

## Collaborative Writing to Enhance Academic Writing Development Through Project Work

### La escritura colaborativa para incrementar el desarrollo de la escritura académica a través del trabajo por proyectos

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Advanced students at university level struggle with many aspects of academic writing in English as a foreign language. The purpose of this article is to report on an investigation aimed at analyzing what collaborative writing through project work tells us about students' academic writing development at the tertiary level. The compositions written by students before the implementation of our research project showed that their command of written English was weak in form and content. The findings suggest that students evidenced difficulties when using language structure and organization of ideas, plus their argumentation often deviates from the topic given.

*Key words:* Academic writing, collaborative writing, project work

Los estudiantes universitarios de niveles avanzados tienen dificultades con muchos aspectos de la escritura académica en inglés. El propósito de este artículo es reportar un estudio que buscó analizar cómo la escritura colaborativa a través del trabajo por proyectos puede contribuir al desarrollo de la escritura académica de los estudiantes universitarios. Las composiciones escritas por los estudiantes antes de la implementación de este proyecto de investigación, mostraron que el manejo del inglés era muy limitado en cuanto a la forma y el contenido. Los resultados sugieren falta de estructura apropiada, organización de las ideas y argumentación, y en algunos casos desviación del tema dado.

*Palabras clave:* escritura académica, escritura colaborativa, trabajo por proyectos

## Introduction

This article reports the outcomes of a study in which collaborative writing through project work was introduced with the aim of enhancing students' academic written production. It was implemented with a group of students who produced different written tasks at a private university in Bogotá, Colombia. A needs analysis carried out during the second semester, 2007, showed that students were struggling with many aspects of writing at the advanced level. When students were asked to produce different written tasks, they showed difficulties in terms of organizing their ideas, identifying different kinds of texts, providing arguments to support their opinions, as well as employing a range of basic and complex grammar structures. Consequently, a pedagogical intervention was necessary to help students with their academic writing difficulties.

## Theoretical Framework

### *Writing*

There are many ways to approach the concept of writing. Authors like Goodman and Hudelson (as cited in Ruíz, 2004) defined it “as an instrument of communication that mediates personal and social learning among human beings” (p. 130). Goodman (as cited in Clavijo, 2007) asserts that reading and writing have to do with the personal history of each individual, his or her culture and his or her social environment. That is why we need to devote quality time to develop this skill in our students, as not all of them share the same background. When students are not used to reading and writing, we cannot expect that they will produce texts and master their writing skills without the appropriate instruction.

Lombana (2002) affirms that this skill is the most difficult to master in any language and especially when learning a new one because it requires aspects such as linguistic knowledge, cognitive and socio cultural aspects (discourse and sociolinguistic features) to convey meaning, whilst writing influences each person's abilities which need the practice and reflection of a spoken language. Salmon (as cited in Galvis, 2004) shares the previous idea since he affirms that the development of the writing skill requires permanent practice and it is the cause of a social environment, cognitive development and psycholinguistic processes. Consequently, we can define writing far beyond a skill but rather a means that helps individuals to communicate according to what influences their lives. Nevertheless, it is expected to be used formally if we write for academic purposes (at a university level).

**Academic writing.** The importance of moving on from writing to academic writing is due to our students' necessity to be part of a very competitive world in which people with excellent competence in all areas of the language have better opportunities. Due to

globalization, many companies require their employees to use oral and written English proficiently. In addition, most universities demand that their students take and pass international exams with a high score and this includes the ability to write academically. Thus, we highlighted what Brian (2010) points out: “Academic writing is indeed vital for growth and the enhancement of important skills to be able to lead a successful life after the completion of studies” (para. 1). Likewise, Rodríguez (2004) noted that academic writing is focused on higher education students. Therefore, it has a definite audience: teachers and students from the academic community.

