

## Supporting the development of students' academic writing through collaborative process writing

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### ABSTRACT

The study examines how undergraduate university students in Rwanda experience collaborative process writing as an instruction method capable of helping them improve their academic writing abilities in English. It involved 34 second-year students, divided into 12 small working groups. The data were collected by means of group interviews carried out in English after all groups finished writing an argumentative essay using the collaborative process writing method. In their responses, students maintained that they still experienced some writing difficulties in English in connection with planning, organization, cohesion and coherence and grammar. However, by combining collaborative process writing with the reflective exercises and classroom reporting strategies introduced by their instructor, students were enabled to spot persistent writing difficulties and plan a course of action to tackle them. Given the tangible learner-focused benefits that are likely to accrue from the implementation of the method, the study suggests that more practice be initiated by the instructors so that students become aware of those benefits.

Keywords: academic writing, higher education, process writing, Rwanda, writing discourses, writing activity

## INTRODUCTION

Developing a good command of written English is one of the abilities desired from university students in many parts of the world. However, in places where English is used as a foreign language, Rwanda inclusive, students are often reported to be challenged by academic writing. To help them overcome this challenge, writing researchers and practitioners have suggested a number of instruction methods, among others, process writing (Coffin et al., 2003; Gillett, Hammond, & Martala, 2009; Murray, 2005; Shulman, 2005; Tynjälä, Mason, & Lonka, 2001), teaching writing through reflective practices (Fernsten & Reda, 2011; Ivanič, 2004) and teaching writing by inviting students to work in small groups (DiPardo & Freedman, 1988; Fontaine & Hunter, 2006; Marshall & Williams, 2010; Preece, 2010).

Process writing is premised on the notion that a writing task follows a systematic and logical sequence which moves into a number of intertwining and iterative stages (Shulman, 2005). Applied to student writers, reflective practices consist of helping students to better understand the work of writing by examining their own beliefs and perceptions of writing so that they become aware of the multiple writing discourses required in various academic disciplines. This self-awareness and self-perception are thought to lead students to think carefully and critically about the choices they make while performing academic writing tasks. From there, students can develop into confident and competent writers (Fernsten & Reda, 2011). As for small group writing, it is often adopted as a method capable of helping students to engage actively in the learning process, to develop teamwork and interpersonal skills, to be exposed to different perspectives and to develop as lifelong learners (Barkley, Cross, & Major, 2005).

Of the three writing instruction methods, this study focuses on process writing while at the same time showing how it can effectively work in combination with the other two methods. In fact, process writing emphasizes the role of the individual student writer and their peers in making a successful final text. In addition to this peer collaboration, there is an element of reflection which enables student writers to look back and take stock of what they have achieved, the lessons learnt and the challenges still lying ahead. Thus, process writing subsumes reflective practice which can be accomplished either individually or collaboratively. In this study, the emphasis is on collaborative reflection. Process writing also stands out by its recursive nature: Most successful writers continually pass through the planning, drafting, revising and editing stages of their writing. This continual moving back to earlier stages is likely to lead to new ideas, critical reflection and deeper thinking which can eventually help improve the quality of the final text. The extent to which collaborative process writing can help address some of students' academic writing challenges is explored in this paper.

## CONTEXT AND MOTIVATION

Focus of the present study is on Rwandan higher education and it reflects the context of change in the system of teaching and learning undertaken since 2007. Part of this change was the introduction of a modular system, largely designed as a move to turn the student into a chief agent in the learning process. In this way, the student's success is measured, among others, against their ability to act autonomously, take responsibility for their own learning and development, communicate efficiently, and work with others (National Council for Higher Education, 2007). Another crucial element of change was the shift to English as the sole language of instruction, in replacement of French, which is another foreign language. Both English and French are spoken by nearly 6% of the Rwandan population whereas Kinyarwanda, the national language, is spoken by 99.4% (Ministry of Finance and Economic

Planning, 2005). Unfortunately, Kinyarwanda is not recognized as an academic language while English is used as the language of instruction from secondary to higher education. However, upon their entry to university, students' proficiency in English still tends to be at the lowest as 85% of the new recruits have to undergo an additional intensive course in general English and communication skills (National University of Rwanda/School for Foundation Language Skills, 2012).

