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## **Revising voice and identity through internet-mediated, intercultural peer review**

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### **Abstract**

This paper examines student-authored texts written before and after a guided peer review process involving U.S. and French students working in English. Students worked on a common set of business-writing assignments, exchanged collaboratively written drafts via email, reviewed overseas partners' drafts and communicated about their reviews via Skype. Texts were analyzed for organizational and sentence-level effectiveness in order to determine whether or how students had increased their awareness of "voice" and its importance to rhetorical context as a result of these intercultural exchanges. Reflective surveys of students revealed changes in attitudinal factors such as confidence and sense of self as writer. Additional, contextualizing sources of information included final course portfolios (for U.S. students) and reflective emails and in-person dialogues (with French students). This research suggests that the intercultural peer review is a strong tool for helping students to develop identities as writers and to learn how to construct appropriate voice.

*Keywords:* peer review; voice; second-language writing; intercultural; internet-mediated

### **Introduction**

The relationship between writing competence and identity has been widely investigated in the research literature in the fields of linguistics, composition and rhetoric and second-language writing. The development of writing competence is comprised in large part by the development of a writer's identity, in turn defined by her or his relationships (including relative power relations) with other individuals and groups. Identity is also represented by aspects of the writer's 'voice' which, following Hirvela and Belcher (2001), Ivanic (1998), Ivanic and Camps, (2001), Matsuda (2001), Tardy and Matsuda (2009), we take here to mean a writer's self-representation. This self-representation evokes both features of individuality as well as the multiple voices to which an individual has been exposed in particular communities of practice. 'Voice' in

other words is an expression not only of individual identity, but also group identity. We further situate the writer's voice as the textual expression of her or his "rhetorical location" (Schell 2006), whereby the writer expresses her or his relationship and position relative to a particular audience or audiences.

One complexity encountered by second-language (L2) writers is the need to construct a voice that is distinct from the voice used in the home language – a complexity of which students are often unaware. Raising awareness of students' own cultural assumptions as writers, and the attributes of voice that may accompany certain assumptions, is therefore very important in shaping writer competence. While a number of studies point to the relevance of raising voice awareness for the high-stakes context of international scientific publishing (Belcher, 2007, Cargill & Burgess, 2008, Lillis & Curry, 2006, Matsuda & Tardy, 2007, Tardy & Matsuda, 2009), the usefulness of teaching voice to L2 writers continues to generate some concern, particularly in the case of new or less experienced L2 writers (Helms-Park & Stapleton, 2003, Hyland, 2007, Stapleton, 2002, Swales, 2004). In effect, some researchers have observed that teaching features of voice to beginning L2 writers appears to have little effect on the development of their writing strategies (Stapleton & Helms-Park, 2008). However, we argue that the notion of "rhetorical location" (Schell 2006) may be useful for helping L2 writers increase a sense of their own identity as writers.

An international writing research project of the scope described here is well-suited to addressing this topic. This article reports on an ongoing, collaborative project between undergraduate writers from two universities, Blaise Pascal University in Clermont-Ferrand (France) and the University of Michigan-Dearborn. The focus of this article is one phase of a study examining the effects of Skype and internet-mediated, intercultural collaboration on the writing strategies of students at the two universities. In particular, our focus here is on second-year undergraduates who are L2 writers working in English in both university contexts, along with L1 writers at the University of Michigan-Dearborn. This phase of our project focuses on how the intercultural peer review may help L2 writers become aware of the importance of textual 'voice' and encourage them to think as writers about what voice is, how voice changes depending on rhetorical context, and how they can craft voice strategically.

On both the French and U.S. sides, the purpose was to expand the ‘relationships’ students build through their writing – i.e., encouraging them to go beyond the teacher as audience – in ways that are real rather than fictionalized. Our purpose in this regard was to increase students’ understanding of audience as an important rhetorical concern not only for university contexts, but also for the workplace and public sphere. While the teacher-as-audience is certainly “real,” the ultimate consequence of the teacher-student relationship is an evaluation and a grade. Students clearly write to this purpose, and so sometimes (perhaps often) fail to imagine the difference between university and other “real-world,” e.g., workplace or civic, audiences. Student writers’ difficulty in perceiving the full breadth and possibility of the concept of audience while still at the university has been addressed by a number of writing scholars over the years (Beaufort 2007, Dias et al. 1999, Ivanic 1998, Yancey 2004).

## **Methods**

This mixed-design, classroom-based action research project sought to determine whether or how students had increased their awareness of voice in relation to rhetorical context through the intercultural peer review. We analyzed students’ revised texts in terms of the changes in global, organizational effectiveness and sentence-level effectiveness. Changes in attitudinal factors such as confidence and sense of self as writer were revealed in reflective surveys completed by both U.S. and French students. Final course portfolios (for U.S. students) and reflective emails and in-person dialogues (with French students) offered additional information about whether and how students’ awareness of voice changed as a result of the intercultural exchanges in which they participated.

There were 15 students enrolled in a second-year undergraduate writing course at the University of Michigan-Dearborn, which serves primarily two groups of students: transfer students who despite bringing with them into the university credit for the two-semester introductory composition requirement, do very poorly on the writing placement exam; and students enrolled in programs in the School of Education for whom the course serves as a requirement. Nine of the fifteen students were returning or nontraditional students (including one displaced auto worker, a current auto worker and a retired postal

employee) for whom the discourse of the university was as yet unfamiliar. Five of the non-traditional students were African-American, and three others were non-native speakers of English for whom English was a second or third language, and whose home languages were Arabic and French. The remaining non-traditional student was a white woman of European descent. Of the six traditionally college-aged students, one was a “generation 1.5” English speaker of Arabic descent and one was African-American. Many of the U.S. students, like their French counterparts, had little prior experience with peer review leading to revision, though as we have suggested this lack of experience for U.S. students was contextualized within an academic culture that is somewhat more attuned to peer review and collaborative work than is the academic culture in France.

