Implementing Dialogic Interactions in a Second Language Writing Classroom

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Abstract. This study investigates the role of dialogic interactions in second language writing classrooms in an English-medium university in the UAE. Expanding Bakhtin's (1981) concept of dialogism, the study further compares two different modes of dialogic interactions, online and offline (or face-to-face), between a writing instructor and students during individual writing conferences with respect to their impact on the revision process. Results from a total of 120 drafts from 60 students show that dialogic interactions between the instructor and an individual student, which was implemented during a writing conference, had a positive impact on content development in revision, and there was no difference found between online and face-to-face dialogic interactions. The findings of the study shed light on the importance of interactions and collaboration between the teacher and students, which can be achieved via various ways such as online and offline methods.

Keywords: Second Language Writing, Dialogic Interaction, Writing Conference

1 Introduction

Dialogic interactions in second language (L2) writing refer to an interaction between a teacher and a student or between peers in an L2 writing classroom. The role of dialogic interactions in L2 writing has been extensively explored in the field of second language acquisition, yet much research has focused on interactions between peers in a classroom or between a tutor and learners in a writing center (Ewert, 2009 [1]). A dialogic interaction in L2 writing is based on two theoretical tenets: (a) Bakhtin's dialogism (1981 [2], 1994 [3]) and (b) a pedagogical construct of scaffolding conceptualized by Wood, Bruner, and Ross (1976 [4]). According to Bakhtin (1994 [3]), every utterance is the product of a broader context of the entire social situation where the utterance occurs (p. 41), and the social situation includes the thoughts and voices of all interlocutors who interact with one another. Through these interactions, the meaning of an utterance is clarified and learning takes place. On the other hand, Wood et al. (1976 [4]) views a dialogic interaction as scaffolding, an act of assisting learners to reach a higher performance level by a teacher or a more proficient peer.

These two approaches to dialogic interactions can be implemented in L2 writing, especially during a writing conference when the teacher meets an individual student. Conferences provide opportunities for the teacher to better understand the student' intentions in his/her writing (Leki, 1990 [5]), for the student to benefit from scaffolding and negotiation with their teachers (Ewert, 2009 [1]; Goldstein & Conrad, 1990 [6]), and for the teacher and the student to co-construct discursive roles (Young & Miller, 2004 [7]). A dialogic interaction also serves as a channel for the teacher to make comments on the student's writing sample by asking for clarification or confirming the writer's intent on a passage. Through dialogic interactions with the teacher, student writers can also take a more active role by answering the questions raised by the teacher and/or clarifying linguistic and non-linguistic issues that the reader/teacher may have pointed out. For dialogic interactions to be successful during a conference, it is important for the teacher to take a collaborative stance rather than an authoritative role (Williams & Severino, 2004 [8]). The teacher may ask the student to clarify the meaning of a certain passage to understand the intent of the writer (Tardy, 2006 [9]). In return, the student writer actively clarifies the points raised by the teacher (Goldstein & Conrad, 1990 [6]). The teacher can also provide scaffolding feedback on linguistics issues (Li & Zhang, 2021 [10]).

Yet, there remains a great deal of challenge to implement dialogic interactions in an L2 writing classroom where the teacher is often a native speaker of the language of writing and students are not. Due to these different linguistic backgrounds, a deeper level of communication may become difficult during teacher-student interactions. Other challenges include equilibrium between the teacher and students, silence exhibited by students as a sign of politeness and submission, the teacher's unwillingness to avoid direct criticism, and an unclear boundary between the teacher's role in coaching and scaffolding (Merkel, 2018 [11]; Thonus, 1996 [12], 2004 [13], 2014 [14]). Overall, there still exists asymmetrical dynamics and power distribution between the teacher and students in an L2 writing classroom. It is also reported that L2 writers often receive short conferences during which the teacher or the tutor may dominate the talk with evaluations and suggestions, and participation of the L2 writer is limited (Williams, 2005 [15]).

In addition, a sudden outbreak of COVID-19 pandemic and its impact on higher education has resulted in learning disruptions (Onyema et al., 2020 [16]). Heavy use of and reliance on technology has also changed the mode of learning from face-to-face interactions to online interactions between a teacher and students as well among students. As a result, the mode of writing conferences has drastically changed from face-to-face or in-person to online interactions in an L2 writing classroom, which has further challenged a successful implementation of dialogic interactions.