Apart from the low proficiency in general English noted from first-year undergraduate students, the graduates are also perceived as lacking adequate speaking and writing skills in English. As evidence, an employer and graduate survey conducted in 2010 in Rwanda showed that university students needed to improve their communication skills and reinforce their learning of international languages (National University of Rwanda, 2010). Presumably, this improvement of language skills was primarily in reference to English as a medium of instruction. Similarly, a Parliamentary report on Rwandan higher learning institutions indicated that students' proficiency in English was not yet adequate and that a lot of efforts were still needed to improve the situation (Parliament of Rwanda, 2010).

Based on the author's teaching experience in the context of the study, it is asserted that the writing skills in English, which largely inform this study, are taught. More specifically, it even seems that both instructors and students know well how to go about academic writing using the process writing model. However, usual classroom practices indicate that the model is often talked about and explained to students but it is normally implemented by students on their own, outside classroom sessions, until they come up with the first draft of their written essays. As a result, not much is known about how students experience each stage of process writing and how those stages eventually help shape students' perspectives on academic writing and their abilities to write.

Outside Rwanda, the problem of inadequate proficiency in academic writing is also discussed. For instance, in their study on how to meet diverse learners' writing needs, Marshall and Williams (2010) noted that students from various disciplines who were using English as an additional language in a traditional British university, nearly always took a graduate writing course because they perceived a problem in their academic writing that was affecting their ability to perform to their maximum. Also, Starfield's (2007) review of recent research on academic writing in English as a second language carried out in Australia, South Africa, the UK and the USA concludes that an academic literacies approach needs to be adopted to address students' problems in written academic discourse. Both the study by Marshall and Williams (2010) and the review by Starfield (2007) show that deficiency in academic writing tends to affect a number of users of English as a second or foreign language.

Based on that background, an academic writing intervention was designed by using process writing instruction method. This intervention stood as a small-scale case study involving second-year undergraduate students in a modern languages program in one Rwandan university. More concretely, the intervention consisted of five two-hour classroom sessions devoted to understanding and illustrating what academic writing is, introducing students to the processes of writing and inviting them to work in groups on an argumentative essay, reflecting and reporting on the writing work done. Thus, the aim of this study is to examine how undergraduate university students in Rwanda experienced process writing as an instruction method meant to help them improve their academic writing abilities. To this effect, three questions are investigated: (1) What kind of ideas do students have of academic writing before they start to write? (2) How do groups of students experience the processes of writing? (3) After collaborative process writing, how do students' perspectives on academic writing change? As all these questions turn around writing, it makes sense to proceed by exploring exactly what writing entails.

## **ROLE OF WRITING IN THE ACADEMY**

Writing is largely considered as a multifunctional tool in higher education teaching and learning situations. According to current research (Coffin et al., 2003; Murray & Hughes, 2008; Gillett et al., 2009), it is mainly through writing that one's success at university is measured. Writing is used by the instructors to find out what students have understood and learned about a particular academic subject. Thus, it is a tool used to judge the quality of students' thinking and learning.

Given the critical role played by writing in the learning process, some researchers suggest that it should be taught across all academic disciplines (Nightingale, 2000; National Writing Project & Nagin, 2006). In essence, the recognition and integration of writing in all academic programs rests on the belief that "effective writing skills are important in all stages of life from early education to future employment" (National Writing Project & Nagin, 2006, p.3). Besides, writing well is "of critical importance for success in a wide variety of situations and professions" (McNamara, Crossley, & McCarthy, 2010, p.58).

Traditionally, writing has been conducted and viewed as a solitary activity (Creme & Lea, 2008) focusing primarily on the final product and emphasizing sentence-level correctness. Nowadays, an effective and relevant writing instruction is the one which enables students to see writing as "a complex process composed of many different kinds of activities that eventually result in that product" (Nightingale, 2000, p.135). The same position on writing was articulated by Murray and Moore (2006) arguing that effective academic writing is "a continuous process involving reflection, improvement, development, progress and fulfillment of various types and in varying measures" (p.5).

