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Cooperative writing response groups: revising global aspects of second-language writing in a constrained educational environment

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This article describes a cooperative writing response initiative designed to develop writing skills in foreign/second-language contexts (hereafter L2). The strategy originated from my desire to cater for my learners' need to become better writers in English within a constrained educational environment in Argentina. In this article I describe this strategy and show how it has worked in my setting. First, I offer the rationale on which it rests, based on a sociocultural conception of reading and writing. This involves brief considerations about the notions of collaborative writing groups, social responses to texts and coherence in L2 writing. Second, I describe and explain the strategy in detail, and include one handout with specific written instructions (as my learners received them) for the cooperative writing response groups with a focus on coherence, i.e. global aspects of the composing process. Finally, I exemplify the strategy using one learner's written text as a foundation (disclosed by permission).

Keywords: cooperative writing groups; English language learners; Argentina

Reading and writing are widely acknowledged as multidimensional and multivalent processes (Bernhardt 2003). The possibility of diversity in reader response to textual content is related not only to the fact that the questions to be answered during reading and writing vary from reader/writer to reader/writer but also to contextual factors both at a mental level (schemata) and a situational level (specific limitations of the context in which a text is read or produced). This context includes social, cultural, political, geographical and historical aspects, among others (Berg 2003; Gee 2001; Fitzgerald 2003; McCallister 2002). It also includes assumptions about the preceding text, the immediate context, cultural knowledge, common-sense knowledge, etc. (Bernhardt 2003). The implication is that we cannot remove reading, writing and literacy from their complex social, cultural and

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economic contexts. At the same time, the cultural practices that surround reading and writing in a given culture indicate appropriate ways to read and write texts in that culture.

The foregoing notwithstanding, language education in Argentina, in particular English language teaching (ELT) in this university and in the course I teach, tended to narrow the complexity of the issues involved in reading and writing to one aspect, usually linguistic. The narrowing in L2 writing focused, for example, on heavy textual analysis, lexical accuracy and grammatical correctness. At the time I implemented this innovation for the first time (2008), my learners wrote for display or, in other words, for the teacher. The focus on decontextualised (mainly linguistic) skills took writing out of its sociocultural and communicative contexts (Berg 2003) and missed its point as genuine social and communicative practice (ibid). By contrast, educators who do take these dimensions into account, as I did in my class back then, believe in foreign language teaching as *educational* and aim at their learners' *literacy* rather than merely *language* development. The cooperative writing response groups constituted one move in this direction.

Collaborative writing

One trend in L2 writing instruction that takes account of this conception of reading and writing as well as a view of ELT beyond its linguistic dimension is collaborative writing. Within this umbrella term, the present proposal is just one of many available options. From a theoretical perspective, traditional (DiPardo and Warshauer Freedman 1988; Nelson and Murphy 1993; Villamil and De Guerrero 1988) as well as more recent L2 writing research points to the importance of peer feedback and collaboration in process-based and genre-orientated classrooms (Hyland and Hyland 2006) in varied contexts such as academic writing (Hu 2005), narrative writing (De Guerrero and Villamil 2000) and online collaboration in academic writing (Tuzi 2004), among others. There is also significant research highlighting the complexity involved in different aspects of L2 writing (Hedgecock 2005). One example of this complexity is the learners' perceptions of the general goals of cooperative learning, which involves tensions and dilemmas between different factors around first language (L1) and second language (L2) learning (Liang and Mohan 2003). Other examples are the role of feedback in L2 writing development (Hyland and Hyland 2006) and the different sub-processes and components involved (Zimmermann 2000). Finally, this body of research captures the evolution of L2 writing pedagogy toward socially-orientated views of writing (see also Atkinson 2003a, 2003b), which focus on socially-situated responses to texts in specific sociocultural contexts and communities (Hyland 2003). The cooperative writing response groups with a focus on coherence that I describe in this article exemplify this view. The benefits of this strategy as I describe

them in different parts of this article predominantly capture the sociocultural dimension of writing, which collaborative writing experiences foreground.

Coherence in L2 writing: general considerations

The main aim of the cooperative writing response groups that I present in this article was to help my learners create coherence in their own narrative productions by developing awareness of this aspect in their own and others' pieces. In very general terms, and following Brown and Yule (1983), readers make efforts to arrive at an interpretation of a writer's intended meaning. This interpretation is based on several elements, among other aspects (Alonso 2003; Lee 2000; Levy 2003a, 2003b; Sawyer 2003; Stevenson et al. 2000):

- An assumption of coherence, i.e. all readers begin with this assumption that a certain text will indeed make sense, and invest time and effort to interpret it (in different degrees, according to their purposes in reading for instance).
- The principle of local interpretation, which means that readers do not construct a context larger than necessary to arrive at an interpretation (we read locally first, and resort to the wider context when the local is not enough).
- The principle of analogy, meaning that everything (setting, characters, motivations, etc.) remains the same unless the reader is told otherwise.
- General features of the context (time and place, topic, participants, participants' goals, reference, etc.).
- The regularities of discourse structure (titles, themes, text organisation, given and new information, etc.).
- Sociocultural knowledge (knowledge of the world, shared knowledge).