At Blaise Pascal 140 students were enrolled in a second-year undergraduate business writing course. The students were mostly native speakers of French, but those who were not spoke and wrote French fluently. The courses were taught only in English, and fulfilled one of their English-language requirements. Of the 140 French students, only 24 participated in a face-to-face peer review during class with their U.S. peers, using Skype. (The remaining French students did receive one-time feedback from U.S. peers via email, to help them with their revision process.) These limitations were due to scheduling and time zone differences. We scheduled the U.S. course and this segment of the French course so students could meet at the same time, despite the time difference of six hours. Students collaborating via Skype worked in small groups of 3 (in the U.S.) and 4-5 (in France.)

To prepare for the peer review exchanges, students were given the same unit on professional writing to read and work through, and all students did the same collaborative writing assignments in groups of 3-5 (local) peers. The first writing assignment was a task-based scenario which asked the students to pose as a “manager” at the *LA Times* and to write a memo to other news bureau managers to inform them of specific changes taking place in the company’s privacy policy.

The second writing assignment was another task-based scenario, where students positioned themselves as a mid-level manager at the “Perrigo company,” a pharmaceutical company that offers low-cost products. They were asked to write a letter to retailers informing them that one of Perrigo’s children’s painkillers had to be recalled

due to a problem in manufacturing and to give them instructions on how to carry out the recall.

Students had one week to prepare each draft, working collaboratively in their local, small groups, and were asked to email the drafts directly to their overseas peers two days before each in-class Skype session so as to leave sufficient time for their long-distance peers to read and comment on the drafts before the Skype session.

We also harmonized the peer review process: all students were given the same peer review guidelines with the same questions and concerns to address as they reviewed their peers' drafts (see Appendix A). In addition, given their lack of familiarity with the peer review process, the French students were provided with a sample peer review which modeled the kind of reflective language their U.S. peers might use. In this way, directions and assignment materials encouraged students to take a similar approach to the peer review task, use similar language, and looking for similar aspects in the drafts such as sufficient attention to audience, purpose, organization, and principles of clear language.

For the French (n=24) and U.S. (n=15) students who participated in the Skype-mediated intercultural peer review, there were three, in-class Skype sessions in all: a first session during which students introduced themselves, and then two other sessions during which they elaborated on their peer reviews (which previously had been written collaboratively in their small groups) and answered questions, having already emailed this same feedback to their overseas peers. During these latter sessions we found that students quickly got the work done and out of the way, and moved on to other conversations about the weather, what their days were like, interests such as sports and travel, how they wanted to go to France or the U.S. During these conversations students also exchanged Facebook and other contact information. The social aspects of these exchanges suggested those students using Skype became quite comfortable over time with the intercultural peer review process, in comparison to the remaining French students who exchanged peer reviews only by email.

Based on the peer review they received, student groups were then asked to revise their texts. A couple of models, or responses to the scenarios prepared by the instructors, were distributed only at the time the revisions were collected for grading. The texts were analyzed for measures of global effectiveness and sentence-level effectiveness, in order

to determine whether or how students had increased their awareness of “voice” and its importance to rhetorical context subsequent to the peer review. These measures included: 1) appropriate awareness of audience and purpose; 2) organization; 3) use of active voice and avoiding nominalization; 4) absence of unnecessary words or overly long sentences. The first two criteria relate to effective academic and professional writing generally, and the third and fourth criteria reflect the emphasis developed in the French students’ business writing course on *Plain Language* principles (see for example, the *Federal Plain Language Guidelines*, May 2011), geared to helping French students avoid the sorts of grammatical constructions that are more difficult to understand in English but which come easily given the structure of the French language.

In addition, reflective surveys completed by both U.S. and French students were analyzed for changes in attitudinal factors such as confidence and sense of self as writer. Once the peer review and revision process was completed, students responded to a set of reflective questions about how useful they thought the exchange had been for helping them rewrite their texts. This reflective assignment also asked students to discuss other aspects of the exchange: differences they had observed in educational expectations and practices between the two (French and U.S.) contexts; cultural differences in the writing of their local and overseas peers; and the quality of the peer exchange itself – including if or how it strengthened or challenged their sense of self or self-confidence as communicators or writers. These reflective questions allowed us – and students themselves – to consider how a writer’s voice or sense of identity was tied to cultural or national context, how the intercultural collaborative exchange might have helped in developing a voice appropriate for a particular rhetorical situation, and finally how the experience may have helped NNE students in both France and the U.S. to move beyond feelings of working at a “deficit” in an English-only context. Final course portfolios (for U.S. students) and reflective emails and in-person dialogues (with several French students) offered additional information about whether and how students’ awareness of voice changed as a result of the intercultural exchanges in which they participated.

### **Results of analysis of student texts**

#### *Learning to construct professional voice in the French writing classroom*

Many students at the French university today have had little or no experience with the types of process-writing instruction common across North America, Great Britain, and parts of northern Europe. While local pockets of process-writing instruction are beginning to emerge institutionally, most notably in universities in larger French cities such as Paris, Lille, or Grenoble, and in Clermont-Ferrand, most French students today still are required to become adept at reproducing appropriate discursal forms *autonomously*.