Against this background, the present study investigated the effects of dialogic interactions that occurred during writing conferences in three advanced L2 writing classrooms. Especially, the study compared dialogic interactions of two different modes, face-to-face and online platforms, between an instructor and students, and further investigated how these two modes of dialogic interactions would contribute to L2 writing in the revision process.

2   Methodology

The present study has the following three research questions:

1) What are the effects of dialogic interactions on overall L2 writing revision?
2) What are the effects of dialogic interactions on the content development of L2 writing?
3) Do both online and offline (face-to-face) dialogic interactions contribute to L2 writing revision?

2.1   Research settings

The study was conducted in three content-based academic writing classes (ENG 204: Advanced Academic Writing) at the American University of Sharjah (AUS) over two semesters from the 2021 fall semester to the 2022 spring semester. The classes were taught by the first author of the paper, and each class met twice a week for three hours over 15 weeks. Due to ongoing COVID-19, all the courses were taught via a hybrid mode in the 2021 fall semester in which students were divided into two groups, and two groups alternated between face-to-face and online classes. Classes were fully resumed face-to-face in the 2022 spring semester.

English is the language of instruction at AUS, yet most students speak English as a second or a foreign language. Thus, the students' linguistic profiles make the advanced academic writing course as an advanced L2 writing course in nature at AUS. The native languages of the students vary from different dialects of Arabic to different dialects spoken in India and other languages such as Farsi.

ENG 204: Advanced Academic Writing is mandatory to all students at AUS. Prior to taking the course, students normally take two writing courses, Academic Writing I (WRI 101) and Academic Writing II (WRI 102), as perquisites to the course. The following is the course description of ENG 204 from the university catalog:

[*The course*] *builds upon the skills acquired in WRI 102 to further develop critical thinking and academic writing competencies. Requires reading and responding to a variety of non-literary texts and drawing on these texts in producing a research paper whose argument demonstrates their analytical and critical thinking skills.*

The Advanced Academic Writing course is designed to emphasize process-based writing that involves various stages of writing an academic research paper such as writing a research proposal, a working draft, and the final draft. After submitting a working draft and before submitting the final draft, students are required to meet the instructor via an individual writing conference. While the actual content and form may vary among different instructors, the instructor of the three classes, from which our data were collected, was the same person, who is the first author of the paper as mentioned earlier. Thus, there was no noticeable variation in these writing conferences in nature.

The instructor strongly advocates dialogic interactions in her classrooms. Especially, to promote and implement dialogic interactions during writing conferences, the instructor trained the students prior to their individual conference with her. Students were assigned to visit the University's Writing Center and have a meeting with a peer tutor

before they submitted their working draft. Prior to meeting their peer tutor, the students were asked to write an agenda that included specific points they would address and discuss with their tutor. After their visit to the writing center, the students also wrote a report stating how the issues they addressed were resolved during the meeting with their tutor. The students also revised their draft after visiting the writing center and submitted both the original draft and the revised draft by highlighting how the issues they had addressed were resolved in the revised draft. Finally, the students were asked to write about their experience on dialogic interactions with their tutors.

The purpose of this assignment was to have the students get familiar with dialogic interactions with their peer tutors during a writing conference. It was aimed that the students would take an active role or even lead the session and be further engaged in negotiating and co-constructing their piece of writing samples with the tutor who would normally lead the conference due to his/her role. The reports indicated that most students found such experience very valuable and helpful, and many of them visited the writing center several times afterwards.

After experiencing dialogic interactions with their peer tutors, students were ready to have similar interactions with the instructor during their individual conference. After submitting their working drafts, the instructor went over them and provided thorough comments according to the course rubric for the working draft, which is attached in Appendix 1. The instructor's comments were provided via Blackboard (iLearn), which is an online platform used in AUS. Similar to their earlier assignment to visit the writing center, students were required to read the instructor's comments and come up with an agenda that included specific points that they would like to address during a conference. Each student spent up to 15 minutes with the instructor during an individual conference. If the students needed extra time, they made an additional appointment with the instructor. Due to different teaching modes, hybrid for the 2021 fall semester and face-to-face for the 2022 spring semester, writing conferences were also offered in two different modes, hybrid for the 2021 semester and face-to-face for the 2022 spring semester. This resulted in online vs. offline modes of dialogic interactions in writing conferences over the two semesters. Table 1 below describes various stages of the revision process implemented in class.

