Reflections on Collaborative Writing in L2 Classes

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Abstract

It is generally accepted that our ability to perform tasks is different when we are with other people from when we are alone. Because research in language learning has found numerous benefits of employing group work and collaborative techniques in the classroom, teachers do well to consider the conclusions that can be drawn from observed group behaviour in order to exploit features which will help develop writing. The purpose of our contribution is to highlight such conclusions we need to recognize when talking about generating ideas for writing in second/foreign language
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Introduction

Collaborative writing refers to environments in which students engage jointly, rather than individually, in a common writing task. In a collaborative writing task, each student has an equal ability to generate ideas, and revise the growing text.

The purpose of our contribution is to highlight the benefits of collaborative writing, benefits we need to recognize when talking about generating ideas for writing in L21

In this paper, we will first discuss collaborative and group work instruction with respect to the notions of collaboration and cooperativeness in the classroom, and then give some accounts of group writing to highlight its usefulness in EFL classes

Résumé

Il est généralement admis que notre capacité à accomplir des tâches que nous avons à effectuer est différente lorsque nous sommes dans un groupe que lorsque nous sommes seuls. Parce que la recherche dans l'apprentissage des langues a trouvé de nombreux avantages à l'emploi de techniques de groupe et d'apprentissage collaboratif en classe, les enseignants feraient bien de considérer les conclusions tirées des observations des comportements de groupes afin d'exploiter les caractéristiques qui aideront à apprendre à écrire. L'objectif de notre contribution est de mettre en évidence de telles conclusions que nous devons reconnaître lorsque l'on parle de l'activation de la récupération ou la collecte d'idées dans la production écrite en langue étrangère.

Collaborative Learning: Theoretical Justifications

The theoretical framework that promotes the use of collaborative group work is collaborative learning theory. The research literature on collaboration, cooperation, and competition has a rich and long history beginning in the late 1800s with the pioneering researcher Triplett (18), who found that children and adults, in cooperative-learning oriented environments, perform better when involved simultaneously with others, rather than on their own. Later, Allport (1) put forward a theory referred to this as social facilitation. Such a theory indicates that people in group situations often increase the quantity of work done, though the quality may be impaired because of our desire to perform well in the skills that can be readily observed. With regard to the standard of work achieved by a group, that there is a leveling out effect, as no one wants to appear too different from the average either above or below (1) What matters is group discussion. When the group members differ in opinion, the effect of discussion is to bring them together. Leveling-out takes place during discussion, and the amount of work done by a group gets larger (8). The nature of the problem will clearly be significantly variable, as a problem, for example, with few solutions may leave little to be said when the basic options have been explored and stated.

A central tenet in collaborative learning theories is that learning, as well as knowledge itself, is socially created. Bruffee (3);(4), one of the leading experts on collaborative learning, in his account of how peer collaboration has helped and encouraged him in his professional writing, discusses the advantages of learning in a community over learning in isolation, particularly when people are learning how to make good judgments. The development of trust and the granting of authority are also observed as crucial aspects of effective collaborative learning. Collaborative work increases the intellectual and emotional participation or involvement of the learners and combines "most effectively all aspects of communication . . . in the most integrated, non-threatening and flexible mode of class organization available to the teacher" (Bruffee 1980:77). Collaborative learning encourages learners to participate in the class, helps instil the values of compromise and negotiation, and allows learners to take risks. In large, mixed-level classes, collaborative activities are not simply beneficial, they are necessary as it is not possible for the teacher to take care of the immediate needs of all students during a lesson.

Through collaborative activities learners learn to use their classmates as resources and assume some responsibility for their own learning.

