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Students' Perception of Value of Interactive Oral Communication as Part of Writing Course Papers

Meredyth Krych-Appelbaum and Joanna Musial

Every day students are able to discuss complex ideas relatively easily in spontaneous conversation, yet when they attempt to express complex ideas in a written paper, students often experience great difficulty. The features of face-to-face conversation and of written communication differ in a number of respects. This study examines student's perceptions of peer evaluation through interactive conversation as compared to non-interactive written peer feedback. This study provides evidence that students perceive value in actively talking with others about their paper. In particular, students often prefer to talk to someone who has investment in their success and who can give them constructive, honest advice. This study provides some initial evidence that students prefer face-to-face conversing with a classmate as compared to non-interactive written peer feedback. We discuss reasons why conversing about a paper in face-to-face conversation has advantages that may benefit students in academic writing.

One of the goals of education today is to ensure that students are able to write effectively. Some educators characterize writing as "the most important academic skill students develop in their secondary and postsecondary education." (Nagin and National Writing Project, 2006, p.10). One of the chief problems of academic writing is that it can be hard to assess what is easy for others to understand. This ability to anticipate one's audience is important for all types of communication. In face-to face conversation, Clark and Krych (2004) demonstrate that speakers are affected by their conversational partners -- not only in what they plan to say, but how and when they plan to say it. Writing, by contrast, typically has a future reader but the writer cannot interact with the reader. Based on previous research on face-to-face communication, we suggest that students will find it useful to talk interactively with another person about what they are in the process of writing.

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Years ago, communication in general was theorized to be a "Message Model" or "Transmission model" (e.g., Shannon & Weaver, 1949) in which speakers take their ideas and put them into words so that the recipient will decode those words and understand the speaker's message. Various forms of written communication, such as writing papers, are effectively similar to this message model since there is little opportunity for interaction between the encoder (the writer) and the decoder (the reader.)

Grounding – Incremental, Interactive Nature of Conversation

In successful face-to-face conversation, by contrast, people need to do much more than simply utter words for others to decode. Conversation is interactive, requiring people to coordinate with one another in order for communication to proceed properly. People not only establish the content of their conversation (the who, what, when, where) but they also provide evidence of their understanding by nodding, asking questions, gesturing, among other techniques. This social coordination is important, because it impacts the ways speakers and listeners plan what they say and do next (Refer to Krych & Clark, 1997; Clark & Krych, 2004; Bavelas & Chovil,

2000; Clark, 1996). According to grounding theory, people are mutually assessing what each other knows *throughout* a conversation and they use this knowledge when planning what they will do or say next. Without the ability to interact, misunderstanding is much more likely to occur. For example, in psychology of language research, when participant pairs engaged in a Lego model duplication task in which they could not interact with one another, the resulting replicas not only took longer times to complete, but also resulted in over *eight* times as many errors than in a separate condition when participants could interact (Clark & Krych, 2004).

Differences between face-to-face and written communication

Face-to-face conversation and writing are similar in that both are used as a means of communicating ideas to another person. However they are also very different, because the methods place very different constraints on how people communicate that information. The features involved in face-to-face communication and written communication differ in a number of respects. Clark & Brennan (1991) describe a number of features of grounding which occur in face-to-face conversation but not in writing (e.g., co-presence, visibility, audibility, cotemporality, and simultaneity). For example, people often are co-present meaning they share the same physical environment, so they can see and monitor their audience (visibility). They can also mutually hear one another including the intonation and the timing of the talk (audibility). Both people typically can speak at the same time (simultaneity). and even interrupt one another when they do not understand (co-temporality). By contrast, when writing papers, none of the above features are possible, which naturally makes effective communication in writing more challenging.

Moreover in face-to-face conversation, speakers typically know the people they are addressing (addressees), unlike the audience in many written papers. The conversation need only be understood by the participants involved rather than by anyone overhearing the conversation. By contrast, effective writing should be sufficiently clear that a variety of people with different backgrounds will be able to understand it.

Alternatively though, writing does have two additional features which face-to-face conversation does not, such as *reviewability* and *revisability*—two features that writers know very well. Thus unlike the spoken word, writers can review what they have written and often revise their work many times in order to make the writing as clear as possible. "As a writer, we look through language and struggle to discover what we mean to say; as reader (of our own work) we look at language with an editor's eye to be sure we've found the right words to say what we mean" (p.9-10 in Nagin, 2006).

Writing as Communication to a Future Reader

Another problem for writers, especially students, is that they often view writing papers as an object -- an item to be checked off a list, rather than as an actual form of communication. In many cases, the reader is their instructor whom they regard as very knowledgeable about the subject area. Students often take for granted that the reader knows much more about the subject area and so fail to explain what important terms mean. Moreover, when students become overly close to the subject, they assume that their prose should be "obvious" to an intelligent reader and so there is less need to revise their written work. Many students consider writing to be an entity checked off a list, much like a test or quiz, rather than seeing writing the paper as a method of communicating important ideas to others.

