Introduction

For many years, the unique benefits language learners can offer to each other were ignored in L2 writing classrooms. Such a failure to recognize the contributions that L2 learners can make to each other has given way to an active effort to tap the potential of learners as teachers and tutors in L2 writing processes. This has given rise to peer response as part of the process approach to teaching L2 writing. Peer response activities, in which students work together to provide feedback on one another’s writing in both written and oral formats through active engagement with each other’s progress over multiple drafts, have become a common feature of L2 writing instruction. As such, there is a need to discuss peer response in L2 writing in greater depth so that the research findings in this area can be closely examined in contextualized L2 teaching scenarios within a unified theoretical framework. This book is offered to fill this void.

In this book, “peer response” is used as an umbrella term to designate what is normally referred to as “peer feedback,” “peer review,” or “peer editing” in teaching L2 writing. Although the term is probably easily understood, it might be helpful to define it clearly from the outset. Peer response is the use of learners as sources of information and interactants for each other in such a way that learners assume roles and responsibilities normally taken on by a formally trained teacher, tutor, or editor in commenting on and critiquing each other’s drafts in both written and oral formats in the process of writing. Due to the collaborative nature and to the employment of both written and oral formats in this activity, the more general term “peer response” is used. In this introduction, we discuss the theoretical stances of peer response, the pedagog-

The intended audience of this book is threefold. The first readership includes those teachers who used or are using peer response activities in their L2 writing classrooms. For members of this group, the book will serve as a stimulus to help them reflect on their own practices in using peer response as a regular classroom activity. The second readership includes those who are or who will be teaching L2 writing courses yet have never incorporated or are not yet planning to use peer response activities in their L2 writing classrooms. For members of this group, the book will serve as a guide to show them what can be done and how. The third readership includes those who are skeptical about peer response and those who have used peer response but found their practice ineffective in one way or another. For members of this group, the book provides numerous examples and analyses to show why the expected results are sometimes not achieved in conducting peer response activities, what the potential problems are with peer response activities, and how to resolve them.

Theoretical Justifications

Why should peer response activities be used in teaching L2 writing? There are four theoretical stances, which in fact complement and to some extent overlap each other, that support the use of peer response activities in the writing classroom from both cognitive and psycholinguistic perspectives: process writing theory, collaborative learning theory, Vygotsky’s Zone of Proximal Development, and interaction and second language acquisition (SLA). Research based on these theoretical stances has provided substantial evidence that peer response activities in fact help second language learners develop not only their L2 writing abilities but also their overall L2 language abilities through the negotiation of meaning that typically takes place during peer response.
Process Writing Theory

The process approach to writing emerged in the late 1960s and early 1970s in L1 writing (e.g., Elbow 1973; Emig 1971; Moffett 1968) as a response to the traditional product views of writing that focused on form over meaning and the finished text rather than on the process in which writing took place. As such, the process approach to writing, which heavily influenced L2 writing theory and practice, focused on the process of writing, viewing writing not as a product-oriented activity but rather one that is dynamic, nonlinear, and recursive. In pedagogical practice, students are encouraged to engage in multiple drafting, and writing is viewed as occurring in stages that may differ to some extent among different writers. Typically, textbooks and courses following the process approach to writing encourage writers to engage in brainstorming activities, outlining, drafting (focusing on meaning), rewriting (focusing on organization and meaning), and editing (focusing on style and grammar).

Within this approach to writing, peer response has been viewed as an important component of L2 writing instruction (Kroll 1991; Leki 1990; Mangelsdorf 1989; Mangelsdorf and Schlumberger 1992; Mittan 1989; Zamel 1985). Peer response supports process writing with a focus on drafting and revision and enables students to get multiple feedback (e.g., from teacher, peer, and self) across various drafts. Additionally, it builds audience awareness; helps make reading-writing connections; and builds content, linguistic, and rhetorical schemata through multiple exposures to a text.

