Writing circles project

Four 'writing circle' peer review classes
with PGT international students

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We will:

- Consider writing circles and peer review activities.

- Look at writing circle activities conducted with my post-graduate students.

- Look at some of the student feedback to those activities.

- Reflect on the benefits and limitations of writing circles.

- End with Q&A

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What are writing circles?

Designed to help students with academic writing where there may be:

- Lack of agency in academic writing

- Poor understanding of process and product

- Lack of genre & disciplinary discourse

- Some social & identity issues

- **Writing Circles – peer review activities to edit and improve written work**
  - Writing activities are social + collaborative

  - Rooted in disciplines - socially & academically

  - Students share, read & evaluate work in draft form.

The importance of peer review activities

Peer review or peer evaluation activities:

- provide social support and scaffolding

- provide socially constructed peer feedback

- improve learning by empowering learners, making them more autonomous (Lee, 2017).

Students who are able to engage in meaningful peer feedback and evaluation activities are better able to self-assess their own writing and identify areas which require improvement (Lundstrom, and Baker, 2009; Lee, 2017).

Such activities provide "*a facilitative socio-interactive environment in which L2 learners receive social support and scaffolding from peers*" (Hu and Lam, 2010:373)

The importance of peer review activities

- Anxiety about academic writing has a negative impact on the quality of students' work

- Students with high levels of anxiety perform less well than students with lower levels of anxiety (Huerta, et al, 2017)

- This anxiety can be reduced by building confidence and providing support from peers through writing circles; by helping students develop an identity and agency in academic writing.

Academic identity is formed through successful engagement with academic language, style and discourse. Identity is enacted through what people do (Lee, 2013).

Recent research and discussion have presented agency in learners as a combination of 'free will, consciousness, identity, autonomy and empowerment' (Larsen-Freeman, 2019)

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Writing circle activities with my class

Background:

- 20 (approx.) adult post graduate students (Education / Humanities).

- English was an L2 for this group of learners.

- They had received at least 12 hours of study skills support focusing on academic writing style in S1 (Oct – Dec).

- Grouping in S1 was quite loose; based around main topic of interest (e.g. CLIL) so groups were unbalanced (ie: some large, some small).

- In S2 (Feb – Mar) 4 x 2-hour classes

- Students were asked to work in groups of 3 to 4 students.

Why run writing circle activities with international PGT students?

