Collaborative Writing in L2 Classrooms

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Preface

My interest in collaborative writing arose unintentionally when I was collecting data for my PhD dissertation. The original purpose of the PhD project was to investigate how second language (L2) learners, and in my context ESL learners, make decisions regarding grammar, and what knowledge sources they draw on, if any. Instead of using think-aloud protocols, a difficult procedure especially for second language learners, I decided to collect data by having students work in pairs on a range of tasks. Furthermore, rather than just using grammar-focused tasks, such as a passage editing task, I decided to also use a short composition task. Over the semester, as I listened and observed my students working in pairs on these tasks, I became aware that the learners' interactions while writing in pairs, the relationships they formed and the outcomes of their joint activity were more fascinating areas for research than the original quest. The joint composition seemed to elicit engagement with ideas as well as language choice. It also elicited quite robust debates (some quite loud). Clearly, there was a notion of text ownership at play, not present when students complete editing tasks based on texts that they did not compose.

When I consulted published work on collaborative writing activities, I found that most of the work was by composition scholars, writing on the merits of collaborative writing for the development of good writing skills (e.g. Bruffee, 1984; Elbow & Belanoff, 1989) that could also prepare students for the kind of writing they are likely to encounter in the workplace (Ede & Lunsford, 1990). These scholars were writing about learners developing advanced writing skills in their first language (L1). However, as an ESL teacher, my interest was also in whether collaborative writing provides a site for second language learning. That is, I was interested in whether collaborative writing could provide language learners with opportunities not only to learn how to compose well-structured texts in the L2, but also opportunities to learn and consolidate knowledge about L2 grammatical structures and

vocabulary. In the literature on L2 learning, there were certainly studies about the nature and benefits of small group and pair work, but most of these studies employed oral tasks (e.g. information gap tasks) rather than writing tasks (e.g. Pica, 1994, 1996; Polio & Gass, 1998).

In my PhD dissertation (published as a monograph in 2009) I reported on the nature of the relationships learners formed when working in pairs on writing and grammar tasks. My study found that although collaboration can result in language learning, not all pairs form collaborative relationships and that some relationships are not conducive to learning. My subsequent research projects in ESL as well as EFL contexts (my own as well as that of PhD students I supervised) aimed to shed further light on the nature of such joint writing activities and on factors that may promote or impede collaboration.

Throughout this journey of investigating collaborative writing activities in L2 classes, I was informed by the writing of a number of L2 scholars. However, it was (and continues to be) the work of Professor Merrill Swain that was particularly informative and that played a major role in shaping my thinking. Her explanation of cognitive processes and affective states enriched my own understanding of the potential benefits of collaborative writing for L2 learning.

Acknowledgments

Thanks…

The first seed to write a book on collaborative writing was planted in my head by my colleague from New Zealand John Bitchener. I owe him and my colleagues at the University of Melbourne, particularly Jo Tapper, Celia Thompson, Janne Morton and Tim McNamara, my heartfelt gratitude for their continuous encouragement and moral support. I want to thank Jo in particular for her careful proofreading of the manuscript. I also owe much to my students: students in the ESL classes that I taught and who agreed to participate in many of my studies on collaborative writing, and graduate students whose research helped to shed further light on collaboration in different L2 contexts. Finally, I would like to thank my family, and particularly my husband Paul, for his love and support, and for never wavering in his belief that this book project was achievable.

The book is dedicated to the next generation of collaborative writers in my family: my sons Amir and Edan Nissen and my nieces Tia and Corenne Storch.

1 Introduction

The Aims of the Book

Writing is generally perceived as a solitary, individual activity. Writing in pairs or small groups is a novel activity and there are reported observations of teachers' reluctance to implement such activities (e.g. McDonough, 2004). Some of this reluctance may stem from the perception of writing as an individual act as well as from assessment practices that tend to measure individual achievement. It may also stem from a lack of awareness of the potential benefits of collaborative writing for language learning or a lack of knowledge of how best to implement such writing activities. However, collaborative writing is likely to increase given developments in Web 2.0 technology, and particularly the use of wikis and Google Docs – new collaborative writing platforms. Ortega (2009a) argues that in our technologically driven world, the inclusion of computer mediated activities in language classes is no longer a choice but an imperative. Research on the use of wikis in second language classes suggests that, as in the case of face-to-face collaborative writing, online collaborative writing activities need to be carefully designed.

