June 2021

English as an Additional Language Doctoral Students’ Ongoing Socialization Into Scholarly Writing: How Do Writing Feedback Groups Contribute?

Tracy Griffin Spies  
*University of Nevada Las Vegas*

Yunying Xu  
*University of Nevada Las Vegas*

Fatmana Kara Deniz  
*University of Nevada Las Vegas*

Gloria A. Carcoba-Falomir  
*University of Nevada Las Vegas*

Suheyla Sarisahin  
*University of Nevada Las Vegas*

Follow this and additional works at: [https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/journalrw](https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/journalrw)

🔗 Part of the Rhetoric and Composition Commons

---

**Recommended Citation**

Spies, Tracy Griffin; Xu, Yunying; Deniz, Fatmana Kara; Carcoba-Falomir, Gloria A.; and Sarisahin, Suheyla (2021) "English as an Additional Language Doctoral Students’ Ongoing Socialization Into Scholarly Writing: How Do Writing Feedback Groups Contribute?" *Journal of Response to Writing: Vol. 7 : Iss. 1*, Article 5. Available at: [https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/journalrw/vol7/iss1/5](https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/journalrw/vol7/iss1/5)

---

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of Response to Writing by an authorized editor of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact scholarsarchive@byu.edu, ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu.
English as an Additional Language Doctoral Students’ Ongoing Socialization Into Scholarly Writing: How Do Writing Feedback Groups Contribute?

Tracy Griffin Spies,* PhD
Yunying Xu, MEd
Fatmana Kara Deniz, MEd
Gloria A. Carcoba Falomir, MEd
Suheyla Sarisahin, MEd

University of Nevada Las Vegas

Although international/English as an Additional Language (EAL) doctoral students bring unique academic, professional, cultural, and linguistic strengths to the university setting, for many students, requirements to produce scholarly writing in English is a source of stress. This case study examined how a writing feedback group supported the language socialization of four international/EAL doctoral students into scholarly writing through a qualitative research design framed in participatory action research. Three primary themes emerged from the data: (a) the writing feedback group became a social, collegial, and supportive space contributing to international/EAL doctoral students’ evolving development and persistence as doctoral students and scholarly writers; (b) participation in ongoing feedback loops as both an author and a reader provided students opportunities to advance in their writing skills and mature in their persistence; and (c) feedback loops facilitated appreciation for the scholarly writing process. Findings highlight the need for institutes of higher education to diversify international/EAL students’ doctoral experiences.

Over the past 40 years, the number of international students seeking graduate education in the United States has steadily increased. During the 2019–2020 academic year, approximately 350,000 international students were enrolled in graduate programs in U.S. institutes of higher education (Israel & Batlova, 2021). These students often come from countries in which English is not the native or primary language. For many of these graduate students, English is an additional language (EAL).

Doctoral requirements to produce scholarly writing in English make some students apprehensive. Students often report anxiety surrounding written academic discourse, noting frustration and embarrassment (Cotterall, 2013). Doctoral students are expected to gain disciplinary content knowledge and methodologies as well as acquire the discipline’s associated discourse conventions (Hyland, 2011). Distress may be internally sourced through self-identified mismatches or an unfamiliarity with English academic discourse (Duff, 2010; Elliot et al., 2016). It may also be externally sourced through interactions and experiences with dominant power structures, particularly in environments replete with exclusionary discourse (Morita, 2009).

Increasing expectations require doctoral students to publish and present research as part of their program of study. Journal publications have replaced dissertation requirements at some universities and are a benchmark for program completion (Badley, 2009). Evidence that publications during doctoral studies predict later publication trajectories in academia has led to universities requiring a minimum number of scholarly publications for beginning assistant professor positions (Dinham & Scott, 2001). Publishing during doctoral studies not only has critical implications for employment but sets the foundation for life in academia (Cho, 2004).

Developing a better understanding of how to support EAL doctoral students’ development as scholarly writers is important for helping
students progress timely through doctoral studies and be competitive in the job market. Supporting these students will also help ensure that their voices and research are included in future academic literature, which is dominated by publications in English (Hyland, 2011). Emerging research points to writing groups as one element of doctoral studies that can support EAL students as they mature in scholarly writing. Writing groups have been found to contribute to students’ development of self-efficacy and self-confidence as academic writers (Li & Vandermensbrugghe, 2011). Furthermore, the feedback process provides for students’ ongoing academic development through coaching, modeling, and scaffolding (Wang & Li, 2011).

Research on writing feedback has tended to focus on students’ response to feedback (e.g., Wisker et al., 2009), the role of relationships in the feedback process (e.g., Wang & Li, 2011), and unidirectional written feedback rather than bidirectional oral feedback. Additional studies are needed on the nature of bidirectional oral feedback and its impact on developing the scholarly writing community. Our aim is to examine the role of writing feedback groups in the ongoing socialization of EAL doctoral students into scholarly writing. In this paper, we seek to understand the influence of ongoing, bidirectional feedback in a group setting on EAL doctoral students’ scholarly writing attitudes, values, habits, and skills.