The context at this university

I teach English Language II, a compulsory annual course for prospective teachers and translators of English at Universidad Nacional de La Plata in Argentina. This is a prestigious, state, access for all university in a developing country. English is a foreign language (EFL), with Spanish as the mother tongue (L1). The 50 students who enrolled in my class in 2008 came from inner cities all over the country and had different socio-economic and cultural backgrounds. The unifying features of the population were ethnicity (Caucasian), gender (90% female), mother tongue (Spanish) and age (between 19 and 21). The medium of instruction was English and students were required to have CAE (Cambridge Certificate in Advanced English) level at this stage.

In this course, one professor taught the theory and three assistant teachers taught practical classes. As one of the assistant teachers, I was told *what* to teach in my classes. Required practices involved the compulsory reading of teacher-selected books, no reading for pleasure (except that arising from the learners' self-direction), a product approach to writing (compositions were judged as final products) and the evaluation of writing skills on the basis of the timed production of grammatically and lexically accurate texts. More precisely, learners had to sit a partial exam, which required them to produce a written text of approximately 350 words in two hours on a teacher-selected topic, with the specification of an artificial (invented) audience and purpose in the assignment topic. Feedback came in the form of error correction by the teacher. I was not allowed to encourage learner self-correction (for example, by providing error detection in the form of clues such as underlining) that activates the learners' linguistic competence, fosters language awareness through reflection and emphasises self-discovery in the learning process (Makino 1993). Rather, I had to locate and correct errors in grammar. Although good content was valued, and flaws in content were penalised, four or five 'serious' grammatical mistakes (e.g. in tenses, prepositions, etc.) outweighed any well-developed piece of writing and resulted in a 'fail' mark.

There was no unified approach to writing instruction. In general terms, classroom practices involved the combination of genre analysis (some analysis of the prototypical rhetorical features of the required genres); very heavy textual analysis (grammatical and lexical characteristics of particular instances of each genre); some student redrafting, revising and editing of portions of their written pieces; and informal whole-class/small-group discussion of student samples with simultaneous teacher/peer feedback on content and grammar. Writing as conducted in this course was not consistent with a view of writing as a recursive, interactive, communicative and social activity (Hyland 1996; O'Brien 1995; Silva et al. 1994). It was not congruent with the widely acknowledged need to regard product and process approaches to writing as complementary (Dyer 1996; Hall 1990; Raimes 1985, 1991; Spack 1988; Zamel 1987) and contradicted research on writing pedagogy that points to the need to respond to student writing as work in progress (Zamel 1985), to encourage revision for meaning (ibid) and to offer specific guidelines and directions on how to proceed (Raimes 1991; Zamel 1985).

Although these learners needed to pass 60% of all required pieces to be allowed to sit the final exam as regular students, they tended to miss many lessons because of personal reasons, usually came to the lessons unprepared (without the homework), failed to hand in assignments, made limited use of the available language lab, missed remedial lessons and voiced strong resistance to my implementing a process-writing approach. Their approach to learning was pragmatic and instrumental: everything that was not perceived

as readily useful for passing the required assignments was considered a waste of time and therefore resisted.

Despite this gloomy scenario, my students' responses to a questionnaire about reading in English and in Spanish which I had administered at the beginning of the year were encouraging. This questionnaire aimed at gathering baseline information regarding their conceptions of reading as well as their reading habits and preferences in both languages. Their responses revealed learners with strong internal motivations, who liked to read both in English and in Spanish, who thought that reading was important in their lives, who appreciated books as presents, who talked with family members and friends about their readings, who had access to varied reading material and who had grown up in homes that encouraged reading. The students' visions of and attitudes toward reading were important because they delineated how these learners conceived reading (and literacy in general) and what values and assumptions they associated with it. The attitudes and beliefs revealed by the questionnaire showed students who were motivated and who were immersed in contexts that valued and encouraged literacy.

Motivation for cooperative writing groups in this setting

In frank alignment with the theory of cognitive dissonance (Festinger 1957), realistically accommodating the culturally specific educational reality described above in the framework of my beliefs about good writing pedagogy transpired to be incredibly hard. Not only was the context limiting but I also needed strength to part company with the status quo. Simultaneously, the learners themselves were accustomed to years of being the passive recipients of education (Cartwright 1962; Milton 1960; Thelin 2005). These concerns notwithstanding, my dissatisfaction with those practices motivated me to introduce, back in 1997, a genuine process-approach to writing in my classroom that I called cooperative writing response groups (see Appendix, Porto 2001, 2002). I devised the strategy myself and implemented it with my class as part of an action research effort. This was possible because, although I had to comply with the required practices mentioned above, assistant teachers were told *what* to teach but not *how*. I thus had to teach narrative writing but was free to decide by which methods. This freedom allowed me to introduce these cooperative groups in 1997, and the adaptation I propose in this article in 2008.