Collaborative Learning Theory

Another theoretical framework that promotes the use of collaborative group work is collaborative learning theory. A central tenet in collaborative learning theories is that learning, as well as knowledge itself, is socially constructed. Bruffee (1984), a leading proponent of collaborative writing, defines collaborative learning as the type of learning that takes place
through communication with peers and states that there are certain kinds of knowledge that are best acquired in this manner. Collaborative learning theories have had a major impact on L1 writing instruction and more recently have begun to have an impact on both theoretical and pedagogical aspects of L2 writing.

Research in L1 writing has found numerous benefits of employing collaborative learning techniques in the classroom. Studies have found that in writing groups, students negotiate meaning as they help each other revise their papers (Gere 1987) and that learning in writing groups is reciprocal and improves students’ work (Bruffee 1984). As Bruffee (1984, 644) states, while students individually may not have all the knowledge or resources available to successfully complete a task, “pooling the resources that a group of peers brings with them to the task” may enable the group to complete a task that individuals may not be able to complete on their own.

L2 writing group researchers have also found that there are a number of linguistic gains of collaborative writing and revising. For example, researchers have found that collaborative writing groups can lead to decision making, “allow[ing] learners to compare notes on what they have learned and how to use it effectively” and providing learners with “increased opportunities to review and apply their growing knowledge of second language (L2) writing through dialogue and interaction with their peers in the writing group” (Hirvela 1999, 8). This is not surprising and in fact echoes the findings of research on interaction and SLA, as outlined later in this chapter, since peer response activities are one kind of collaborative group work that may lead to greater opportunities for students to negotiate meaning as they work with peers in improving a written text.

**Vygotsky’s Zone of Proximal Development**

A third theoretical stance that supports the use of peer response in the writing classroom is based on Vygotsky’s (1978) belief that cognitive development is a result of social interac-
tion in which an individual learns to extend her or his current competence through the guidance of a more experienced individual. Simply stated, “Social interaction is a mechanism for individual development, since, in the presence of a more capable participant, the novice is drawn into, and operates within, the space of the expert’s strategic processes for problem solving” (Donato 1994, 37). The space between the person’s actual level of development (i.e., what can be done independently) and the potential level of development (i.e., what can be done with the help of someone else) is called the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). Higher cognitive processes are hypothesized to emerge as a result of interaction, resulting in the individual’s independent completion of the task, with the language use within the interaction serving as the “critical device for mediating cognitive development” (DiCamilla and Anton 1997, 614). While Vygotsky originally developed the notion of the ZPD to account for child development and considered the novice as a child and the more experienced individual as a guiding adult, his work has since been further developed by L1 researchers such as Wood, Bruner, and Ross (1976), who employ the term “scaffolding” to describe the supportive conditions that occur within the ZPD. Vygotsky’s theoretical framework has been employed by L2 researchers such as Donato (1994) and Lantolf and Appel (1994) to investigate interaction in group work and by L2 writing researchers (Guerrero and Villamil 1994; DiCamilla and Anton 1997; Villamil and Guerrero 1996, 1998) to examine how peer response activities during group work in the second language writing classroom influences language learning.

Results of the research (e.g., Guerrero and Villamil 1994; DiCamilla and Anton 1997; Donato 1994; Villamil and Guerrero 1996) indicate that collective scaffolding occurs in group work, wherein “the speakers are at the same time individually novices and collectively experts, sources of new orientations for each other, and guides through this complex linguistic problem solving” (Donato 1994, 46). Furthermore, long-term language development was found as a result of this collective scaffolding (Donato 1994). In addition, peer re-
response activities “foster a myriad of communicative behaviors” that benefit all members of a group (Villamil and Guerrero 1996, 69).