The recurrent feature in the modern perspective on writing is that it should primarily be seen as a set of processes which entail different stages of activities. These stages bear different names depending on the researchers but the most common ones are pre-writing, planning, drafting, reviewing, revising and editing (Coffin et al., 2003; Murray, 2005; Myhill & Jones, 2007; Shulman, 2005). Although those writing stages apparently stand in a logical sequence, in the actual writing processes, writers do not move through them linearly but rather in a recursive manner (Myhill & Jones, 2007). This implies that at each point of the processes the writer may repeatedly return to earlier stages.

While moving through various stages of writing, writers have to read, consult written sources or just rely on their prior knowledge and experience. This prior knowledge and experience very often link with the socio-cultural context they grew up in which translates into a set of beliefs, values, norms and behaviors. All these elements confer the social nature of writing (Ivanič, 2004; Tynjälä et al., 2001), which brings in the importance of collaborating with others while writing.

To justify the relevance of collaboration in writing, Creme and Lea (2008) contend that "there are many parts of the writing process where it is enormously useful to get ideas and feedback from others" (pp.3-4). In practice, such writing stages as brainstorming, planning and organizing, drafting, peer reviewing and revising could be highly effective and beneficial when carried out in small groups. In sum, the more students are willing to work together in small groups on process writing, the more successful writers they are likely to become.

## **POSITIONING STUDENTS IN ACADEMIC WRITING DISCOURSES**

Researchers in academic writing pedagogy have identified three types of discourses into which students are positioned, namely the study skills discourse, the academic socialization discourse and the academic literacies discourse (Ballard & Clanchy, 1988; Lea

& Street, 1998; Lea & Street, 1999; Preece, 2010; Starfield, 2007). In the study skills discourse, also called remedial discourse, students are viewed as lacking the study skills necessary for success in academic and professional life. At university, these study skills can be taught independently, irrespective of their disciplines and later transferred to different contexts in which students need to write. As a result, students need to be taught generic or technical aspects of writing. The limitations of this approach are that it emphasizes the surface features of writing, such as grammar, spelling and punctuation and ignores the close relationship between writing and knowledge construction in various academic disciplines as well as the relationship between writing and student diversity.

In the academic socialization or anthropological discourse, students are exposed to the characteristics, textual norms and conventions and written genres of specific academic disciplines. In other words, students are portrayed as undergoing a process of acculturation into a homogeneous discourse community or new culture and writing is seen as a transparent medium for the representation of given disciplinary forms (Lea & Street, 1998; Preece, 2010). Just like the study skills discourse, the limitation with the academic socialization discourse is that it may fail to recognize the language repertoires and perspectives that students bring with them into the academic community which could be used as a resource for learning.

In the academic literacies discourse, academic literacies are viewed as heterogeneous, diverse, contested social practices, shaped by interests and power relations, and are open to change (Starfield, 2007). In this discourse, student writers and their instructors are viewed as adopting different identities and positions as they negotiate these contested practices, which construct meaning in a discipline rather than simply represent it. One of the merits of academic literacies discourse is that it recognizes the language repertoires and literacy practices that students bring with them into higher education and the need to assist them to develop their awareness of what is appropriate to a given setting (Preece, 2010). In terms of academic writing, what these diverse literacy practices imply is that successful meaning making possibly results from students' negotiated and collaborative efforts.

## **METHODS**

### **Settings, Participants and Ethical Considerations**

The study was conducted in one higher learning institution in Rwanda in 2009 and involved 34 second-year undergraduate students (31 males and 3 females) and one instructor of a Written English II module. All students were enrolled in the discipline of Modern Languages and their participation was entirely voluntary. Other ethical issues pertaining to participants' anonymity and confidentiality were also observed by using Roman numerals to refer to groups (from group I to XII), letters F for females and M for males, followed by numbers (from 1 to 34).

### **Design of the Intervention and Implementation Procedures**

The academic writing intervention took place in the middle of the Written English II module which is normally offered to second-year undergraduate students in the discipline of Modern Languages. The module comprises 200 hours of student notional learning time. Of the 200 hours, only 10 hours were devoted to the academic writing intervention. To maintain the order of the class timetable and to implement the writing intervention as planned, the 10 hours were divided into five non-consecutive sessions, each session comprising two hours.