Table 1. Different stages of the revision process

Weeks	Stages
Week 9-10	Submission of the working draft (draft 1)
Week 10-11	Teacher's feedback on the working draft (via Blackboard)
Week 12-13	Online or Offline (fact-to-face) writing conferences implementing dialogic interactions
Week 14	Submission of the final draft (draft 2)

2.2 Data collection & analysis

A total of 120 drafts, 60 working drafts and 60 final drafts, were collected from 60 students who were enrolled in three sections of ENG 204: Advanced Academic Writing course over two semesters. Drafts were collected from the students who passed the course and completed both their working drafts and final drafts in time. Table 2 summarizes the data collected for the study.

Table 2. Writing drafts collected for data analysis

Types of drafts	Fall 2021 (online)	Spring 2022 (online/face-to-face)	Total
Working drafts	38	22	60
Final drafts	38	33	33

The collected working drafts and final drafts were graded according to the rubrics, which are attached in Appendix 1 and 2, respectively. In addition, the instructor provided detailed written feedback on each draft, and the students were asked to read the instructor's comments on their working drafts before they had an individual writing conference with the instructor. To answer the three research questions asked in this study, the collected data were analyzed quantitatively. The research questions are repeated below:

1) What are the effects of dialogic interactions on overall L2 writing revision?
2) What are the effects of dialogic interactions on the content development of L2 writing?
3) Do both online and offline (face-to-face) dialogic interactions contribute to L2 writing revision?

To see the effects of dialogic interactions on overall L2 writing revision (research question 1), the mean score of the 60 working drafts was compared to the mean score of the 60 final drafts, assuming that dialogical interactions took place during a writing conference, which occurred between the submission of working drafts and the submission of final drafts.

To see the effects of dialogic interactions on the content development of L2 writing, the scores allotted to the content of the two drafts were compared. While the content of the working draft included three sections of the paper, namely, the introduction, the body, and the conclusion, the content of the final draft had an additional section, an abstract. Also, distribution of the scores across these sections differed between the two drafts. Table 3 below compares the content of the working draft and the final draft and the maximum score that can be obtained in each sub-section.

Table 3. Content scores for the working drafts and final drafts according to the rubrics

Section of the writing	The score of working draft	The score of working draft
Abstract	NA	5
Introduction	10	5

Body	55	50
Conclusion	5	8
Total	70	68

As shown in Table 3, an abstract was required only in the final draft, not in the working draft. Thus, to make a comparable analysis of the content of the two drafts, the three sections shared by the two drafts were analyzed, which is summarized in Table 4.

Table 4. Content scores for the working drafts and final drafts for analysis

Section of the writing	The score of working draft	The score of working draft
Introduction	10	5
Body	55	50
Conclusion	5	8
Total	70	63

Once the common content areas were established between the two drafts as shown in Table 4, the mean content score of the 60 working drafts was compared to that of the 60 final drafts. Since the total content scores assigned for the working draft and for the final draft differed, 70 and 63 respectively, the obtained mean scores were normalized to percentage scores for comparison. In addition, the normalized mean scores for each section of the content, the introduction, the body, and the conclusion, were also compared between the two drafts.

Finally, to see whether both online (hybrid) and offline (face-to-face) dialogic interactions would contribute to L2 writing revision, the collected drafts were divided into (i) those collected from 38 students during the 2021 fall semester when writing conferences were conducted online and (ii) those collected from 22 students during the 2022 spring semester when writing conferences were conducted face-to-face. After that, the mean scores for the working drafts and the final drafts were compared between the two groups.

3   Results

3.1   Effects of dialogic interaction on overall writing revision

Results from a paired t-test indicated that there was no significant effect of dialogic interactions on overall L2 writing revision. Table 5 summarizes the results.

Table 5. Mean values between working drafts and final drafts

Types of drafts	N	M	SD	t	df	Sig (2-tailed)
Working drafts	60	84.82	10.36	-1.50	59	0.14
Final drafts	60	86.64	9.87			

As presented in Table 5, the students, overall, improved their writing after revision: the mean score of the working drafts was 84.82 out of 100, and the mean score of the final drafts was 86.64, showing overall increase. However, the difference between the two mean scores was not statically confirmed as the p-value was 0.14, which was greater than .05.