I have been using this strategy successfully since then. It is a procedure that foregrounds the sociocultural dimension of writing through collaborative work. It focuses on writing as a process, and helps learners direct their attention to crucial aspects of the composing process, such as having a real audience and purpose, considering the reader and including meaningful content, among others. Groups of three or four students take

turns to read out their written pieces to group members, who give feedback to the writer as genuine readers of work in progress. Writers craft their productions at home, under no time pressure. When they perform the role of readers of their peers' productions in these groups, they first focus on content, coherence and global aspects of the composing process. This step involves identifying views with which they agree and disagree, asking questions, asking for clarification, giving opinions and examples and making suggestions for improvement on content. On the basis of this feedback, each writer revises his or her piece at home and attends for the second round of cooperative groups with the revision. The emphasis now is on language, mechanics and style or, in other words, the local aspects of composing. This focus on content *first* aimed at re-directing their attention away from the linguistic aspects that were so ingrained in this educational setting at the time.

Among other benefits, learners become consciously aware of the affective and social aspects of composing, such as the need to consider the reader and anticipate his or her reactions and expectations; to decide what to textualise on the basis of the purpose of their writing and the intended audience; and to move away from writer-based toward reader-based prose. Writers produce modified output (initial draft, two revisions – one on content, one on language – and final copy) and focus on their strengths (as opposed to the location and correction of errors, which focuses exclusively on the writers' weaknesses). For a full description of the procedure, see Porto (2001, 2002).

The approach: cooperative writing response groups focused on coherence

The variation of cooperative writing response groups that I describe here focuses on the coherence of written texts. The learners in this course, prospective teachers and translators of English, studied the notion of coherence in theoretical classes as in Brown and Yule (1983). Linguistic aspects were of course addressed too, both in theoretical and practical classes. However, as mentioned above, to pass the course they mainly needed to produce lexically and grammatically accurate narrative texts. In other words, in assessment the focus was predominantly on linguistic accuracy and precision. The chief aim of this initiative was to help my learners become aware of the need to foreground global aspects of the composing process (i.e. content) before addressing local (linguistic) aspects. This change of focus would help them realise that global coherence is as important as linguistic accuracy in writing. Through the meta-cognitive awareness that the strategy stimulated, theory and practice were smoothly integrated in my classes. More specifically, the aims of this variation were to deepen the learners' consciousness regarding the writing process in general and their idiosyncratic writing

habits in particular; to develop their awareness of the sociocultural and identity issues involved in writing; to consolidate their knowledge of the specific steps, procedures and strategies involved in L2 writing; and to become efficient and increasingly expert editors of their own written productions as well as the written productions of others (in this case, peers).

Implementation of the cooperative writing groups

Learners wrote a narrative composition (course requirement) of about 250 words on a teacher-selected topic as a two-hour piece of homework, replicating the conditions under which they write in the partial exam. In this course, for this partial exam, learners are given a few lines, taken from a real novel or short story, which they must insert in their own texts in order to produce a coherent composition. These given words must appear in the beginning or end of their texts and cannot be changed in any way.

On this occasion, I chose the following lines from *The Door in the Wall* by H. G. Wells:

There are times when I believe that Wallace was no more than a victim of the coincidence between a rare type of hallucination and a careless trap, but that indeed is not my profoundest belief. I am more than half convinced that he had, in truth, an abnormal gift.

This replication of exam conditions was purposeful: although I was convinced that the cooperative groups would contribute to the development of my learners' writing skills, they still needed to pass this partial exam and, more crucially, they needed to perceive that this innovation was useful to help them pass this test in the first place. In this sense, while the assignment topic and the exam conditions responded to the nature of writing assessment in this setting, the cooperative groups that I describe next portray the process-orientated and social conception of L2 writing to which I adhered.

I now describe the procedure. For the implementation of this adaptation, learners brought their original compositions together with enough photocopies for all classmates. As learners were familiar with the strategy because we had already used it several times, they proceeded in small groups. Otherwise, I recommend a whole-class session first, with the teacher assuming the role of group member. The specific instructions the students received follow. In parentheses and *italic*, I include (when necessary) some simplifications and paraphrases to make the instructions suitable to less knowledgeable learners regarding the meta-language of coherence. Teachers may use the original version of this handout, its simplification (which appears in parentheses and *italic*) or both (i.e. meta-language plus explanation).

Cooperative writing response groups

Focus on coherence or global aspects of composing

Objective: To revise aspects related to the coherence (overall impression) of a written text.

