writer's work and assessing how well all these components functioned together to express a writer's ideas in Canadian academic English. At this point, moving from the basic protocol, they began to develop their own strategies—which sometimes included grammar correction—for working through the sessions. Sharing this creative experience became productive and enjoyable. In the words of one facilitator, "It really felt good when someone would leave Paper Partners feeling they had learned and understood something new about English" (Student-Facilitator 6, 2005-2006).

Related to understanding something new about English, facilitators noted how frustrated many of the student-writers were about using English appropriately for Canadian academic purposes. Most had not expected to have to work so hard to develop their academic writing skills in English. They had felt that if they knew one language well already and had the ability to express ideas well in that language, then it would not be difficult simply to translate their ideas into English. In addition, most had been studying English for years. It had been a real shock to discover that academic writing in another language required such a challenging transition. One facilitator observed, "Students feel that if they know one language and can create ideas with that language, they should be able to easily translate their ideas into English, maybe with the help of some translating device. English is not seen as something which needs practice" (Student-Facilitator 2, 2005-2006).

The student-facilitators also commented on the differences they had observed between what students said and what they wrote. Once students began to read their work aloud, they were often able to correct their own mistakes, either without prompting or with a few cues from the student-facilitators. "Why didn't I think of that?" they often asked (Student-Facilitator 1, 2005-2006).

Developing insight into the relationship of diverse perspectives and learning was another outcome of the experience mentioned in the reflections. For the facilitators who had come from other linguistic and cultural backgrounds, the experience reminded them of their own earlier days in Canada; for others it put a human face on the writers' struggle to achieve a level of expression in English that they themselves took for granted.

One facilitator spoke of her experience working with a mature student. There are "different styles of learning and teaching; mature students have differences in the approach to understanding. Learning changes as we get older, learning is a long hard process" (Student-Facilitator 4, 2005-2006).

Another mentioned how much she had gained from working with students in other academic disciplines:

It was a bonus to know that I would be working with students with pursuits other than nursing. I think this has really helped me grow and see things from different perspectives. This [experience] has certainly had an impact on my understanding and acceptance of diversity. (Student-Facilitator 3, 2005-2006)

In all cases the student-facilitators wrote of the value of this experience from the point of view of the relationships they developed. They spoke of the respect for each other that had grown over time and the feeling of satisfaction that they experienced when student-writers recognized them on campus and stopped to chat (Student-Facilitator 5, 2005-2006).

Best Practices

The final requirement for the student-facilitators in the Paper Partners program was to establish a set of best practices to act as ground rules for new facilitators. The set of best practices 2005-2006 appears in Table 3.

Achievement of Program Goals

The goals of the Paper Partners program were (a) to support the development of English-language academic skills of student-writers; (b) to provide an opportunity to reflect on the experience from the student-facilitators' perspective; and (c) to leave a legacy of the experience for future student-facilitators.

Based on the feedback from the student-writers, it would appear that they had enjoyed and learned language from their Paper Partners experience. Sharing the talk-aloud process with a student-facilitator gave student-writers a chance to build on the English they already knew in order to create better pieces of academic work. This was borne out by their marks, their comments, and their referrals of other students to the Paper Partners program.

In addition, the program provided the unexpected outcome of offering a context for building supportive relationships among peers. The experience also provided ample opportunity for the facilitators to reflect on their experience. As a result of keeping records of their sessions with student-writers, having discussions with other facilitators, and completing reflections on their practice, the student-facilitators gained insight into the language-learning experience and its multiple linguistic, sociocultural, and cognitive dimensions.

In this regard, one notable language-teaching insight was that language shapes perspectives. This was captured in realizations such as that there is no magical *translating device* to move meaning from one language to another

Table 3
Best Practices

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- Always respect the student. Treat the student as an equal, regardless of their age.
 - Always make the student comfortable.
 - Show a deep sense of appreciation for the student's work.
 - Try to be open to differences.
 - Be patient.
 - Do not take language-learning for granted.
 - Do not underestimate the process of teaching.
 - Read aloud. This allows students to recognize areas for improvement and lets them practice their verbal communication skills. Suggest reading aloud in front of family and friends.
 - Let students tell you about their work and summarize it. Let the student explain. Usually their oral explanations are worded correctly and that is what should be written on the paper.
 - Try to prompt student learners when an area for improvement is recognized. This helps them to begin to recognize their problems and to correct their own mistakes.
 - State the good points—help identify mistakes—help with corrections—state the good points again.
 - Make teaching fun; find ways to make and keep your sessions interesting.
 - Work with your team members—you are always learning from each other.
 - Take notes on the back of your intake form and reflect.
 - If you have problems, speak to your Supervisor.
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and that, “even though English is a global language, it still differs from country to country ... English keeps mutating; it adopts words from other languages. This continuous evolution of language becomes even more difficult for non-English speakers” (Student-Facilitator 1, 2005-2006).

By creating a set of best practices based on personal and shared reflections on the teaching and learning experience, facilitators were able to leave a *legacy* for future student-facilitators. This legacy represents the cumulative learning of all participants in the program and serves as a guide for others to follow and extend over time.

Although the program successfully achieved its initial goals, it also calls for development by others in order to continue to build on the experience. A possible development might be the creation of a mutual critique in which student-writers and facilitators would work together to identify productive language-learning and language-teaching strategies.

Conclusions

Today the program continues and employs almost twice as many student-facilitators. It works in partnership with several university faculties and runs year-round. ELS has also suggested that talk-aloud components open to students from all language backgrounds be introduced into the curricula of

content courses as part of pan-university engagement and retention initiatives.

The first team of student-facilitators, who are now in the world of work, also report that the experience has helped them with many transferable workplace skills such as building professional relationships, working with cultural diversity, participating as a member of a team, teaching others, taking responsibility, and providing customer service.

As Canadian English-medium universities continue to grow in student diversity, programs that (a) work with the experience of linguistically and culturally diverse students, (b) build supportive relationships, and (c) develop English-language skills will become increasingly important for academic retention, engagement, and success. And because many international students will probably stay in Canada to work after they complete their studies, programs that include the negotiation of learning across languages and cultures, as well as the development of transferable workplace skills, can be seen as taking healthy and necessary steps to prepare all students more effectively for success in Canadian and global society.

Note

¹Facilitators' reflections are quoted without revisions to spelling or grammar. In order to preserve anonymity, facilitators are referred to by number.

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The Authors

Andrea Vechter received her doctorate in educational linguistics from OISE/University of Toronto. She has been an ESL instructor, language-learning researcher, project consultant, teacher-trainer, and ESL program manager in colleges and universities in Toronto and abroad for over 30 years. She now works as an international communications consultant in the private sector.

Christopher Brierley has taught ESL/EFL in Canada and abroad. He has also co-developed teacher-training programs and special programs for developing academic writing and speaking skills. He is a certified assessor for the Canadian Language Benchmarks and a producer of Internet and CD language-learning materials. He currently coordinates English Language Support (ELS) at Ryerson University, Toronto.

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