Peer Reviews and Graduate Writers: Engagements with Language and Disciplinary Differences While Responding to Writing

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Although peer review as a method of writing response has been examined extensively, only limited research exists on peer review at the graduate level. This study examines graduate students' peer review interactions in a writing workshop in which first- and second-language students from different disciplines were enrolled. The researchers focused on how students engaged with language and disciplinary differences as they peer-reviewed. Data were collected from two separate writing workshop classes over two semesters and included video recordings, observation notes, writing samples, and end-of-semester surveys. The researchers found that some students could provide only limited assistance when working with peers from different fields. The peer review groups' effectiveness was strained when there were large gaps in academic levels. However, peer review groups were generally productive when students from different language backgrounds worked together. The peer reviews were effective in raising students' rhetorical awareness and strengthening their understanding of genre conventions. Students showed an openness to language differences, and in their discussions they helped each other navigate the challenges of graduate school. Implications for using peer review in writing interventions for graduate students are discussed.

Keywords: peer review, graduate students, writing workshop

Ever since the writing process movement began in the 1970s, peer review has been considered an important way of responding to student writing. After peer review received considerable attention from influential composition scholars such as Elbow (1973) and Bruffee (1984), researchers including Zamel (1976), Raimes (1983), and Spack (1984) began to recommend its use in the second-language (L2)[1] writing classroom. Studies on peer review in L2 writing have proliferated since then. However, as Chang (2016) pointed out in her review of 103 studies of peer review in L2 writing classrooms, most studies have focused on students in undergraduate or intensive English programs and, as a result, graduate students are underrepresented in peer review research. This neglect is concerning because of the increasing numbers of graduate students in U.S. higher education, including international and resident U.S. L2 students, many of whom may be unprepared for the kind of writing that their degrees require. As a result of this influx of students, graduate programs across the country have strengthened writing support for graduate students by offering programs and activities such as writing boot camps and workshops, facilitated writing groups, and peer tutoring (Caplan & Cox, 2016; Fredericksen & Mangelsdorf, 2014). Many of these writing support interventions include opportunities for students to work with each other so they can give feedback on their writing. Because these writing interventions may be open to students across campus, they can attract both L1 and L2 students from a variety of disciplines. This article examines the peer review interactions of linguistically and disciplinarily diverse graduate students enrolled in a writing workshop intended to help students complete major writing projects. By focusing on the students' interactions in peer review, we examined how the students engaged with differences in languages and disciplines. The results of the study contribute to our understanding of how graduate-level students respond to peer review, how their different language and disciplinary backgrounds can shape the interactions, and the benefits they might gain from this process.

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1 Throughout this paper we use the term *L1* for students who speak English as their first language and *L2* for students as speak English as an additional language, while understanding that these labels and others are inadequate for expressing the complexity of students' language backgrounds.

Graduate Students and Peer Review

In graduate-level higher education in the U.S., the number of international students has steadily grown. According to the Institute of International Education Open Doors data (2016), the number of graduate-level international students in the United States in 2014–2015 increased 9.8% from the previous year. Increasing numbers of domestic Latinx[2] and Asian-American students are receiving degrees in U.S. colleges and universities (National Center for Education Statistics, 2017), making it likely that the numbers of resident L2 students are also increasing. Graduate student writing is receiving more attention because of low graduate student completion rates, the cost of getting a degree, and the extended length of time to receive a degree (Casanave, 2016; Cassuto, 2013). The types of writing support offered to students include writing courses, writing groups and retreats, tutoring, boot camps, and workshops (Aitchison & Guerin, 2014; Caplan & Cox, 2016; Simpson, 2013). Effective feedback on students' writing is an important part of the success of these efforts. In fact, the feedback that graduate students receive on their writing is an important factor in students' successful enculturation into academic discourse communities (Can & Walker, 2014; Casanave & Li, 2008; Kamler & Thomson, 2006; Leki, 2006; Paltridge & Starfield, 2007; Ting & Li, 2011).