Thus this book has two overarching goals. The first goal is to encourage language teachers to consider implementing collaborative writing activities in their classes. The book attempts to provide a theoretical, pedagogical and empirical rationale for the use of collaborative writing activities in second language (L2) classes as well as some guidelines about how to best implement such activities in both face-to-face and online modes. The second goal is to encourage researchers to continue investigating collaborative writing activities. The book critically reviews the available body of research on collaborative writing and identifies future research directions. It should be noted at the outset that throughout the book the term second language (L2) is used as an umbrella term to refer to both second and foreign languages,

although I acknowledge that there are important differences between second and foreign language contexts in terms of exposure to the target language and learners' need and motivation to write in the target language (see Manchón, 2011a).

What Does Collaborative Writing Mean?

Let me begin by defining collaboration, the central term in this book. Collaboration means the sharing of labour (co-labour) and thus collaborative writing, in its broadest sense, means the co-authoring of a text by two or more writers. Some writing scholars (e.g. Bruffee, 1984; Harris, 1994) assert that all writing is collaborative to some extent. Individual writers composing with a certain reader in mind or seeking assistance from others at some stage of their writing can be said to engage in collaborative writing. Under such a broad definition, peer editing or peer planning would also qualify as collaborative writing.

An alternative view of collaborative writing is offered by Ede and Lunsford (1990). The authors identify three distinguishing features of collaborative writing: (1) substantive interaction in all stages of the writing process; (2) shared decision-making power over and responsibility for the text produced; and (3) the production of a single written document. From this perspective, collaborative writing is a distinct process and product. The process is one where participants work together and interact throughout the writing process, contributing to the planning, generation of ideas, deliberations about the text structure, editing and revision. This process is not merely an exchange of ideas but negotiations which often arise as a result of a struggle to create a shared understanding and shared expressions (Schrage, 1994). The product of the collaborative writing process is the jointly produced and shared text, a text that cannot easily be reduced to the separate input of individuals (Stahl, 2006). As such the text produced is also jointly owned, with all writers sharing in the ownership of the text produced.

On the basis of this definition, peer planning or peer editing (often referred to as peer response) do not qualify as collaborative writing because the interaction occurs only at one stage of the writing process (planning or editing) and the process of writing remains a private act. More importantly, ownership of the text produced rests with the individual writer rather than being jointly owned. Hirvela (2007) uses the term 'collaborative approaches to writing' to describe peer planning or peer editing, rather than 'collaborative writing'. Collaborative writing also excludes editing tasks where the learners are asked to amend a text that they did not compose, or a

text-reconstruction task where learners have to reconstruct a text based on given content words (see Storch, 1998a, 2001a).

Although I have previously referred to such tasks as collaborative writing tasks, on reflection I think that these kinds of grammar-focused tasks, where learners are not involved in constructing a text, should be labelled collaborative editing or reconstruction tasks rather than collaborative writing tasks.

Similarly, group projects, a frequent form of assessment at universities (Leki, 2001; Strauss & U, 2007) which are said to emulate the kind of writing prevalent in the workplace (Ede & Lunsford, 1990; Lay & Karis, 1991; Mirel & Spilka, 2002), do not necessarily qualify as collaborative writing activities. Here Dillenbourg *et al.*'s (1996) distinction between cooperation and collaboration is useful. Whereas cooperation involves the division of labour between individuals in order to complete a task, collaboration involves individuals in a coordinated effort to complete a task together. Research (e.g. Ede & Lunsford, 1990; Lay & Karis, 1991; Leki, 2001) has shown that in group projects, responsibilities are often divided, either by negotiation or by an assigned group leader, with each member of the group having a defined role. These roles may include the drafting of one discrete section or the editing of the entire document once it has been completed. Thus, what such an activity describes is cooperative writing (Dillenbourg *et al.*, 1996), a form of co-authoring which involves the production of 'a singular text by multiple authors' (Ede & Lunsford, 1990). In collaborative writing, roles and contributions to text creation are not split up. Instead, there is mutual engagement and a coordinated effort by all members of the group or pair throughout the composing process.

Thus, in this monograph, collaborative writing describes an activity where there is a shared and negotiated decision making process and a shared responsibility for the production of a single text. In the L2 class, the text produced may be a composition or a report, but can also include more language-focused tasks such as a dictogloss, where students work in small groups or pairs to reconstruct a text based on notes taken from a dictated text (Wajnryb, 1990). However, it excludes grammar exercises such as joint editing, cloze or text reconstruction. In such tasks, students do not compose a text, rather they 'reprocess language previously produced by others' (Manchón, 2011b: 76). Nevertheless, I will refer to studies reporting on learners completing such grammar tasks in pairs as their findings are of relevance to a discussion of collaborative writing as a site for language learning.