**Theoretical Framework**

As individuals pursue membership into a specific community, they are socialized into its exclusive norms through interactions with members. Socialization is the ongoing acquisition of the attitudes, values, norms, knowledge, and skills characteristic of the target community (Austin, 2002). Socialization during graduate education captures the curricular knowledge, skills, and normative dispositions of the postsecondary education and the professional careers that students seek (Weidman et al., 2001).
Scholarly writing is a core element of socializing into doctoral studies. Doctoral studies demand a significant amount of writing, and students must write in academic discourse. Academic discourse encompasses the distinct genres, registers, linguistic structures, and interactional patterns that are prioritized, privileged, and expected in academic and professional settings (Duff, 2010). It is distinct and has profound social, cultural, institutional, and historical foundations (Duff, 2010; Leki, 2007).

Language socialization is the explicit and implicit mentoring of members regarding the normative use of the language, ideologies, values, and identities of community members (Duff, 2010). Academic discourse socialization, a subset of language socialization, focuses on the social processes, negotiation, and interactions surrounding learners as they acquire academic discourse. For EAL doctoral students, academic discourse socialization is particularly important. The target academic discourse is normally not conducted in an EAL student’s native language and, in fact, may have features and conventions that are distinctly different (e.g., the linear vs. circular writing approach; Hoang & Ma, 2019).

This study is guided by the view that socialization is an interactive, dialectical process through which students develop their roles by engaging with others (Staton & Darling, 1989). Socialization frameworks offer a way to view the writing feedback group as one mechanism through which doctoral EAL students come to adapt to the ways that academic scholars think, behave, and write. Specifically, a writing feedback group can serve as a frame to examine the influence of ongoing, bidirectional feedback in a group setting on EAL doctoral students’ attitudes, values, habits, and skills regarding scholarly writing.

**Review of the Literature**

When compared to research regarding domestic doctoral students, the research literature related to the process of supporting international/EAL doctoral students’ scholarly writing is in its infancy. Much of the research

---

surrounding international students is focused on graduate-level students, including those who are in the early stages of their postgraduate studies. This literature review highlights current findings related to (a) the impact of writing groups and writing centers on students and (b) feedback on students’ writing development.

**Writing Groups and Writing Centers**

Writing groups and writing centers help students develop their scholarly writing. Writing groups show promise in meeting the unique needs of international/EAL doctoral students, as many of their needs are related to building essential skills, knowledge, and the confidence to write academically (Ku et al., 2008; Li & Vandermensbrugghe, 2011). For example, Li and Vandermensbrugghe’s (2011) study on the effects of an ongoing writing group for international students who were writing their theses found that the students became more comfortable writing in English and sharing their writing. They also found students maintained consistency in their writing practice and began to develop a sense of efficacy and self-confidence as academic writers as a result of the group (Li & Vandermensbrugghe, 2011).

Writing centers are designed to serve students across all academic disciplines and educational levels. Writing centers provide services to help students produce highly complex and technical academic writing (Okuda & Anderson, 2018). They may also offer research and plagiarism workshops to improve international/EAL students’ academic writing and research skills (Chen & Van Ullen, 2011). However, research has suggested that writing centers at the university level are not equipped to meet the specific academic writing needs of international/EAL doctoral students, particularly discipline-specific writing support (Okuda & Anderson, 2018) or academic publishing guidance (Cho, 2004).

**Writing Feedback on Scholarly Writing**

Feedback plays an essential role in socializing students into academic discourse—particularly into the norms, preferences, and expectations...
of writing within a specific discipline. Feedback provides corrective and evaluative information about students’ writing with the aim to develop and improve the writing. Students’ initial experiences with the feedback process, particularly their first experiences with a supervisor questioning their work, often lead to a loss of confidence (Wisker et al., 2009). Although feedback may evoke negative feelings, Wisker et al. (2010) posited that feedback is critical to the threshold-crossing process through which doctoral students (a) begin to understand writing and feedback loops and (b) learn to amend associated tension and apprehension.

Multiple studies have examined international/EAL doctoral students’ response to and experiences with feedback. For international/EAL students, the initial stages of producing writing carry additional emotional and psychological weight as they combat their insecurities with scholarly writing in English. In Wei et al.’s (2019) study of 80 doctoral students, students expressed anxiety both before and after submitting their work to their advisors. Wang and Li (2011) found PhD students tended to respond to feedback in one of two ways: Students who were frustrated by the feedback process were uncertain how to move forward in their writing, whereas students who were inspired by the process felt confident in their next steps.