Directions

- Take turns to read your compositions aloud to group members. Read your complete narrative once. Group members listen and read, following the text in the photocopies.
- Reread your composition paragraph by paragraph. As you do so, group members give feedback to the author using the following guidelines:
- State your overall impression of this text so far as coherence is concerned.
(What global impression does this text create for you? Does it make sense as a whole?)
- Identify the elements that contribute to the coherence of this text in your opinion.
(Identify the elements that contribute to this impression in your opinion.)
- Think about your knowledge of the formal requirements of narratives. Does this story have the prototypical elements of the macrostructure of stories? How hard/easy was it for you to identify these elements? Justify your answers.
(Think about your knowledge of how narratives are constructed. Does this story have the typical elements necessary for a story to be a story (such as events, problem, resolution, etc.)? How hard/easy was it for you to identify these elements? Justify your answers.)
- Does this text combine this macrostructure with any pattern of textual organisation (for example, the problem–solution pattern in story writing)?
(This question can be omitted if students lack some background in text patterns in L2 writing.)
- How does the presence or the lack of a title impact on your interpretation of this text?
- Inspect the text again and find examples of the following:
 - Natural order *(What happened first? And after that? Is this ordering natural? If not, why not? What catches your attention?)*.
 - Point of view in a story *(Through whose eyes is the story told?)*.

- The principle of local interpretation and analogy (*The principle that says that everything – characters, time, place, etc. – remains the same unless you are told otherwise*).
- Inference (*The writer cannot put everything on paper. What has he or she left out? Can you supply what is missing without difficulty?*).
- Pragmatic ambiguity (*Does the text make you doubt at any point? Are there two possible interpretations at any point for any part of this story? Where? Why? Is this a problem?*).
- Relevance/irrelevance (*Identification of important and auxiliary information*).
- Redundancy (*Repetition of ideas, repetition of words and phrases*).
- Contradictory information (*One part of the text contradicts another*).
- Creation of a basis for reader prediction (*Does the story contain words or phrases that help you predict what is coming next, for example 'first, after that, in the end, you'll never guess what happened' followed by an event, etc.?*).
- Fulfilment (or lack of fulfilment) of expectations created (*Does the writer do everything he or she anticipated? For instance, if you learn that a character did something for two reasons, can you find these reasons in the text?*).
- Consideration of address: presence or absence of writer/reader (*Does the writer address any part of the text to you as a reader, for instance through expressions such as 'You won't believe what happened' or direct questions to you such as 'Do you know what happened?'*).
- Denials (*Where does the writer negate something? Why does he or she do this? Do you believe in or agree with the statement being denied? This may help you explain the reason for the denial*).
- Any other aspect that you notice with respect to coherence (*Overall impression*).
- How do these choices reflect this writer's intentions, identity and background? What is your basis for saying this? (*In which ways does this story reflect some characteristics about its writer such as age, gender, sociocultural background, religious or other affiliations, etc.? How did you realise this was the case?*)
- On the basis of your own background and identity as writer, choose one element of coherence from this text that is unclear to you and justify your reasons for this lack of understanding. What would you have needed to know, as the reader of this text, to be able to follow

it better? (*From your perspective as a reader of this story, which elements/parts are unclear to you? What would you have needed to know, as reader of this text, to be able to follow it better?*)

- Ask the author to reread confusing parts, ask questions, ask for clarification, give your opinion, give examples, make suggestions for improvement on these aspects, etc.
- Take turns telling the author your responses, for the author to write down as needed.

Note: The focus is on content, meaning and overall coherence not on grammar, mechanics or style.

By asking questions, asking for clarification, giving their opinion, making suggestions for improvement and providing examples, group members played the role of readers and found value in each piece of writing. Members responded as genuine readers of work in progress, challenging ideas, raising questions, pinpointing problematic aspects and so on before linguistic aspects were considered. Authors revised and redrafted their work on the basis of the feedback obtained from group members, and these revisions were used in another cycle of cooperative writing response groups, this time with a focus on cohesion, that is, a linguistic focus (which I do not report here). Notice again that this focus on coherence *first* aimed at re-directing the learners' attention away from linguistic aspects, which were so ingrained in this educational setting. Learners revised their texts on the basis of the feedback obtained and wrote a final version of their stories.

A caveat here refers to the use of specific terminology in the instructions. My learners, as student teachers of English, were familiar with the terms used. With students who are unfamiliar with these terms, problematic concepts can be simplified through paraphrasing, for instance. I show possible simplifications in parentheses and italic in the handout. In the section that analyses one student sample, I also show the type of scaffolding that took place in my classroom when using this strategy. Outside this undergraduate course, I have personally used this adaptation in the teaching of English as a foreign language to young adult learners in contexts other than this college setting (adolescent literacy and adult literacy within ELT). Added to this, the heavy narrative component in the course I teach made the implementation with narrative texts natural. However, the strategy can be used with a multiplicity of text types (e.g. non-narrative informational, narrative-informational and other texts) and a variety of genres in order to the suit specific course requirements in other educational contexts.

