



Exploring the relationships among student preferences, prewriting tasks, and text quality in an EAP context



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ABSTRACT

Despite their prevalence in second language (L2) writing classrooms, prewriting discussions have not been widely investigated in terms of their relationship to students' written texts. Furthermore, students' preferences for individual or collaborative work have not been considered in terms of their potential impact on the quality of either prewriting tasks or written texts. The current study investigates the relationships among students' preferences for collaboration, the format of prewriting tasks (collaborative or individual) and student text quality in an English for Academic Purposes (EAP) course ($N = 21$). The students carried out three collaborative and three individual prewriting tasks, submitted six written texts, and completed a questionnaire about their learning preferences. Analysis of two focal participants with divergent preferences for collaboration revealed that the collaboratively-oriented student reflected more on content during the collaborative discussions than the individually-oriented student. However, the individually-oriented students did not engage in more reflection during individual prewriting tasks. In addition, the texts both students produced after collaborative prewriting discussions received higher ratings than the texts they wrote after individual prewriting tasks. The findings suggest that collaborative prewriting may be beneficial for text quality, even for students who prefer to work individually.

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1. Introduction

Collaborative writing activities have received increased attention in second language (L2) writing research in recent years fueled by their sound theoretical basis and a body of empirical research that supports their effectiveness at promoting writing development (see [Storch, 2013](#) for a recent overview). From the perspective of sociocultural theory, collaborative writing tasks can help learners perform beyond their individual abilities through the help of an expert who scaffolds their performance ([Vygotsky, 1978](#)). Although the expert is often conceived of as the instructor, researchers have argued that peers can take on the role of expert and scaffold each other when co-constructing written texts in English. Empirical studies have found that co-constructed texts are linguistically more accurate, more complex, and contain more relevant ideas for a given assignment than the texts written by individual students ([Storch, 2005](#); [Storch & Wigglesworth, 2007](#); [Wigglesworth & Storch, 2009, 2012](#)).

Despite these benefits of collaborative writing, instructors may be reluctant to implement collaborative writing tasks due to the fact that pairs require up to twice the amount of time to complete the same writing task compared to individuals

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(Storch, 2005). In many writing courses, especially in an English for Academic Purposes (EAP) context in tertiary educational settings, instructors simply do not have sufficient instructional hours to set aside class time for collaborative writing. Another potential problem with the use of collaborative writing tasks in EAP contexts concerns the reliability, validity and fairness of group assessment (Kagan, 1995). In other words, it is difficult for instructors to determine how and how much each individual student contributed to a collaborative writing task (Johnston & Miles, 2004; