

Collaborative Writing in the Classroom

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Abstract

The benefits and importance of collaborative writing are well documented in the field of language learning. The purpose of this paper is to report on the results of a classroom investigation into the effects of collaboration on the quality of student writing in a university freshman EFL classroom. It was assumed that text quality in L2 is higher in a co-constructed text than one constructed individually. Two groups of intermediate EFL students were asked to write a short argumentative essay. Those in the first group were asked to co-construct the essay in pairs while those in the second group wrote their essays individually. Both groups were given identical instructions and materials. The essays were then rated according to a simple rubric. The results indicate that when learners collaborate on written work it is more accurate, complex and coherent. These results and positive student feedback suggest that the increased interaction provided by collaboration has not only linguistic but social benefits.

Despite its importance in L2 acquisition, whether it is due to linguistic, cognitive or pedagogical reasons, writing is often considered the hardest skill to learn (Nunan, 1989). Teachers are constantly searching for new methods and activities that not only encourage their students to write and improve their writing ability but also make the process less frustrating and more enjoyable. One of the reasons for this frustration is that writing is generally viewed as a solitary activity. When students write at home in isolation, they often suffer from a lack of ideas, which is compounded by the absence of any immediate and meaningful feedback. Even when students write in a classroom environment, teachers tend to require them to write in silence and the work they produce is rarely seen or commented on by anyone other than the teacher. However, writing is part of learning and if learning is a social activity, then so is writing (as, like the other three language skills, it involves the conveyance of meaning to others as clearly as possible). As Brodkey (1987) states "Writing is a social act. People write to and for other people" (p. 54). Collaborative writing, with its focus on maximising learner interaction is increasingly being seen in language teaching as providing meaningful opportunities for students to enhance their learning process. Indeed, Trimbur and Braun (1992) have argued that ways to incorporate collaboration into the writing process has become "one of the central preoccupations in studies of writing" (p. 21). This paper seeks to examine the benefits of collaborative writing over individually produced texts. The main research questions posed in this paper are:

1. Does collaborative essay writing help students to produce better quality work?
2. Do students see any benefit in collaborative writing?

Literature Review

Definitions of collaborative learning

According to Gerlach (1994), "Collaborative learning is based on the idea that learning is a naturally social act in which the participants talk among themselves" (p. 12). The widespread adoption of collaborative learning in the classroom has its foundations in the social constructionist theory of Vygotsky (1978), who states that for a learner to develop cognitively there must exist some kind of meaningful social interaction with others; these others can be peers or teachers, but should ideally be more capable than the learner if development is to take place. This idea informed the interactionist approach to writing, which places emphasis on the co-construction of knowledge through interaction and negotiation. There exists a raft of research supporting the idea that interaction and collaboration are central to language development (Gass, 2003; Gass & Mackey, 2006; Hawkey, 2004). This interactionist view of learning is now so widespread that most language classrooms encourage learners to actively collaborate through pair and group work, and the expression, *peer learning* has become a staple in the language-learning classroom (Boud, 2001). Much of this research and activity, however, has been focused on speaking, with writing (until recently) still seen and taught as a solitary activity. However, as writing is now considered to be less an individual pursuit and more a process of interaction which benefits learners, the idea of collaborative learning has become more widely applied to the writing process, and as such research into writing tasks in which learners collaborate is becoming more prevalent in the field of language teaching (Hyland, 2003; Matsuda et al., 2003; Storch, 2005). There are a wide variety of definitions of the term *collaborative writing*, and their range highlights the fact that there is some disagreement within the field over how much of the writing process has to be cooperative in order for it to truly be called collaborative. Flower and Hayes (1981) propose that collaborative writing can be defined as *any* group effort towards producing a text. However, there are those who argue that for true collaboration to occur a text must not merely be planned and edited together, but that every stage of the writing process must be completely co-shared (Hirvela, 2007; Storch, 2013). Storch (2013) argues that it is the following three features that separate true collaborative writing from other types of collaborative writing: (a) substantive interaction in all stages of the writing process; (b) shared decision-making power over and responsibility for the text produced; and (c) the production of a single written document. This is the definition most applicable for the purposes of this study.

