

A collaborative writing approach: Methodology and student assessment

Keywords

collaborative writing, peer editing, student feedback, university writing program

This paper will review a collaborative writing methodology designed for the authors' EFL university classes in which students work in pairs to produce co-authored paragraphs and essays. Throughout the step-by-step procedure, students use the target language to plan, negotiate, draft, and revise their writing assignments, and thus make meaningful, task-oriented use of multiple skills at all stages of the process. At the end of the year-long course, the authors asked their students to submit written feedback about their experience in order to assess the efficacy of the collaborative approach. This paper provides background information on collaborative writing, outlines the actual program put into place, analyzes student feedback and concludes with suggestions for improvements that could be made to the program.

本論では、著者らが大学のEFLクラスのために考案した協働的ライティング手法について概説する。この手法では、学生が2人1組でパラグラフとエッセイを作成する。学生は段階的な手順に従い、目標言語を使ってライティング課題の計画、交渉、草案、修正を行うことで、プロセスの各段階において複数のスキルを有意義かつタスク指向型の方法で用いる。1年間のコースの終わりに、この協働的ライティング手法の効果を評価するため、学生達自身の体験について書面によるフィードバックを求めた。本論では、協働的ライティングの背景と実際に導入されたプログラムの概要について述べ、学生からのフィードバックを精査し、最後にプログラムを改善するための提言を行う。

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Overview of collaborative writing

Research has shown that collaborative writing assignments and peer editing, as done in pairs or small groups, can have numerous affective benefits for the learner. Such tasks can enhance student interaction in the EFL classroom, lower the anxiety associated with completing tasks alone and raise students' self-confidence (Johnson & Johnson, 1998; Raimes, 1998; Reid & Powers, 1993; Rollinson, 2005). Collaborative writing tasks require that students utilize a range of social skills that can help foster a sense of accountability, cooperation and community (Murray, 1992; Savova & Donato, 1991; Villamil & De Guerrero, 1996). In addition, Reid (1993) suggests that collaborative writing efforts can increase motivation, risk-taking and tolerance among learners, and Foster (1998) notes that these tasks can maximize student interaction in the target language.

As for improvements in writing, the process of peer writing and editing can be effective in raising students' awareness of important organizational and syntactical elements that they otherwise might not notice on their own. As noted in Hansen and Lui (2005), and substantiated by others (Storch, 2005; Swain & Lapkin, 1998), peer editing leads to more meaningful revision, as these revisions are superior in vocabulary, organization and content. Studies by Gousseva-Goodwin (2000) and Storch (2005) further found that advanced ESL learners' collaborative essay grades were higher than those done independently and tended to have greater grammatical accuracy. One reason for

the higher grades may be that the collaborative process can lead to more productive feedback sessions (Murphy & Jacobs, 2000). Perhaps most importantly, the entire collaborative process can have the end result of producing writers who are more independent, “as they have attained the skills necessary to self-edit and revise their own writing” (Rollinson, 2005, p. 29). It can be inferred from the above that through collaborative writing, students can learn multiple language skills more effectively than by working alone.

Depending on the culture, however, some students may view peer editing skeptically (Nelson & Carson, 1998). They may have doubts about the reliability of non-native learners’ editing comments, preferring those of the instructor instead (Gousseva-Goodwin, 2000; Zhang, 1995), and thus wishing to finish their compositions individually. Therefore, collaborative writing tasks that are devised without careful planning can end up having poor, even ruinous consequences. Because English language learners “lack the language competence of native speakers” (Kroll, 2001, p. 228), peer editing needs to be “modeled, explicitly taught and controlled” (Reid, 1993, p. 157) throughout the whole process. Cote (2006) further points out that for students to benefit from collaborative writing tasks, the teacher must first establish an environment of mutual trust and respect among the members of the class. He advises teachers to ease students slowly into the process by revising a number of sample essays together as a class first, making extensive use of modeling, and holding class discussions on how to approach the collaborative writing and revision process. The collaborative writing process, then, needs to be closely monitored and supported by well-defined guidelines and clear editing checklists.

Keeping these points in mind, we designed a comprehensive step-by-step collaborative writing program for our university EFL writing classes. To attain a thorough assessment of the method, we felt it would be important to rely not only on our own observations about student progress but also the opinions of the students themselves, how they felt about the process, and how much they felt they learned from it. This paper presents our approach, as well as our evaluation of the program and its results; finally, we examine student feedback about the individual tasks they completed and their reaction to the process as a whole.

Participants

All classes were held at a private university in Kyoto. Of the four classes which participated in the program, the first two were year-long required advanced-level writing classes for freshmen, with about 35 students in each class. The first semester focused on paragraph writing, and the second semester focused on essay writing. The TOEFL scores for both these groups were high, with Group 1 ranging from 475 to 525 and Group 2 ranging from 520 to 620. Group 3 was a first-year low-intermediate required writing class focusing solely on paragraph writing; this class met for the second semester only. Their TOEFL scores were between 377 and 425. There were also 35 students in this class. Group 4 was a two-semester course composed of second-year students in an elective advanced English language course, part of which focused on essay writing and research. Their TOEFL scores were 550 and above. There were 20 students in this class.