A number of writing interventions for graduate students include peer feedback (Belcher, 2009; Delyser, 2003; Dudley-Evans, 1995; Frodesen, 1995; Heinrich, Neese, Rogers, & Facente, 2004; Steinert, McLeod, Liben & Snell, 2008). Despite the increase in L2 writing students in graduate education and in the amount and kinds of writing support that is available, as well as the importance of feedback on writing, only a surprisingly small number of studies have focused on graduate-level peer review. Some of these studies involve L2 graduate students working with other L2 graduate students. For instance, studies have examined how peer review exchanges and writing groups that use peer review can help promote writing development (Hu & Lam, 2010; Li & Vandermensbrugghe, 2011). Poverjuc, Brooks, and Wray (2012) found that the L2 graduate students that they examined distrusted their peers' ability to give effective feedback, which prevented the peer review process from being as effective as it could be. Because writing interventions for graduate students are

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2 We are using this term to avoid gender binaries.

often open to students across campus (Caplan & Cox, 2016), peer-review groups can consist of both L1 and L2 students. Studies of L1 and L2 graduate students engaged together in peer review have found various results. Crossman and Kite (2012) found that both L1 and L2 peer-reviewing students in a U.S.-based MBA program improved their writing quality and engaged in "discovery-mode" interactions that involved asking probing questions and assuming collaborative stances. Fredericksen and Mangelsdorf (2014) surveyed L1 and L2 graduate students who had taken a writing workshop in a university in the Southwestern U.S. and concluded that most students were satisfied working with students from different language backgrounds, though a slight preference was given for native English speakers when working with grammatical issues.

As studies of undergraduate review groups have revealed, power dynamics often emerge when L1 and L2 students work together, with L2 students speaking less than their L1 peers (Zhu, 2001), being perceived as less able (Leki, 2001; Ruecker, 2014), having strong expectations for surface-error correction from L1 peers (Ruecker, 2011), and being ignored (Leki, 2007). Similar power dynamics emerged in Cheng's (2013) examination of an L2 graduate student's experience in a writing group that participated in peer review with L1 writers. In this two-semester study, Lee (the L2 graduate student) was initially positioned by her L1 peers as being unable to contribute to the group; in Cheng's words, "Lee was deprived of the ownership of her own writing" (p. 20). In the second semester, however, Lee was able to negotiate a more powerful position within the group by learning more about her discipline of applied linguistics and adopting coping strategies such as strengthening communication with her L1 peers. Because many writing interventions for graduate students include L2 and L1 students, more studies of these interactions are necessary.

Because of the limited number of graduate-level peer review studies, in contrast to the proliferation of studies on the undergraduate level, a great deal more research on this topic is needed. Peer review research on L2 undergraduate students cannot automatically be applied to L2 graduate students because important differences exist between these two groups. Graduate students' writing projects are generally much longer

and more high stakes. Although they might be successful writers in their first language, they might not yet have the English-language skills to communicate highly specialized knowledge or the confidence to develop an authoritative academic voice (Paltridge & Starfield, 2007). Compared to undergraduates, most graduate students are entering specialized communities of practice that involve a process of identity change and enculturation (Prior, 1998; Starke-Meyerring, 2011). Despite these challenges, the writing support that is available to them is often limited and short-term, such as a boot camp or one-day workshop (Simpson, 2016). Though many graduate students make use of writing centers, the quality and availability of assistance varies widely (Caplan & Cox, 2016). In general, graduate students are more dependent on the instruction and approval of their major professors (Casanave, 2002; Paltridge & Starfield, 2007) compared to undergraduate students.

The current study contributes to our understanding of what happens when graduate students peer-review their writing. This topic is important to explore because of the number of writing support interventions for graduate students that attract diverse students and the lack of research that has studied this context. Specifically, the research focuses on graduate students in a U.S.-university writing workshop that attracts L1 and L2 students from various academic fields. We explore the following questions:

1. How do graduate students' different language and disciplinary backgrounds manifest themselves in peer review exchanges in this writing workshop? How do students engage with these differences?
2. How and to what extent do students benefit from these peer review exchanges?

Methodology

This study took place at Southwestern University[3], which has long offered a course open to graduate students across campus called Graduate Writing Workshop, a 16-week, credit-bearing course. While some scaffolding is provided to students in the form of mini lessons and discussions on writing expectations at the graduate level, these workshops have always focused primarily on peer review interactions to the extent that

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3 All names are pseudonyms. This project received approval from Southwestern University's IRB.

almost every class period includes an extended peer review session. Two-thirds of the students are typically L2 English speakers, while the remaining students are bilingual in English and Spanish or proficient in only English. Students are asked to bring to class their current writing projects, which are often theses or dissertations, and they spend most of class reading and commenting on each other's work. The class is structured around the notion of a writing process in which writers attend to content, development, and organization in their early drafts and focus more on linguistic accuracy in their later drafts (Cumming, 2003; Ferris & Hedgcock, 2014). The first time that students bring in a particular piece of writing, they are encouraged in their peer review groups to focus on providing content-driven feedback. The students then revise the text at home and bring the revision to the next class period for a peer review session in which they focus on formal features of the language such as format, grammar, and punctuation. Discussions about rhetorical matters such as audience and purpose occur in both types of peer review sessions. The class uses a shorthand description of these two different sessions: "content" peer reviews and "proofreading" peer reviews. The workshop professors group students from the same or similar disciplines for the content peer reviews and group students from different disciplines for the proofreading peer reviews. The course includes several cycles of peer review sessions so that students are asked to bring back a revised version of their writing for further review; the new version is revised one more time before being included in a workshop portfolio. Workshops are small (7–15 students) and typically include two to three groups of students.