Benefits of collaborative learning

There are a wealth of studies that present both the social and cognitive benefits of collaborative writing. Research shows that collaborative writing leads to overall language improvements, as well as providing learners with more opportunities for interaction and L2 use (Gass, 2003; Kuiken & Vedder, 2002; Swain & Lapkin, 2001). In addition, collaborative writing leads to improvements in both grammatical accuracy and language structure recognition (McDonough, 2004; Swain & Lapkin, 1998). Furthermore, the peer feedback and correction inherent to collaborative writing has been shown to result in increased negotiation for meaning (Ohta, 2001). Collaborative writing have also been shown to improve learners' critical thinking (Neumann & McDonough, 2015).

Rationale

One of the issues that writing teachers are confronted with is that after a long vacation, students often give the impression of forgetting more than they learned in the semester preceding it. This memory loss is most likely because they have had little opportunity to maintain and develop their language and critical thinking skills as well as little motivation to review what they have learnt. The challenge is for teachers to reacquaint students with previously studied material, start them thinking critically again and make them interested in the writing process. It seems that collaborative writing “in which students work together from start to finish, producing a single paper from the group,” (Howard, 2001, p. 54) could meet all of these goals as well as providing the benefits mentioned in the previous paragraph.

Methodology

Participants

The participants in this study were Japanese freshman university students in the fall semester of an academic reading and writing course at a liberal arts university. The lesson in which the study was conducted was one in which the objectives were to have students review the elements of an argumentative essay in preparation for writing an outline.

Materials and Procedures

In the instruction phase of the lesson, students were asked to review, discuss and share what they remembered about the structural elements that make up an argumentative essay. These elements were then reviewed with the class and students were given a handout that explained these elements and provided examples (see Appendix 1). Students were then instructed that they would be completing a short essay in class and were given the option of writing the essay individually or in a pair. Exactly half of the class chose to write their essays individually, with the other half choosing to coauthor the essay with a partner. Students were placed into two groups comprising equal numbers (10 students each). Group A were split into 5 pairs, while Group B was comprised of 10 individuals. Both groups were then instructed to write an argumentative essay in 16 sentences. A template was provided for students to write their essay on (see Appendix 2) and they were reminded to pay particular attention, when writing, to the structural elements of an essay on the handout. This handout was used as the basis of the rubric used to score the essays for the purpose of this paper (see Appendix 3). To ensure that the students in Group B were not at a disadvantage, they (as well as Group A) were told that they could use their classmates, the Internet or the teacher as a writing resource. Those in Group A were further instructed that responsibility for task completion as well as all decision-making should be shared equally and that they should interact in the L2 only. Forty-five minutes were allotted to both groups to complete the task. After the task was completed, the essays were collected and rated by the teacher for text quality (i.e. how well they adhered to the rubric in Appendix 3). In order to get feedback on the activity, students in both groups were asked for their opinions on the activity both orally in class immediately after the activity and in their writing journals in the form of brief written feedback. Oral feedback was recorded as verbatim as possible. This oral feedback as well as all legible feedback from the writing journals is presented in the Results section.

Results and Discussion

The intention of this paper was to describe an attempt to introduce collaborative writing into the classroom and to share the results of that attempt; specifically, whether or not and in what manner co-constructed texts differed from those produced individually and whether students saw any benefits from writing collaboratively. The results are shown below. Table 1 shows the percentage of each group whose essay met the criteria in the rubric.

Table 1
Percentage of each group's essays that met the rubric criteria

| Rubric Criteria | Group A | Group B |
|---|---------|---------------|
| | (pairs) | (individuals) |
| 1. Does the essay contain a hook? | 100% | 80% |
| 2. Does the thesis statement include the ideas in each body paragraph? | 100% | 70% |
| 3. Do all topic sentences connect to thesis statement? | 80% | 80% |
| 4. Are all explanations preceded by a transition phrase? | 80% | 70% |
| 5. Is the counter-argument correctly introduced? | 100% | 90% |
| 6. Does the conclusion restate all 3 main ideas from the body paragraphs? | 80% | 70% |

In half of the rubric criteria the pairs *scored* 100%, in all other criteria the pairs scored no lower than 80%. None of the individuals scored 100% in any of the rubric criteria. The highest score for the individuals was 90% in one of the categories, while their lowest score was 70% in three of the categories. The average score for group A was 90%, and the average score for group B was 77%.