**Interaction and Second Language Acquisition**

Over the past 20 years, researchers (e.g., Doughty and Pica 1986; Long 1985; Long et al. 1976; Long and Porter 1985; Pica and Doughty 1985; Pica et al. 1989; Porter 1983, 1986; Varonis and Gass 1983) have begun recognizing that there are a number of psycholinguistic rationales for using group work. The findings of the research on interaction and second language acquisition provide clear evidence that engaging learners in group activities that require students to negotiate meaning, such as peer response activities, enables learners to gain additional practice in the target language. Group work increases opportunities for students to engage in the negotiation of meaning, and the increased opportunities to negotiate meaning may lead to increased comprehension, which leads to faster and better acquisition. Furthermore, group work pushes learners to produce comprehensible output, which some researchers (e.g., Swain 1985) believe is necessary in order for second language acquisition to take place. Long and Porter (1985, 221–22) list a number of other psycholinguistic reasons for group work: (1) increased quantity of practice, especially in two-way communication tasks; (2) increased range of language functions utilized; (3) similar levels of accuracy in student production as in teacher-led activities; (4) increased error correction in group work (students almost never miscorrect); and (5) increased negotiation of meaning.

**Summary**

Research based on process writing, collaborative learning theory, Vygotsky’s Zone of Proximal Development, and interaction and second language acquisition indicates that there is ample evidence that language learners need to be engaged in
interactive activities that create opportunities for them to negotiate meaning and to learn from and implicitly teach peers in order to promote second language learning, including L2 writing development. Peer response activities, which involve problem-solving tasks focused on improving the quality of a written draft, provide learners with the opportunities necessary to test their knowledge, learn from their peers, and negotiate meaning—all of which have been shown to be important in the development of second language skills.

Pedagogical Considerations

Now that peer response activities have been supported by process writing theory, collaborative learning theory, Vygotsky’s ZPD, and interaction and second language acquisition, what are some of the pedagogical benefits of peer response? Over the past decade, many L2 writing instructors have been trying to incorporate peer response activities in their ESL writing classes and have been convinced of their beneficial effects on motivation, attitude, and even on writing quality (e.g., Allaei and Connor 1990; Mittan 1989). But they have also experienced constraints in using peer response in their L2 writing classrooms. The benefits and the constraints of peer review can be summarized in four major categories—namely, cognitive, social, linguistic, and practical, as shown in table 1.

Benefits of Peer Response Activities

Cognitively speaking, peer response activities in teaching L2 writing can force L2 students to exercise their thinking as opposed to passively receiving information from the teacher (Mittan 1989). Students engaged in the peer response process can take an active role in their learning, and they can “reconceptualize their ideas in light of their peers’ reactions” (Mendonça and Johnson 1994, 746). In peer response, students can engage in unrehearsed, low-risk, exploratory talk that is less
feasible in whole-class and teacher-student interactions (Ferris and Hedgcock 1998). Responding to peers’ writing, for instance, builds the critical skills needed to analyze and revise one’s own writing (Leki 1990). Moreover, the suggestions and explanations offered during the peer response activities allow students to show what they know about writing and to use that information in their revisions (Mendonça and Johnson 1994). In addition, peer response activities allow students to develop audience awareness, and the fact that writers revise their essays based on their peers’ comments suggests that peer response activities “develop in students the crucial ability of reviewing their writing with the eyes of another” (Zamel 1982, 206) and allow them to modify their written texts to meet the

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<th>TABLE 1. Benefits and Constraints in Using Peer Response</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Cognitive</strong></td>
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<th>Constraints</th>
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<th><strong>Linguistic</strong></th>
<th><strong>Practical</strong></th>
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<tr>
<td>1. Uncertainty concerning peers’ comments</td>
<td>1. Discomfort and uneasiness</td>
<td>1. Too much focus on surface structure</td>
<td>1. Time constraints</td>
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<td>2. Lack of learner investment</td>
<td>2. Lack of security in negotiating meaning</td>
<td>2. Lack of L2 formal schemata</td>
<td>2. Counter-productive feedback</td>
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<td></td>
<td>3. Commentary may be overly critical</td>
<td>3. Difficulty in understanding foreign accent</td>
<td>3. Lack of student preparation</td>
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needs of their audience. In peer response activities, students are talking about what they have learned or what they are learning. Instead of working independently on their own writing, students are continually talking about their writing, reinforcing knowledge they have already acquired but feel uncertain about, and filling in gaps in their understanding of what they have learned (Hirvela 1999). Writing groups also help writers develop a sense of audience and compel them to revise as they negotiate meaning with their readers (Gere 1987).