For this study, we collected data from two writing workshops. The total number of students enrolled in these classes was 23, and they all volunteered to participate in the study. However, student attendance fluctuated so that the total number of students who consistently attended the workshops and took part in the research was 12. A total of six groups were observed and video recorded over this time period; each group averaged five or six students, though group numbers decreased when students were absent. Each peer review session lasted approximately 45–60 minutes, during which time students alternated between reading and commenting on peer papers. Transcriptions of the video recordings included both

verbal and nonverbal elements, such as the gestures or facial expressions of participants. We transcribed students' language as spoken, adding commas or periods to mark pauses; for legibility we also added quotation marks when students were directly quoting from peer papers. In order to respect their language levels and varieties of English we have refrained from marking or otherwise correcting what may be perceived as errors. We also collected students' drafts with comments from the peer review groups and the instructor. Other data included students' personal statements about their research interests and backgrounds and their responses to a survey distributed at the end of the semester that asked them to reflect on the process of working with students from different disciplinary and language backgrounds.[4]

For our analysis, we initially focused on the video recordings and transcriptions from the six groups. Using an open-source qualitative analysis program (TAMS Analyzer), we collaboratively read and interpreted the transcriptions in several rounds of analysis that included coding and categorizing students' stances toward each other in the groups (Lockhart & Ng, 1995) and the mediating strategies (Lei, 2008) students used in their discussions. From these analyses emerged several trends in the peer review interactions that were related to students' different disciplines and language backgrounds. A more focused analysis of these trends revealed specific patterns concerning L1-L2 and disciplinary interactions that are the emphasis of our discussion. While the recordings were the primary focus of the analysis, students' drafts, personal statements, and survey responses were also used to check the validity of these patterns and to supplement the analysis.

The research participants in these peer review groups included students from education, geology, environmental science, rhetoric and composition, and communication. Students' linguistic and cultural backgrounds were diverse as well, including U.S. L1 English speakers along with students from Mexico, Kenya, India, Thailand, and Iraq. Table 1 lists the names, country of origin, and disciplinary background of the students in the study, as well as the degree that they were seeking.

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4 Interested readers can contact the first author for a copy of the survey.

Table 1

Student Backgrounds

Name	Discipline	Country	Degree sought
Andrew	Engineering	Kenya	PhD
Catalina	Environmental Science	Mexico	MS
Cora	Environmental Science	Mexico	MS
Chouduri	Engineering	India	PhD
Jane	Education	U.S.	MA
Laura	Rhetoric/Composition	U.S.	PhD
Lisa	Communication	U.S.	MA
Marisol	Education	U.S.	MA
Nan	Geology	Thailand	PhD
Prija	Rhetoric/Composition	Thailand	PhD
Roberto	Communication	Mexico	MA
Rahimah	Rhetoric/Composition	Iraq	PhD

Findings

In this section we describe examples of students' interactions in order to respond to our research questions. This description is based primarily on students' peer review interactions in class and is supplemented by relevant students' drafts, personal statements, and survey responses.

Language Differences and Rhetorical Knowledge: "That's Why We Learn Together, Native and Nonnative"

The interactions that we studied in which L1 and L2 students were working together showed that "language difference" is a multidimensional term, encompassing more than a language code or adherence to grammatical rules. We identified occasions when L2 speakers did not help their L1 peers with grammar, or when their suggestions were grammatically incorrect; however, L1 students at times were the same way. We found

that students' attitudes about language difference and their awareness of macrolevel rhetorical concerns played a larger role in the peer review discussions.

When L1 and L2 students worked together, they were generally receptive to the assistance that they received. In one peer review group, a pair of students consistently displayed appreciation for the various language resources that their fellow student brought to the peer review process. This pair consisted of Jane, a monolingual English speaker who was earning a master's in education, and Prija, a rhetoric and composition doctoral student from Thailand. Jane and Prija frequently talked about their different language backgrounds. In this example they were reviewing Prija's literature review for her dissertation. They were sitting close together, Prija's hard copy between them. Prija had asked Jane for help with verb tenses and articles.