3.2 Effects of dialogic interactions on the content development of L2 writing

In general, dialogic interactions had a positive effect on the content development in L2 writing. Results from a paired *t*-test showed that the normalized mean value was 83.13 for the working drafts and 88.24 for the final drafts, and the difference was significant, as reported in Table 6.

Table 6. Mean values for the content between working drafts and final drafts

Types of drafts	N	M	SD	*t*	*df*	Sig (2-tailed)
Working drafts	60	83.13	12.53	-3.23	59	0.02
Final drafts	60	88.24	10.07			

While all three sections of the content area were improved after revision, the introduction was the most significantly improved area. On the other hand, such improvement was not statically confirmed for the body and the conclusion. Tables 7 to 9 summarize the statistical analyses for each content section.

Table 7. Mean values for the introduction between working drafts and final drafts

Types of drafts	N	M	SD	*t*	*df*	Sig (2-tailed)
Working drafts	60	82.60	14.58	-3.81	59	0.00
Final drafts	60	89.60	17.04			

Table 8. Mean values for the body between working drafts and final drafts

Types of drafts	N	M	SD	*t*	*df*	Sig (2-tailed)
Working drafts	60	83.77	13.37	-2.86	59	0.06
Final drafts	60	88.73	9.93			

Table 9. Mean values for the conclusion between working drafts and final drafts

Types of drafts	N	M	SD	*t*	*df*	Sig (2-tailed)
Working drafts	60	77.07	21.26	-2.70	59	0.09
Final drafts	60	84.28	14.57			

3.3 Effects of different modes of dialogic interactions on L2 writing revision

Finally, different modes of dialogic interactions, online vs. offline (or face-to-face), and their effects on L2 writing revision were compared. To do so, a simple *t*-test was conducted to compare the mean value of the content score obtained from the online group

(2021 fall semester) and the offline group (2022 spring semester). This was done to see whether the two groups had any difference prior to being exposed to different modes of dialogic interactions. Results showed that there was no significant difference between the two groups before their exposure to different modes of dialogic interactions. Table 10 summarizes the results.

Table 10. Mean values for working drafts between online and offline groups

Type of drafts	Mode of interaction	N	M	SD	t	df	Sig (2-tailed)
Working drafts	online	22	79.35	16.82	-1.81	58	0.75
Working drafts	offline	38	85.32	8.73			

To see whether different modes of dialogic interactions would contribute to L2 writing revision differently, further statistical analysis was conducted. The mean scores of the final drafts were compared between online and offline groups. Results showed that there was no significant difference found between the two groups, which indicated that the mode of dialogic interactions did not make a difference towards L2 writing revision. Table 11 summarizes the results.

Table 11. Mean values for final drafts between online and offline groups

Type of drafts	Mode of interaction	N	M	SD	t	df	Sig (2-tailed)
Final drafts	online	22	89.05	8.56	0.47	58	0.64
Final drafts	offline	38	87.77	10.93			

4   Conclusion

The sudden outbreak of COVID-19 has changed the world, not to mention the method of teaching and learning. Various online platforms were adopted, and the nature of teacher-student interactions has changed accordingly. Against this background, the present study examined the effects of different modes of dialogic interactions, online vs. face-to-face, which were implemented in writing conferences in three university-level L2 academic writing classrooms. Results from a total of 120 drafts from 60 students indicated that dialogic interactions implemented during a writing conference had a positive impact on L2 writing revision, especially in content development. Also, there was no difference found between online and offline (or face-to-face) modes of interactions, suggesting that both online and offline modes of dialogic interactions had a positive impact on L2 writing revision. The findings of the study shed light on the importance of interactions and collaboration between a teacher and students, which can be achieved via various ways such as online and offline methods.