Anxiety

- English as an L2.
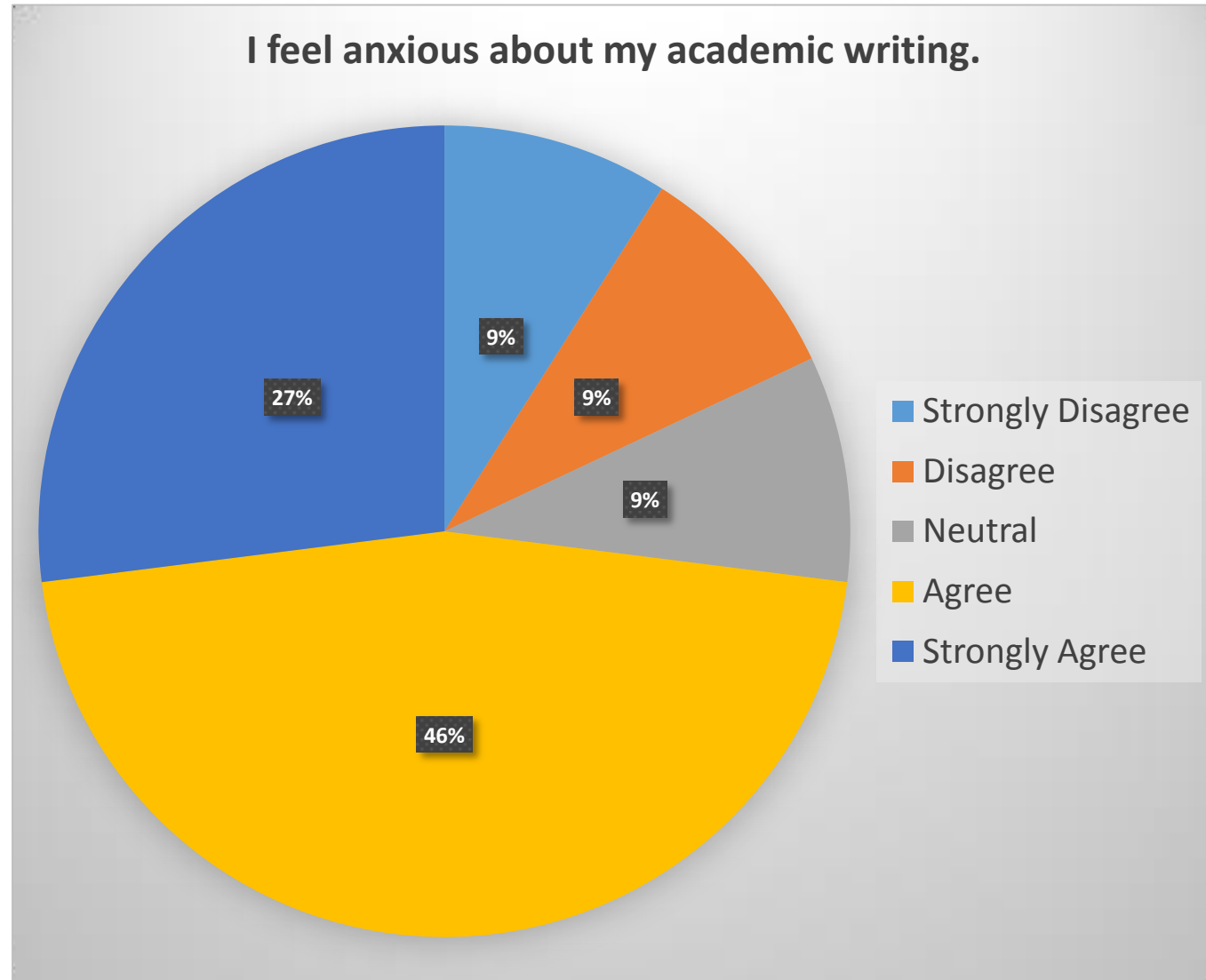- Pre-sessional programme students.

Agency / identity

- To encourage / develop autonomy
- To establish the identity of the individual writer

Anecdotal

- Reports from teachers / tutorials that writing was weak

Plagiarism

- On the assignments from the taught course the level of plagiarism was very high.

I feel anxious about my academic writing.

Strongly Disagree — 9%
Disagree — 9%
Neutral — 9%
Agree — 46%
Strongly Agree — 27%

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Procedure (120 minute classes)

- Each session followed a theme (e.g. paragraph structure; paraphrasing, etc) and began with a 20 – 30 minute presentation (input) on academic writing skills.

- Students (in groups of four) were given an article (published / unpublished) that had been 'deconstructed' to match the 'theme' of that class (e.g. paragraphs had been altered / information omitted, etc).

- Using prompts students were encouraged to work collaboratively to 'notice' the problems and then 'reconstruct' a version of the text together.

- The students' reconstructed text was then compared to the original with an annotated version from the tutor which highlighted the problems.

- Students were then encouraged to look at each other's work to notice and discuss both good and weaker examples of academic writing.

- The class ended with whole group discussion of some of the key points from the peer review.

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Example activity: paragraph moves

1) **Elements of paragraphs and paragraph writing:**

Distressed model

Look at this excerpt from an ELT Journal article. There are four (short) paragraphs. The paragraphs are in the wrong order and have been split up. With your colleagues:

1) Identify the topic sentences and linking devices.
2) Put the text in the correct order.
3) Identify the four paragraphs.

Nevertheless, a closer examination of the ways in which age combines with other variables reveals a more complex picture, with both favourable and unfavourable age-related differences being associated with early- and late-starting L2 learners (Johnstone 2002).

Furthermore, although the age factor is an uncontroversial research variable extending from birth to death (Cook 1995), and the CPH is a narrowly focused proposal subject to recurrent debate, ironically, it is the latter that tends to dominate SLA discussions (Garcı´a Lecumberri and Gallardo 2003), resulting in a number of competing conceptualizations.