Excerpt 1
L1 Writer and Grammar Rules

> P: "Will prevent" or "will prevents." That's another problem because I don't have tenses in my language.
>
> J: You use them fine though.
>
> P: Yeah, that's why.
>
> J: And I'm trying to figure out how to explain the article thing but I'm really not sure how because in English singular subjects are given an article like "a pen." Um, but multiple subjects like here you're discussing . . .
>
> P: You mean general.
>
> J: Right, general subjects don't need an article.
>
> P: Okay, okay.

As a native English speaker, Jane never had to focus on rules for using articles before; she was learning the grammar of her native language. She acknowledged this in another exchange when Prija was reviewing a section of her thesis.

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Excerpt 2
L2 Writer as Language Expert

> P: And again you used comma for the conjunction again. You cannot use comma to combine two sentences. You need to have something to link.
>
> J: To link the sentences.
>
> P: And, but . . .
>
> J: I'm never gonna make these mistakes again.
>
> P: No, you have to understand it.
>
> J: I think this is good.
>
> P: Yeah, that's why we learn together, native and nonnative.
>
> J: Well, the only thing I know is the native speaker's phrasing.

In this exchange Prija, the L2 writer, was positioned as the language expert. Jane's appreciation of Prija's knowledge of English usage, as well as her desire to learn more about her native English language, led her to see language differences as a resource for furthering her own writing development. She commented about this in the end-of-semester survey when asked about what it was like to work with students from different language backgrounds:

> There were definitely hiccups in terms of the feedback from English as a second language peers. Occasionally corrections would be made that were actually incorrect. However, the benefit for me as an English speaker was to have the nitty gritty points of grammar corrected in my work.

Jane perceived both herself and Prija as language learners who are helping each other learn to write successfully in their graduate studies.

In some peer review exchanges, language differences between L1 and L2 writers were not as relevant as knowledge about the rhetorical situation, in particular audience awareness. In the following exchange, Marisol (L1), Roberto (L2), and Laura (L1) discussed a writing maxim.

Excerpt 3
Rhetorical Knowledge

> M: They always tell me that a paragraph should be 4 sentences minimum.

> R: Really? They tell you that? Who told you?

> M: Uh, since I was in elementary school.

> R: But it's different when you write academic, no?

> M: But when you read academic journals, you don't see a paragraph with less than 4 sentences.

> L: Well, it depends. If you want to emphasize one thing you can have a sentence as a paragraph, even for academic writing. I don't think there is a set number of sentences.

> M: That's not what I was taught.

> R: I really mix my paragraphs [depending on] my ideas.

In this example, the L2 writer, Roberto, used his rhetorical knowledge to help his L1 peer understand that a writing "rule," in this case concerning the number of sentences in a paragraph, does not apply to all rhetorical contexts. The L1-L2 distinction between the students was not as relevant as the students' different levels of awareness concerning academic writing contexts in English.

Disciplinary Differences: "It's a Very Technical Paper"

While the students' language diversity in the peer review groups could lead to productive exchanges, disciplinary differences created more challenges. For instance, eight out of 18 (44%) students felt "Very Confident" giving feedback to students from their disciplines compared to five out of 19 (26%) students who felt similarly about giving feedback to students from other disciplines. When students from different disciplines worked together, typically in proofreading or editing groups, they were made aware of disciplinary differences in terminology and writing conventions. However, disciplinary differences could also limit the assistance

they could provide. Several students expressed this point in their survey responses, with one student writing "I had more helpful comments from a student who was from my discipline." In the following example, Nan, Catalina, and Laura were reviewing Nan's research report on a geological analysis of a dead volcano. Nan was a doctoral student in geology from Thailand, Laura was a doctoral student in rhetoric and composition from the United States, and Catalina was a master's student in environmental science and engineering from Mexico. They had worked together in this proofreading group several previous times. In this interaction, the three students were sitting closely together at a table in the seminar room. They were discussing a suggestion by Catalina that a lengthy sentence in Nan's paper be broken up into two sentences.

Excerpt 4
Gaps in Students' Backgrounds

> C: Initially this is what I suggested: "We did similar structure mapping on our magnetic anomaly data that can be applied to . . ."

> L (interrupts): So you think it should be two sentences?

> C: But that was just my suggestion. I think it makes more sense like that to me at least.

> N: Really? I just want to convince the reader that that was the kind of mapping that we did.

> C: I guess like the way I read it, it is like, I don't know anything about it, so your goal is for me to understand it overall.

> N: I just want to make sure my reader understand too, but I don't want to deter my meaning that I want to communicate either. I don't want to change my meaning because that's the meaning I want to communicate, but you didn't understand I don't know how to. I want to make it easier to understand for the reader too (laughs).