Benefits

In addition to the benefits described in Porto (2001, 2002), this extension of cooperative writing response groups develops the learners' awareness of how written discourse is created in using language to communicate in a foreign language and, concomitantly, which aspects readers take into account when interpreting this written discourse. Sensitivity to how written discourse works is achieved here through observation, critical inspection of data (i.e. the learners' written texts), illustration on the basis of such data, interaction with the data, analysis, reflection, discussion and collaboration (Carter and McCarthy 1995). The strategy provides learners with the opportunity to experience how discourse works in practical terms, away from the traditional methods of instruction in this university, such as the teacher-fronted, lecture-based, theoretical, whole-class lessons typical in this setting. As a hands-on, experiential strategy, cooperative writing response groups are motivating and engaging. In addition, the strategy integrates the processes involved in the comprehension and production of written discourse because learners perform varying roles in one lesson: they are writers, readers of their own texts, assessors of their own written productions, readers of the texts of others (peers) and assessors of these texts. This integration of reading and writing in the classroom rests on the idea that this combination is more effective than their independent teaching and practice (DiPardo and Schnack 2004). Overall, what is important to emphasise here is that the overall approach to writing lends itself to generative and dynamic response. Finally, as I will show later, learners grow as human beings, that is, they become more aware of others and grow in sensitivity regarding how others influence one's own views in different ways.

An application: insights related with coherence

Using one student's narrative text, I offer now a general description of the insights that my learners gained about the notion of coherence in written discourse through the cooperative writing response group sessions. For the reader's convenience, I signal paragraphs in parentheses and use numbers to indicate lines. I will refer to these line numbers in the analysis.

(First paragraph)

(1) There are times when I believe that Wallace was no more than a victim of the coincidence between a rare type of hallucination and a careless trap, but that indeed is not my profoundest belief. I am more than half convinced that he had, in truth, an abnormal gift.

(Second paragraph)

(4) Since I have left my family's home several decades ago I have always lived a rather solitary life. Being from a small town in the Blue Mountains I

felt to have no other choice than to break off those ties that were my ball and chain.

(Third paragraph)

(7) I became a swagman and the bush became my new home. Loneliness never seemed a price too high to pay for my freedom and I never expected it to change. But life is like a wild river – you never know what expects you behind the next bend.

(Fourth paragraph)

(10) And so one day my life came to one of those bends. It was a rough time in the Northern Territory and rough hands like mine were needed from time to time. One of those opportunities brought me to Wallace, a place full of red-necks, wretched prostitutes and rich white farmers getting drunk.

(Fifth paragraph)

(13) I chose not to stay in one of the hotels in town – you never know what kind of surprise expects you there – and preferred to camp about three miles up the creek that gives the place its name.

(Sixth paragraph)

(15) Already half asleep I was suddenly woken up by a strange, rattling sort of noise from somewhere near the water. Impossible to tell whether I really heard it or if it was just my paranoid imagination. Still wondering what might have caused the noise I carefully climbed down the steep riverbank avoiding any suspicious sound.

(Seventh paragraph)

(19) What I found there in an old breadbasket between the roots of a nearby tree was not only the most beautiful gift I ever received, but also a key to the most amazing secrets of life. I named the little boy Wallace, after the place where I found him. (Amadeus [pseudonym], 10 October 2008; reproduced with permission)

I include in this section some examples of the kind of comments and reflections generated by the first step of the cooperative writing response group sessions with a focus on coherence. For the sake of clarity, this description follows the order of presentation in the handout. Although some of the understandings that became manifest were highly familiar and simple concepts, the fact that these concepts were tied to the concrete examples in the text made them appear even more readily ordinary and simple. At the same time, the straightforwardness and accessibility of the insights that follow show two things: first, that these student teachers became more accurate and sophisticated in how they discussed simple issues in theoretically appropriate ways (for instance, they learned the specific names of the principles, resources and so on behind what they observed in the written productions); second, that the strategy can be helpful to ordinary learners in different contexts, that is, learners who are not student teachers, as is the case here.

To begin with, it was clear that Amadeus' text follows the stereotypical chronological ordering for narratives, that is, it is natural to put the event that happened first before the event that followed it. So we read that, first,

the narrator left home; then he became a swagman; then he arrived in Wallace; then he found a little boy. Any learner may benefit from the explicit awareness of such a simple issue because, in general, knowledge of this kind is mostly intuitive through experience with L1 use.