Peer response activities also have many social benefits. For instance, they enhance students’ communicative power by encouraging students to express and negotiate their ideas (Mendonça and Johnson 1994). In the process of responding to their peers, students constantly receive “reactions, questions, and responses from authentic readers” (Mittan 1989, 209), so that they gain a clearer understanding of what has been done well and what remains unclear. Peer response activities help students gain confidence and reduce apprehension by allowing them to see peers’ strengths and weaknesses in writing (Leki 1990). In peer response, students experience excellent opportunities to establish collegial ties with other students who share the same concerns and backgrounds as they do. The dynamics involved in peer response activities may offer comfortable and secure learning situations to students who otherwise may feel isolated and misunderstood. They also may open up new avenues for friendship through students’ collaboration (Hirvela 1999).

In terms of linguistic benefits, the collaborative setting in which peer response activities take place allows students to review the metalanguage of reading and writing supplied in a course as they use technical terminology in their discussions (Gere 1987). Through collaborative group production, students experience valuable opportunities to improve their ability to read and write because the ongoing community orientation of this approach enables them to draw on the strengths and resources of their peers while sorting through their own growing knowledge of L2 writing (Hirvela 1999).
Students are able to practice the target language in authentic and meaningful communicative contexts as they interact with each other while completing collaborative tasks such as peer response activities. They also have a chance to explore the target language as they respond to their peers’ drafts and discuss such issues as appropriate word choice and grammatical structures. An added benefit of peer response activities for many L2 contexts (e.g., with preadmission or postadmission students, immigrants, or adult education students) is that students gain additional practice with other language skills, thereby enhancing their overall English language proficiency. In fact, group work increases individual students’ participation in terms of conversational turns (Pica and Doughty 1985), and it provides opportunities for learners to go beyond sentence-level discourse, practice turn-taking strategies appropriate for the target language, engage in unplanned speech, and receive exposure to sociolinguistic contexts otherwise unavailable to them. Peer interactions can help L2 students communicate their ideas and enhance the development of L2 learning in general (Mangelsdorf 1989). In addition, audience feedback is important in SLA as students must test out and revise their hypotheses about the second language in meaningful contexts. In sum, peer response activities give students more ways to discover and explore ideas, to find the right words to express their ideas, and to negotiate with their audience about these ideas.

On a practical level, peer response activities are flexible, as they can take place at various stages of the writing process (prewriting/discovery/invention, between-draft revision, and editing) (Connor and Asenavage 1994), and they fit well with the increased emphasis on process in composition teaching. Moreover, peer response activities can reduce the writing teacher’s workload and can impart to the teacher important information about individual students’ reading and writing abilities and their understanding of what constitutes good writing (Mittan 1989). Furthermore, peer response activities with the instructor participating by assuming the role of a peer can be highly time-efficient (Liu 1998).
Constraints of Peer Response Activities

There are four legitimate and recurring reservations concerning the use of peer response activities in the teaching of L2 composition: *uncertainty concerning peers’ comments, lack of learner investment, superficial comments due to time constraints,* and *inappropriate interactions in commenting on peers’ drafts* (Liu 1998). In peer response activities, students often feel uncertain as to whether their peers’ comments are accurate. Their insecurity can lead to a lack of enthusiasm toward this activity. Meanwhile, some students may come to peer response sessions underprepared, thus “seriously hindering the mutual exchange among peers and demonstrating a lack of respect for others” (Liu 1998, 237).