With this in mind, we adopt Bednar’s (n.d.) definition of academic writing as formal writing that implies great effort to construct coherent and well argued texts whose production is difficult for the writer, but easier for the reader. “Academic writing encompasses a range of approaches and types of practice for it that requires various techniques to train student writers” (Jordan as cited in Rodríguez, 2004, p. 19). We can connect this quote to the previous idea in the sense that certainly we need to work on academic writing to bridge the gap we have had between writing and other skills in English as a foreign language (EFL) teaching. We also need to become acquainted with those techniques in order to train ourselves on how to teach writing at a higher level and assure students succeed in this skill.

For the purpose of this study, we followed the principles of academic writing presented by Montero (2005); those principles include brainstorming, organizing, outlining, editing drafts, and reaching a consensus on the final product. It is worth mentioning that different authors in the field of academic writing like Keenan and Pavlik (1990) present these principles but give them different names.

In synthesis, academic writing involves not only form and function but also rhetoric, which is the ability to use language effectively. Our study is based on the “non linear, exploratory, and generative process whereby writers discover and reformulate their ideas as they attempt to approximate meaning” (Zamel as cited in Ariza, 2005, p. 38). Thus, we believe there should be a balance between content and form though what really counts is to trigger the written language ability in learners. This will help our pupils grow academically and professionally in addition to providing them with an opportunity to experience peer collaboration.

**Collaborative writing.** Most teacher-researchers state that in essence, collaborative writing means that the student teams up with one or more peers to go through the writing process. We definitely agree with this statement and, in addition to this, we have to mention that collaborative writing in class is a way to prepare students for future assignments where team abilities are required. Widdowson (as cited in Montero, 2005) points out that when students work together they are dialoguing and making decisions due to constant feedback. The classroom technique of collaborative learning of writing skills is strongly advised in our

setting where students must be the center of the class and interact as much as possible with their classmates.

English teachers are also required to encourage peer and self correction. “Collaborative writing presents not only a highly motivating learning experience for EFL/ESL students, but also a creative pedagogical tool for teachers” (Montero, 2005, p. 38). According to this author, who carried out this approach using poems in a university in Panama, the benefits are numerous: It promotes individual participation, increases self-confidence, encourages productivity, and makes the activities fun. Taking advantage of these benefits, written-project work was used in the intervention to collect data.

### ***Project Work***

Projects are descriptions and accounts of students’ production using different skills. Burke (1993) states that projects can be an individual or a group formal assignment on a topic related to the curriculum which will trigger creativity and enhance problem solving skills. In addition, this sort of activity provides opportunities for students to collaborate, interact, negotiate, learn, and enjoy in an EFL setting, especially in our context where people were used to working individually.

According to Cárdenas (2006), project works strive for learners’ autonomy, self-monitoring and a capacity for responsible social action. Written projects need to be exploited and implemented as a part of the curriculum if we want students to succeed in this skill and if teachers want a challenge to their methodology and resourceful capability.

In our setting, projects are almost always oral presentations gradually developed in class and linked to the objectives of a lesson. Taking advantage of our students’ need to write, we decided to implement a written component with the kind of project students develop at the university. With collaborative writing through project work we planned to follow Freire’s (1970) philosophy of *transformation from critical pedagogy*, accounting for students’ opinions due to the fact that in this study free opinion was promoted.

### **Research Question**

What does collaborative writing through project work tell us about academic writing development at the tertiary level?

### **Objectives**

1. To identify the changes (if any) in the formal aspects of language students have when they develop academic writing through project work.

2. To identify features of collaboration that are recurrent while writing.
3. To describe the role of project work in the academic writing process.

## **Participants**

This study was conducted with 18 upper-intermediate EFL students aged 16 to 28. There were nine men and nine women whose social background was middle to upper. This group was selected because they were interested in improving their writing skills. Furthermore, we envisioned that they were committed to this investigation and were willing to work collaboratively to enhance their academic writing skills.