In relation to specific descriptions, we discussed the fact that because ordering is determined by salience, the most salient entity is mentioned first:

Whole – Part/Component:

Northern territory — Blue Mountains

Blue Mountains — Wallace

Wallace — creek

Creek — riverbank

Large – Small:

territory — town

town — hotel/creek

Learners had a brief but interesting discussion here about whether what a writer perceives as salient is the same as what a reader perceives as such, about whether this salience could vary among individuals and, if it could, what effects this would have on themselves as readers and writers. They pointed out that sociocultural background could be one important factor, implying that the members of different cultures, in particular cultures markedly unlike their own, may conceive of salience differently. I jumped into the discussion at this juncture, directing their attention to how their own background (sociocultural and other) had narrowed the options of what they could perceive as salient in this particular context. This involved awareness of how members of other cultures may perceive things differently from themselves, including members from different subcultures within their national culture. This was a significant issue for my learners because they discovered, through this discussion, that they held the idea that a different culture had to be located outside the boundaries of their own country. I made the point that one classroom in their province could host learners from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds such as indigenous populations, the descendants of immigrants from neighbouring countries, from Peru, Asia (Korea, Taiwan) or some African nations, the children of homeless farmers or rural workers in precarious conditions, children from neighbourhoods stigmatised as low or dangerous, gypsies, migrants from other provinces, etc. We discussed what might be salient in Amadeus' text for some of these groups, and in so doing realised how hard it is to put oneself in someone

else's shoes and see the world through their eyes. This led to a first attempt at genuine sensitivity toward otherness. This initial discussion was very inspiring, and my learners came back to it over and over again in their analysis of the issues that follow to conclude that the culture matrix is clearly complex and extremely influential in how people read and write in any language.

In reference to the principles of local interpretation and analogy, learners took the two sentences in the second paragraph to describe related events, happening adjacently in time and situated adjacently in place: the family's home is in the Blue Mountains; several decades ago he broke ties; the referent for *I* is the same in both sentences. As the readers of this text, my learners assumed that the place, for instance, remains the same up to the fourth paragraph, where the writer explicitly mentions that now the action happens in Wallace. Here, what they learned were basically the technical terms. For more inexperienced learners, however, that assumption might not be seen as such a straightforward fact and would therefore become an interesting discovery.

My learners also drew inferences (Shiro 1994), some of which were automatic and seen as filling in missing links, which required no additional processing effort. For instance, from *I have left my family's home* (1.4), these inferences were made:

- *I* is a human individual
- He is not at home now (from *left*)
- He did not live alone (from *family*)
- Ties are broken (from knowledge or experience that family ties can be broken)

By contrast, other inferences were not directly supported by the language used, such as:

- The *I* has left his home for a reason (from our knowledge of the world)
- If you leave your home, you need a new home (the bush became my new home, 1.7) (from our knowledge of the world)
- If you leave home, you can be lonely

Some other inferences, however, required more effort to derive and varied from individual to individual depending on a multiplicity of social, cultural, economic, educational and other factors. Prompted by the question, 'What can you say about the *I*?', learners mentioned that he is middle-aged (from *several decades ago*), that he is male (from *swagman*) and that he is probably big or works in the open air (from *rough hands*). The question, 'What can we say about ethnicity?' resulted in interesting inferences: he may be

an Indian from Australia because of the place (*Northern Territory*), because of his particular physical characteristics (*rough hands*) and because of the contrast with the *rich white farmers* (1.12).

A revealing insight was the discovery that there were some things that this author deliberately chose to leave unsaid – as reflected by some of the questions that group members asked Amadeus at different points in her text:

- *several decades ago* (1.4): When exactly? At what age?
- *those ties* (1.5–6): Which ties? Family ties? Which family ties?
- Why did you need to break those ties?

Although Amadeus answered these questions in the cooperative groups, it became clear to everybody that, at these points in her text, group members could take on Amadeus' role as author and become authors themselves, filling in the gaps with their own information, each group member providing significant points from different idiosyncratic perspectives. As each reader in the group shared their individual responses and expectations in relation to the questions posed to Amadeus, the role played by social, cultural, economic, educational and other factors, as well as by personal experiences and identity issues, in comprehension came to the surface.

Another revelation came from the awareness that sometimes gaps of this kind may become a serious problem. Acting as a group member, I guided the discussion in this direction with the following questions: 'What do you notice in relation to the word *gift* in the first and last paragraphs? What happens here? Are we told at any point in this text what this abnormal gift is?' Through analysis, reflection and collaboration, learners realised that, in all previous texts that we had shared (i.e. other learners' compositions), we had witnessed the writers making a reference to a strange, peculiar or abnormal event or characteristic about Wallace. So we had read about Wallace doing something strange or abnormal, or causing something strange or abnormal to happen, or there was something peculiar in his personality, etc. Here, however, learners came to the conclusion that the word *gift* in the last paragraph referred to the little boy himself and not to something abnormal about him. After this realisation, the questions addressed to Amadeus as writer of this text, as well as all group members, flowed: 'What is the problem with the word *gift*? Is this a gap in understanding? If so, what kind of gap is this? Can we as readers supply the missing link to understand the text? How hard is it for us to do so? Is it necessary that we as readers supply the necessary information for the text to be coherent? Or can this be an open gap, i.e. one that does not need to be resolved during reading?' The conclusion reached was that this gap needed to be addressed by the author in a revision, as it was of such significance that attempting to interpret the text had required an enormous amount of time and effort on the part of group members.