In general, writing is taught in the French schools by having students imitate ‘models.’ Students are given an example of a ‘perfect’ (or what they take to be perfect) example, and they strive to copy what they perceive. The only feedback they typically receive on their writing is the final grade, which is very often the sole indication of how well they managed to copy the discursal form being studied (for further discussion see also Donahue, 2004; Dressen-Hammouda, 2008).

This approach to writing instruction, as noted by Donahue (2005) in her review of depictions by French writing scholars of student writing in France, is driven above all by an institutional concern with making students “autonomous.” The making of an autonomous student in the French educational system begins very early on in primary school (Ravn, 2001), and is considered to be a necessary quality for success at the university, both in terms of writing and overall academic success (Beaud 2008, Erlich 2004). As Donahue further comments (2005, p. 140):

... student autonomy is one of the markers that differentiate successful students from those who struggle, even well before high school. This focus on autonomy is not a question of encouraging students to have a singular voice, to be individuals, or to benefit from group workshopping in individual ways... Rather, it is a focus on ... students’ ability to produce texts independently, alone, in on-demand situations, without relying on peer review, group processes or even revision as part of the writing process.

The absence of a “process” perspective for French student writers, as that has been defined by second-language writing scholars (e.g., Hyland, 2003), means students typically receive no feedback on their writing prior to submitting the final assignment. In addition, French high school students and university undergraduates are rarely asked to revise their writing, an experience specifically confirmed by the French students involved in this study. When asked at the beginning of the semester if they had ever been asked by

a teacher to revise a piece of writing after receiving their teacher's feedback, for example, only two out of 140 students reported they had. And none of the French students reported ever having been involved in a peer review of their writing, nor had they even heard of such a process.

The intercultural peer review therefore presented a novel experience for French students, in terms not only of feedback and revision but also of receiving and giving feedback to *peers* who were being educated in a different cultural context. For U.S. students (both ENL and NNE) the peer review process was not as unfamiliar, though the majority of U.S. students reported that their previous experiences with peer review were not particularly helpful to them in revising their writing, citing a lack of specificity in guiding questions and/or in feedback from peers. One of our main questions, therefore, was whether and how the intercultural peer review, in particular, helped NNE and ENL students to revise their writing by encouraging them to develop a voice appropriate for a particular rhetorical situation.

To examine this question, the 24 French students involved in the project were divided into groups of four to five. Each group was paired with a group of three U.S. students, with whom they exchanged both drafts and carried out face-to-face, Skype-mediated peer reviews of those drafts.

The results of a comparative analysis of first and second drafts are somewhat surprising. In effect, while the French student writers were generally able to address sentence-level concerns their U.S. peers had about using active voice and avoiding nominalizations, their attempts to accommodate their U.S. peers' more global comments related to meaning seemed less successful, and often involved simply rearranging the order of information or eliminating it entirely. This can be seen for example in the two versions of the LA Times memo prepared by Group 5 (below).

LA Times Memo (DRAFT)

To : News Bureau Managers  
Date : Saturday, February 6th 2010  
Subject : Changes in Electronic Privacy Policy

Dear Colleagues,

As you should know, the legal department of the LA Times has always assumed that all of our employees respected some basic rules of common sense regarding email privacy and journalistic ethics, hence the absence of strict privacy policy.

However, some events that happened recently have forced us to revise our position, and it has been decided that stricter rules should be implemented.

Another memo will be displayed in a couple of days with more details. For now, the management team has already set up the penalties for those who would violate the new policy:

- For a **first offense**, the penalty will be a verbal warning in presence of a direct supervisor, which will be written in the employee's human resources files,
- For a **second offense**, a reassignment or suspension without pay for a period decided by the employee's supervisor,
- For a **third offense**, the result will be an immediate termination without severance pay.

These measures will take effect next week.

It is also suggested that the managers routinely share the information -especially to new hires- during special meetings from now on.

All suggestions are welcome.

We look forward to hearing from you.

The U.S. peers who reviewed this draft made helpful suggestions for developing an awareness of audience by observing that in their first draft, the French writers do not indicate what event had occurred to cause the change in policy. Furthermore, they pointed out that “suggestions are welcome” is not very useful in this particular rhetorical situation because “the managers already discussed what they wanted to be done and this is what they wanted. These are the consequences that they want... The employees should have no say in company consequences.”

Group 5 revised their draft based on these comments, moving around the sentence “Another memo will be displayed. . .” and including more information about why the policy had been changed. The French students similarly changed the tone of the ending to more align it with the particular rhetorical context of the scenario, deleting the sentences “All suggestions are welcome” and “We look forward to hearing from you”(changes noted in bold):

LA Times Memo: (REVISED)

To : News Bureau Managers  
 From : The Legal Dpt.  
Date : Saturday, February 6th 2010  
Subject : Changes in Electronic Privacy Policy

Dear Colleagues,

As you should know, the legal department of the LA Times has always assumed that all of our employees respected some basic rules of common sense regarding email privacy and journalistic ethics, hence the absence of strict privacy policy.

However, some events that happened recently have forced us to revise our position, and it has been decided **that consequences should follow. Indeed, one of our employees has broken our confidentiality rules.**

For now, the management team has already set up the penalties for those who would violate the new policy:

- For a first offense, the penalty will be a verbal warning in presence of a direct supervisor, which will be written in the employee's human resources files,
- For a second offense, a reassignment or suspension without pay for a period decided by the employee's supervisor,
- For a third offense, the result will be an immediate termination without severance pay.