The relationships international/EAL doctoral students have with feedback providers may influence how these students receive and utilize feedback. Wang and Li (2011) examined the feedback experiences of eight international PhD students and two professional doctoral students. Students who reported positive experiences with feedback maintained supervisory-mentor relationships with their advisors, while students who reported negative experiences held more apprentice-master relationships with their advisors. Furthering the research on relationships in the feedback process, Yang (2016) and Chen (2010) found that international/EAL graduate students are likely to incorporate feedback from peers.

One purpose of the feedback process is to close the gap between current levels of performance and expected levels of achievement (Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006). Opinions vary as to whether feedback should

be oral, written, or both. Although most recommendations on scholarly writing are presented from the perspective of supervisors, some literature incorporates students’ perceptions of helpful feedback (Odena & Burgess, 2017). Productive feedback is personalized, supports independent learning, and moves students forward (Odena & Burgess, 2017). Too often, however, feedback is unidirectional and is described as incomplete, unclear, demotivating (Duff & Anderson, 2015), and lacking opportunity for discussion (Stracke & Kumar, 2020).

The empirical literature related to the socialization of international/EAL doctoral students is limited in scope when compared to that of U.S. domestic students (Wang & Li, 2011); this area of research, however, is promising. Writing centers, although well-established and part of common university practice, may not be equipped to address the unique continuum of writing challenges international/EAL doctoral students face. Evidence suggests that supportive writing groups build students’ confidence in scholarly writing and help establish consistent writing habits. Feedback for EAL students is also an important avenue by which students learn to navigate new academic genres, formats, and styles (Duff & Anderson, 2015). The impact of oral feedback on EAL doctoral students’ development is limited but should not be overlooked. Specifically for EAL students, the juncture between oral and written discourse can support students’ understanding, help them produce academic literacies (i.e., complex, multimodal texts for academic purposes), and guide their broader socialization into the academic community (Duff & Anderson, 2015). Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to better understand the influence of consistent, bidirectional feedback in a group setting on EAL doctoral students’ ongoing socialization into scholarly writing.

**Methods**

This study employed a qualitative research design framed in participatory action research. Participatory action research (PAR) is a form of action research in which researchers participate fully with community members...
to study and transform a community (Greenwood et al., 1993). PAR is a powerful research methodology that advances scientific knowledge and practices as both parties (i.e., researchers and community members) engage in decision-making and full collaboration (Whyte, 2011). To follow the PAR framework, the authors of this article participated in the writing feedback group.

A case study approach was selected to develop a comprehensive understanding of how the writing feedback group contributed to the ongoing socialization of EAL doctoral students into scholarly writing. This approach is appropriate for this study because it allowed the researchers to examine the object of study “from many angles and attempt to understand the interconnectedness of the elements comprising it” (Thomas & Myers, 2015, p. 15).

Participants

This study took place at a public university in the southwest United States. Four EAL students who were enrolled in different PhD programs within one college participated in this study. Although all of the EAL doctoral students self-identified as international students because they had come to study in the U.S. as adults, some were employed prior to their studies and were therefore not officially designated as being international students within the university. To accurately capture all the participants in the case, international/EAL doctoral students will be used to refer to the doctoral students who participated in this study.

Nicole is a Turkish EAL doctoral student whose first language was Turkish. At the time of the study she was in her first year of doctoral studies in the university’s special education program and had experiences in academic writing stemming from her coursework assignments (e.g., literature reviews, conference proposals) when she joined the writing feedback group. She successfully published one article after one year in the writing group. She worked at the university as a teaching assistant.

Vicki was a Mexican EAL doctoral student whose first language was Spanish. She was in her second year of doctoral studies in the special

education program and had completed one publication and two conference presentation proposals when she joined the writing feedback group. She worked at the university as a research assistant.

Pearl was a Turkish EAL doctoral student whose first language was Turkish. She was in her third year of doctoral studies in the special education program and had submitted one journal article and a written conference proposal when she joined the writing feedback group. She had one accepted journal article after one year in the writing group. She worked at the university as a teaching assistant.

Lucy was a Chinese EAL doctoral student whose first languages were Mandarin and Cantonese. She was in her fourth year of doctoral studies in the curriculum and instruction program, had published three peer-reviewed articles, and had presented at five conferences when she joined the writing feedback group. She worked at the university as a research assistant.

Emily was an associate professor, born in the U.S., whose first language was English and whose second language was Spanish. She served as either these international/EAL doctoral students’ doctoral advisor or as their supervisor in their work as research assistants on grant-funded projects. Emily’s educational and research background focused on the academic language development of bilingual students. During the writing feedback group, Emily sought to be a colleague as well as an active writing participant, both giving and receiving feedback on scholarly writing.