To start writing, the instructor requested the students to propose an argumentative topic to work on in small groups (i.e three members per group). Among the suggested topics, students agreed to discuss gender and equality: *Can women be equal to men in the Rwandan context?* In light of the selected topic, groups of students were introduced to the various stages of writing and were then instructed to produce a 400-word essay. In agreement between the module instructor and the researcher, all groups were guided to follow the planning, drafting, reviewing, revising and editing stages of writing. To make sure that these stages were adhered to, all writing sessions were carried out in one classroom in the presence of the usual module instructor. However, his role was not to impose the order in which to write but rather to guide and assist students whenever it was needed. The researcher also attended classroom writing sessions to make sure the academic writing intervention was conducted as designed. After completing the essay, groups of students were requested by the researcher to reflect on the writing stages they had gone through and report to the class what they thought they had accomplished in terms of academic writing thanks to those stages, the difficulties they had experienced, persistent challenges and how to overcome them.

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

Beyond the classroom writing sessions, in-depth, open-ended interviews were conducted in English with individual groups of students and on separate occasions. The interview questions focused on the ideas that students had of academic writing before they started to write in groups, how they had experienced the various stages of writing, what they had gained by writing together, and what they saw as persistent difficulties with their academic writing. Given the variety of responses that were expected from 12 groups of students, qualitative interviewing (Bryman, 2008) was judged the most appropriate data collection strategy to use. All interviews were audio-recorded, each lasting 20 minutes on average (see Appendix I for interview guide).

To analyze the data, all audio-recorded interview responses were first transcribed. Next, the data were organized according to the original order of interview questions and across the groups of respondents. Then, the data were read, re-read and closely examined until the main categories and sub-categories were derived. Finally, an inductive analysis of the data was applied by interpreting the meanings reflected by those categories and sub-categories and by quoting representative interview responses. The interpretation of the meanings of the categories and sub-categories was largely influenced by the theories of process writing.

### **FINDINGS**

The analysis of findings focuses on students' understanding of the academic writing activity before the intervention, how they experienced the introduced writing processes and their new perspectives on writing in an academic context after the intervention.

#### **Students' Understanding of the Academic Writing Activity**

With a few exceptions, students' views on academic writing generally meant that it is a very challenging activity. Under this category, three sub-categories were found, namely writing as a thought-provoking and organized activity, an iterative activity and a means to position oneself in a discourse community.

## **Writing as a Thought-provoking and Organized Activity**

When the groups of students were asked to explain the ideas they had about academic writing before they started to write, some of them clearly mentioned their worries about the type of information to include, how to obtain and organize it and the amount of time all this was going to take: “It [writing] is a very difficult task because it demands much time to think. You can’t write without thinking first, reading books, searching for convincing arguments... Briefly, it requires time, concentration and attention” (VII: M17). Other groups of students made it clear that it was actually more difficult for them to organize the information than collecting it. Their position was argued as:

Writing is just the matter of reading and thinking. When you have read a number of documents you get some ideas and the remaining task is to know how to organize them, structure them and develop them. But without reading you can’t get anything to write about; writing just becomes a puzzle for you (IX: M24).

Most students refer to reading, thinking and organization as prerequisites to any writing activity, which are not easily achievable. As a measure of anticipation to their writing fears, students were advised to work in groups.

## **Writing as an Iterative Activity**

Through students’ responses, it was noted that it was not actually their first time to be exposed to the processes of writing. This was revealed when they referred to a number of stages they had moved through to reach the final draft of their text. Their awareness of the writing processes was expressed in: “Writing is an activity which requires attention and time to collect ideas, to pull them together, to make drafts, to make revisions until you reach the final version” (III: M6). Another student supported this, saying that “writing is really challenging; you need to follow some stages,...you need to take your time and decide what to keep and what to correct” (V: M10). To some students, the information and knowledge about the writing stages were evident. But the way they used to translate them into practice was yet to be proven.