These measures will take effect next week.

It is also suggested that the managers routinely share the information -especially to new hires- during special meetings from now on. **Another memo will be displayed in a couple of days with more details.**

**Regards,**

While the writers showed attentiveness to their U.S. peers' observations, providing reader-centered information and a more appropriate tone, such changes were relatively superficial when compared to the changes made by U.S. students. Based on an analysis of French students' texts it is therefore not clear that the intercultural peer review successfully led to significant improvements in the written text. The question of the peer review's effects is addressed again in a later section of this paper.

### *Developing Self-Reflection in U.S. Second-Language and Monolingual Writers*

In the U.S. this pedagogical project involved a mix of monolingual, second-language, and multilingual writers at the University of Michigan-Dearborn who were taking a 200-level course in exposition and argumentation, with a special focus on culture, writing and rhetoric. Specifically the class studied language use as an aspect of culture or community membership, and examined language practices in different

academic disciplinary communities, professional or workplace communities, and national or ethnic communities.

For the U.S. students, there were at least three purposes for this pedagogical project, the first two of which were similar to the French-side of the project: expanding the “relationships” students built through their writing – i.e., beyond the teacher as audience; increasing students’ awareness of the importance of rhetorical position or context – their own and others – in making judgments about language ability; and finally, demonstrating – not only for those students whose first language was English but also for those for whom English was a second or third language – how English varied according to context and in order to serve specific rhetorical purposes.

From the U.S. side, we were particularly interested by interactions and reflections that increased the students’ awareness of how their rhetorical position within a particular national and cultural context affected their own sense of their linguistic abilities. As Writing Program Administrator at my institution at the time, I noted among faculty members from varied disciplinary backgrounds a discourse of “deficit” around the language abilities of multilingual students, a discourse which cast these students’ abilities in a very negative light. Rather than being valued for the richness of linguistic and cultural experience they brought with them to the university, multilingual students who struggled with English, particularly academic English, were often characterized (explicitly or implicitly) as at best “unprepared” and at worst simply not literate. UM-Dearborn is a commuter school of about 9,000 which is culturally and linguistically diverse. Though the university keeps no data on linguistic diversity, 40% of students using Writing Center services (which during 2011-2012 provided more than 1200 tutoring appointments to undergraduates) cited a language other than English as their “home” language (with most frequent home languages being Arabic, Korean, Urdu, Russian, French, Spanish, Chinese and Farsi).

Within this institutional context, second-language students often internalized negative assessments about their language abilities, with profound effects on their confidence and views of themselves as writers. Therefore, one of the major questions for this project was to know whether or how working closely with second-language students situated in another geographical and cultural context could encourage multilingual

students in the U.S. to perceive their own linguistic abilities differently, and whether or how this would show up in their writing. An unexpected outcome for this research, however, was observing the ways in which the writing and attitudes of returning, non-traditional students were also affected positively by the opportunity to work with second-language students in another national context.

U.S. students, only half of whom reported previous experience with peer review in other classes but all of whom participated in a peer review process together earlier in the semester, worked in five groups of three, with non-traditional and second-language students dispersed across all five groups. In order to determine whether or how students had increased their awareness of “voice” and its importance to rhetorical context through the peer review process, students’ collaboratively authored drafts, written before and after peer review activities with their French partners, were analyzed for global effectiveness and sentence-level effectiveness. Measures for this analysis were the same ones used to analyze French students’ drafts: 1) adequate awareness of audience and purpose; 2) organization; 3) use of active voice and avoiding nominalization; 4) and absence of unnecessary words or overly long sentences.

**The Los Angeles Times: Internal Memo (DRAFT)**

**To:** The *Los Angeles Times* News Bureau Managers

**Date:** 25 June 2014

**From:** Team 4; The *Los Angeles Times* Legal Department

**Subject:** Policy Change

Because of recent confusion concerning The *Los Angeles Times* privacy policy, a clarification has been added to our Email guidelines.

In the past, the email guidelines were:

- Employee email will not be used for personal business;
- system administrators or even managers may check employee email at any time;
- derogatory language, obscenity or copy-righted material will not be used.

A strict “privacy policy” has been added to the list.

For violations, Management has decided the penalties will be:

- reassignment;
- suspension without pay;
- termination of employment.

For the first offense, the employee will receive a verbal warning in a meeting with a direct supervisor, which will also be entered in writing in the employee’s human resources file. For a second offense, the employee will be reassigned or suspended without pay, for a period to be determined by the employee’s supervisor. A third offense results in the immediate termination of the employee without severance pay.

Managers should introduce these new rules to employees immediately in a special meeting, and routinely explain all the rules and guidelines to new employees.

A more detailed policy memo covering all issues will be distributed in a few weeks and must be posted at each bureau in an area visible to employees.

A close reading of student texts reveals that U.S. students' initial drafts in general already made use of the active voice, and had no significant difficulties with nominalization or wordiness. Unlike the revisions produced by their French counterparts subsequent to the peer review sessions, U.S. students' revisions often showed more global improvement in rhetorical awareness and in developing an organization appropriate for the business audiences included in the assignment scenarios. For example, Group 4's draft of the LA Times memo appears above.