It therefore needs to be recognized that there is a marked contrast between the CPH as an issue of continuing dispute in SLA, on the one hand, and, on the other, the popular view that it is an invariable 'law', equally applicable to any L2 acquisition context or situation. In fact, research indicates that age effects of all kinds depend largely on the actual opportunities for learning which are available within overall contexts of L2 acquisition and particular learning situations, notably the extent to which initial exposure is substantial and sustained (Lightbown 2000).

Students are given 4 paragraphs divided into several parts and asked to put them in the correct order (jigsaw).

They work together to identify the topic sentences, linking devices and moves in the text.

Groups note down the key points from their discussion whilst completing the tasks.

Example activity: paragraph moves

Solution:

There is a popular belief that children as L2 learners are 'superior' to adults (Scovel 2000), that is, the younger the learner, the quicker the learning process and the better the outcomes.

Commented [DB1]: Good topic sentence – states the purpose of the article and paragraph.

Nevertheless, a closer examination of the ways in which age combines with other variables reveals a more complex picture, with both favourable and unfavourable age-related differences being associated with early- and late-starting L2 learners (Johnstone 2002).

Commented [DB2]: Indicates a contradiction or limitation. The topic of SLA and age is repeated here.

The 'critical period hypothesis' (CPH) is a particularly relevant case in point. This is the claim that there is, indeed, an optimal period for language acquisition, ending at puberty.

Commented [DB3]: A good topic sentence. This develops the discussion further by focusing on a specific topic within SLA = CPH and therefore this requires a new paragraph.

However, in its original formulation (Lenneberg 1967), evidence for its existence was based on the relearning of impaired L1 skills, rather than the learning of a second language under normal circumstances.

Commented [DB4]: Contrasting information. This gives us information about where ideas of CPH were initially limited.

Students are then given a correct 're-ordered' version with teacher commentary.
Students compare this version and commentary to their groups' ideas and notes.
The tutor then encourages discussion about the process of re-ordering the text; what questions students asked each other; how they managed to complete the task.

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Example activity: paragraph moves

Students are now asked to 'present' an example of their writing in the small group.

The group is encouraged to use prompts to discuss the writing.

Example prompts – used to frame discussion about their drafts:
- - What's the main idea?
- - Could you explain that in more detail/ another way?
- - Do you have any research literature to support this?
- - So what? Why is this important? / What does it mean in practice?
- - How does this relate to your larger point … / Next paragraph?

The tutor monitors; prompting where necessary and encouraging reflection among the students.

Agreed rules for sharing work

- Students could share 'marked' work or work in progress.

- Students did not have to share work if they didn't want to.

- Everyone had to ask at least one question / make on suggestion about their peers' work.

- No negative comments permitted; frame advice and suggestions as questions.

- While use of English was encouraged, L1 was permitted in this class.

Other peer review activities

Reverse outlining: taking a piece of text – one or more paragraphs - and creating an outline of the content as bullet points. Discuss whether the order is logical and builds an argument within each paragraph.

Conciseness review: identifying 'wordiness' / clarity in a text. Make a text difficult to follow by overloading the content with too many words and lots of repetition. Students discuss and alter the text to make it more concise.

Don't quote me!: provide a text with lots of direct quotes and very little commentary from the writer. Students have to combine ideas and identify where those ideas have come from. This is helpful in showing how paraphrasing can help develop the writer's voice.

Other peer review activities

What's your reference? : Take a text and omit, confuse or incorrectly present citations. Discussion of this will help learners identify where references and citations need to be made appropriately.

Creating questions: Take a short text and some jumbled critical questions about the content. Students unjumble the questions and link them back to parts of the text. The aim is to encourage students to turn the ideas of paragraphs into questions, to think about criticality and how a critical reader will be asking similar questions as they read.