Procedure

Choosing partners

The first major consideration in applying this collaborative writing method was whether to have students choose their own partners or be assigned one at random. According to Zhu (2001), the instructor could facilitate learning by preventing homogenous pairing. However, since our classes were composed solely of Japanese students, that was not a consideration for us. Though the instructor may have a better idea of which student would complement or be more compatible with another (Cote, 2006), allowing students to choose for themselves would foster the kind of cooperative learning that is one of the approach’s fundamental goals. Wanting to reflect student preferences as much as possible, we took a poll in class. The majority opted to choose their own partners and to change partners for each subsequent essay-writing cycle.

Steps of the procedure

To minimize any confusion, we provided students with an outline of the entire process beforehand. The steps of the procedure were as follows: (1) students chose their partners

themselves, and exchanged contact information to facilitate meeting outside of class; (2) in class, pairs brainstormed ideas about the target topic and organized the information into coherent groupings; (3) pairs arranged to meet outside of class to do research and information-gathering to support their paper; (4) in class, pairs did outlining, planning, and crafting of the first draft. Students were required to hand in a detailed outline before submitting the first draft; (5) the instructor handed back the outlines with pertinent comments; (6) work on the first draft commenced. Student A typed the first draft and completed a detailed checklist provided by the instructor. After that, the draft was sent as an email attachment to Student B, who was then responsible for editing the draft. The editing had to be done with different colored ink to highlight the revisions. After finishing this, Student B completed another checklist to make sure the work was proofread carefully. The detailed checklists were provided to help students in the writing and proofreading process. They helped students to eliminate simple grammar mistakes, spelling and typographical errors, as well as to ensure correct format, organization of ideas within each paragraph, and sound essay structure. The first draft was then submitted in class along with both checklists; (7) the instructor checked the drafts, pointing out structural and organization errors, and providing comments and suggestions; (8) work on the second draft commenced. Student A and B switched roles for this part. That is, this time Student B had to type the revision and Student A had to edit it. The second draft was then submitted; (9) students received a single grade based on their overall effort and the quality of their essay; (10) for the next writing assignment, if a student had been assigned the role of A, they then assumed the role of B and vice versa, to ensure fairness.

Writing tasks

In the first two groups, first semester, students were required to write paragraphs that focused on process, classification, cause and contrast. Group three, which was a lower level, worked on these types of paragraphs for the whole of one semester. For the second semester, the first two groups were then exposed to the essay

format, including the conventions of writing an introduction and a conclusion, and they were required to write classification, comparison/contrast and argumentative essays. The fourth group, composed of second-year students, were expected to write process, classification, cause/effect, comparison/contrast essays, as well as a problem-solution paper, which was a ten-page research effort.

Evaluation of the approach

Teacher evaluation

We found that students, having a goal-oriented focus and purpose for their oral interaction, were able to speak at length in the target language and stay engaged in their deliberations. The purposefulness of their interaction combined with personal control over the direction of their work seemed to provide motivation to continue speaking. For the higher level classes, not surprisingly, students needed few reminders to remain in the target language. The low-intermediate group needed more monitoring at first, but gradually got accustomed to the English-only rule, at least during class time. We noticed, particularly in the case of the low-intermediate students, that they were much more engaged and focused on the task when in pairs, as opposed to when instruction was given in a lock-step fashion.

As for the writing itself, the quality of the papers exceeded our expectations, and more than 70% of the first drafts submitted required no rewrites. These findings were also substantiated by Rollinson (2005) and Hansen and Lui (2005), who found that the quality of papers was higher when edited by or jointly written with a peer. We can attribute the proliferation of well-organized papers in part to the extensive collaborative outlining and planning that was done in class and checked before students could go on to the final product. Also, the step-by-step approach ensured that students had a sufficient number of chances to reconsider the organization of their ideas, and then suggest and reach agreement on needed revisions. The dual checklist approach likely contributed to the production of papers that had few formatting, typographical, spelling, and simple grammatical errors. If one student did not catch an error, the other student still had a chance to do so. These factors all combined to

make the approach, seen purely in terms of writing skills development, a resounding success.

Student feedback

At the end of the semester, students were given a questionnaire asking the following questions: (1) Do you think this was an effective way to write a paper? (2) What advantages did this process have? (3) What were some of the disadvantages?

The results from the first question indicate that the vast majority of students found the approach to be beneficial to their learning. Table 1 breaks down the general assessment provided by students.

Considering the advantages

In examining the positive comments provided by students, we noticed that they could be placed clearly into five discrete categories. The categories we identified from their comments were: (1) social skills development; (2) stress reduction and time-saving benefits; (3) motivational effects; (4) improvement in the content of their writing; and (5) gains in grammatical and structural proficiency.

