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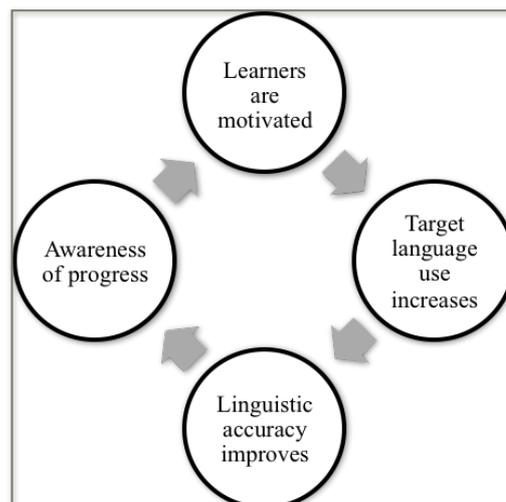
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Making a case for collaborative writing in the L2 classroom

by Susanna Wickes (Emerald Cultural Institute)

In the L2 classroom, learners working together to practise and develop their spoken language skills is a frequent and expected occurrence. Writing, however, is often still thought of – and taught – as a quiet, solitary activity. For this reason it is not surprising that many learners and teachers consider writing to be perhaps the most tiresome of the four skills. Through my teaching, in Ireland and abroad, I have strived to change this attitude by making the practice of writing a collaborative endeavour. In this article I share my observations and argue that the process of writing in pairs or groups – and taking the focus off speaking altogether – can generate excellent results in both fluency and accuracy in the target language, while simultaneously fostering a lively classroom environment and motivated learners.



Collaborative writing maximises target language communication

Pic by author

Writing as a group activity

One thing that sets collaborative writing apart from speaking-focused group activities is the shared goal that it involves. During a typical oral task such as comparing a set of pictures, the ephemeral nature of speech can easily tempt students to take shortcuts (or revert to their L1 in monolingual contexts), but when learners are asked to work in pairs or groups to produce a single piece of writing, they focus on a concrete goal, a tangible result of their efforts which characteristically requires extensive use of the target language.

Stahl (cited in Storch, 2013, p.3) defines collaborative writing as an activity involving two interconnected components: “a shared and negotiated decision making process and a shared responsibility for the production of a single text”. While the text is unquestionably important as the physical, assessable evidence of a group’s collaboration, it is crucial to note that the decision making process that takes place during writing can have a profound effect on their development as learners. Storch calls this “collective cognition” (Ibid.), a fundamental understanding which emerges “when two or more people reach insights that neither could have reached alone, and that cannot be traced back to one individual’s contribution”. In this way, it is clear that collaborative writing offers far more to learners than merely an opportunity to exercise writing skills.

Collaborative writing fosters motivation

As many students and teachers know, writing texts in a classroom can equate with tedium, and it can be a gruelling process when this writing is done in a foreign language. For these reasons it is vital to ensure that writing is an enjoyable, meaningful experience and a productive use of classroom time. A key way to achieve this is by abandoning the notion of “teacher as audience” (Rosen, cited in Barnes, 1992, p.92):

In school, it is almost always the teacher who initiates the writing and who does so by defining a writing task with more or less explicitness. Not only does he [sic] define that task but also nominates himself as audience ... [and] the sole arbiter, appraiser, grader and judge of the performance.

The result of this is that the learner has little interest or sense of responsibility in what he or she writes, and often does the bare minimum to meet the teacher’s demands (Ibid.). The minimal incentive to expend more effort than is necessary generally results in low quality written work and very little learning. A simple remedy for this problem, then, is to provide learners with a ‘real’ audience and consequently a ‘real’ reason for writing. Publishing jointly produced student work by creating class newsletters or school magazines, for example, can be an incredible motivator, especially when learners are given the freedom to choose and brainstorm topics together. Moreover, since technology is now such an integral part of life, it makes sense that learners’ digital literacy be exploited for its educational potential. Groups of learners could thus produce blogs, Wikis, or even use websites like FlipSnack.com and Lulu.com to publish online magazines and ebooks free of charge. Using technology and creating a ‘real’ product that learners are proud of is extremely motivating, and encourages teamwork and maximum effort into producing written work that is imaginative and of high quality.

‘Intrinsic’ motivation is widely accepted as optimal and as – arguably – the only way to truly progress in learning. According to Ushioda (1996, p.20), if learners are able to derive pleasure and satisfaction from their learning then they will continue to do so for the internal rewards they gain, which in turn reduces the teacher’s need to nag or scold. She makes a case for collaborative learning as an ideal psychological environment for intrinsic motivation to be cultivated: [I]t explicitly puts the learning initiatives and control of the learning process in the hands of the students themselves, by harnessing their sense of peer-group solidarity and shared responsibility, and minimizing their perception of external direction and control from the teacher (Ushioda, 1996, p.46).