How were tasks evaluated?
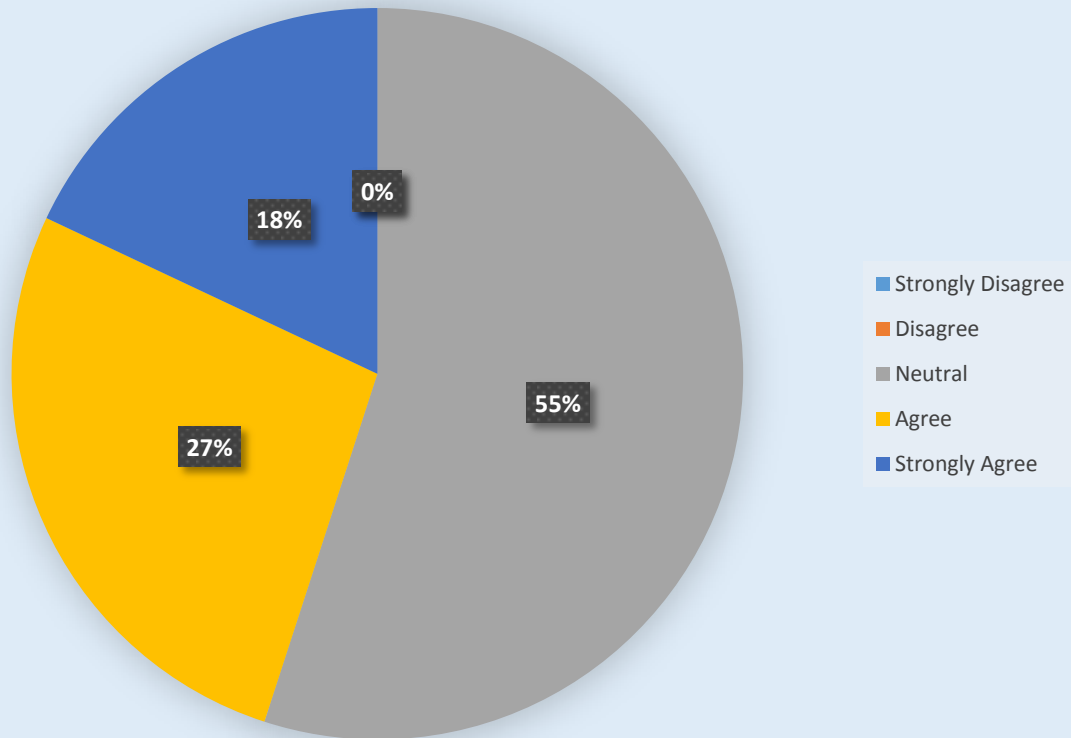
Each class ended with a 'one-minute' paper.

Students were given one minute to answer two to three questions:

- ***How has this session helped develop your academic writing skills?***

- **How do you feel about working in a group?**

- ***What will you do next to develop your academic writing skills?***

- *What two things have you learned about academic writing during this session?*

- *Think of a question you would like to ask a colleague about today's class.*
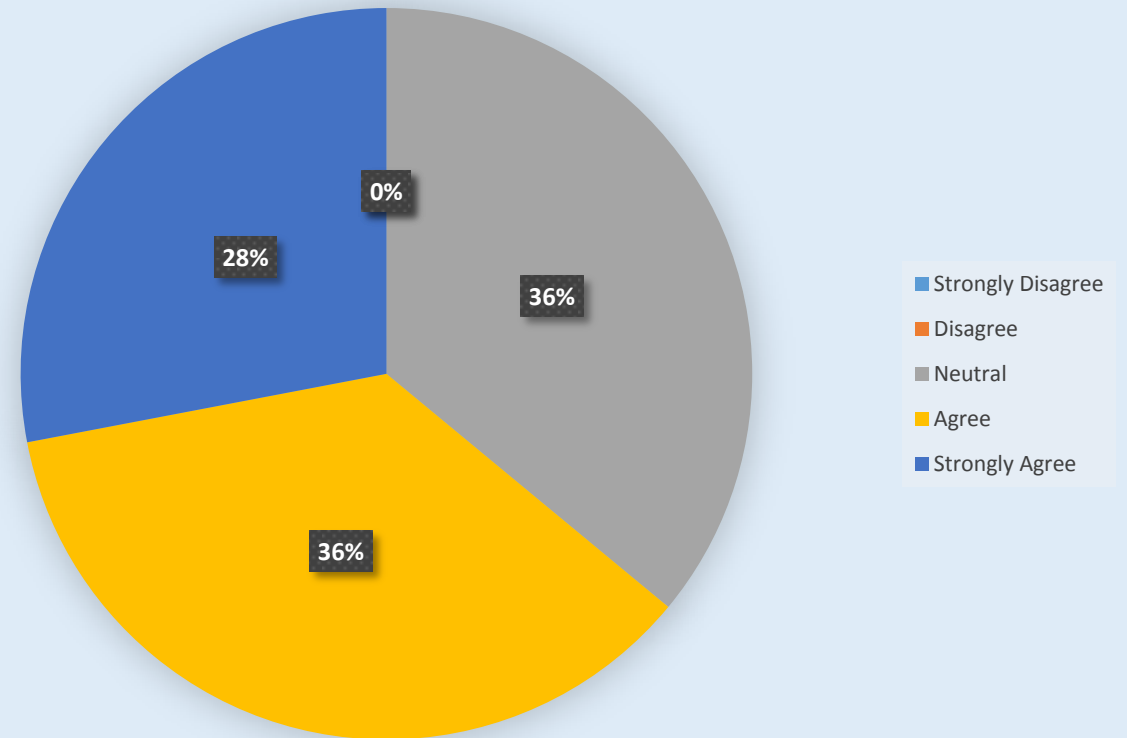
At the very end of the classes we conducted short class questionnaire (feedback follows):