The value of collaborative group work approach resides in the encouragement it gives for self-expression in a secure situation, particularly for the less able. Such a learner task centered approach enables learners to see that they have similar difficulties, similar abilities, common aims and common achievements and failures. The result tends to be a reduction in anxiety and aggression, less random behavior and less resistance to change. This implies greater achievement by group members. Stevick (16) regards teaching as a process of creating tension and uncertainty in the learner, and feels that the group situation provides the support and encouragement necessary for this to be a constructive experience. This is because a group is more accurate than an individual in choosing from alternative answers, because correction, for instance, from a peer is more acceptable, and less threatening than from a teacher: "working, risking and suffering together" is the group writing principle.

Collaborative Writing in L2 classes

Collaborative learning theories have had an impact on L1 and L2 writing instruction. Although the term "collaborative learning" is easily understood, it might be helpful to define it in the context of writing. In this paper, "collaborative learning" is used as an umbrella term to designate what is normally referred to in the context of L2 learning/teaching as the action of working with someone to produce something (i.e., a written composition). Here 'collaboration' is primarily between and among students and rests on the approach viewing writing not as a product-oriented activity but rather one that is dynamic, nonlinear, and recursive (7). Bruffee (4), a leading proponent of collaborative writing, defines collaborative learning as the type of learning that takes place through communication with peers and states that there are certain kinds of knowledge that are best acquired in this manner.

Research in L2 writing has underlined if language is "part of wider social interaction and behavior," we are bound to consider the communicative value of language and "introduce the process of interaction into the classroom" (15). In the process approach to writing (10), the focus of attention has shifted from the finished product to the whole process of writing. Within this approach to

writing, writers engage in *brainstorming* activities, *outlining, drafting* (focusing on meaning), *rewriting* (focusing on organization and meaning), and *editing* (focusing on style and grammar). This shift of focus from the finished product to the processes and sub-processes of writing has provoked a change in the teacher's role requiring greater emphasis on activities such as collaborative group writing and peer evaluation.

Collaborative writing encourages learners to participate in the class, helps instil the values of compromise and negotiation, and allows learners to take risks. While students individually may not have all the knowledge or resources available to successfully complete a task, "pooling the resources that a group of peers brings with them to the task" (4) may enable the group to complete a task that individuals may not be able to complete on their own. In group writing, students negotiate meaning as they help each other revise their papers (8) and that writing is reciprocal and improves students' work (4). Group collaboration is a quality that has to be learnt since it is rarely obvious to students that the aim of the activity is a group product to which they all contribute. A number of techniques have been suggested in the literature for training groups for this, including brainstorming, in which the ideas on some topic are solicited from all members in an uninhibited way (Richardson 1971 quoted in (12)). Once the - necessary - period of working in groups is over, the members of a collaborating group can discus their tasks in a way that is not provoked by traditional lockstep classroom organization with the teacher drilling the entire class. Arguments develop, information is shared, and gradually a complete picture is built from individuals' contributions (12).

Benefits of Collaborative Writing

Faced with the nature of writing being "a language skill which is difficult to acquire" (17) , and with the difficulties students face in learning to write in L2, teachers have been looking for ways to develop students' writing skills and ability. But, for many years, teachers failed to see the strengths of collaborative writing activities for two reasons: (i) teachers are accustomed to regarding writing as an isolated activity, and (ii) students are accustomed to working competitively, not cooperatively. Additionally, teachers failed to see the various benefits language learners can bring to each other were in

L2 writing classes. Such a failure to recognize the contributions that L2 learners can make to each other has given way to an active effort to draw on the potential of learners as teachers in L2 writing processes. This has given rise to collaborative writing as part of the process approach to teaching L2 writing.

L2 group writing researchers have also found that there are a number of linguistic gains of collaborative writing and revising. Researchers have found, for example, that collaborative group writing can lead to decision making, "allow[ing] learners to compare notes on what they have learned and how to use it effectively" and providing learners with "increased opportunities to review and apply their growing knowledge of L2 writing through dialogue and interaction with their peers in the writing group" (12). Since research on group or collaborative learning, as discussed earlier in this paper, indicates that such strategies enhance learning, we used them in my writing classes with first year students majoring in English in the university. I assumed that if students found group writing helpful and beneficial for generating ideas, they would be less inhibited to write individually and develop their writing skill.