> L: We're the, we're not your average reader because we don't know, we don't know too much.

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> C: (Talks over Laura) Yeah, I don't know, yeah it's a very technical paper.

> L: But what we can tell you for example, how to fix it so you won't sound repetitive.

Here, the students acknowledged the gaps in their backgrounds: Laura and Catalina did not understand Nan's report because "it's a very technical paper." The audience for Nan's paper was her major professor in geology, not lay readers. Nan's expression of frustration—"I don't want to change my meaning because that's the meaning I want to communicate"—led to Laura's assertion about what she and Catalina can help Nan with: "for example, to fix it so you won't sound repetitive." In other words, we cannot help you communicate what you want to say, but we can help you say it better. As Leki (2006) noted, a disparity can exist between a high degree of content-area knowledge and a more limited level of language proficiency for graduate students who are studying in English. This interaction with Catalina and Laura gives Nan little help in conveying her specialized knowledge, but she was able to express her frustration and get assistance with another aspect of her writing.

Even when students from the same or similar disciplines worked together, the peer review exchanges could become one-way rather than reciprocal if a large gap existed in their academic levels. When this happened the less experienced students tended to learn more about writing in their discipline from more advanced peers, but not the other way around. In this example, Nan, the doctoral student in geology, was helping Cora, who was beginning a master's program in environmental science. Nan dominated the exchange.

Excerpt 5
Gaps in Academic Levels

> N: There no, how to, no words, find me the words for this sentence, find me the words.

> C: I just like explained this. In this mechanism, the bacteria formed nitrates.

> N: You're try to say that this mechanism indicates that this created a nitrate right?

> C: Yeah.

N: Let me try to rewrite it.

C: I guess I just need to say it better.

N: I know you are trying to make it sound specific but it turned out to be all mixed up.

Cora's draft from this peer review session was filled with Nan's hand-written corrections concerning technical procedures and terminology. Nan appropriated Cora's draft—"let me try to rewrite it"—but at the same time she has helped Cora; at the end of the session Cora said, "Thank you, that was pretty good. Some good pointers." While Cora learned from Nan's corrections, Nan herself was disadvantaged by not having a doctoral-level peer to assist her, though her peers and her workshop professor helped her edit her work.

Disciplinary Discussions: "It's Just Sometimes Different Styles"

Throughout many of these peer review interactions students in the same fields of study tried to help each other better understand the expectations of their professors and the writing conventions they had to learn. As one student wrote in the survey, "I really learned a lot from students that have the same discipline as me. They know what is expected and their suggestions helped me see other perspectives that I was not aware of." In the following exchange, Roberto, an advanced master's student in communication, was explaining to Lisa, a beginning master's student in the same area, the different parts of a research report. Lisa was researching recent political protests in Mexico. They referenced Lisa's professor, Dr. S., who had also been Roberto's professor.

Excerpt 6
Genre Knowledge

R: I think there are some theories that you can find, sociology, explain why people protest and what's, especially for this project for Dr. S.'s class.

L: Umhum.

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> R: Then you have to describe your methodology. How are you going to get your participants, uh, how are you going to interview them, if it's going to be a focus group.

> L: And then what will she [Dr. S.] think?

> R: Okay, so, um, after that you have to read the responses that they give you . . . After analyzing your data, you need to find a theory that could um, that can, um lead your study. Or that you can relate some of your finds with your theory, that's what you want to do, really.

While Lisa seemed most focused on what her professor expects, she was also learning about an important genre in her field.

During many peer review sessions, students would break away from text-based discussions in order to talk about their experiences in graduate school. They frequently described their relationships with the faculty in their programs. These discussions allowed the students to vent their frustrations and get help. In this next example, Chouduri, an engineering student from India, was talking with Andrew, a fellow engineering student from Kenya.

Excerpt 7
Contradictory Advice about Writing in the Discipline

> C: There is this confusion for me, I have taken a class called Research Methods with Dr. D., he's American. He told me to write in layman language. Like his mom should understand my research. That is layman's language. Then I started in layman's language and from the basics, like what is radar, what is a signal, and my professor is like, you know what, your research engineers are going to read your research . . . So be technical.

> A: It's just sometimes different styles.

> C: I'm like, what's going on.

Andrew attempted to explain this contradictory advice by saying "It's just sometimes different styles." As in this example, students would offer support to each other by trying to make sense of what they had been told about writing in their disciplines.

Different Roles and Identities: "I Need to Know What This Is"

In general, these peer review exchanges demonstrated that both language and disciplinary "differences" are less like categories and more like ever-shifting continua. The language and disciplinary differences of these students could be less salient than their level of confidence, engagement with the course, or openness to criticism. This was especially notable with one student, Rahimah. As a native Arabic speaker, Rahimah was an outsider at this border university with a predominantly Spanish-English speaking student body. However, she found ways to be fully a part of the peer review exchanges.