Questionnaire feedback

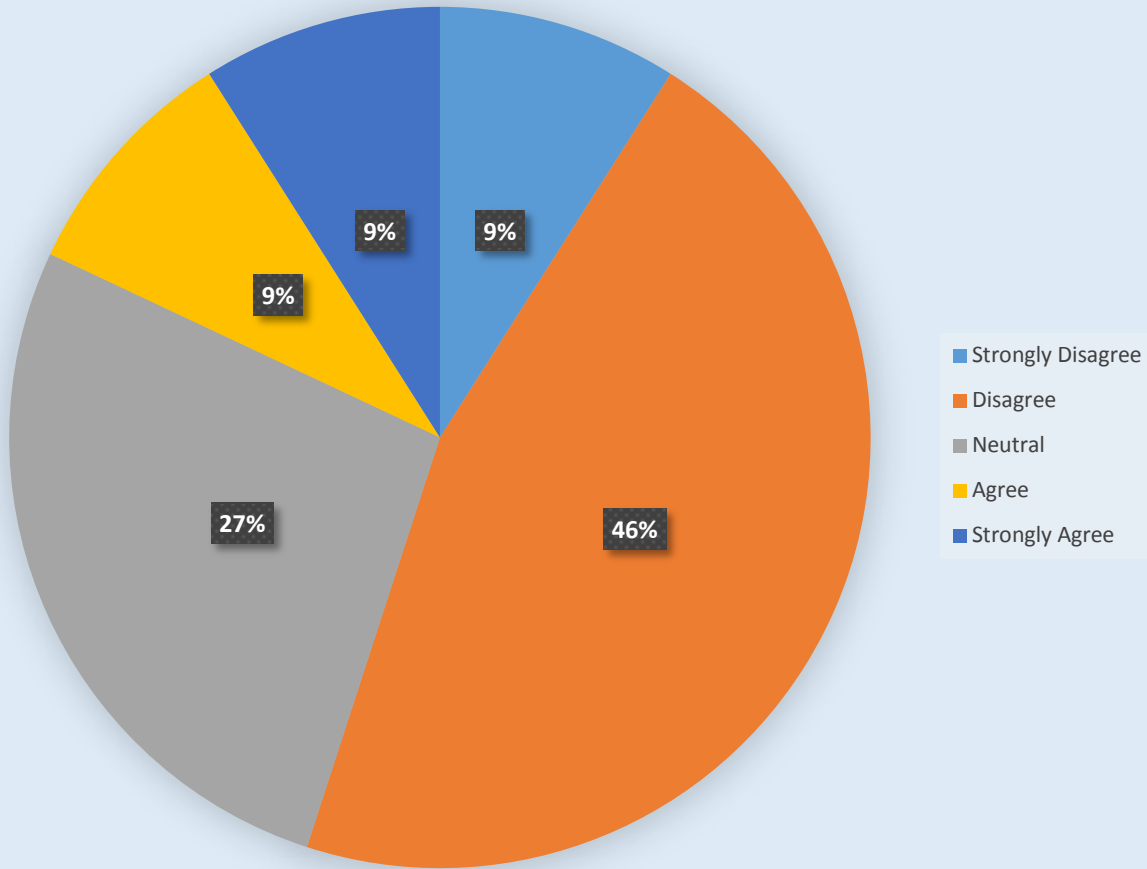**There are benefits to sharing my writing with my peers.**

- 0%
- 18%
- 55%
- 27%

Legend:
- Strongly Disagree
- Disagree
- Neutral
- Agree
- Strongly Agree

Looking at writing with my peers is a good way to develop my academic writing.