A number of studies have examined various writing techniques as a means to improve writing. For example, outlines and mental outlines have found to be useful (Kellogg,

1988). Other evidence suggests interactive peer revision is useful (McGroarty & Zhu, 1997; Reese-Durham, 2005) though there is often less discussion of different methods of communication used in peer revision. Here we suggest that it is important to consider the specific means students use to communicate and that students perceive value in actively interacting with others about their paper.

Current Study

Given this theoretical background, this study compares student's perceptions of interactive, conversational peer evaluation on their writing as compared to non-interactive peer feedback via email. It is predicted that the collaborative conversation about what one is writing should be viewed as beneficial. Students who converse with a peer about their writing should be more likely to want to talk to others to facilitate their paper writing on future papers.

Method
Participants

Participants were 20 undergraduate students enrolled in a psychology of language class who participated in the assignment as part of course credit. All students provided informed consent for participation.

Procedure

All students completed a writing assignment, which required them to reflect on and integrate class readings. The minimum length of the paper was five to six pages. Students were randomly assigned to one of two feedback conditions. In the *written-only* condition students exchanged written feedback from a classmate after they wrote their first draft. In the *conversational* condition students conversed about the paper both before and after writing a draft of the paper. The paired classmates tried to explain to each other a summary of what they planned to write for their papers before beginning to write it. After students wrote the first draft,

the partners met in class to discuss their papers and exchange feedback. Students in the written-only condition prepared their written feedback in a separate room and sent their feedback by email. After the papers were handed in, all participants were asked to fill out a questionnaire about their experience and the techniques they would use to write papers in the future. Identification numbers, rather than student names, were used on all materials to avoid any potential for instructor expectancy bias.

Materials

The questionnaire was developed to measure students' perceptions of the writing assignment in this study. Students rated the usefulness of the writing techniques and the peer revision. Students indicated their likelihood of using writing techniques in the future on a 5-point Likert-type scale (*1* [not very likely to do] to *5* [very likely to do]). In some questions, students not only chose the answer from the given list, but also were asked to explain their choice.

Results

Figure 1 displays the student ratings of the usefulness of the techniques by the type of feedback condition, written (non-interactive) versus conversation (interactive.) There was an interaction of technique ratings by condition (F(1, 13)= 5.722, p< .05). Students in the conversational group rated the interactive conversation more highly than the other techniques, whereas the written email group rated outlining as most useful.

Figure 2 displays the percentage of students choosing each technique as their top choice to use in the future. Half of the students from the conversational condition (as compared to 0% from the written condition) planned to *talk before writing* in the future. Taken together, these results provide initial support that actively talking with someone about writing can be useful for student writers. In contrast to the conversational group,

Figure 1. Ratings of usefulness of the following techniques depending on feedback condition: written feedback versus conversation.
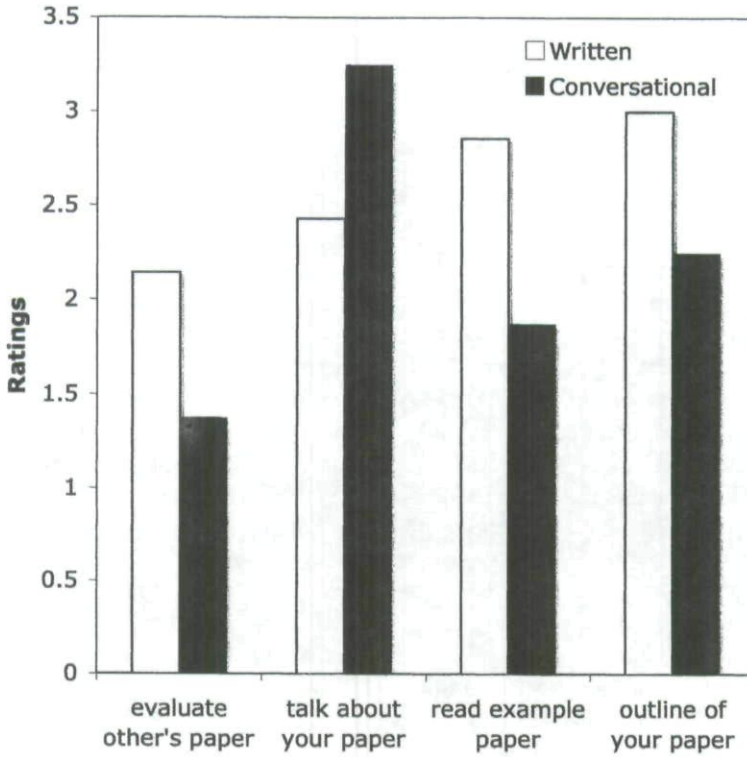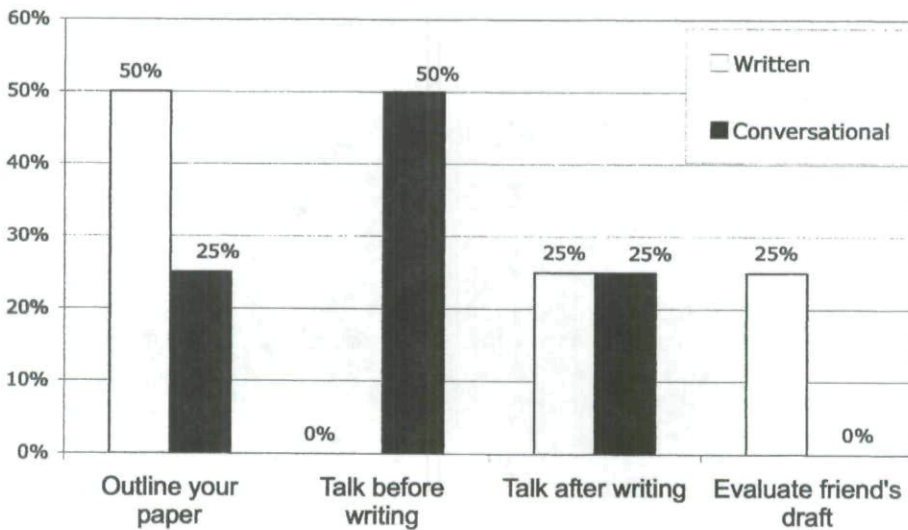