## **Research Methodology**

We report the implementation of a pedagogical intervention intended to achieve the goal of enhancing academic writing development by means of collaborative writing and project work (see Appendix 1). We started with a diagnosis stage to assess students' abilities in writing and determine how they would produce different written tasks. Afterwards, we created materials and took relevant elements from academic writing as well as the theory that lies behind project work and collaborative writing for the EFL classroom. The former seeks to improve aspects of writing regarding form and function at a tertiary level. The latter is supported by the idea that collaborative writing through project work allows students to share knowledge and awakens their interest and motivation, facilitates the use of real language for real purposes, and increases their knowledge of the world (Haines, 1987, Fried-Booth, 1990).

Additionally, students faced models of different kinds of texts and took workshops on how to develop argumentation and draw conclusions. Students also practiced the use of connectors and linking words which are part of cohesion and coherence. The final stage was to request pupils to develop the written tasks by following the principles of academic writing suggested by Montero (2005). The development of this study implied using the topics and objectives shown in Table 1.

## ***Instruments and Procedures for Data Collection***

Video recordings and written papers (projects) were used to collect and analyze data. However, students' projects were considered the main source of information. "Video recording allows teachers to observe many facets of their teaching and provides heuristic and accurate information for diagnosis" (Hopkins, 1995, p. 132). Through video recording we were able to evidence the collaborative aspects that emerged from students' compositions such as project work with peers, oral interaction during the sessions as well as students' behavior towards collaboration among their peers.

**Table 1.** Instructional Design Topics

Topics	Outcome
1. Dancing and health. Internal and external organs.	Writing an opinion composition about dancing benefits.
2. Landmarks, natural and man-made. Solutions and decision making.	Writing for a tourist brochure.
3. Movies, positive and negative aspects.	Writing a movie review.
4. Conflict and risk, peace process, war, and other related terms.	Writing a solution-problem composition about something related to the topic.
5. Friends and different types of relationships.	Writing an opinion composition of friendship by giving examples.
6. Television. Describing a TV program by discussing TV censorship.	Writing a composition for and against the positive or negative aspects of TV on people.

Six classes were completely recorded and transcribed verbatim into written form. However, for the analysis, only the sections that could attempt to answer the research questions and achieve the objectives were fully transcribed. It was also a form to observe that students were able to monitor their own learning whilst selecting and implementing appropriate learning strategies such as asking for help and taking charge of their own learning.

The project consisted of collaboratively written compositions. Students' products had at least three paragraphs (introduction, body, and conclusion), each one including a main idea and supporting ideas.

Lastly, we triangulated the data information from the instruments for the validation of this research project.

## Findings and Discussion

After both analyzing the data from the instruments and considerable reflection, we grouped the ideas into two main categories.

The first main category, Collaboration Features in Academic Writing, pinpoints the relationships that arose between students while they were working together. The sub-categories, From Difference to Agreement and External Aid Related to Collaboration, deal with the collaboration performed in class.

In relation to the video recording transcriptions, we could observe that most students were willing to work and enjoyed writing collaboratively because they helped each other and established meaningful negotiation. However, some students struggled to reach agreement on certain aspects such as the connector or the appropriate word to support their opinions as is illustrated ahead in the sub-category From Difference to Agreement.

The second main category, Understanding How to Write an Essay, pertains to the language use per se, meaning form and content, holistically. In other words, the production is not judged according to its mistakes but by the overall impression the work of the participants makes on the readers. Also, it illustrates that the objective of the project was reached so that is why the sub-category was called Moving Toward Completing the Task; because most students wrote their compositions using paragraphs with a main idea and supporting ideas as well as giving their opinions about the topic in question, as displayed in the excerpts related to task completion. In addition, we found that letting students have a voice via the written form is a valuable way to include them and let them know that they can also be able to take action one way or another. We named the subcategory regarding this aspect Critical Thinking Trigger. The last subcategory that emerged after the data analysis was The Mechanics of Academic Writing, for students improved greatly in punctuation, use of capitalization and also wrote more complex sentences and used vocabulary for expressing their opinions as well as connectors.