- 0%
- 28%
- 36%
- 36%

Legend:
- Strongly Disagree
- Disagree
- Neutral
- Agree
- Strongly Agree

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Questionnaire feedback

I often share my writing with my peers.

- Strongly Disagree 9%
- Disagree 46%
- Neutral 27%
- Agree 9%
- Strongly Agree 9%

Writing circles can help students develop confidence in academic writing.

- Strongly Disagree 0%
- Disagree
- Neutral 36%
- Agree 55%
- Strongly Agree 9%

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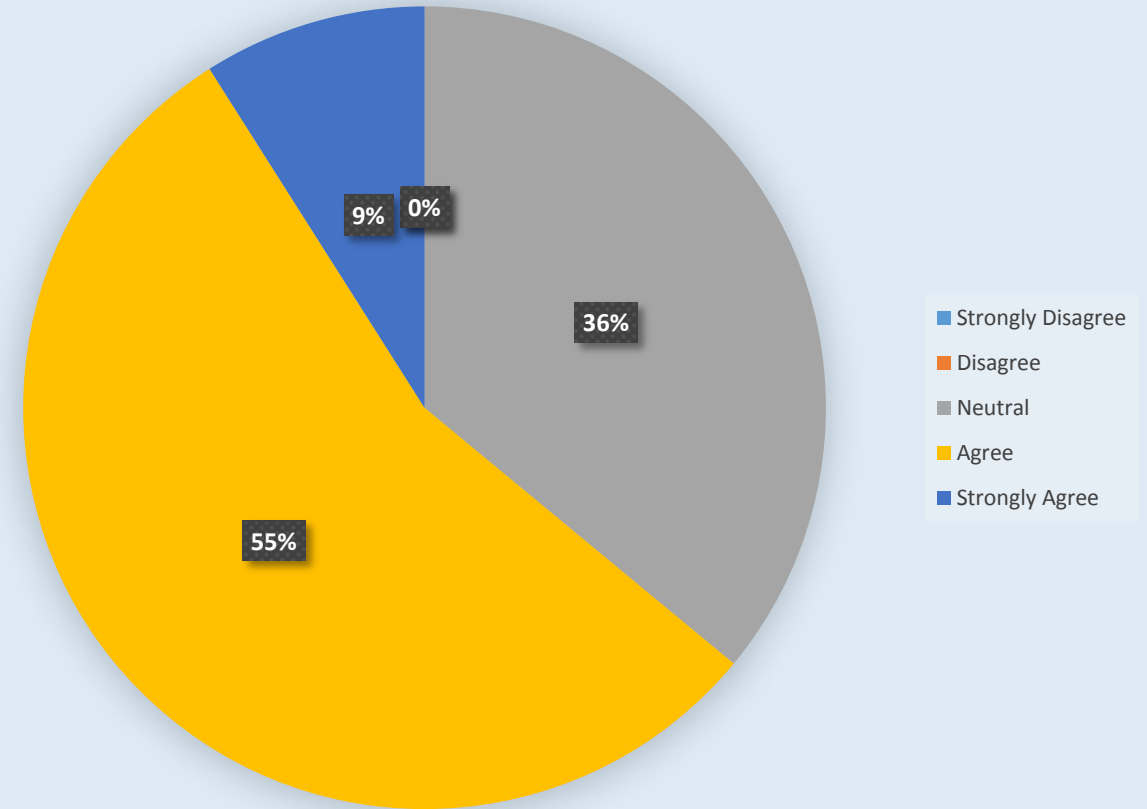
How do you feel about working in a group?

- "It's a **very helpful** way to **improve my writing skills**, as I can get various **suggestions from peers**"
- "We could **share the ideas** which **help us to think more**."
- "Classmates gave opinions and **helped each other** very well"
- "It's **great to give feedback** for others because it **helps me find my own shortcomings**"
- "It's really **helpful to share papers** with partners. It **makes you think clearly**"
- "It's **interesting** and **good to get peer review** from my groupmates"
- "Working in group is much more **motivating**"
- "Partners are always **inspiring**"
- "**Fantastic, we can exchange ideas**"
- "Pretty good, especially when **members exchange their ideas**"
- " "**I like to work in a group** …. it provides me with feedback for my own writing"

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How do you feel about working in a group?