Student Feedback

All group A students who participated in the study reported that working together to construct the essay was better than working alone. Students reported that the sharing of knowledge and ideas helped them think more critically about the essay and that they felt the experience was more enjoyable than had they worked individually. The comments are shown below:

- I could finish the essay quicker with my partner helping.
- Talking together it was easier to think of ideas.
- I know that the essay was better because we could argue together about it.
- My ideas were questioned and this made us think more about our opinion.
- We have more fun than the section mate writing alone and...my partner did lots of writing. Thank you!
- Writing together helped me think about all parts of the essay...I don't forget small things.

Feedback from Group B learners was mixed. Negative comments tended to focus more on the learning environment than the task, while positive comments seemed to support claims that collaboration leads to increased confidence and a greater lexical and structural resource. The comments are shown below:

- The pairs were noisy and to concentrate was difficult.

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- I think that they were not going to finish as they were talking much.
- Noise was high but pairs could use more knowledge to complete the assignment.
- If you work in a pair you can have confidence in the essay.
- It may be better to be a pair because you can check things like grammar more quickly.
- I chose to write my own essay, as I don't want to my classmates to see my writing.
- Pair is good they have more knowledge and essay ideas from talking together.

This paper set out to investigate whether the claims for the benefits of collaborative writing were justified, and has found that when students co-construct texts it leads to benefits in terms of text quality. Though the differences do not seem large the fact that, in all but one of the rubric categories, the pairs scored more highly leads to the conclusion that collaborative writing has a positive effect on the quality of students' written work.

This positive effect may be due to the fact that through collaborative writing, students have more of an opportunity to share ideas, discuss in detail and give and receive immediate and meaningful feedback than when working as individuals (Storch, 2005). This is encouraging and has implications for classroom writing activities. All this is not to say that collaborative writing comes with no disadvantages. There are studies that point out the negative effect of collaboration on student writing, in that it is viewed negatively by learners, that attempts to reach a consensus and differing personalities are possible sources of increased conflict, and that it leads to increased use of L1 and delayed task completion (Hong, 2006; Storch, 2005; Storch & Wigglesworth, 2007). This study also has obvious limitations in several aspects, not the least of which is the sample size and that without statistical analysis it is difficult to attribute any differences in text quality to collaborative writing alone. A variety of other factors, not the least of which are English ability, writing experience and motivation, may have been potential factors for the differences in text quality, and it is clear that it would be presumptuous to generalize the findings of a single study. However, the results are encouraging as they show that there is a way to make the task of writing more productive, meaningful and in line with the goals of university academic English courses.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The aim of this research was twofold: to discover whether collaborative writing can benefit students' work and whether students see collaborative writing as beneficial. The text quality results showing that those who wrote collaboratively produced higher quality texts, together with the positive student feedback from both groups show that there are overwhelming benefits to instructors having students write more collaboratively in the classroom. What follows are recommendations for teachers who might want to use collaborative learning techniques, on how to address some of the main problems associated with collaborative learning. This researcher has found the main obstacle to implementing collaborative writing in the classroom is resistance from students due to a lack of confidence in their L2 writing skills, resulting in them being hesitant to share their work with others. However, this researcher has found that this is generally only an issue when they are asked to collaborate in the peer editing of finished tasks. By confining collaborative writing to those activities that involve the complete co-construction of a text and students have equal stakes in the decision making process, instructors can address this issue. The Group B student who said she didn't want others to see 'her' writing would have fewer reservations, as the writing would now be co-owned...it would be 'their' writing.