It is important to note that all of the participants knew one another and Emily before the writing feedback group began. Participants had been in classes together or worked on the same grant-funded projects. Emily had served in an advisory capacity but had not worked with students specifically on scholarly writing.

Writing Feedback Group

The writing feedback group was collaboratively established around individual and group commitments. Individual group members committed to write intentionally and deliberately, as well as to seek and give meaningful feedback.
feedback on writing. As a group, we committed to hold one another accountable for consistent writing and to encourage one another toward achieving writing goals.

The writing feedback group met once per week for two hours during the fall and spring semesters and followed a consistent structure: (a) 15 minutes of social conversation, (b) 10 minutes of sharing writing successes from the week, (c) 15 minutes of individual feedback per group member, and (d) 15 minutes of reflection and goal setting.

Each session, members of the writing feedback group brought one or two pages of writing from their ongoing writing projects for feedback and asked group members to read for, and provide feedback on, specific concerns the writer was seeking to address (e.g., clarity, organization, and word choice). Participants were not limited in the type of writing they brought to the group; however, the majority of writing pieces were articles to submit for publication. Several academic resources and texts were used to guide the structure and feedback components of the group (e.g., Belcher, 2009; Goodson, 2017).

Participants received limited initial training on requesting and giving feedback. Training took place prior to the first writing feedback session. Students were provided guidance on what types of feedback they might request from the group. In giving feedback, the training focused on starting and ending positively, providing feedback specific to the request, and providing specific examples and support to ensure the writer left the session motivated and secure in their next steps. Over the course of the year, students were provided “just in time” strategies to help support and guide recurring challenges in their writing (e.g., identifying key sentences, transitioning).

Data Sources

The analysis of this study comes from three sources of data: semistructured individual interviews, a focus group interview, and journal entry reflections. The semistructured interviews and the focus group primarily addressed questions about students’ fears and challenges, the role of the group in their
development as writers, and the role of the group’s feedback in their writing (see Appendix for sample questions). In total, four individual interviews and one focus group were conducted after IRB approval. Group members also completed journal entries after feedback sessions to reflect on their learning and growth as scholarly writers. Journal entries addressed how feedback sessions impacted individuals’ goals for the following week and how the writing feedback group supported writers’ efforts to overcome previous challenges. Thirty-three journal entries were collected.

Data Preparation and Analysis

The focus group and the individual interviews were transcribed and imported into the data-coding software Dedoose for analysis. Deductive thematic analysis was applied to the data-coding process. We based our coding framework on current research findings and available frameworks. Elliot et al.’s (2016) framework captured the informal spaces leading to personal growth and development. Cheung et al.’s (2018) findings influenced initial codes related to student identity as a writer, and Wang and Li’s (2011) findings guided initial codes for the role of feedback in writer development. Table 1 displays the detailed coding framework. After concluding the coding process, we used the constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) to compare the codes across data sources for emergent themes.

Findings

Three primary themes emerged from the data: (a) the writing feedback group became a social, collegial, and supportive space contributing to international/EAL doctoral students’ evolving development and persistence as doctoral students and scholarly writers, (b) participating in ongoing feedback loops as both an author and a reader developed and advanced students’ writing skills and helped students mature in their persistence, and (c) feedback loops facilitated appreciation for the scholarly writing process.

Table 1

**Coding Framework**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Main code</th>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Definition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Influences on self-efficacy</td>
<td>Cultural</td>
<td>Fear of not belonging to a local group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Linguistic</td>
<td>Deciphering accents, nuances, and meaning to ensure the clarity of ideas expressed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Social/relational</td>
<td>Support or validation in times of adversity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Loneliness</td>
<td>Isolation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feedback</td>
<td>Emotion</td>
<td>Perception of feedback</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Relationships</td>
<td>Relationships with the person giving feedback; position and qualifications</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Pedagogical needs</td>
<td>Needs of a person getting feedback</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Negotiation of feedback</td>
<td>Agreement on feedback; use approaches</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Authorial writer identity</td>
<td>Confidence</td>
<td>Self-belief in writing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Value of writing</td>
<td>Appreciation of writing abilities and skills; appreciation of the writing process; value of feedback; value of self-reflection</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ownership/attachment</td>
<td>Having pride in one's work; having their own voice in writing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Authorial thinking</td>
<td>Creative thinking; thinking about the perspective of a reader</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Authorial goals</td>
<td>Writing with an intended audience, message, or point of view in mind</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* This study's framework was adapted from Elliot et al.'s (2016) third-space framework, Wang and Li's (2011) findings on feedback, and Cheung et al.'s (2018) findings on authorial academic writing.
A Social, Collegial, and Supportive Space

The writing feedback group served as a protected “space” for international/EAL doctoral students to procure social and emotional support for the challenges and anxiety they encountered during their doctoral studies. International/EAL doctoral students expressed that participating in the writing feedback group strengthened their persistence as scholarly academic writers. The social, collegial, and supportive relationships amongst themselves nurtured their confidence and motivated them to persist through challenges and setbacks. In a focus group, Nicole and Vicki both expressed this sentiment:

Nicole: I had several moments when I felt this is hard, I can’t do this... I had those negative thoughts, but this support group, the writing group, helped me to be determined. Okay, I can improve. I can do better. I want this. Determination and perseverance, you know.