## **Writing as a Means to Position Oneself in a Discourse Community**

In a number of ways, students’ responses showed how writing can be a means to engage with a discourse community for which they are writing. One way to attempt this engagement is to have a target audience in mind: “Writing is something which must be done seriously because you write for someone you don’t know” (IV: M8). Before the writing intervention, the issue of target audience was apparently not fully grasped by students but with practical process writing in class, they were encouraged to know their ideal reader and what could be his/her needs.

While reflecting on the writing activity especially when carried out in English (as a foreign language), another student pointed out that he is mostly wary of language-related mistakes. The underlying message is that in order to position himself meaningfully into his disciplinary community he should attend to those mistakes, probably through revision and editing processes: “I am afraid of making mistakes because English is my third language. I do my best but I know that I can’t totally avoid them” (XII: M31). Another possible way to engage with a written discourse community is to quote from authoritative sources within that community: “Academic writing is difficult because when you are writing you provide

references and this implies reading and consulting different sources” (VII: M16). In process writing, language accuracy is not a priority. What is important is the way writers communicate their ideas, feelings and experiences and draw from other people’s ideas to make meaning. So the preliminary picture that some students had of writing needed to be adjusted.

### **Experiences with the Writing Processes**

To examine how the writing processes were experienced by individual groups of students, they were asked to explain what stages they had found most difficult, easiest and most essential and provide their reasons. Of all writing stages, planning and organization turned out to be the most difficult. The second most difficult stage was drafting, that is, in the context of argumentative essay writing, knowing how to shape the introductory part and how to develop arguments for and arguments against within the body of the essay. The explanations for students’ planning difficulties is that they found it relatively easy for a group to collect ideas or search for information but difficult to agree on the exact path to follow while developing their essay. Some of their views were expressed as: “The most difficult stage was that of organizing ideas. It happened that one of us wished to put a given idea in the introduction whereas another one said ‘no, let’s place it in the body [of essay]’” (VIII: M20). Another student added:

Yes, brainstorming is normally easy because you write ideas as they come to your mind. But organization is difficult because it requires deep and serious thinking. You need to know what to write first, what to write next in a coherent way (II: M4).

Students’ responses on the most difficult stages of their writing were quite similar to what they deemed most essential, that is, planning, organization or ordering of written information. Two students justified their standpoint arguing that “we need to make sense of all ideas collected so that we know what to keep and what to leave. So the most essential stage for me is the selection of key ideas to develop” (V: M10). This was firmly supported by another respondent:

Organizing ideas as a group and deciding in which order to put them on paper was the most important thing. The discussion at this step took longer than usual because we had to agree on what ideas to write first, what to write next and how to conclude. (XII: M31)

As regards the easiest stages of the writing processes, students’ responses pointed to brainstorming, revising and editing. These responses could be self-explanatory as editing, for instance, entails checking on the writing mechanics and linguistic accuracy of a complete piece of writing, which normally “do not require fresh reflection” (XII: M29) while brainstorming is “just a matter of exchanging our ideas” (III: M6).

### **New Perspectives on Academic Writing**

Students’ new perspectives on academic writing include what they say they gained from the writing exercise, what they see as persistent problems and what they propose to be done so that they are able to overcome them.

## **Gains from the Argumentative Writing Exercise**

Not everything related to argumentative writing was expressed in challenges and problems. A few respondents were keen to highlight its potential to sharpen their mind as well as its important appeal even beyond the academic context. Their views were articulated as: “I find [argumentative] writing a very good exercise because it enlightens your mind and sparks your reflection” (III: M5). Another respondent added that “writing is an essential skill in our life because when we leave the university, most of what we will be required to do will be centered on writing” (XI: M28). A different perspective on writing was brought by those who view it as a means of activating tacit knowledge on a topic and thus a gateway to self-discovery: “When you take a pen and paper to write you discover fresh ideas you didn’t have before you started to write” (II: M3).