### ***Category 1: Collaboration Features in Academic Writing***

**From difference to agreement.** This subcategory arises in response to the main question and the main category that refers to the characteristics of collaborative work. It indicates the way students negotiated in order to reach agreement on different aspects of their paper; aspects such as layout, the connectors, examples, and their opinion with regard to the topic. It also reflected the control of turn taking and the role of participants, amongst other things, due to their personal experience with the theme. The latter is connected to the different strategies that students used to reach a consensus and to persuade the other(s) to make use of their prior knowledge as shown in Excerpt 1.

**Excerpt 1.** Video session 1, dancing.

1. S2: I know...*escribamos* Joropo. // S1: No, I don't know about that. I
2. think is more interesting, I think, Mapalé, is better no? // S2: I like Joro
3. po more // S1: But is good for what? // S2: for people timid and
4. Boring // S2: Ok so we recommend this dance for fat, timid and bored
5. S1: no look the board // S2: What? (high pitch) // S1: The *tablero*...board //
6. S2: So overweight // S1: Because you burn calories you do...make
7. exercise...you move many parts like hips // S2: legs, arms // S3: shoulder
8. *Bueno*...write...this dance consist in...Teacher (high pitch) you say

9. consist in? // T: No, on // S3: consist on some kind of *coqueteo...busque*
10. S12: Flirt // S3: Flirt? (highpitch) Yes // T: Flirting // S12: in man a women
11. S3: No...(low pitch) between // S12: Yes, yes it is traditional dance in
12. Pairs // S3: and group // S12: *entonces...*it is traditionally danced in pair
13. pairs but always making part of a group // S3: of a large group...is
14. better *así*.

**Excerpt 2.** Session 1, composition-dancing, S2 and S4.

Mapalé is a dance of Caribbean region. This dance is very “move” and you need a lot of energy and a good attitude. In many occasions people who dance mapalé can do it in pairs or in group. You need to move your arms, hips, legs and head faster.

As seen in Excerpts 1 and 2, both participants acknowledged the fact that writing about something they knew about would help facilitate accomplishing the task. Students also followed the guidelines for writing a composition. In this case, the participants supported their choice using either the benefits or drawbacks that dance could provide for one’s health. These students both agreed and disagreed as often happens in classes and activities where collaboration and cooperation are necessary.

Even though students completed the task (Moving Toward Completing the Task subcategory), it is clear that within this subcategory they were still in a state of flux, frequently revising connectors, supporting ideas, and even the topic. As Elbow and Belanoff (1999) affirm, moving from difference to agreement is not just a difficulty but also an opportunity to reach full agreement in thinking as well as in finding a common voice. Discrepancies are difficult to avoid and, as in real life, something has to be done to make decisions that will benefit students’ learning process and results.

**External aid related to collaboration.** With regard to external aid related to collaboration, Tennant (2001) asserts that academic writing is difficult for nonnative speakers of English even if they have high ability and strong motivation because they need other resources such as dictionaries, the Internet and other people’s advice to develop writing successfully. This subcategory describes the different resources students used in order to complete the task. Students resolved their doubts, answered their questions and even asked for the opinion of other pairs or groups. Another recurrent aspect in collaborative work was the need for the teacher’s help to feel confident with the content; however, this latter response was not as frequent as the former. Tessema (2005), who carried out a project-based writing task with advanced English students in Ethiopia to enhance motivation, found that “even students who were ordinarily reticent became actively engaged in the project and were highly motivated” (p. 26). His participants also frequently requested help (teacher intervention) which, for him, indicated a high level of motivation. He believes that students must be encouraged gradually to be independent and self-reliant. The participants of this

research project also acknowledged the use of the dictionary as an indispensable tool when writing. Many students mentioned it numerous times throughout the sessions.

**Excerpt 3.** Video session 3, conflict.

1. S17: in conclusion the manufacture // S13: of what! // S17: of the
2. biological weapon and bomb is a big error because is a future
3. killer // S13: *uy SL...*is nice like this and the title? // S17: how do you
4. say *en contra?* // S12: Against // S14: thank you...against David like
5. that? // S12: I think so but ask the teacher or in the dictionary you
6. can look the word, find how to write it // S17: Against biological weapons because is the principal topic.