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In addition, it may be the case that students are reluctant to the idea of collaborative writing as they are concerned about the possibility of an uneven workload, are naturally wary of partners not doing their share, and more importantly (since many students are primarily motivated by grades) do not want their grade to be dependent on others who may not do the work. While having a partner who does not fully participate is a valid concern, this may only be an issue when students collaborate outside the classroom; therefore, restricting all collaborative writing activities to the classroom setting where students can be easily monitored would address this issue. Regarding assessment, a clear rubric provided by the instructor or, better yet, constructed by the students themselves should ensure that participants are aware of exactly what they *all* need to do to get a grade. Better still, collaborative assignments with no assessment at all would not only remove anxiety but also encourage the students to see the process of collaboration as valuable in its own right. Teachers who think that collaborative writing activities may take up too much class time could try asking students to collaborate on smaller, more manageable pieces of writing such as a single paragraph or section of an essay, thus ensuring that they have enough lesson time to complete the task. Finally, simply having students brainstorm problems and negotiate solutions when introducing collaborative writing into class for the first time can help familiarise them with the concept and make the whole process less taxing. The problems associated with collaborative writing may not be eliminated by these suggestions, but they should go some way to decreasing them. It is hoped that more instructors will try to introduce collaborative writing techniques into their teaching as students can gain much from a well-planned collaborative writing activity: improved writing skills, critical thinking expertise, the ability to interact creatively and stronger personal relationships.

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Appendix 1

| | |
|--------------------------------|---|
| A hook: | An opening sentence that catches the reader's attention and make them want to read more. It can be a surprising statement / a story / question / an interesting statistic / a quotation. E.g. “Every human falls in love at least 4 times in their life.” |
| Background information: | Explains the issue (<i>in case the reader knows nothing about the issue</i>) - can include a history of the topic / current situation of the topic / different perspectives of the topic / definitions of important terms / statistics. |
| Thesis statement: | This is a CLEAR statement of the writer's opinion on the topic, and tells the reader exactly what the essay is about. It should include all the main ideas of your body paragraphs. “Schools in Japan must teach classes about love as doing so will increase the birth rate, improve the economy and stop wars.” |
| Topic sentences: | These CLEARLY introduce what each paragraph will be about. “Schools in Japan must teach classes about love as this will help stop Japan's falling birth rate.” |
| Supporting sentences: | These sentences support / demonstrate / prove or develop the ideas in the topic sentences. These sentences should contain CLAIMS / EVIDENCE and EXPLANATIONS . |
| Explanation | This explains 'Why?' or 'How?' your supporting sentences support your topic sentence / thesis statement. The explanation should be introduced with a transition. (Use phrases like 'As a result...' / Therefore... / Consequently... / This shows that...', to introduce <i>the explanation</i> .) <i>e.g. Knowing how important love is will encourage students to start families and consequently the falling birth rate will no longer be a problem.</i> |
| Counter-Argument: | Introduces the opposite opinion to the writer's. A counter-argument shows that the writer understands other points of view. “Some people argue that it is impossible to find good textbooks to teach young people about love.” |
| Refutation: | The writer's direct response to the counter argument. “However, by using movies, magazines and guest speakers the classes would be motivating and successful.” |
| Conclusion: | This restates the writer's opinion using different language (<i>no new information or empty statements in the conclusion</i>). The conclusion should restate ALL 3 main ideas of the body paragraphs. “In conclusion it is clear that to increase Japan's population, make the country more financially stable and bring peace we need love classes in schools.” |
| Final thought: | Finishes the essay and leaves the reader with a prediction / recommendation / warning. “If humans don't learn about love, will there be a next generation?” |

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Appendix 2

Your assignment is to write an essay in 16 sentences.

| | |
|--|--|
| Essay Question: | |
| INTRODUCTION PARAGRAPH | |
| Hook: | |
| Background: | |
| Thesis statement: | |
| BODY PARAGRAPH 1 | |
| Topic sentence: | |
| Evidence: | |
| Explanation: | |
| BODY PARAGRAPH 2 | |
| Topic sentence: | |
| Evidence: | |
| Explanation: | |
| BODY PARAGRAPH 3 | |
| Topic sentence: | |
| Evidence: | |
| Explanation: | |
| COUNTER-ARGUMENT AND REFUTATION | |
| Counter- argument: | |
| Refutation: | |
| CONCLUSION | |
| Summary: | |
| Final thought / Suggestion: | |

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Appendix 3

| Rubric Criteria | Group A (pairs) | Group B (individuals) |
|--|--------------------|--------------------------|
| Does the essay contain a hook? | | |
| Does the thesis statement include the ideas in each body paragraph? | | |
| Do all topic Sentences connect to thesis statement? | | |
| Are all explanations preceded by a transition phrase? | | |
| Is the counter-argument correctly introduced? | | |
| Does the conclusion restate all 3 main ideas from the body paragraphs? | | |