## **Specific Academic Writing Problems and How to overcome them**

To learn more about students’ specific problems in academic writing, each group of students was requested to collaborate with another group, exchange their essays, read them closely and finally, tell the whole class what could broadly be looked at as specific problems for their group’s writing. In general terms, persistent academic writing problems pointed out by students themselves were related to structure and organization (how to divide and order paragraphs), cohesion and coherence, content and focus (developing convincing arguments supported by examples), language interference (thinking in Kinyarwanda and writing in English) and grammatical errors (word choice, word order, use of tenses and spelling). To illustrate some of these problems, some groups observed the following from their peer groups: “In the introduction, there is no clear focus on the problem to be discussed. As the essay develops, you can’t see different paragraphs. So, structure is a big problem here. The transitions between paragraphs are not either visible” (Group III evaluating Group I). Another group noticed that “the topic is well developed. But it seems they [group members] were thinking in the native language and translating in English because there are many instances of this” (Group IV evaluating Group II).

To overcome their academic writing problems, students propose a number of strategies mainly centered on the role of the instructor and, to a less extent, on that of their peers. More specifically, students request more practice in process writing under the guidance of their instructor. The instructor ought to design many and varied writing exercises along the process writing model and then closely follow students up, provide them with assistance whenever needed, assess their final work and provide feedback.

On the assessment point, students lamented the fact that they do not always obtain feedback from the many writing exercises they are subjected to. Feedback complaints were expressed as: “Those who teach writing should avail the corrections of the written tasks we are often asked to work on so that we see the outcome of our efforts” (III: M6). “I would request the instructors to provide the feedback [on our writing] so that we learn from our mistakes. Otherwise, we will go on reproducing the same mistakes” (VII: M15).

However, while articulating the role that they ought to play to improve their peers’ proficiency in English writing, the students’ tone goes down. For them, their academic writing responsibility is limited to accepting to work together, which they praise as “a sure way of generating ideas quickly, organizing them appropriately and coming up with a coherently written piece” (X: F2). Students also recognize that participating in organized talks can help them gain new ideas which they can include in their writings: “Something else that can help us develop our ideas is to join the debating clubs. This can be an opportunity for us to talk but also to gain some new ways of thinking” (IX: M24).

In summary, students' responses show that they have varied ways of understanding academic writing and how process writing strategy has enabled them to reflect and weigh their strengths and weaknesses. Altogether, students' responses clearly indicate the steps to follow to address specific writing challenges and who should take that responsibility. The implications of these findings are discussed in the next section.

## DISCUSSION

The aim of this study was to examine how students experienced process writing as a technique that could help them improve the quality of their academic writing. To achieve this aim, it has been of paramount importance first, to gain knowledge about what students understand by academic writing before embarking on their experiences of the technique itself, the challenges it posed and the new perspectives it could open up to them. According to Starfield (2007) it is crucial for instructors to learn about their students' prior perceptions and assumptions about writing so that they build upon them in an effort to help them become acquainted with the requirements of disciplinary discourses.

Looking at writing as a thought-provoking and organized activity refers to the cognitivist approach to learning. In this approach, writing is conceived as an activity which requires thinking processes since it involves seeking ideas in long-term memory. But these thinking processes always interact with the task environment, that is, the social context in which a written text is going to be used as well as the discursive conventions that govern it (Tynjälä et al., 2001). Translated into practice, the writing processes involve collecting ideas and converting them into sentences which in the end make up a whole text. These processes cannot be completed at once but rather occur in a number of recurring stages of planning and organization, drafting, revising and editing. Thus, writing stimulates thinking and reflection which also support learning (Boscolo & Mason, 2001; Tynjälä, 1998).

The second assumption held by students about writing is related to its iterative nature. In fact, writing moves into various recursive processes and some of them require the intervention of more knowledgeable individuals for the final text to be more meaningful. This intervention of other people in an individual's writing processes confers the social nature of writing which is linked to the social constructivist and socio-cultural theories of learning. Both theories emphasize the role of learners' social interaction and their participation in the cultural discourse practices (Starfield, 2007; Tynjälä et al., 2001). Depending on their interaction and participation in the writing practices, students will be able to position themselves into specific academic discourse communities (i.e, students' third assumption about writing). In brief, the three assumptions held by students about the writing activity serve to confirm its complex and multifunctional character as shaped by the individual, the social and the institutional discourses.