Thus, when what learners are working on is meaningful and fun, the experience of writing ceases to be boring and the classroom becomes a place of inspiration and activity.

Collaborative writing maximises target language communication

Particularly in classroom environments where learners share an L1, speaking-focused communication activities can often feel artificial and contrived. However, when learners are working together to construct an English text, it is inevitable that they engage in authentic communication in the target language: they need to speak English to produce English writing. This is hugely beneficial for shy or anxious speakers who may feel 'on the spot' during oral tasks, as removing the pressure to speak English means learners can relax into their roles as writers and the speech that is unconsciously produced as the group members discuss their work is consequently stress-free.

Through writing collaboratively, students learn to 'think out loud' in English, a concept Barnes refers to as "exploratory talk" (1992, p.28). This is crucial for developing fluency in the target language since it is a means for learners to "talk [their] way into the problem [...] monitor[ing] thought and reshap[ing] it" (Ibid.). Like this, it is possible for groups of learners to arrive at new conclusions which they would not have been able to do when working independently, and by continually verbalising their ideas and suggestions their confidence in the target language grows. Further, since the focus is on producing text rather than speech, the fluency-hindering worry of speaking 'correctly' is significantly reduced.

Collaborative writing improves linguistic accuracy

When two or more learners collaborate on the same text, they are able to pool their linguistic knowledge in order to help and learn from each other. This not only allows for a wider range of vocabulary and structures in the text, but also means that the texts produced are generally more accurate since learners are able to discuss and share their knowledge as they

write. This ongoing dialogue also encourages learners to notice each other's errors more readily and to become more aware of making mistakes themselves. When learners work together and pool their knowledge, they not only increase their chances of solving linguistic problems, but they also begin to realise their self-sufficiency, depending less on the teacher for support.

Peer feedback and correction are integral features of the collaborative writing process. When learners are asked to look for mistakes in their own texts, and then in their peers', they are of course not able to find every error, nor can they accurately correct each one, but over time as they get used to this process they learn to quickly notice 'silly' mistakes – such as omitting the 3rd person singular 's' – and make them far more infrequently. By training learners to be responsible for the whole writing process from initial brainstorm to final draft, the experience becomes more meaningful and results in a more profound level of learning.

“One thing that sets collaborative writing apart from speaking-focused group activities is the shared goal that it involves.

These things are interconnected

We have seen that through writing collaboratively learners can become more motivated, can maximise their use of the target language and can produce more accurate work. It should be clear by now that these concepts are significantly interrelated, forming a cyclical process as shown above. When learners are allowed to collaborate towards a common goal (on a topic they have chosen themselves with a 'real' audience), they are eager to get to work, and the more involved they become in the process, the more

exploratory talk is generated. Through working together and sharing their knowledge, and later through peer feedback, they are able to construct texts of high linguistic quality. Finally, becoming aware of their progression in the target language fosters intrinsic motivation, which gives them the confidence to take more risks with their language and speak more. Once this cycle is established, the teacher's role becomes less teacher-like; learners have developed the autonomy to work by themselves, and the teacher only needs to monitor and offer guidance as required.

Some considerations

Despite the benefits of collaborative writing, teachers must be conscious of learners' attitudes towards writing with others and be open to the possibility that some learners may prefer to work alone (Storch, 2013, p.165). For such students, individual written assignments could be completed outside the classroom as homework, with peer- and teacher feedback given later. Additionally, working in pairs or groups can be frustrating for learners if roles, duties and objectives are poorly defined, so care must be taken to ensure responsibility is divided equally within groups, especially when learners are still getting used to working collaboratively. In this way, peers can learn to work interdependently and systems can be introduced to help weaker students learn from stronger ones.

This article has discussed the practice of collaborative writing as a learning process and the ways in which this process can benefit learners. I have argued that we should transform not only the way that writing is taught in L2 classrooms but also reconsider the reasons why it is taught. Firstly, students should not be writing essays and other texts just for the sake of it (though regular practice is important to develop the proficiency required for examinations and so forth), and secondly, we should stop thinking of writing and speaking as completely separate disciplines when the two can be integrated. For learners of English, writing need not be a traditional activity completed laboriously in solitude, rather teachers should fully exploit the writing process and all the rewards it brings to learners, including cognitive development, more confident, accurate oral skills, creativity and learner autonomy. Improved writing ability is only a small component.