The group work activity was introduced in EFL university level classes with descriptive and narrative writing, with the class divided into groups all 'buzzing' away in English for a short time on a chosen topic, provoked by some reading or listening passage. The class is usually divided into five or six groups, each consisting of about four or five students[2]. One of the students in each group plays the role of secretary, records and reports what the members of the group have said and keeps the group activity going. The groups are structured so the 'secretary' would rotate among the group; each member had his turn. The primary activities for each group are generating ideas aloud, rehearsing them aloud, writing down all the ideas that come to mind in connection with a topic, and reading them aloud for subsequent writing, *i.e., drafting.* It did not take long to spot benefits of group writing.

From this experiment into the relative effectiveness of group work in writing classes, we have found that the latter produced co-operative behaviors. Students were responsible, and showed diverse contributions. Energies that go into trying to outshine and dominate others may well instead be devoted to co-operative enterprises, and that often those who are domineering in a competitive situation prove

to be those who are most helpful in a cooperative one. The importance of interpersonal output, in which the reception and exchange of feedback occur, is central to writing. The simple activity of rehearsing and reading aloud is helpful because it makes one's work public and turns writing into a social act. As a result of collaboration, the students described the exchange of ideas in an informal group setting as beneficial. In general, they found group generating ideas for planning their writing and peer collaboration helpful and stimulating. Rehearsing - the biggest part of idea generation for the planning stage in writing - not only exposed students to other interesting points of view but also helped them gather ideas and more examples to use in their writing. The suggestions for generating and sharing ideas were welcomed because these revealed weaknesses the students had overlooked when writing in isolation. In particular, peers' comments made the student-writers more aware of their reader's evaluation of ideas and helped them in the revision process.

Group writing provides the ingredients for the pre-writing stage: (1) the ideas to work with, and (2) how to use them. The thinking that the group members were able to do at this time of course had considerable value from a cognitive point of view. The opportunity to sort ideas out and safe from teacher's judgment, in the first place, was evidently a welcome relief to many students. Although most of the students enjoyed and found collaborative writing benficial to overcome inhibition and passivity, we observed that this was true of only some groups and selected tasks (e.g. from their readings). It was evident that students found choosing their own readings and topics for discussion most enjoyable.

'Collaborative' is a quality that has to be learnt since it is rarely obvious to students that the aim of the activity is a group product to which they all contribute. The group work technique has been suggested in the literature for training groups for this, including brainstorming, in which the ideas on some topic are solicited from all members in an uninhibited way (Richardson 1971 quoted in (12)). Once the necessary period of working in groups is over, the members of a collaborating group can discus their tasks in a way that is not provoked by traditional lockstep classroom organization with the teacher drilling the entire class. In collaborative writing, arguments develop, information is shared, and gradually a complete picture is built from individuals' contributions (12)

Conclusion

Collaborative writing is viewed as one of the effective ways experimented in foreign language writing classes. Group writing is an effective way to help students overcome inhibition and passivity in the writing class. For L2 learners, the struggle to master the complicated and sometimes impossible task of writing can seem a frustrating, tedious, and ultimately painful exercise. With peers' collaboration, however, the experience of English language group writing can turn from pain to pleasure. The members' positive engagement in their group writing breeds success, which then fuels their idea generation and their desire to start writing together as a group. By generating and encouraging collaborative writing, not just texts per se to be read and corrected by the teacher, our students who work together to create, write, review, respond to, and assess classmates' writing can benefit from each other's experiences and perspectives, and will gain self-confidence, and autonomy.

Notes

[1.] the term L2 is used here to refer to any language other than the native language of the learner independently of its status vis-à-vis the host country
[2.] Collaborative learning research suggests that groups should be no larger than six members. Groups of three tend to be effective when the course involves long-range collaborative writing assignments.

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