The dynamics between the teacher and students in a classroom is commonly known to be asymmetrical. Teachers lead and students follow. Students may have a minimal input when it comes to constructing their own knowledge and contributing to their skill development. Instilling in students' rich skills such as critical thinking and voicing their

own opinion and concerns can be possible by adopting dialogic pedagogy, an approach that "seeks to facilitate students' construction of knowledge through the questioning, interrogation and negotiation of ideas and opinions in an intellectually rigorous, yet mutually respectful manner" (Teo, 2019, p. 1). Dialogic interactions, whether they occur face-to-face or online, which were implemented during a writing conference through several steps in this study, are proven to be effective as it was shown in the students' significant improvement in the revision process. When implemented appropriately, regardless of their modes, online or offline, dialogic interactions allow L2 student writers to voice their concerns, discuss and clarify ambiguous points, and have an ownership over their own writing with guidance. This very much falls under the Bakhtinian perspective of a dialogic talk, which is characterized by teacher-student collaboration through which they co-construct meaning by critically questioning and filtering ideas through the writer's own knowledge, perspectives, and lived experiences (Teo, 2019 [17]).

The findings of this study echo the findings of previous studies on dialogic interactions in relation to L2 writing. Collaborative stances are more productive than authoritative or prescriptive attitudes, which result in the resolution of identified problems in subsequent drafts (De Guerrero & Villamil, 2000 [18]; Ewert, 2009 [1]; Weigle & Nelson, 2004 [19]). A dialogic interaction can benefit students greatly by granting them autonomy while maintaining a mutually constructive educational relationship between a teacher and students. Students among themselves can also practice dialogic interactions via peer reviews and feedback in class as well as at a writing center, as it was done in this study. With various teaching and learning tools and platforms available both online and offline, it is important that educators consider empowering their students and allowing them to be more autonomous in their educational journey and decision making.

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Appendix 1: Rubric for evaluating the working draft

The Working Draft is an 8-10-page (2550 – 3200 word) draft that includes an introduction, a developing body synthesizing relevant research sources, a conclusion, and a list of references.

	Elements	Points
Content		
	Introduction (~1 page)	/10
	Provides appropriate and compelling entry to the topic	
	Includes and develops relevant background information	
	States research question(s)/research thesis	
	Is structured through appropriate paragraphs	
	Body (~7-8 pages)	/55
	Presents an effectively organized body with sections	
	Includes headings that reflect the paper organization	
	Supports points/arguments with credible and relevant source material and cites definitions of key terms/ideas as applicable	
	Synthesizes several scholarly and credible sources	
	Demonstrates critical thinking and analysis	
	Conclusion (~½ a page)	/5
	Summarizes main points	
References		/15
	Uses correctly formatted APA in-text citations	
	Includes correctly formatted APA references	
	Reference list contains all and only the cited texts	
Mechanics		/10
	Is accurate in terms of grammar, spelling, punctuation, capitalization, word choice, transitional usage	
Format /layout		/5
	Follows APA page layout (title page, running head, headings, font, spacing, paragraph indentation, left alignment)	
Total		/100

Appendix 2: Rubric for evaluating the final draft

The final research paper is 10-12 pages (3200 – 3850 words, excluding reference list, abstract, and title page) and incorporates feedback from the drafting process.

Elements		Points
Content		
	Title Page	
	Abstract and Key Words	/5
	Effectively summarizes research paper (between 130 and 150 words)	
	Lists 3-5 relevant key words	
	Introduction (~1 page)	/5
	Provides appropriate and compelling entry to the topic	
	Clearly articulates the research question(s) and thesis	
	Body (~9-11 pages)	/50
	Presents a well-structured, logically argued, and cohesive discussion	
	Includes headings that reflect the paper organization	
	Supports all points/arguments with credible and relevant evidence and cites definitions of key terms/ideas as applicable	
	Synthesizes multiple sources	
	Shows originality, critical thinking, and in-depth, nuanced analysis	
	Conclusion (~up to 1 page)	/8
	Restates main points and addresses the research question/thesis	
	Comes to logical conclusion from evidence	
	Makes final comment(s)	
References		/7
	Uses correctly formatted APA in-text citations	
	Includes correctly formatted APA references	
	Contains all and only the cited texts	
Style	Entire paper	/10
	Is polished in tone and style appropriate for an academic audience	
	Uses clear and sophisticated language and variety in sentence structure	

Mechanics	Entire paper	/5
	Is accurate in terms of grammar, spelling, punctuation, capitalization, word choice, and transitionals	
Format/ Layout	Entire paper	/5
	Follows APA page layout (title page, running head, headings, font, etc.)	
Revision		/5
	Incorporates feedback from the Working Draft and any consultations	
Total		/100