One way that Rahimah was disadvantaged was that her proficiency in English lagged behind that of the other students in the class: She would make many grammatical corrections on her classmates' papers, but they were sometimes wrong. At one point she was reviewing her classmate Laura's paper that concerned a Columbian man's appeal for political asylum in the United States. Figure 1 is a sample from the paper with Rahimah's handwritten corrections:

The IJ also denied Cano Arias' application for relief under CAT because he could not prove *was fail to* that he would be tortured by the Colombian government. *was* In November 2009, the BIA dismissed his appeal, agreeing with the IJ's determinations.

Figure 1. Paper excerpt with comments.

Both "was fail" and "was tortured" demonstrate that Rahimah did not understand a key fact in the paper: the appeal of asylum was based on what *would* happen if he returned to his country. Rahimah might also have been disadvantaged by the limited time allocated for reading her peers' drafts.

Despite her disadvantages, Rahimah assumed an assertive stance with more proficient peers. Writers' stances in peer review tasks are shaped by their motives for participating, which can make them willing to reshape tasks according to their goals (Yu & Lee, 2015; Zhu & Mitchell, 2012). Rahimah was motivated by her strong desire to succeed in her academic program. Without being prompted by her advisor, she enrolled in the

graduate writing workshop in order to get as much help as possible with her final paper for her degree plan. Rahimah consistently reshaped the peer review dynamics of her group by interjecting herself into their discussions, often interrupting her peers' conversations by saying "excuse me" and then adding a comment. She also would remind her peers that she was not familiar with the university's border context in which Spanish was frequently used. In the following exchange, Laura asked about a Spanish-language acronym.

Excerpt 8
An Outside Reader

> L: They put the letters of the acronym in Spanish. I don't know if I should change it.
>
> R: Remember, I was wondering, like, I'm reading your paper like an outside reader, right. So in this case I need to . . .
>
> L: You need . . .
>
> R: I need to know what is this.

As this exchange shows, Rahimah could be an insistent reviewer ("I need to know what this is.") This insistence would remind her peers that they needed to keep their audience in mind as they wrote. In this next exchange, Rahimah was reviewing Marisol's paper, which was about higher education in Mexico.

Excerpt 9
An Assertive Stance

> R: This is a Spanish word so I didn't understand.
>
> M: Oh, these are states in Mexico. Guadalajara.
>
> R: I heard like, oh my gosh this is a Spanish word.
>
> M: Maybe if I change places for states? Because Monterrey is not a state, it's a city.
>
> R: All of these abbreviations, I am a bit lost.

While this discussion began with Rahimah pointing out her inability to understand a Spanish word, it led to Marisol's clarification between "states" and "places," an improvement in the paper.

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Perhaps because of her lower language proficiency, as well as her role as an outsider in an English-Spanish environment, Rahimah would sometimes become defensive when her classmates told her how she could improve her writing, which could make the discussions longer and more charged. However, on the whole Rahimah worked collaboratively with her peers, influencing her group in several important ways. She proposed to the group that they alter their method of giving feedback so that all suggestions were given on the same copy, a change that improved the group's procedure. She also consistently expressed her appreciation of their feedback and pointed out how much she benefited by seeing how they revised their papers: "I like to see your revision, I will keep reading the whole paragraph because I want to see why you revised it in this way." While Rahimah's corrections on her classmates' drafts could be misleading, her comments regarding more macro issues such as audience awareness, as well as her intense engagement, made her more limited language proficiency less of a hindrance. Her confidence as a peer reviewer and her intense interest in developing as a writer shifted her identity from a student who struggled in English to one whose assertive and collaborative actions within the group allowed her to make a meaningful contribution.

Discussion

Based on the patterns that emerged from these peer review exchanges, we will focus on how language and disciplinary differences played out in students' peer review interactions, paying particular attention to language attitudes, disciplinary and academic gaps, and students' fluid roles and statuses in the groups.