All these issues about inference led group members to talk about another related topic, namely, relevance, irrelevant information and redundancy. One of the most troubling concerns in this respect was related to the question of how relevant it was to mention that farmers were *white*. This choice of an apparently simple and neutral lexical item generated insightful discussion. Reflections about the cultural appropriateness of this inclusion abounded. It took learners some time to realise that the very notion of referring to *white* would be strange in our culture simply because only in a culture in which whiteness is a distinctive characteristic would it be mentioned. So *white* would only be schematically significant in a culture in which *white* has a certain significance. The implication is that, if you live in a culture where everybody is white, then you do not need to mention *white* farmers. Group members realised, with my help, that this reflected a cultural reality or, in other words, that they as readers needed to be in the know about this cultural reality in order to be able to interpret *white* in this context. They asked each other, 'Is it relevant to mention *white* here?' The answer was positive, which led them to explore the implications. 'Would Amadeus have needed to include this word if she had decided to locate the narrative in our country?' they asked themselves. The discussion ended with a brief reference to the topic of global and social justice, considering that *white* is the privileged or unmarked race in many contexts worldwide. My learners were not aware of this reality and this piece of writing inspired them to address issues of racism, prejudice, bias and discrimination on the basis of one of the multiple identifications of an individual, in this case ethnicity. The analysis then moved to other aspects of a person's identity that could be addressed under the notion of social justice, such as identifications in terms of gender, social class, educational, historical, and cultural background, religion, sexual orientation, physical appearance and special capacities, among others. From this perspective, this strategy allowed for much more than literacy development in English.

Readers concluded that Amadeus appeared to be an expert writer as she overtly showed consideration of her readers through the use of different lexical and grammatical resources. For instance, she created a basis for reader prediction, fulfilled these commitments to her readers and therefore did not disappoint them (Johns 1994; Tadros 1994). After *But life is like a wild river* (1.8), we find a reason. *One day my life came to one of those bends* is followed by a description of the bend. After *What I found there in an old breadbasket* (1.19) is the subsequent identifying and naming.

In addition, she used hedges (expressions of tentativeness) (Hyland 1996) to signal an invitation to her readers to participate in dialogue, leaving room for negotiation. The expressions of tentativeness abounded in this text: *a rather solitary life* (14); *Loneliness never seemed a price* (1.7); *kind of surprise* (1.13); *somewhere near* (1.15–16); *really* (1.16); and *might have caused* (1.17). The discussion here focused on how learners may appear

through their linguistic choices in writing and how all writers, consciously or unconsciously, project their identities as writers. In other words, the expressions of tentativeness, or the lack of them, precisely show how tentative (hesitant, cautious) or assertive (authoritative, self-assured, determined) a writer has chosen to appear to be, in each case along a continuum (more or less tentative, more or less assertive).

Finally, Amadeus identified some parts of her text which she thought might be confusing, dubious or ambiguous for readers, and parts that were likely to be misinterpreted, and then cancelled potentially wrong interpretations by denying the propositions that readers might wrongly entertain or infer from the text (Pagano 1994). For instance: *no other choice* (1.5); *never* (1.7, 8, 13); and *chose not to stay* (1.13). Group members realised that if Amadeus explicitly denied staying in a hotel, it is because the normal state of affairs shared by readers in this community, in this particular sociocultural setting, is that when you are out of town you stay in a hotel. So as a writer, she carefully and wisely decided to point out that the narrator did not stay in a hotel but camped. This is a denial of the readers' expectations based on their knowledge of the world, and a clear example of the interactive nature of the use of negatives in written discourse (ibid). Obviously, Amadeus could have denied different things depending on her assessment of what different readers would know, assume or entertain.

After all groups finished their discussions, we came together as a whole class for the final remarks. It became clear to all learners that the elements they had talked about in their groups contributed to helping them as readers make the text coherent. At all times during this step in the cooperative groups, both Amadeus and group members gained a sophisticated awareness of the processes of reading and writing. What became evident in all cases was the fact that, in the process of interpretation, although the language narrows down the possibilities, inevitably we are left to our human judgement to decide how comprehension should proceed in each case. As readers of Amadeus' text, learners realised that they all interpreted the text differently, depending on a multiplicity of factors that far exceeded the words on the page. One student, Martina, made an interesting discovery in that even an interpretation of a demonstrative (like *there* in the text, she said) requires an estimate of the writer's beliefs and intentions at the time of writing. On the basis of this analysis, she expressed how perplexed she was by the fact that interpretation could be so vague and open at times, resolvable only to the extent that the writer's intentions can be reconstructed. Ultimately, we all concluded, it is guesses about what the writer intended the reader to assume or to infer that determine what will be comprehended from a text. What the cooperative writing groups did was give life to the writer's perspectives.