- "**It helped me a lot** by communicating with my classmates"
- "**Very helpful**. I didn't do peer review for my essays so **it's great to have someone read my writing** and point out the weakness"
- "**It is very helpful**; **sharing ideas** and getting comments about ones writing is **extremely effective**"
- "**Inspiring, brainstorming**"
- "Great… **interesting experience**… **can learn a lot**"
- "Peer experience **sharing is good**"
- "It's great because we can focus more on the class and **learn from our classmates**"
- "It's **better to exchange each other's opinions**"
- "I like group working **and I can learn from others** and know different opinions"
- "It's **useful to share information**"

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How has this session helped develop your academic writing skills?

- "It provides me (with) **many good ideas from my classmates**"
- "(I) **understand more** about proofreading"
- "It's effective since one gets an **insight into different writing styles**"
- "We got the answers clearly through **team work** (asking each other questions)"
- "We discuss peers' essays and **learn from them**"
- "to gain a **deeper understanding** of how to support arguments"
- "They have **made me more aware** of my weaknesses and **how I can improve** my writing"
- "Talking with peers always **seems a bit easier than talking directly with the teachers.**"
- "Generally, it has **helped me have a general picture of academic writing.**"

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How has this session helped develop your academic writing skills?

- "It helps me realise **the value of peer reading**"

- "I **learn how to organise**"

- "Peer discussion and outline (of) evaluation will **help me reflect**"

- "We can **exchange ideas** on our assignments and **get inspired by others**"

- "Got **useful knowledge** and perception from peer study and discussions"

- "To have an **opportunity to communicate with peers**"

- "**critically examine** the work we have done"

- "It's a **good way to share ideas** and find out some points which sometimes may be ignored (when working alone)"

- "Enrich my view by **listening to others' ideas**"

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Not all positive!…. Areas to consider moving forward…

- "I think **it would be more beneficial or helpful** when students start working on their assignments and producing some paragraphs"

- "To be honest, **it didn't help much**. It's probably because **not many students have started working on their assignments** and because we as **students who don't have much experience of writing academically can't really provide many constructive advice** to our peers"

- "To be honest, **it's quite difficult for us to give any constructive feedback** to one another in the writing circle/peer review activities…"

- "it's **difficult to do peer review when most students haven't started writing** anything for their new assignments or **when they are not willing to show their assignments** submitted last semester …"

- "we as **students might not feel qualified** to comment on our peers' work because **we are still learning** or even struggling with **how to write academically** ourselves."

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What will you do next to develop your academic writing skills?

- "To be even more critical"
- "To do proofreading"
- "Practise more, read more"
- "Try to present ideas more critically"
- "I'll try to write everyday"
- "To organise better paragraphs, to link them all together"
- "Try to organise my text in a clear way"
- "I'll read more"
- "Learn to paraphrase well!"
- "Write it quickly and edit it slowly"

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On reflection: what were the benefits?

- reminder to students that we write for a reader

- Reminder that the questions students ask their peers are questions they need to ask themselves = greater autonomy

- listen and practise giving feedback = normalise sharing drafts

- establish writing as a process = write, review, edit, write…

- Reflect on the move from writer to reader

- Develop the metalanguage to discuss academic texts

- Talk about process and challenges of writing

- Set immediate micro targets to progress towards

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Reflections: moving forward

- Students need 'scaffolding skills'; how to frame comments and questions constructively.

Solution: The first session will include support on peer work and peer review. Bring in the peer review activities gradually from lesson one and make links to their own writing more explicit.

- Students do not feel qualified to comment on academic writing.

Solution: Emphasise that academic writing should not just be for specialists; complex ideas need to be made clear for everyone. Understanding the meaning of a peer's writing might make your own writing easier to understand.

- Some students felt it was not relevant as they had not started writing assignments yet (however, they did have work from semester one to bring in)

Solution: Remind students that it's never too early to start writing! Bring your writing – any writing - to class!

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Questions and comments?

References

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