Moreover, participants requested aid according to their immediate need to achieve the task which allowed them to understand how to write a formal paper.

Reaching agreement and external support in collaboration helped students reach a consensus and use different resources to achieve the task. Students also strove to write a formal document in which autonomy and negotiation were fostered.

## ***Category 2: Understanding How to Write an Essay***

The second category describes the different aspects of how students communicated their opinions through language use, which at the same time allowed examination of the way they developed their academic writing using collaborative writing through project work. After the study, pupils were more aware of the importance of capitalization, the use of connectors, transition words, and punctuation than before the intervention, as revealed in the diagnostics stage. In those compositions, students failed to follow the instructions; additionally, these compositions were full of reduced forms (*wanna, gotta, 'coz, cause, gonna*, etc.) and contracted forms that are common in spoken English but considered too informal or inappropriate for written assignments. Thus, this category led participants to what we called changes in formal writing due to awareness of the elements required for the goal of crossing the finish line. Certainly, the aspects already mentioned contributed to students' movement toward completing the task.

Conversely, there was a recurrent problem in identifying cohesion, which was observed from both students' projects and video recording. This aspect comprises part of the mechanics of the academic writing subcategory.

**Moving toward completing the task.** Undoubtedly one of the main difficulties observed at the university, before carrying out this research, was that many students failed to complete a given task and many times wandered off the topic which often was already poor in terms of content. The following excerpts demonstrate how students completed the task after a process of negotiation, agreement, and disagreement.

**Excerpt 4.** Session 3, composition-conflict, S16 and S12.

(An introduction)

The army conflict in Colombia is a problem that affects all Colombian people. Many of Colombian citizens had been kidnapped or killed by terrorist parties. The government is declaring that armed counter attack is the best solution to end the problem and bring the kidnapped people back to freedom. Some other people think that is too dangerous and the best solution is to start negotiations with the terrorist party.

**Excerpt 5.** Session 5, composition-effects of TV, S11 and S14.

In conclusion, TV is like a window where you can see the whole world. And image can say or explain more than a thousand words, and through this you can see things you probably would never see in your life.

In the excerpts above we can see that students were not only aware of the development of each section, but also of the importance of providing examples to support their ideas. According to Tessema (2005), project work, where students can express themselves freely, makes them feel committed to take action on social problems.

**Excerpt 6.** Session 2, composition-landmarks, S3 and S10.

Finally we think that it is an amazing destination for travelers who likes the history and the adventure.

The following excerpt belonged to a class in which learners had to write a persuasive critical movie review.

**Excerpt 7.** Video session 4, movies.

1. because of violence // S5: and the blood // the famous line is here
2. to live or to die you decide...much blood are you arrange to
3. spill to follow with life. . . . and the conclusion // S6: in summary,
4. is more...is different the teacher said to use different not the
5. same connectors all time...so in summary it is excellent // S5: is
6. definitely an excellent...for the characters and the great plot. //
7. S6: YES we're done // [students clap their hands as a signal that they satisfactorily completed the assignment].

In the triangulation of the data, it was observed that most students completed the task.

**Critical thinking trigger.** Topics used in the research encouraged opinion because they belonged to the real world and triggered meaningful input and therefore output, as emphasized in the review of the related literature. Participants also went beyond form inasmuch as they had a space in which to include their voice. Vargas and Abouchaar (2001) remarked that project work strives for students' capacity for responsible social action connected to their communities. Similarly, Ochoa (2004) found that through project work, he

helped children develop skills to reflect, commit, and self-assess themselves in a school. Therefore, project work facilitated critical reflection due to the outcomes that were promoted and sought in a specific setting. Extract 8—taken from the projects—is evidence of students’ critical thinking.

**Excerpt 8.** Session 2, composition-landmarks.

In conclusion, we put more interest in iron and metal monuments instead the natural things, how really give us more things than that, our lives and our future depends for the care and worried for this places.