Vicki: Seeing my friends’ struggles and accomplishments motivates me to continue my journey with confidence.

International/EAL doctoral students attested that they acquired non-cognitive skills as an outcome of the social, collegial, and supportive nature of the writing feedback group. These skills included time management, goal setting, prioritizing, and achieving a greater work–school–life balance. For example, Pearl indicated, “I feel that it [the feedback group] definitely helps with personal growth because we talk about challenges, we set goals, which helps with our time management.”

Although the initial objective of the writing feedback group was specifically developing scholarly writing skills, the supportive space served as a resource for students’ broader growth. It was a place students could be open about their challenges, not only in their writing but also with the balance of being students, instructors, researchers, and members of their individual families.
Ongoing Feedback Loops

The feedback process is considered to be a loop that closes or is complete when there is a marked influence on the feedback recipient and identifiable evidence of improved performance (Moore & Teather, 2013). In the context of this study, feedback loops were operationalized as the back and forth exchanges students engaged in with a group while giving or receiving feedback. Engaging in the ongoing feedback process as both authors and readers aided international/EAL doctoral students by advancing their writing skills and helping them persist in the scholarly writing process.

Feedback Loops as Authors

Engaging in feedback as authors helped students learn how to respond to and utilize feedback. Ongoing feedback provided students the opportunity to work through (the often emotional) initial responses to feedback. Prior to participating in the writing feedback group, international/EAL doctoral students noted that feedback often evoked negative emotional responses. When giving feedback in the writing group, however, participants acknowledged the emotional aspects of feedback and encouraged persistence. Vicki’s words confirmed the emotion connected to writing and feedback:

Vicki: At the beginning, it [feedback] was very emotional. When they were talking about my piece [of writing] and it took me so long to write. All this feedback after I spent so much time [writing], and then I learned, you know what . . . I am just going to learn from it and move forward.

Lucy, aligning with Vicki, revealed an initial negative attitude toward feedback, but she also suggested the feedback group guided her not to personalize the feedback she received:

Lucy: But from this feedback group I learned they [feedback comments] are not harmful because sometime in my mind I was hurt so I demonized those feedbacks. So, in this writing group, I learned a lot on how to deal with this feeling of how not
to isolate myself from getting useful feedback. This feedback group has helped me to realize that feedback shouldn’t be something that you dread.

Over the course of the writing feedback group, international/EAL doctoral students experienced varied uncertainty in their decisions about how and if the feedback they received should be incorporated into their writing. Although building confidence in writing, Vicki, for example, remained uncomfortable negotiating feedback from authority figures such as her advisors. Pearl, on the other hand, started to develop a sense of ownership of her writing and became more comfortable negotiating the feedback she received.

Vicki: If someone gives me feedback, especially from my faculty or advisor, it makes me feel, of course, I am wrong and I will change it. I don’t stop and think he might be [wrong] and defend my point. I think I am starting to feel confident about writing, but I don’t feel that confident to be “No, I am going to defend my absolute point of view.” Yeah, I don’t feel that yet.

Pearl: When someone gave me feedback, I was feeling like I need[ed] to change it because I don’t know enough. But right now, I can actually make a decision, “Is it a good feedback? Is it a good idea?”

Overall, students indicated that their experiences in the writing feedback group helped them learn how to respond to and utilize feedback. Both inside and outside of the group, the international/EAL doctoral students had emotional responses to feedback. Over time, however, students viewed and valued feedback as a learning opportunity. Students responded differently to feedback outside the group, particularly as it related to advisor feedback. Some were more comfortable engaging with their advisors in feedback loops to ensure their voices and messages were heard while others remained reluctant to engage in this type of discourse.

**Feedback Loops as Readers**

Students noted that participating as a reader in feedback sessions expanded their confidence as scholarly writers and guided them toward internalizing writing skills. As international/EAL doctoral students gave feedback regarding how their peers were developing their papers’ arguments, they internalized elements of scholarly writing and generalized those aspects to their own writing. Note the following exchange from the focus group interview:

Vicki: It [giving feedback] helps to develop our critical thinking when a paragraph looks good to you—right—you read and you think, “how can it be better?” You try to look from different perspectives.

Nicole: When we give each other feedback, I am reflecting on my writing. “How can I do it better?”