This initial draft not only over-relies on bullets as an organizing strategy (a common mistake for novice, business writers) but also inaccurately characterizes (or perhaps glosses over "politely") the real impetus for the policy change by referring to "recent confusion." (In fact the assignment scenario cited employee "snooping" in the email of another reporter as the motivation for the change.)

Subsequent to their peer review exchanges with their French partners, Group 4 revised their memo as follows:

|                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <p style="text-align: center;"><b>The Los Angeles Times: Internal Memo (REVISED)</b></p> <p><b>To:</b> The <i>Los Angeles Times</i> News Bureau Managers<br/> <b>Date:</b> 7 February 2010<br/> <b>From:</b> Team 4; The <i>Los Angeles Times</i> Legal Department<br/> <b>Subject:</b> Policy Change</p> <p>Because of a recent violation of The <i>Los Angeles Times</i> privacy policy, a clarification has been added to our Email guidelines.</p> <p>In the past, the email guidelines stated: employee email will not be used for personal business; system administrators or managers may check employee email at any time; derogatory language, obscenity or copy-righted material will not be used.</p> <p>A strict "privacy policy" has been added to the list.</p> <p>For violations:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• First offense: the employee will receive a verbal warning in a meeting with a direct supervisor, which will also be entered in writing in the employee's human resources file;</li> <li>• second offense: the employee will be reassigned or suspended without pay, for a period to be determined by the employee's supervisor;</li> <li>• third offense: immediate termination of the employee without severance pay.</li> </ul> <p>Managers should introduce these new rules to employees immediately in a special meeting, and routinely explain all the rules and guidelines to new employees.</p> <p>A more detailed policy memo covering all issues will be distributed in a few weeks and should be posted at each bureau in an area visible to employees.</p> |
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At 22 words shorter than the original, the revised memo is more effective for the audience of busy news bureau managers described in the assignment scenario; and the use of bullets, while not perfect, is improved. The purpose of the memo is also clarified

and sharpened for employees, reading more accurately (and compellingly) as a “violation” (though it would have been even more accurate to say not a violation of a privacy policy that did not yet exist, but rather a violation of an employee’s personal email account, demonstrating the inadequacy of the “commonsense guidelines” previously used by the company.)

In several ways the writers of this memo, like others in the class, therefore seemed to increase their awareness of the need to construct a particular “voice” for the rhetorical context presented in the scenario. Significantly, however, this was a rhetorical context that was as unfamiliar to the traditional, college-aged, native English speakers in the class as it was to the second-language students or to the non-traditional students – or to their French peers overseas. In other words, all students in the class were in some way “strangers” to the discourse, language and “culture” of the scenarios, a status they also shared with their partners overseas. The textual evidence suggests that the intercultural/intercultural peer review, by de-familiarizing (in more ways than one) the academic writing task and the rhetorical context for students, presented them with an opportunity to learn better how to develop an appropriate “voice” for their writing. Additionally, a consideration of responses to the reflective survey, contextualized by other reflective writing U.S. students completed as part of their final course portfolios, was important in gauging if or to what degree students shifted in their attitudes about writing or their own writing abilities as they developed a better understanding of voice.

#### *Reflective survey responses by the French students*

Twelve responses by French students to an ongoing reflective survey were collected and analyzed. Students were asked, after each Skype session, to reflect in writing on the interaction, and were also asked to respond to a final set of reflective survey questions (6 responses to the latter collected). The reflective surveys were analyzed for change in students’ sense of confidence over the course of the project as well as other attitudinal changes, such as their sense of self as writer, with a particular focus on how they perceived themselves as writers in comparison to their U.S. peers. Answers to such questions are important in terms of what they reveal about NNE

students' change in attitude toward their own 'non-standard English' as being perhaps less deficient than they previously thought.

All of the Skype respondents reported feeling a real development in their relationship with their U.S. peers over the course of the project, and this affected their sense of feeling more relaxed and effective during the final peer review session. These feelings were further reflected in answers to the question of whether or not they had come to feel more comfortable with giving feedback to others. Most students responded that they did feel progressively more comfortable, realizing that even though they themselves were non-native speakers of English, they still had things to contribute or suggest to their U.S. peers who, too, were learning new forms of discourse. They specifically mentioned feeling more comfortable giving feedback as a result of having gotten to know their peers better. Perhaps because they had been placed in a situation where they needed to directly critique their peers' writing 'in front of them' via Skype, they appreciated even more strongly the opportunity to gain some level of trust beforehand.

In addition, students were also asked to describe how they felt about *getting* feedback. They reported receiving a useful evaluation of their writing from their U.S. peers, and that the experience differed from the typical teacher-student interaction they were used to. In addition, because it was not just a situation where they were writing for the teacher, many of the students commented feeling as though they were writing for a 'real' audience, and described their angst and effort in really putting out a text that would fit the situation. Here, then, the invocation of audience was something real for them, rather than theoretical, and this played into their investment in writing for their overseas peers.