As we noted earlier, many writing supports for graduate students are open to students across campus, and as a result both L1 and L2 students can be enrolled in the same writing workshop, studio, or program. One concern with this blending of students is that L2 students' feedback might be more likely to be incorrect than their L1 peers', and indeed we did find that at times L2 speakers could give erroneous grammatical feedback, producing what the student Jane called "hiccups" in the review process. It is also important to remember that native English speakers also can give incorrect feedback and may be unable to explain grammatical rules

(Casanave, 2014). As Jane noted, native English speakers such as herself could benefit from learning about the grammar of their language from a student who had studied it, which few native English speakers have. She viewed Prija's knowledge of the English language as a resource that benefited both of them. When Rahimah pointed out to Laura that she would have to spell out an acronym, or when Roberto and Laura deconstructed a writing maxim for Marisol, they were together creating a shared understanding of how to improve communication. Both Rahimah and Roberto were L2 students giving useful advice to their L1 peers. Language proficiency is important; it is certainly possible that a low-level English learner could feel overwhelmed by higher-level L2 and L1 peers. But in the groups that we examined, students' attitudes toward language difference and their willingness to be open to their peers' feedback played a greater role in making successful peer reviews than students' categorizations as L1 or L2 students. While existing research shows that students may adhere to the native speaker standard longer than their teachers (Timmis, 2002), we found that survey respondents generally did not see a difference in feedback from English L1 and L2 students or that they viewed them as having complementary strengths; as one L2 student wrote in his response to the survey, "English speakers were excellent for grammar reviews. Nonnative speakers were good on content reviews." On the other hand, some students in the present study did not see differences: "There is no difference. The difference in feedback was between majors and not language background." The students' overall openness to language difference might stem from their location on the United States–Mexico border or from the fact that students valued disciplinary expertise more than grammatical correction.

The graduate student participants in this study were entering different academic disciplines, ranging from communication to engineering to education. As mentioned earlier, for the "content" peer review sessions, students from the same or similar disciplines were grouped together under the assumption that they would know more about each other's material. In other words, the groups would approximate the idealized notion of peer review as consisting of "a community of status equals" (Bruffee, 1984, p. 642). We found that this was sometimes the case. For example, Jane

(education) and Prija (rhetoric and composition) discussed the history of writing process research in some depth, and Roberto and Laura helped Marisol prepare for the challenges of conducting research in Mexico. As one student commented in the end-of-semester survey, "I really learned a lot from students that have the same discipline as me. They know what is expected and their suggestions helped me see other perspectives that I was not aware of." However, when entry-level master's students were grouped with much more advanced students in the same discipline, the gap between academic levels could impede the sharing of information and practices. This was exemplified when Nan, a doctoral student, was working with Cora, a new master's student. Though their disciplines were similar—geology and environmental science—Nan's more advanced position in her field led her to dominate her exchanges with Cora. While Cora benefited from Nan's review, she was unable to help Nan. Students' differing academic levels could be equally as significant as their shared disciplinary backgrounds in determining the effectiveness of their peer review exchanges.

No matter if the students were from similar or different disciplines, they increased their rhetorical awareness through many of the peer review discussions. As Andrew wrote in his reflective essay at the end of the semester, "I have also noticed that writing varies across discipline in terms of style and structure and vocabulary." Not all conversations reflected this awareness; for instance, Roberto's explanation to Lisa of the structure of a research report was formulaic. But for the most part, students' discussions about writing led them to at least indirectly challenge the notion of writing as a decontextualized, rule-governed activity. Marisol, for instance, was under the impression that all paragraphs had to have at least four sentences, but Roberto and Laura pointed out to her different writing contexts in which this was not true. Rahimah's frequent observations that she did not speak Spanish and was an outsider to the border region helped to remind her classmates to broaden their ideas about who was reading their writing.

Rahimah's assertiveness in her peer review group, despite her lower English language proficiency and cultural unfamiliarity, demonstrates how students often negotiated their roles and status in each peer review

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interaction. This was not true for all students; for instance, Chouduri always seemed to take on the role of an academic inquirer, as he frequently asked questions about what his peers were writing about in order to enhance his own learning. Roberto consistently took on the role of an expert in writing conventions, in particular the structures of research reports or IRB proposals. Other students, though, changed their roles depending on who they were working with or the topic under discussion. Sometimes this role-changing improved their own status—for example, when Nan expressed frustration that her peers were unable to understand her doctoral-level writing, Catalina and Laura told her that they could, in fact, help edit her writing. Sometimes this role shifting was a deliberate attempt to raise the status of a fellow reviewer. Though Jane was an L1 writer, she described herself as language learner, thus putting Prija on the same level. As Chang (2014) has noted, writer-reader relationships influence students' stances toward their peers and the peer review task. On the whole, the peer review interactions could be characterized as collaborative in that reviewers tried to help their peers improve their writing instead of simply pointing out problems (Lockhart & Ng, 1995; Mangelsdorf & Schlumberger, 1992; Min, 2008). The students demonstrated a level of confidence and agency that allowed them to challenge each other, ask for clarifications, and be willing to acknowledge mistakes. They often referred to the difficulties and stress that they were experiencing as graduate students, and they commiserated with each other and tried to bolster each other's self-esteem. Chouduri, for instance, expressed his frustration about his advisor's writing advice to Andrew.