Lucy: . . . By reading your writing I learned a lot, not only by learning from your experience but in the end also reflect[ing] on my own writing process. I see, “Oh, she wrote this,” and I think maybe I can do this in my writing. Maybe I can start a sentence with this, sometimes even word choice.

The opportunity and expectation to provide feedback to peers had a positive impact on students’ self-confidence as they participated in the feedback process. Participating in the writing feedback group as readers helped international/EAL doctoral students believe they were able to give feedback. Initially, students doubted they were qualified to give feedback:

Pearl: This was the first time we found ourselves in that situation where we were expected to give feedback. Because, through all the doc program, you always receive feedback. What do I tell her? And not having the skills at the beginning to provide feedback [was difficult].

---

Along with Pearl, Vicki also expressed how she had developed her skillset and capacity to give feedback, “It is getting easier for us to give feedback.”

Over time, students repositioned themselves in the feedback process. Initially, international/EAL doctoral students were hesitant to give their peers and mentor feedback. They did not feel they were in the position to give feedback. As Vicki noted:

I didn’t feel and didn’t have the courage to give feedback. . . . it was hard for me to give my own feedback at the beginning because I felt like . . . ‘who am I to give feedback?’ Even though I am two years into the graduate program and they are in the third and fourth [year].

Vicki valued and respected the academic hierarchy inherent to the higher education context, and she did not feel she could play an active role in the feedback process. However, she expressed how giving feedback shifted her self-concept as related to her self-positioning in the feedback process: “I appreciate the opportunity to give my opinions on other people’s work. I know there is a trust component in our writing group that makes this possible. With time, I have felt more confident giving feedback.”

The opportunity to give feedback led to shifts in international/EAL doctoral students’ self-confidence as scholarly writers and heightened their awareness of academic writing skills. The participants realized that whether they were in their first or their last year, they could all approach giving feedback from the perspective of a reader. As a reader, they knew what they needed to understand and follow in an author’s line of argument. This realization, coupled with the relationships and the trust built across the group, developed their confidence in giving feedback. Their observations of what they needed as a reader, in turn, led them to generalize these aspects and perspectives as a reader to their own writings.

Appreciating the Scholarly Writing Process

Giving and receiving feedback facilitated an appreciation for the writing process. Specifically, the writing feedback group helped students appreciate
the importance and demands of high-quality writing and develop a commitment to writing.

**Appreciating the Importance and Demands of High-Quality Writing**

Over the course of the writing feedback group, doctoral international/EAL students began to vocalize their appreciation of high-quality writing. They began to distinguish the elements of high-quality writing from that which was of lesser quality. In addition, they began to generalize the elements of high-quality writing into their papers while acknowledging the effort required to produce exceptional scholarly writing.

Pearl: When I read how they built their arguments . . . I can model it, and if they are not strong in their argument, you don't value [the writing] even if it's a good study. So, I need to get, I need to improve my skills to communicate clearly. Because if I believe in something strongly . . . I have to use the right words; I need to build my argument clearly to communicate.

Nicole: Now when I read articles, I pay attention to certain things—their design . . . “Did they explicitly state their [research] design?” “Did they state their questions?” So it helps me to pay attention to this and I realize when I am writing I need to be as specific as I can be.

The writing feedback group provided international/EAL doctoral students the opportunity to experience the demanding and recursive nature of academic writing. Doctoral students learned initial drafts did not always effectively and precisely communicate the ideas that students were aiming to convey. The ongoing feedback loop process supported doctoral students in refining how they communicated their ideas to ensure the clarity of their messages. For example, Vicki noted, “Now I realize that with this writing group we are developing this [writing] skill. It is a learning process. It is a skill we will all learn.”

More specifically, Lucy expressed how the writing group had helped her better understand the writing process and had changed her writing habits:

---

The writing group has changed me a lot. Before the writing group, my writing process was just, like, I sat down and wrote for a long time, and that is a whole piece. And then, [the] writing group is like, okay, you bring a little piece and then they give you feedback. You go back and you write on that and you incorporate the feedback.

**Developing a Commitment to Writing**

Through the writing group, international/EAL doctoral students deepened their understanding of the dedication and persistence necessary to achieve high-quality writing. Findings indicate that students became aware of distractions that took away from their writing. Pearl noted, “It’s about managing your time; it’s about dealing with your surroundings.”

Further, students began to verbalize how the writing feedback group supported them in developing strategies to overcome challenges in their school–work–life balance and in maintaining a commitment to academic writing regardless of their personal, professional, and student responsibilities. Nicole noted:

In each writing group we talk about our challenges of the week and we set our goals for the next week. That was very helpful for me to manage my time because it was my first year and I am a full-time graduate assistant, I am teaching, I’m taking two classes, and I have a family, I have kids, so there are so many things. Writing sessions were helpful for me to learn to manage my time.