The survey's final questions pertained more to the intercultural or intercultural aspects of rhetorical location of which the peer review experience was trying to make students aware. The questions tried to bring out the differences students perceived in others' writing styles and discursual practices. Generally speaking, the French students perceived the U.S. students as being more direct and getting to the point faster, whereas they perceived themselves, as French speakers, as getting bogged down in a more French tradition of, as one student put it somewhat facetiously, 'smoothing things over.' For example, the students observed that:

*“They [the U.S. students] are more concise; as French speakers, we are used to making long speeches to say ten words.”*

*“I noticed that their style is more direct and simple than ours. This might be explainable by French speakers getting lost in long explanations and the writing style being overdone.”*

*“We’re used to respecting formulas and we say too many things.”*

*“Really no difference between their style and ours, just that we French speakers tend to make things more complicated for ourselves.”*

*“I noticed they were more likely to go straight to the point. I think it’s due to the fact that usually we are taught to put in a lot of sentences even if they’re not very interesting, just to show our ease with language.”*

In this sense, they viewed their U.S. peers as being more successful at writing for an international audience, because their writing strategies were perceived as adhering more closely to the principles of professional communication that had been taught in class. Their reflections show, however, that they felt capable of analyzing and comparing their writing strategies with those of peers from a different national context and to measure the degree of difference that separates them from other “rhetorical locations” (Schell, 2006).

The ability to step back and reflect on what makes their writing different from the writing of U.S. peers points to a potential area of growth. While this growth is often difficult to perceive over the course of a single semester, it does become more tangible over time. As writing instructors, we often look for tangible and immediate evidence of improvement in terms of grammar, rhetoric or genre. Even then, however, evidence of growth is sometimes elusive, as it was for the French students described in this paper. Indeed, is ‘shifting content around’ really indicative of the growth of voice? However, there are also more intangible changes taking place in writers over time that evidence what Katznelson et al. (2001) have described as a “changing of the person.” Such changes are the types of long-lasting shifts in attitude and identity that we hope our students will take along with them.

In a later phase of our work with the French students, we sought evidence as to whether continued growth in voice and attention to rhetorical context could be identified in their writing. Preliminary analysis of the students’ more recent work shows that they have indeed come to pay significantly more attention to the needs of audience than in their earlier texts. After a group writing conference with the instructor, the students evidenced paying close attention to adapting their tone and shifting their perception of the

reader's need for detail to bring it into alignment with the rhetorical context of the writing situation. Whereas earlier revisions showed simple shifting and discarding of information, the more recent work shows more substantial and sophisticated modifications to adapt to the rhetorical context, and stands in contrast to the recent work of French students who did not participate in the Skype exchange during the previous year.

In this sense, participating in the intercultural peer review has enabled this group of students to become more attuned to and appreciative of the need to shift their voice to adapt to the contingencies of rhetorical context.

*Reflective survey responses by the U.S. students*

Fifteen responses to an ongoing reflective survey and to a final reflective survey were collected and analyzed. As part of their work for the course, students were asked to write a series of reflections about their experiences working collaboratively with peers on both sides of the Atlantic, and about what they learned through these interactions about writing, higher education, and their own language abilities more specifically. Students were asked to reflect in writing after each Skype exchange, and were also asked at the end of this cluster of assignments to respond to the same "reflective survey" to which their French partners responded. All fifteen reflective surveys were analyzed for changes in attitudinal factors such as confidence and sense of self as writer, with a particular focus on how students' perceived limitations (or lack thereof) in their knowledge of languages other than English could have an impact on their overall communication effectiveness. Like their French peers, these responses revealed that NNE students' attitudes toward their own 'non-standard English' changed for the positive. Non-traditional, returning students also reported a positive change in attitude toward their own language abilities.

It is important to note again that members of the course were very diverse in terms of preparation and background, including linguistic ability and their reasons for taking the course. The latter included being required to take the course because of a low score on the writing placement exam or to complete the requirements of a program in the School of Education, and electing it as an additional writing course. Nine of fifteen students were returning or nontraditional students for whom the discourse of the

university was as yet unfamiliar. Three of these nontraditional students were also non-native speakers of English. Given this diversity, students began the semester with a range of attitudes toward the course, their own abilities as writers and writing in general. It therefore was important for pedagogical reasons to ask students to reflect explicitly on their experiences during the peer review exchanges in order to encourage them to articulate what they had learned about developing a “voice” appropriate for a particular rhetorical (and linguistic) context. This explicit reflection was also important for encouraging students to develop a more complex understanding of their own (and others’) linguistic abilities, at times perhaps challenging those predispositions. In short, contextualized by other reflective writing students completed as part of their final course portfolios, this information helped us gauge the degree to which a shift in awareness about “voice” and the attendant differences in the writing observed in revised texts students produced, were also accompanied by a change in students’ attitudes about writing and their own abilities as writers.

U.S. students commented on many aspects of the exchange and differences between the French and U.S. educational systems. In particular they were interested to learn about the French system of higher education system (e.g., a three-year Bachelors degree, involving between 30 and 40 credits per year – which U.S. students characterized as “astounding” and “mind boggling”); the absence of extracurricular activities for their French peers (few outside jobs, no college sports); and the number of languages their peers spoke (of which they acknowledged the importance, and expressed some envy). Students also wrote about spending some time during the second Skype session and even more time during the third session in social exchange about hobbies, interests, backgrounds, etc., several making Facebook or other (e.g., MSN messenger) connections.

U.S. students also reported learning much from the intercultural peer review assignment, especially with regard to how these activities increased their confidence as writers and, consequently, their writing ability. For example, one second-language student who struggled with much of the writing for the course reported enthusiastically that during an in-class Skype session her French peers (some of whom were studying Arabic) explicitly valued her knowledge of that language – a very different message than the one second language students often get about the value of their home languages or

their effectiveness as communicators. Another multilingual student (quoted below) observed with some pride that when her French and American peers were having some trouble understanding each other during one in-class Skype exchange, she drew on both her French and English to facilitate the exchange of ideas.