The core question that inspired this research was to see how process writing technique can help improve students' academic writing skills. From the students' responses, it was noted that they found the planning and organization stages of process writing the most difficult while at the same time the most essential of all. After writing, students also mentioned that they were not sure of how to deal with the issues of content, cohesion and coherence and grammar. According to writing researchers and practitioners, the above findings do not actually depict a hopeless situation since more experienced writers normally spend a substantial amount of their time planning and organizing what they are going to write and what to include. The same researchers and practitioners advise writers to avoid being overly concerned with linguistic accuracy unless it affects the meaning of text (Coffin et al., 2003; Fernsten & Reda, 2011; Ivanič, 2004). In fact, in the process writing model, all issues

pertaining to grammar, spelling and language use are tackled during the reviewing, revising and editing stages and these were labeled the easiest stages by nearly all students.

A finding that was surprising was that students suggested that the entire responsibility to solve their academic writing difficulties was on the instructor. In a strict sense, process writing technique is meant to be learner-centered even though the role of the instructor as a facilitator in the learning process cannot be overlooked. That is why the solution to students' academic writing problems should mainly come from themselves. In this regard, students resolved to dedicate themselves more to collaborative work and to engage more openly in group debates as a means to sharpen their thinking and learning. This resolution seems to support Tynjälä et al.'s (2001) view that combining writing with other forms of discourse like reading, classroom talks and group discussions is an authentic way to learn because in real life "we do not learn only contents but also modes of action and social and cultural practices" (p.14).

Another strategy to help students surmount their academic writing difficulties was implemented in the classroom by the instructor even though its intended goal was apparently not readily captured by students. After groups of students completed the writing task, they were requested to look at each other's essay and report to the class what they had found as persistent writing difficulties for their peer group. Also, by verbalizing what they were doing, they had to use the terminologies used in process writing and had to defend their stand point, which would strengthen the impact of their work. This agrees with Frederick's (1993) view that classroom reporting is crucial because "not only are groups [of students] understandably interested in what other groups have decided, but student learning is enhanced by hearing the range of similar and different arguments" (para. 19). In terms of group writing, Fernsten and Reda (2011) preferred to name that strategy 'reflective exercises' as they are meant to help students make their ideas explicit, defend their standpoint, learn more about themselves, better understand the work of writing and gain greater confidence while negotiating the variety of literacies required in the academy and beyond.

## CONCLUSION

This study has shown that it is possible to improve the way students perceive and do academic writing. More importantly, through collaborative process writing, students have been enabled to spot their academic writing difficulties and reflect on the strategies to address them. From a pedagogical point of view, this self-awareness and self-reflection are relevant because they are valuable learning tools required in any academic context. In addition, collaborative writing has enabled students to be exposed to and make sense of different views and arguments, which could in the end help shape the individual student's way of thinking and going about academic writing.

From a theoretical perspective, this study has expanded on the existing theories and approaches to the teaching and learning of academic writing. More concretely, the study has demonstrated what students are likely to gain when they shift from the traditional study skills discourse of writing, which is still dominant in the context of the study, to the academic socialization discourse of writing. Even though both discourses are not necessarily mutually exclusive, the message for other EFL writing instructors would be that there is no single way of addressing students' deficiencies in EFL writing. The best strategy would be to be aware and keep trying various other options available according to which option fits best a specific context.

However, due to the limited scope and design of the study, it has been impossible to examine in what measure collaborative writing affects the quality of the final text, how it helps improve the individual student writing and how other languages spoken by Rwandan

students constitute an advantage or an impediment to their academic writing abilities in English. Neither could the study explore what collaborative writing is like and what it can lead to in other academic disciplines. Thus, further research could look into these issues by enlarging the scope of the study and using a quantitative design.

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## APPENDIX I: INTERVIEW GUIDE

1. When you hear of academic writing what kind of thoughts come to your mind?
2. As a group, how did you experience the stages of writing you have gone through together?
  - Which stage did you find as the most difficult?
  - Which stage was the easiest?
  - Which stage did you see as the most essential in your writing?
3. In light of what you have experienced in various stages of your group writing, what can you say you have gained? And what do you see as persistent challenges in academic writing for you and your fellows?