Not only did international/EAL doctoral students develop and learn about scheduling writing time but they also began to schedule their writing time to minimize distractions and maximize their clarity and focus. Pearl emphasized:

There are other factors actually that impact my writing—my time management, mental clarity, my goal setting. I think through the writing group and journal writing I learned to manage my time and say “no” properly to my friends and my family, to become more effective, and also to increase the mental clarity because I am a people pleaser . . . Now I understood [sic] what is actually holding me back. It wasn’t only
the skills to write, [it was] my skills to actually control my life and to [sic] my social surroundings.

Discussion

Socialization is one’s ongoing acquisition of attitudes, values, norms, knowledge, and skills as they pursue membership into a target community (Austin, 2002). The writing feedback group was only one component of the students’ doctoral experience, but it contributed to students’ development in two key areas: self-efficacy and a broader awareness of scholarly writing. Students’ beliefs in their capacity to learn and develop as scholarly writers as well as their competence to give productive feedback shifted throughout the course of the group. They developed a stronger sense of understanding and appreciation of the scholarly writing process and the characteristics of quality writing.

Students attributed specific components and experiences within the writing feedback group to boosting their self-efficacy as doctoral students and scholarly writers. The writing feedback group provided a formalized space and process that supported international/EAL doctoral students’ social and emotional well-being. International/EAL doctoral students experience many psychological stressors during their programs as they grapple with differing or increased academic expectations, dominant power structures, and cultural and linguistic differences between their home language/culture and that of U.S.-based institutes of higher education. Social conversation was built into the writing group feedback model with the intent that it would help students transition from outside responsibilities and activities to writing; critical social connection, however, was an unanticipated outcome of this time. Similar to Bilecen (2012), the writing feedback group became students’ network and was a source of support in coping with the challenges of balancing academic and home life. This social conversation time allowed students to address challenges they were facing beyond writing.
that, left unaddressed, could have served as barriers to their progress and development as scholarly writers.

The group’s model also provided time for discussing specific writing challenges and setting writing goals. This time was particularly important for the students in this study as women from nonmainstream cultural backgrounds. Most of the participants in this study were mothers, and all of them were in partnerships. They maintained high expectations for their roles as partners, mothers, and scholars. The high expectations for themselves in each of these roles were sources of challenge and stress for the participants, as multiple roles and responsibilities often lead to time constraints and less self-confidence in academic abilities (Lin, 2016). Although the time to discuss writing challenges and set goals was intended as a space to solve academic challenges, it was clear that this time was needed to also address social and emotional barriers that were inhibiting students’ writing.

The group’s model created a space to address the anxiety, loneliness, and isolation that international/EAL doctoral students often experience as they enter doctoral studies (Stubb et al., 2011). The participants in this study noted that the writing feedback group helped them realize they were not alone in their feelings of inadequacy. By sharing their challenges from the previous week, the group generated synergy as all members brainstormed ways for their peers to overcome challenges. This synergistic collaboration led to a shared celebration of successes, which motivated and inspired group members to persevere. As these feelings were normalized, group members began to identify with and see themselves as part of the scholarly writing community.

Students also learned to appreciate feedback through their experiences with the writing feedback group. Wisker et al. (2010) noted that learning to deal with the associated tensions and emotions of receiving writing feedback is a critical step in the process of developing students into scholarly writers. Similar to other research in this area (e.g., Wang & Li, 2011; Wei et al., 2019), in this study participants’ initial reactions to feedback were emotional (e.g., students felt anxious, negative, and overwhelmed), but the

writing feedback group supported students in transitioning their view of the feedback process from one of evaluation and judgment to one of growth and learning. As students learn to embrace feedback, it becomes a powerful tool in their development as scholarly writers.

The importance of presenting international/EAL doctoral students with opportunities to give feedback should also be underscored. Similar to Nagori and Cooper’s (2014) findings, participants were initially tentative about giving feedback due to perceived qualifications, lack of experience, and hesitancy to critique their peers’ and Emily’s work. Through ongoing weekly feedback opportunities, students realized they were more than qualified to give feedback when they considered supplying feedback through the lens of a reader. Wang and Li (2011) highlighted that students’ overreliance on supervisor feedback has negative effects on their self-confidence. For the international/EAL doctoral students in this study, opportunities to give feedback not only increased their self-confidence but also allowed them to reflect on their own writing in light of the feedback they provided. The time spent as critical friends became professional development as they matured in their own writing and self-confidence.

The importance of self-efficacy as a scholarly writer, particularly for international/EAL doctoral students, is essential to note. Self-efficacy encompasses the beliefs individuals hold about their capabilities to produce specific performance outcomes, and it influences how people feel, think, and act (Bandura, 1993). Self-efficacy guides the goals individuals establish as well as their expended effort, perseverance through challenges, and resilience to failure (Bandura, 1993).