It is commonly understood that peer response activities suffer from several drawbacks. Students sometimes focus too heavily on “surface concerns” (Leki 1990, 9), or editing, neglecting larger revising issues. They provide vague and unhelpful comments; are hostile, sarcastic, overly critical, or unkind in their criticisms of their classmates’ writing; feel uncertain about the validity of their classmates’ responses; struggle with their own listening comprehension skills because of foreign accents; and have a lack of a formal L2 (rhetorical) schemata, which may lead to inappropriate expectations about the content and structure of peers’ texts, resulting in counterproductive feedback that leads writers further away from academic expectations. In addition, the interactions of the group are at times unpleasant, with students being overly critical of each other’s writings (Nelson and Murphy 1992). In fact, the nature of responding to peers’ drafts sometimes generates a sense of discomfort and uneasiness among the participants. Generally speaking, the students could become rather defensive when their work is criticized, especially by their peers (Amores 1997).

Summary

Peer response activities in teaching L2 writing have revealed both strengths and weaknesses in four major areas. Cogni-
tively speaking, peer response activities help students take charge of their own learning, build critical thinking skills, and consolidate their own knowledge of writing, although sometimes peer comments could be questionable and thus difficult to incorporate in revision. In terms of the social effects, peer response activities can enhance students’ communication, build their social skills, and provide them with a supportive social network, although they sometimes can also be anxiety provoking and lead to communication breakdown. Linguistically, peer response activities are considered good opportunities for students to build their own linguistic knowledge, enhance participation, and improve both oral and written discourse, although students tend to overemphasize local structural and/or grammatical comments. From a pedagogical perspective, peer response activities can be done across students’ proficiency levels and at different stages of writing, although time-efficiency is of great concern.

The Structure of the Book

This book conforms to the major characteristics of the Teaching Multilingual Writers series—comprehensibility, illustrativeness, and research-based data—in dealing with the topical issue—peer response—from the three perspectives of teachers, learners, and researchers. All the chapters in the book are centered around the questions teachers of multilingual writers usually encounter in their daily classroom practice. Including an overview of the literature on peer response in L2 writing over the past two decades, the chapters focus on salient issues, such as the effects of peer response (chap. 1), contexts of peer response (chap. 2), grouping students in peer response (chap. 3), modes and roles in peer response (chap. 4), foci of peer response (chap. 5), instructing students in peer response (chap. 6), and making peer response effective (chap. 7).

Within the discussion of each issue, the questions are addressed through various examples of learners at different proficiency levels (beginning, intermediate, and advanced) in a
variety of programs (preadmission and postadmission) and in several teaching contexts (ESL and EFL). Research findings, both positive and negative, are used to elucidate our discussion rather than as a priority in guiding the discussion. In each chapter, apart from the topical discussion prompted by teacher-initiated questions, we offer our comments, explanations, and suggestions for teachers and students, which we believe will be beneficial in assisting teachers to use peer response activities in their classrooms effectively and efficiently. For example, chapter 1 discusses three areas in which the effects of peer response seem to be obvious—namely, students’ perceptions, revisions, and long-term learning. In our discussion of these areas, several issues are examined.

- In terms of students’ perceptions, what perceptions do students generally hold toward peer response? What are students’ preconceptualizations and postconceptualizations of peer response? What are the salient factors that determine students’ perceptions of peer response?
- In terms of the effects of peer response activities on students’ revisions, can students detect problems in their peers’ texts and offer suggestions on how to correct them? What kinds of errors do students usually detect (surface, rhetorical, content)? Whose feedback do students adopt in revision, feedback from peer or self or teacher? Does peer response lead to quality revisions?
- Regarding the long-term effects on students’ language learning, are the benefits of peer response short term? Or does it have long-term effects on students’ overall language development?

This book concludes with chapter 7, which presents problems and solutions in peer response and a final checklist for teachers to use before engaging in peer response activities.