As for social skills development, student remarks indicated that they developed a greater sense of responsibility through the collaborative effort and that it helped them to get along with others and gave them an opportunity to get to know their classmates better. In terms of stress reduction and time-saving benefits, students wrote that the pair-work approach gave them less pressure to do a good job, eased their burden as they could share the work load, and allowed them to save time because of the shared effort. The motivational benefits included the fact that because they were being given a single grade, it made them try harder, thus reflecting the role social responsibility played in their output. One

student even remarked that this process helped him stay awake in class.

Concerning actual improvements in the content of their writing, it was clear that the collaborative approach enabled some of them to create a richer body of content. One student noted that through the initial brainstorming tasks, their arguments became deeper and stronger because one student challenged the other to think more carefully about the topic at hand. Another student noted that the collaborative approach allowed them to develop the topic from different points of view, thus strengthening the quality of the content. By sharing ideas, another student remarked, their topic had more depth. Lastly, one student reported she was able to write more than usual.

Finally, it was clear gains had been made in structural and grammatical proficiency thanks to this approach. Among the comments was the remark that they could find mistakes more efficiently. Another wrote that it improved the accuracy of their paper. The approach helped another to organize and edit papers well. Lastly, through the process of revising each other’s drafts, they could learn words and phrases that they did not know beforehand.

Considering the disadvantages

In contrast, there were not as many negative comments made, but we were also able to place them into five distinct categories. The categories were: (1) increased stress; (2) logistical problems; (3) target language usage; (4) a conflict with personal learning style; and (5) issues of fairness.

The one comment about stress had a social component to it. One student commented that he felt pressure because he did not want to *hurt* his partner. As for logistics, one student felt it was hard arranging time outside of class, and another remarked that he did not have a computer at

Table 1. Students’ general assessment of the collaborative writing approach

N=105	Group 1	Group 2	Group 3	Group 4
Benefited	79%	92%	85%	76%
Didn’t benefit	9%	4%	15%	12%
Mixed reaction	12%	4%	0%	12%

home. In terms of target language usage, one student noted that they spoke too much Japanese while working in pairs. They were instructed to speak English only, but this rule obviously could not be enforced outside of class; this is perhaps an unavoidable pitfall of a homogenous class. In terms of personal learning styles, one student remarked that being a “solo player” was more enjoyable for him.

By far the largest number of the relatively few negative comments centered on the issue of fairness. Five separate comments all focused on this issue, which suggests that this would be an important consideration when designing collaborative tasks in the future. One student wrote he tended to do more work than his partner. Another felt it was unfair if one’s partner was just plain lazy. The difficulty of sharing tasks equally, and the responsibility for the first draft being greater than the second, were two more issues along the line of equity and fairness. Finally, at least one student did not approve of the fact that both students received the same grade even if one did more of the work.

Final considerations

It became clear to us from the student surveys that one aspect that needs to be considered anew is the issue of how students should be paired to ensure fairness in the amount of work done for each task. Though we at first reasoned that having students choose their own partners would be the best method of achieving equity and compatibility, it turns out that this method was flawed. Of all the points raised in the student feedback surveys, this was the one negative point that stood out with any consistency. From this, it can be assumed that it is important to keep changing partners with each new essay-writing cycle. Assessment surveys can be handed out and completed after each cycle, through which students have a chance to make confidential remarks about the process and whether they felt they worked harder than, less hard than, or about equally as hard as their partner on the assignment. Students can choose their own partners for the first task, but for each subsequent task, the teacher should use the assessment surveys in reshuffling partners. These post-writing surveys will work, then, to inform the next pairing.

From our own and our students’ evaluation of the entire procedure, we are able to conclude that the approach, if executed properly, can indeed have a positive impact on students’ writing, as well as oral interaction in the target language. Student feedback informed us that the logistics of arranging to work on tasks together outside of class, which we feared would be perceived as troublesome, was for the most part not an issue. As it turned out, students had mostly a positive attitude to this approach and seemed to think working with a partner was beneficial in the writing process. Their responses seem to contradict the notion that students would be reluctant to offer constructive criticism to their peers in the editing process or would reject criticism by their peers. Their agreeable responses, in fact, are predicted by Villamil and De Guerrero (1996), who claim “it is in the exchange of ideas during interaction, where both peers extend and receive help, that they are able to advance their knowledge” (as cited in Cote, 2006, pp. 7-8). Finally, Ellis (1997) asserts that noticing, comparing and integrating are key elements in facilitating second language development. The peer writing approach clearly provided these elements for students as seen in their essays, which had richer content, were more carefully organized, and contained fewer simple and careless errors.

In conclusion, collaborative writing is a non-threatening approach for students that results in purposeful usage of the target language across skills and demonstrable improvements in writing. By providing methodical guidelines and lending support, the teacher can execute this approach without major logistical drawbacks. It is important to give students a chance to assess the method, as through careful analysis of student feedback, the instructor can ascertain those features of the process that were not beneficial and make necessary modifications in the program’s design.

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