In the excerpt above we can see that students are concerned with the need to generate awareness of the importance of taking care of natural landmarks as they will benefit Colombia in the future. On the other hand, other participants expressed their feelings and insights with respect to the guerrilla groups, the government, and the United States’ behavior towards Colombian territory, and how these issues affected Colombia.

**Excerpt 9.** Video session 3, conflict.

1. S14: If is true that guerrilla has lost the ideology // S18: or ideas //
2. S14: ok ideas, whatmore...the ideas of them // S18: yes, yes // S14:
3. the Unite States or USA (high pitch) try to got Colombia // S18:
4. yes, our country...and the TLC // S14: and the connector *aquí cuál*
5. *ponemos* // S18: ehhhhhhh wait!wait! sorry!(he hit him
6. accidentally with his foot) S14: le parece...an the most important
7. example is the TLC where we'll receive all *basura*...S18: Trash //
8. S14: For example or change such as...S18: yes sounds better
9. (high pitch) // such as chicken and machines and what
10. more // S14: Colombia suffers *escribamos algo así, la* industry
11. suffer for...S18: competition demand, so too industry, industrial
12. Colombia business going to suffer or be hard // S14: keep
13. business and we don't have power to keep that...now.

Likewise, they visualized what might happen in the future due to these actions, which may have a direct impact on the economy and affect other aspects of society. Here, it is relevant to mention Üstünlüoğlu’s (2004) ideas in the sense that to be a critical thinker does not mean that one has an opinion; rather, it means that one is alert to ideas that may change the person’s opinion.

This author referred to the prejudices that teachers and students have and which comprise one of the obstacles concerning the development of successful critical thinking. These ideas are connected to Thomson’s (2006), who stresses the importance of allowing students to think, share, and argue positions. She highlights the fact that in critical thinking activities, there are no right or wrong answers, but instead a space to be tolerant of different

points of view that help illustrate the positive and negative of both sides. Critical thinking accounts for “the aspect of reasoning as the ability to go further than the information given, to draw conclusions from evidence, to see what follows from statements which other people make” (Thomson, 2006, p. 78).

For the purpose of this study, which sought to investigate the development of academic writing, this was a good way to start exercising critical thinking in the sense that students were free to express their opinions. As Harvey (2003) emphasizes, we cannot separate writing from thinking and learning due to the fact that it is a restless cycle of inquiry and revision that pushes students toward the true goal of higher education: critical thinking, creativity, analysis, and informed judgment. Students did attempt to attain this accomplishment as already seen in Excerpts 8 and 9.

**The mechanics of academic writing.** The mechanics of academic writing refers to the great improvement in punctuation, use of capitalization, and syntax that students achieved throughout this process. Additionally, students used vocabulary for expressing their opinions including the use of connectors that they had not used before as indicated by the needs analysis carried out to determine students’ shortcomings. Similarly, there was a more logical order of ideas making it easier to understand the structure of the text. Moreover, the text followed the required format to write a composition. As Hedge (1999) says, “good writers tend to concentrate on getting the content right first and leave details like correcting spelling, punctuation, and grammar until later” (p. 23).

All these elements played a determinant role in the changes of the formal aspects of writing. Therefore, in spite of the fact that there was a problem in identifying cohesion when students had to pay attention to the referent word, the participants were capable of expressing much more about a given topic, thus making fewer mistakes in terms of punctuation, connectors and capitalization as seen in the following sample from a movie review.

In Excerpt 10, students’ skill and acquisition of punctuation, capitalization, and connectors can be seen. It shows progress in form with respect to the diagnosis papers, too.

**Excerpt 10.** Session 4, movie review, S10 and S9.

Another reason to say that this movie is good, it is the excellent view because we can see mountains and sea. In addition, the characters used the clothes according to the time, for example swords and shields.