In contrast, U.S. monolingual students reflected frequently on their own deficit of language ability, citing their French peers' knowledge and facility in three or more languages as something the U.S. might do well to "import" and suggesting that such knowledge is important for overall communicative ability. These reflections effectually add to Christiane Donohue's recent critique of U.S. researchers in the field of composition and rhetoric, who she asserts assume their work represents only surplus: "We must first revisit our own discourse. Notice that we 'import' problems (the problems of multiliterate, multicultural students, for example) and we 'export' our expertise about writing instruction" (2009, p. 226). Following Donohue, given the research discourse in the U.S. often, if not always, attributes some kind of lacking to the o/Other (whether that o/Other is an alternative research tradition or multicultural students), we might expect that U.S. students – including multilingual students – would exhibit or internalize the same bias. Yet students in this class, in light of their personal and intellectual collaborations (internet-mediated yet nevertheless "face-to-face") with multilingual peers studying in another national context, were able to think in a much more complex fashion about how they and their educations involved "problems" and/or how they themselves lacked "expertise."

In addition, in terms of the goal of improving their writing through increasing awareness of rhetorical location, students clearly saw how their own location – among U.S. peers as well as among intercultural peers – in large part affected their confidence, and consequently their writing ability. Often this new awareness brought with it with increased confidence as well as perhaps motivation, as that was articulated in individual, written reflections. For example, the student who saw her English language ability very differently once she had the experience of being the "authority," helping to translate some of the comments of French students for her U.S. peers during Skype sessions, wrote:

*This intercultural exchange affected my sense as a communicator. English is also my third language, but when I communicated with our French peer (sic), I feel different and I discovered that my language is now better than before. I feel in*

*self-confidence (sic) because for sure they were expected from us to speak and write good English. So, I was always making sure to do the best as we can our assignment.*

This student's sense of "feeling different" was repeated in the majority of responses to the survey question: "Were there any ways in which this intercultural exchange affected your sense of your own abilities as a communicator or writer?" An affirmative response to this question was articulated by all of the non-traditional students (including the three multilingual students) and three of the six traditionally college-aged students. Particularly significant in the above student's comments is the observation that her growing self-confidence was linked to the "expectation" for "good English" she perceived her French peers as having for her along with the other U.S. students.

Another non-traditional student, a displaced auto worker on a "No Worker Left Behind" tuition scholarship who at beginning of semester self-identified as weak writer with little to contribute to the writing of others, wrote of his growing confidence, and sense of self as a writer in a wider, intercultural context:

*This exchange reinforced that my abilities as a communicator and a writer were good. It helped to build my confidence. I believe that the Skype sessions and our written exchanges have made me realize that I can compete and interact with all of these smart students.*

Though all students in the class said how much they enjoyed learning about the culture and educational experiences of their overseas partners, this kind of emerging confidence vis a vis a globalized sphere was articulated most often by multilingual students and their (monolingual) non-traditional peers.

A comparison of results of the reflective surveys completed by U.S. and French students therefore suggests areas of overlap as well as difference. While French students were initially much less accustomed to and comfortable with the peer review process than were U.S. students, the majority reported feeling progressively more confident they had something of use to contribute to their overseas peers and progressively more comfortable with (and invested in) both giving and receiving feedback as a result of having gotten to know their peers better through the Skype interactions. Among U.S. students, second-language and non-traditional students were initially the least confident about their abilities to contribute to the learning of their overseas peers, but also came to

evolve significantly their view of their own language abilities. While French students viewed their U.S. peers as being more successful at writing for an international audience because their writing strategies were perceived as adhering more closely to principles of professional communication, U.S. students viewed their French counterparts' multilingualism as an important advantage for overall success as communicators. Both sets of surveys also suggested the peer review process helped students become attuned to and appreciative of the need to adapt "voice" to the contingencies of rhetorical context.

### **Conclusion**

In our pedagogical project, students' sense of how their own rhetorical and cultural locations can be at once unique and shared was also emphasized by the visual and audio elements of the Skype exchange. For example, one African-American student noted her surprise at seeing that the French class was, like her own classes in the U.S., racially diverse with many students of North-African descent. U.S. students at the same time noted the absence of non-traditional, older students in the French context. In addition, it may well have been that U.S. students' unanimous, positive assessment of French students' linguistic abilities (as "amazing") was in part due to the opportunities they had to converse in real time with their French peers, rather than simply seeing their words on a page or in an email.

Other purposes for this project included complicating for both ENL and NNE students notions of linguistic correctness that posit all alternative (relative to Standard American English) variations as necessarily deficient; and increasing students' awareness of the importance of rhetorical position or context – their own and others – in making judgments about language ability. Schell (2006), for example, points out that "pivotal to rhetorical study is the notion that a rhetor speaks or writes from a particular location in time and space to a particular audience" (p. 168). Students for whom English is a second language often see themselves – and are perceived by others – as operating at a deficit in large part because of the social and cultural privilege attached to English monolingualism. Through an increased understanding of how rhetorical location determines the linguistic choices a writer/speaker might make, second-language and monolingual students develop an enhanced appreciation for a range of linguistic abilities.