Final remarks

These cooperative writing response groups grew out of my need to seek a viable alternative to the unsettling state of affairs described at the beginning of this article. As classroom/action research by an individual teacher, this project allowed me to take direct control of my classroom. I had anticipated that learners would resist an innovation that did not seem to address their urgent concerns with the linguistic aspects of composing and, consequently, apparently failed to be of immediate help with their course requirements. Recall that the cooperative writing response group assignments were in addition to the required 350-word timed task the learners needed to pass. Learners needed time to see the value of the innovation, and this required patience and commitment from me, as the teacher of this course. Although I was committed to fulfilling my purposes even when these were in conflict with those of the curriculum, I knew that I was putting myself in a situation whereby I could expect to be questioned. In the context of lecture-based instruction, whole-class teacher-fronted sessions, heavy exam preparation with grammar exercises, and a great deal of exercise correction, introducing this innovation generated strong psychological tension in me (Festinger 1957). To my surprise, the learners welcomed the change. I expected to find unbearable resistance because I knew that they would experience a similar kind of dissonance to the one I had gone through (*ibid*). However, I was faced with learners who, after some understandable perplexity and distrust, gradually became receptive. Here, I speculate that the role of the family in supporting literacy, as revealed by their responses to the questionnaire about reading in the L1 and L2, may have been important in alleviating this dissonance. For a description of how the learners and the institution have responded to the cooperative groups, see Porto (2001, 2002).

Conclusion

In these cooperative writing response groups focused on coherence, learners made exhaustive comments about each of the elements identified in the written instructions they received. Their reflections, observations, questions and opinions were deep and varied. When they found an issue interesting, they pursued and refined it with a capacity for criticality and reflexivity that I did not think they possessed as a result of years of schooling in an educational system that did not encourage this kind of critical analysis. My learners clearly benefited from the implementation of this strategy in our EFL classroom because they grew as L2 readers and writers in different ways. The cooperative writing response groups resulted in incredibly interesting feedback about the coherence in this student sample text. Ultimately, however, it was this writer's job to decide what elements of the feedback to take up, and what to omit, in order to edit her piece and write a final version.

The activity also revealed the fascinating ways in which each individual wrote and the different ways in which they used the elements of coherence, all idiosyncratic, but interesting in their own terms.

The richest potential outcome of these cooperative writing response groups is that the learners grow as human beings and discover things about themselves and others beyond their own imagination. One student wrote in her reflective journal:

It really never crossed my mind that I had to take so many things into account in my writing. For instance, it had never occurred to me that there might be readers out there who had different backgrounds from my own. What you Melina said about the various backgrounds and origins of the student population in La Plata came as a surprise to me. It made me see how naïve I have always been about my assumptions about my potential readers, and how blind I have been in my personal life not to have paid attention to these different people ever before. (Journal entry, 20 November 2008, reproduced with permission)

Interestingly enough, I did not initially conceive of adapting the cooperative writing response groups that I describe here with this noble aim in mind. I never imagined that this strategy would transcend the academic to impinge upon the lives of my learners. But it did, and that is something worth exploring.

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Appendix: Cooperative writing response groups (from Porto, 2001, 42–3 respectively)

**Cooperative writing response groups
Step I: Content-orientated**

- **Objective:** To revise meaning-related aspects of writing

Directions

- Take turns to read your paragraphs aloud to group members.
- After each author has finished reading her work, group members should complete the following tasks:
 - Write down what you think is the main point
 - Answer the question: ‘What does the author say that is important?’
 - Comment on something you learnt
 - Write down one idea/view you like, and tell the author why you like it
 - Write down one idea/view you disagree with, and offer the author an alternative perspective
 - Ask the author to reread confusing parts, ask questions, ask for clarification, give your opinion, give examples, make suggestions for improvement on content, etc.
 - Take turns telling the author your responses, for the author to write down as needed

Note: The focus is on content and meaning not on grammar, vocabulary or style.

**Cooperative writing response groups
Step II: Language-orientated**

- **Objective:** To revise language-related aspects of writing

Directions

- Take turns to read your paragraphs aloud to group members.
- After each author has finished reading her work, group members should complete the following tasks:

- Write down one word/expression you like, and tell the author why you like it
- Answer the question: What does the author say that is particularly well written, or is written in a special way, or is colourful, or has a personal touch, or ...? Write down one or two examples
- Write down one word/expression you don't know the meaning of, and ask the author about it
- Ask the author to reread confusing parts, ask questions, ask for clarification, give your opinion, give examples, make suggestions for improvement, etc.
- Choose one or two sentences you think can be expressed differently, and make suggestions for improvement. In your group, decide what effects the changes would have on readers
- Take turns telling the author your responses, for the author to write down as needed