According to Harvey (2003), mechanics in general entails more than the simple correct use of punctuation and capitalization. It is the correct use of spelling, connectors, transitions, subordination, and conjunctions more than simply using good grammar. The students advanced greatly in the use of connectors and transitions which helped them in the organization of the paper and the content as well. In the following excerpts from three

different compositions, examples of the use of connectors can be observed. Connectors make students' papers more coherent and easy to follow (see Appendix 2 and Excerpt 11).

**Excerpt 11.** Session 4, essay movie review, S8 and S7.

In spite of the fact that they were very different, they fell in love. However, they fight for their love and begin a relationship. The Titanic, that was the ship where they had been in the 1920's crashed an iceberg, and started to sink.

The use of connectors is closely related to enriching what students want to express. According to Harvey (2003), good writing in English consists of combining simple sentences using conjunctions and transitions to help writers unify a paragraph. Connectors make written documents more cohesive and make the writing sound more natural. Besides, "the main function of connectors is acting to facilitate a listener or reader the interpretation and comprehension of written discourse although without them the comprehension would still be possible" (Balažic, 2004, p. 2).

In Excerpt 12, we can see students' awareness of the need to use connectors to improve their compositions. Additionally, they were careful not to use reduced forms and contractions since they knew that this was not suitable for formal writing.

**Excerpt 12.** Video session 6, friendship.

1. S8: yeah! They disappear because they are interested or
2. something like that // S5: however there are special friends that
3. are in the difficult moments with us and are...S8: together with
4. us, in addition with C or T // S8: look with *t* and double *d*, it is
5. important that a friend BE confidential person // S5: yes a
6. confidential person because if you tell a secret to a friend and
7. he/she don't // S18: doesn't keep it, could be dangerous for you...
8. S18: in conclusion, a friend is a part important in our life and
9. don't, they don't feel alone // S5: ready! Here we need a
10. connector // S18: Ok.

Nonetheless, there was a failure to use cohesion regarding the use of referents. As we advanced in the activities proposed to enhance academic writing, we noticed that some students declined in their ability to identify cohesion. In spite of the fact that they improved in unity (paragraphs directly related to the main idea of the essay and all sentences in each paragraph being related), and coherence (paragraphs and sentences followed each other in an orderly way and students used transitions to connect them), they failed to identify cohesion: misuse of the referent words.

In summation, the categories and their subcategories tell us that collaborative writing through project work helped students enhance their academic writing through practice of the writing process which triggered different formal aspects of language whilst promoting critical

thinking. Nonetheless, there are some aspects that need further work and intervention—such as identifying cohesion—because at the advanced level, students should defeat this drawback. As many people state formally speaking nowadays, through minor adjustments people are able to learn and acquire daily skills. Writing academically is a worthy project to try in the classrooms.

## Conclusions

Thanks to collaborative writing, it was established that students thought critically, offering their viewpoints about the topics discussed. Students' voices were heard in a different way: the written form. As Vargas and Abouchar (2001) advocate, project works contribute to democracy inasmuch as it is a participatory opportunity for learners to express their opinions whilst they deal with real situations that affect us directly or indirectly such as the topics students wrote about: conflict and friendship, among others.

The categories and their subcategories tell us that collaborative writing through project work helped students enhance their academic writing development, as this process prompted different formal aspects of language and promoted critical thinking. Another relevant change identified in the process of academic writing development was the students' awareness of the use of mechanics (spelling, punctuation, capitalization).

Nonetheless, there is an aspect that needs further work and intervention and it is identifying cohesion. Bearing in mind that the participants of this study belonged to the upper-intermediate level, we expected they had already overcome cohesion failure since identifying cohesion is a metacognitive strategy worked on via the other abilities in all levels at the university where this study was conducted. Therefore, we did not expect to see a failure in this aspect.

Conversely, the features of collaboration that were recurrent along this research project were students' agreement and disagreement with respect to aspects such as connectors, ideas and how to organize the text. External aid in collaboration was another characteristic of collaborative writing because students asked other peers, their teacher and learned to rely on a dictionary.