The peer review groups were dynamic and evolving throughout the semester, and many students' confidence levels grew. In his reflective statement, Andrew wrote that at first he felt inadequate as a peer reviewer, but "[after] continuous reading over time, I realized that it got easier and better to read and hence, give comments." Andrew's shift in confidence is an important part of his academic progress because it shows how, in Casanave's (2002) words, students "shape, change, and represent their own identities as community members" in the academic socialization process (p. 29). Despite the many differences among the students, their interactions demonstrate how lively, engaged, in-depth conversations about writing

can help improve students' knowledge about rhetoric and language, make them more confident writers in English, and ease the stress of entering new academic communities.

Implications

In this study, language backgrounds were not as important in peer review exchanges as students' openness to language difference and their positioning as co-learners. While the students struggled at times because of differences in disciplinary backgrounds or academic levels, they generally increased their rhetorical awareness by working with students from different fields. Overall, the groups helped students claim their identities as successful academic writers.

Our findings are suggestive and limited in generalizability because of the small number of students involved. Also, we were unable to determine how well the review groups helped students improve their writing in their major professors' eyes. Additional studies are needed that involve more graduate students, other types of writing interventions, and different university settings. Despite these limitations, this study is significant in several ways. It helps us to see that language and disciplinary differences are multidimensional and fluid and that students can work across and within differences productively. It illustrates how peer review interactions, and writing interventions in general, can assist graduate students in the process of enculturation into academic discourse communities. Finally, it contributes to our knowledge of peer review on the graduate level in heterogeneous academic settings, a context that is becoming more common as universities create different types of writing interventions to help graduate students become successful academic writers.

Based on this study, we have several recommendations for writing interventions that include peer review groups containing diverse groups of graduate students. The peer review literature shows that students need training and preparation to ensure successful reviews (Berg, 1999; Ferris & Hedgcock, 2014; Hansen & Liu, 2005; Liu & Hansen, 2002; Min, 2005; Min, 2006; Rollinson, 2005; Stanley, 1992; Tigchelaar, 2016; Zhu, 1995). We stress that this preparation should also include discussions of language attitudes, especially the importance of being open to language difference

and seeing difference as a resource that can benefit all learners. Drawing from Berg (1999), Ruecker (2014) has found that small group conferences are an effective way to prepare students for more productive peer review interactions. Asking students to write and share narratives of their own language histories would be useful as an initial, informal assignment before the peer review sessions begin.

Second, students should be given a great deal of time to converse with each other in peer review groups so that they can go into depth about the writing issues that concern them. This will allow students to engage in dialogue between peers who encounter linguistic problems and work with each other to solve these problems (Swain, Brooks, & Tocalli-Beller, 2002). When given plenty of time, students can also create what Hyland (2000) calls a "peer support mechanism" that is separate from the instructor. Students can explain the "writing games" (Casanave, 2002) that are a part of assuming the identity of a successful student. Based on our observations, we recommend at least a 1:3 ratio of reading to talking (for example, five minutes reading, fifteen minutes talking). Ruecker (2014) has suggested hybridizing the peer review process by moving the initial reading and commenting parts online in order to accommodate slower readers and allow more discussion in the classroom, something we experimented with to some success in one graduate writing workshop.

Finally, instructors should encourage students to be confident and assertive. The graduate students in our study were highly engaged and critically involved in their high-stakes writing projects, which made them active participants. However, this might not be true of all students, especially those just entering graduate school. Instructors can give individual feedback to less confident students not only about their writing but also about their participation with their peers. Instructors can also regularly solicit students' views about the effectiveness of the groups and make changes as necessary, particularly when large gaps in academic levels are frustrating students or other problems arise. As they go around answering queries and checking in on groups, instructors should monitor interactions and provide feedback to students regarding productive and unproductive interactions and stances.

As we have stated, graduate students are different from undergraduates in important ways. Graduate students' academic specializations can

limit the extent to which reviewers outside of that specialty can help in content-related matters, though assistance with editing can be offered. Compared to less advanced students, graduate students may be more likely to sustain lengthy peer review conversations and see themselves as co-learners, making peer review exchanges valuable not only with writing but also with academic enculturation. When graduate students are prepared for peer review, given the time to read and discuss each other's writing, and offered a chance to make suggestions and receive suggestions on ways to improve their interactions, peer review can play a central role in writing interventions and in the graduate academic socialization process.

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