Interactions are central to the socialization process and can contribute to experiences that advance or hinder the development of self-efficacy. Bandura (1977) identified two sources of self-efficacy information for which interactions are at the core: vicarious experiences and verbal (or social) persuasion. Vicarious experiences reference learning through observing the behaviors of models. Recognizing that one can replicate the actions and behaviors of models can lead to increases in self-efficacy. Verbal persuasion

is defined as encouragement provided by someone with significant influence in an individual’s life (e.g., teacher, peer) that cultivates a belief in oneself to master a task or accomplish a goal. The writing feedback group served as a socialization context (Gerbauer et al., 2020) in which group members indicated that vicarious experiences and verbal persuasion contributed to their development of self-efficacy as scholarly writers.

**Limitations**

Limitations to this study should be acknowledged when reflecting upon the findings. First, the findings are limited to a very small sample size. Although the sample could also be considered fairly homogenous (e.g., all participants were female international/EAL doctoral students), it is important to note that the unique cultural and linguistic experiences international/EAL students bring to the university are quite diverse. Second, all of the participants in the writing feedback group knew one another and the professor prior to the first session. Although prior interactions were not specific to writing, these interactions contributed to the socialization process. Relatedly, a final limitation is that the writing feedback group is merely one component of students’ socialization experience. Even though students attributed specific aspects of the group to their socialization, it is important to remember the group took place in the midst of other socializing experiences (e.g., coursework, conference attendance, interactions with students’ doctoral advisors).

**Implications and Concluding Remarks**

International/EAL doctoral students come to U.S. institutions of higher education with a history of academic success from the educational institutions in their home countries. For some students, cultural differences and academic expectations in English composition present unique challenges, leaving students with diminished self-confidence and feelings of isolation and anxiety (Stubb et al., 2011). The writing feedback group’s original intent was to develop students’ scholarly writing while specifically targeting their language socialization process into scholarly writing. However, the writing
feedback group played a larger role in students’ broader socialization into the academy.

International/EAL doctoral students often feel neglected as they are often viewed as being highly mature, prepared, and capable by their advisors (Zhang, 2016). Unknowingly, advisors may not be aware of the challenges their international/EAL doctoral students are facing. Although students come to the doctoral program highly knowledgeable and skilled, the reality is that their skills may not be recognized by individuals working with them in U.S.-based institutions. Students may experience tensions in their relationships and changes in their self-identification (Zhang, 2016). These tensions are compounded when students struggle to produce academic writing in alignment with the expectations of doctoral studies. International/EAL doctoral students may not experience the same socialization trajectory, or have the same socialization outcomes, as their domestic, native English-speaking peers.

Although the findings of this study may not be surprising, they do provide a frame and a chance for institutions of higher education to reflect on our understanding of international/EAL doctoral students’ strengths, needs, and corresponding experiences in their development as scholarly writers. The unique cultural, linguistic, and professional strengths of these students, coupled with real or perceived mismatches that students may experience, create opportunities for institutes of higher education to diversify the experiences that guide international/EAL doctoral students through the socialization process. As institutes of higher education, we must ask ourselves:

- How often do we create spaces and build relationships for students to address:
  - their work–life–academic balance;
  - the psychological stressors of living in another country;
  - linguistic and cultural challenges; and
  - feelings of isolation and inadequacy?
- Are we intentional in building experiences that limit isolation?

• Do we provide ongoing and consistent opportunities for students to talk through complex ideas and findings with supportive feedback?
• Do we teach and provide students the opportunities to give feedback on others’ writing to improve their own writing?
• How might the institution provide faculty with resources (e.g., time, space, adjusted workload, limited advising load) to support ongoing, well-implemented writing feedback groups?

While these questions initiate our reflection, they are by no means comprehensive. The challenge is to move us beyond pockets of excellence in supporting international/EAL doctoral students in scholarly writing to a systemic understanding of students’ strengths and a holistic understanding of their unique needs to ensure their voices are represented in scholarly literature.

References


Appendix

Sample Interview/Focus Group Questions

1. Has the writing group helped your academic success? If so, how?
2. Has the writing group helped your personal growth? If so, how?
3. What are the challenges to collaborative mentoring?
4. To the faculty mentor, what suggestions would you have for someone mentoring international graduate students?
5. Do you have fears as a writer? Explain.
6. How has feedback supported your growth as a writer?
7. How has feedback hindered your growth as a writer?
8. How do you respond to rejection/critical feedback?
9. Have your habits of reading, writing, and researching changed since you’ve been in the writing feedback group? If so, how? To what do you attribute the changes?
10. Have you felt any pressures related to academic scholarship? Who or what was the source of the pressure? How have you reacted?