It should be noted that the outcome of a collaborative writing activity is not just the jointly produced text. It is also collective cognition, emerging when two or more people reach insights that neither could have reached alone, and that cannot be traced back to one individual's contribution

(Stahl, 2006). In the context of L2 learning, it is cognition related to language learning, including, for example, learning new vocabulary, improved ways of expressing ideas, gaining a greater understanding of certain grammatical conventions or greater control over the use of a particular grammatical structure.

Outline of the Book

Chapter 2 presents the theoretical and pedagogical rationale for the use of collaborative writing tasks in L2 classes. The chapter also includes a brief review of collaborative writing in first language (L1) composition literature, where collaborative writing is relatively well established. However, as noted above, L1 scholars promote collaborative writing as a vehicle for developing good writing skills. In L2 contexts, the rationale for collaborative writing is generally to develop language skills. Manchón (2011b) distinguishes between using writing activities as the means to develop writing skills; that is, learning to write (LW) and activities which use writing to learn language (WLL). Using this distinction, the rationale for collaborative writing in L1 is predominantly couched in terms of learning to write (LW); in L2 it is writing to learn language (WLL).

Chapter 3 reviews empirical research on collaborative L2 writing showing that such tasks provide learners with language learning and language practice opportunities. It presents excerpts from a range of studies on collaborative writing showing what learners focus on when they deliberate about language, and how they use language in their deliberations. The chapter also discusses extensively the unit of analysis used in this research, the language-related episode (LRE).

Chapter 4 discusses the factors that may impact on the number and quality of the LREs found in the talk of learners when they write together. Here I include reference to studies where the learners completed grammar-focused tasks in pairs. The factors discussed include the type of task, the learners' L2 proficiency and the relationships they form. Chapter 5 reviews the relatively small body of research investigating the outcomes of collaborative writing activities. The outcomes considered are in terms of the nature of the co-authored text and evidence of longer term language learning.

As mentioned previously, language teachers may hold some reservations about using collaborative writing tasks for language practice or assessment purposes. Learners have also been observed to be reluctant to participate in collaborative writing activities. Chapter 6 discusses the language learning beliefs and concerns that underpin teachers' and students' attitudes towards

group and pair work in general, and by implication to collaborative writing tasks. The chapter then presents the findings of a relatively small number of studies which have elicited learners' evaluations of collaborative writing once they had experienced such activities.

Whereas the previous chapters focused mainly on face-to-face collaborative writing activities, Chapter 7 focuses on collaborative writing that is computer mediated. It discusses briefly research on collaborative writing using text-based online communication, but the main focus of this chapter is on wikis, the new collaborative writing platforms. Wikis have a number of features which facilitate the creation of collaborative texts by multiple authors. The chapter describes these features and then reviews the main strands of research on wiki collaborative writing in both L1 and L2 contexts.

Chapter 8 concludes with a summary of the main themes covered in the book, reiterating the main reasons for implementing collaborative writing activities, both in face-to-face and online modes. It then identifies the decisions that L2 instructors need to make before implementing collaborative writing activities in their classes and the challenges they may face. Some suggestions are put forward for how such writing activities could be implemented in order to maximise the language learning opportunities they offer. Throughout the book, I note the dearth of research on a number of aspects related to collaborative writing. The final section of the chapter thus identifies future research directions.

2 Theoretical and Pedagogical Rationale for Collaborative L2 Writing

Introduction

Collaborative writing involves learners interacting in pairs or small groups on a writing task. Thus the two key components in collaborative writing are verbal interaction and writing. Verbal interaction has been identified as fundamental in both cognitive and sociocognitive theories of second language (L2) learning. The act of writing also has language learning potentials. The cognitive processes that occur in the production of oral language also occur in the production of written language and in fact some research suggests that writing may be superior to speaking as a site for L2 learning.

The first section of this chapter discusses the importance of interaction from both theoretical perspectives. It describes the evolution of Long's (1983, 1985, 1996) interaction hypothesis and Swain's (1985, 1993, 1995) output hypothesis, leading cognitive theories of second language acquisition (SLA). It then presents arguments and some research evidence which suggest that tasks which combine speaking and writing may be better than speaking only tasks in promoting interaction with a focus on language. A discussion of sociocognitive perspectives, and in particular Vygotsky's (1978, 1981) sociocultural theory of mind, follows. Vygotsky's sociocultural theory is, strictly speaking, not a theory of second language learning, but rather a psychological theory that explains the development of complex human cognitive abilities. The ability to acquire a second language is one such cognitive ability.