Figure 2. Top choice of writing technique to use in the future. 50% of the Conversational students (and 0% Written) plan to talk before writing. In contrast, 50% of Written condition had outlining as their top choice.

50% of students from the written condition chose *outlining* as their top future writing technique. Thus students who talked with others before writing were more likely to use this technique in the future. Students from the conversational condition rated *conversation* as a useful writing technique more highly than the written feedback group.

Refer to Table 1 for overall percentages of the technique students would most prefer to use in the future across all participants. Combining the talking before writing and talking after choices, 53% of students indicated that their top choice of technique would be talking with someone about paper in the future. Of those, 37.5% said they want to talk with someone *before writing* the paper. Outlining the paper was the third technique selected as useful for future writing with 19% of the overall respondents choosing it. Talking with someone before and after writing was the most preferred choice over the other three techniques combined.

Comments from students across both conditions indicated they preferred to talk with someone who could give them honest, useful feedback and who was invested in their success. That is, students preferred input from someone who honestly wanted to help the student improve the clarity of the writing. More students preferred talking to a trusted friend or family member, especially when they were in the conversational condition

(80% of students in the conversational condition vs. 55% from the written condition.)

Discussion

Every day students are able to discuss complex ideas relatively easily in spontaneous conversation, yet when they attempt to express complex ideas in a written assignment, students often find that the process of writing is much more difficult. When writing, students often encounter difficulties in organizing their ideas, determining their "main point", among other difficulties. One problem in particular for writers of all ages is to make sure that their writing will be clear to a relative novice in the subject area.

In this study, students perceived a benefit in interactively talking about what they are writing. These results provide some initial evidence that talking with another person about what one writes or what one plans to write may be very useful. In particular, students indicated they were likely to converse with someone in the future about their writing. Half of the students who were in the conversational condition rated it as their top choice of technique for writing in the future, whereas none of the students in the written condition did so.

All in all, we suggest that rather than viewing writing papers as an entity to be completed, students will benefit more by viewing writing as a means of communicating with a future audience. Students should choose

Table 1

Percentage of writing techniques students would most prefer to use in the future from those who responded (n=16). Talking with someone before and after writing was rated more highly than the other three techniques across all participants.

Talk after writing	32%
Talk before writing	21%
Outline	19%
Read aloud own paper	17%
Write notes evaluating friend's draft	11%

someone whose opinion they trust and could give them useful input on their writing. In this study, students indicated they would prefer to talk with someone who is more invested in their success such as a trusted friend or family member whom they think can give them honest feedback.

There are a number of reasons in the language literature to help account for *why* conversing with someone face-to-face rather than using purely written feedback might be useful. First, in face-to-face conversation, people typically introduce ideas step-by-step, to make sure that they are mutually understood (see Clark & Wilkes-Gibbs, 1986 and Clark & Krych, 2004). Conversational partners provide assessments such as "mhm, yeah, right" at the end of an increment, to indicate their current understanding. In writing, however, there usually is no specific addressee from whom to get feedback as to what is currently understood. Another benefit of face-to-face conversation is that conversation allows us to obtain immediate feedback on what the addressee currently understands and how this understanding might be different from the writer's intention. Third, the discussion may increase or re-invigorate the students' own interest in the topic and the assignment, especially if the listener finds the topic particularly interesting.

The ability to write and think critically is a crucial skill for people of all ages to develop, and students often indicate that they need to improve their writing skills. By viewing writing as a collaborative endeavor in which they interact with their audience, students may learn to more efficiently and effectively communicate their ideas in written form as well as verbally. Students indeed view interactively talking with others as very useful and rated talking before and after writing combined was higher than the other three techniques combined. We suggest that students may benefit by viewing writing as another means to communicate with other people. By initially focusing less on the evaluative aspect and focusing more on the writers ideas and how to best break them down to be understandable to a real listener, students can benefit by then applying such knowledge from face-to-face conversation to their paper writing.

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