Collaboration fostered free opinion and created a space for drawing conclusions about topics that are part of the students' lives. Those opinions should be shared, not only assessed. In addition, decisions ought to be made in teams, groups or pairs since the collaborative work approach is invading many fields. The following quote summarizes a reflection that should be made when working with writing in any context: "Writing in the English-language classroom can become unreal if it is only ever produced for one reader, the teacher, and if its purpose is limited to enabling the teacher to assess the correctness of the linguistic forms used" (Hedge, 1999, p. 61).

Regarding the role of project work in the academic writing process, it is worth noting that for this study it was used as the means for students to collaborate in class and to produce different written tasks exploiting the contents of the syllabus. As mentioned above, there was a mismatch between the expected outcomes of students in writing and what they could actually produce. In fact, such mismatch was lessened because of this collaborative project work.

Furthermore, implementing a written project was a course of action to innovate our teaching practice since we also used to carry out speaking projects. We believe that this written project helped the participants complete the different tasks as part of the class' objectives and encouraged changes on behalf of students' academic writing.

## **Pedagogical Implications**

The development of this research project and the findings involve some pedagogical implications. Writing requires a considerable amount of time from teachers in terms of preparation on how to introduce students to writing. "Academic writing encompasses a range of approaches and types of practice for it that requires various techniques to train student writers" (Jordan as cited in Rodríguez, 2004, p. 19). Teachers need to look for, create, or adapt appropriate models as well as design workshops for students to practice the use of connectors, linking words, and grammar structures. They also need to train students in critical thinking skills in order for them to argue and support their ideas when writing academic texts.

Writing also demands a lot of time once students have started their own production. Teachers need to monitor students' papers, and when they are finally delivered, they need to provide feedback in terms of content, grammar, and coherence as well as in other areas. Students must be required to correct their papers and hand them in again, which involves a final revision. It takes assuming academic commitment, responsibility, and discipline on behalf of student writers (Zamel as cited in Ariza, 2005).

Even though this research project was carried out some years ago, we still see most of the weaknesses detected in our needs analysis. Writing is not an easy task to attempt. There is the need to include the formal instruction in this skill for our students from the syllabus, and institutions need to constantly train their teachers and require them to write because if teachers do not write themselves, it will be very difficult to introduce their learners to this skill.

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## Appendix 1: Stages of the Pedagogical Intervention

Project Stage	Date	Activity
Diagnosis	August 8	Collecting the first sample
Learning about written projects in collaborative work	August 10	Giving feedback of the first draft
Learning about opinion essays. What are essays?	August 15	Sharing background knowledge
Providing tools	August 22	Using logical connectors for drawing conclusions
Let's write together	September 5	Analyzing Exams Organizing points for an opinion essay Brainstorming and outlining
The process of composing	September 14: Video Recording 1	Writing and rewriting
Gathering information	September 22: Video Recording 2	Decision making
Editing final polish up and writing the conclusion	September 29: Video Recording 3 Mid-term project	Acknowledging and reflecting upon the process
The project: The product of writing	October 8: Video Recording 4	Pair work editing: reaching a consensus
Defending an opinion	October 22: Video Recording 5	Final Project: Communicating through writing
Students score their essays and title them Discussing the whole process Data analysis	November 12: Video Recording 6	The essay project Students share their projects Students discuss their experience

## Appendix 2: Sample of a Student's Composition

### *Fantasy 2000*

*Fantasy 2000* is a Disney animation studios movie, in which there one showed a great work of 2D animation. The main characters are famous Disney's cartoons such as Mickey mouse, Donald Duck and more cartoons taken of many Disney's fantastic stories

The animation of the characters are synchronized with the background music making *Fantasy 2000* the best animation movie ever like. Some parts of the movie are kind of dull, because some sequences can be very long. For example a sequence were there are some flowers floating in a river wich his duration of 10 min.

In addition, classical music is played as background using a variety of recognized classical music for example, Bach, Mozart and Beethoven, among other composers.

Finally, *Fantasy 2000* is a movie with an excellent fantastic plot, whit great music and perfect for all kind of ages. You cannot miss it.