Students – both French and U.S. – valued these technology-facilitated exchanges in a number of ways, including the opportunities they afforded to write to an audience beyond the classroom and teacher, and how they helped them see their own language ability in a wider, globalized context. The textual evidence suggests that the intercultural peer review, by de-familiarizing (in more ways than one) the academic writing task and the rhetorical context for students, presented them with an opportunity to learn better how to develop an appropriate “voice” for their writing. This sequence of collaborative exchanges over Skype (and email) involving peer reviews of written work also helped emphasize for students that writing involves the multiple “human relationships,” beyond the student-teacher relationship, advocated by Yancey (2004). The technology which mediated the exchange allowed the students to develop in a more grounded fashion their understanding of the rhetoric of location, as well as their understanding of how to shape an appropriate voice for intercultural or intercultural (or other unfamiliar) audiences. For all students, learning to effectively shape their voice for an intercultural audience involved becoming aware of their own pre-existing, cultural assumptions about writing; for second-language students this process also involved increasing their awareness of the differences between their writer identities in their first and second (or third) languages.

These explicitly intercultural exchanges also laid the groundwork for helping U.S. students – both monolingual and multilingual – become aware that multiple varieties of English exist world-wide, though this concept of World or vernacular Englishes needs more attention, especially for students writing within U.S. contexts who rarely (perhaps never) travel beyond those contexts and who do not have an appreciation for the multiple varieties of the language.

And finally the reflections of our second-language, multilingual and monolingual writing students suggest that the concept of rhetorical location is particularly helpful for them to become aware of how any writer’s relationship to a particular nation-state, for example – and the culture and language of that nation-state – is never a given, but rather complex and changing over time and through space. There is an indication that such an emerging or newfound awareness might also lead to greater linguistic confidence overall.

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## Appendix A

### Instructions for Peer Reviews

**When peer reviewing a text, be as specific as possible in your observations and suggestions.**

**1** Read the text draft over once while you sit on your hands. Focus on the information, purpose, and style.

**2** Analyse the draft thoroughly. Check:

- Is the audience obvious ? Is it the right one?
- Is the authors' purpose for writing clear ?
- Is the information complete?
- Is it well organized ?
- Do the author(s) use the most effective model/structure for the task ?

If you have answered 'no' to any of these questions, suggest to the author(s) how they might improve on those points.

**3** Edit the text to increase its effectiveness. Identify and circle :

- unnecessary words and information
- passives
- nominalizations
- long sentences (10-20 words)
- places where the author(s) should use a vertical list
- problems in paragraph structure
  - are the topic sentences clear ?
  - are the other sentences in the paragraph clearly related to the topic sentence ?
 If not, suggest to the author(s) how they might improve their draft.

**4** Tell the author(s) at least two things you thought were effective about the draft.

**5** Tell the author(s) what you have learned by reading their draft that will help you when you revise your own text.

*Appendix B***Reflective Survey**

Professor XXX and I were very pleased with how well you and your French peers interacted in the Skype exchanges of your writing and peer reviews. I'd like you now to take some time to reflect on this experience. While 'meeting' French students with whom you share some experiences was a definite plus, remember that the primary purpose of both the collaborative work you completed within your own groups and the intercultural Skype exchanges was to help you to become better writers who are more aware of how writing intersects with 'culture' – in this case both business (professional) culture and national culture.

Please bring to our class meeting on Tues. February 23 your individual responses to the following questions, providing **as many details as you can**. (Please refer to your previous reflections, notes, etc. as appropriate.)

**The Skype intercultural exchange**

- What words would you use to describe – 'in a nutshell' – the intercultural exchange with your French peers?  
How did the final Skype meeting go in comparison to the other two? If there were differences, why do you think those existed?
- Did you correspond with your French peers outside of class? About what, specifically?
- What did you find most significant or surprising about your French peers, individually and/or collectively?
- Were there any ways in which this intercultural exchange affected your sense of your own abilities as a communicator or writer? Did it strengthen, challenge or not impact at all your sense of self or your self-confidence as a communicator or writer? How so?

**Educational differences**

- What surprised you the most about the university system in France? What do you think surprised your French peers about the American system, and why?
- For you, what does it mean to be "a student" in the American university system?
- Based on your observations, what aspects of the French university system, if any, do you think it would be beneficial to 'import' into the American university? Why do you think so?

**Peer review**

- Did you feel more comfortable, less comfortable or about the same giving your French peers feedback on their writing the second time (during the "Perrigo" review)?
- How was your experience getting feedback on your texts?
- Did this feedback help you enough in knowing how to rewrite your texts, or would it also have been useful to have models or other types of support to revise your texts? How so?
- How would you compare the approach used in this class (intercultural peer review) with other writing experiences you have had in school?  
What are some of the main things you learned about communicating or writing from your French peers?

**Intercultural differences in writing**

- Did you notice differences in the way your French peers wrote their texts ("*LA Times*," "Perrigo") in comparison to the way your group wrote? If you noticed differences, how would you describe or explain them?

- Did you notice any differences between the way an American peer had reviewed your draft of Assignment #5, and how your French peers reviewed your “*LA Times*” and “Perrigo” texts? If you noticed differences, how would you explain them?

**Small-group collaborative writing (relates to American peers only)**

- Overall, how well did your group of American peers function in accomplishing the tasks required for the last two assignments (#7 “*LA Times*” and #8 “Perrigo”)? What challenges did your group encounter and how did your group address these?
- Please assess your *two (American) peers’ individual contributions* to your group’s writing and revising: exactly what contributions did each of them make and how important were their contributions to achieving the group’s goals in each assignment?
- Please assess *your own individual contribution* to the group’s work: exactly what contributions did you make and how effective were these contributions to achieving the group’s goals in each assignment?
- Would you suggest assigning a group grade or individual grades on these two assignments? Why?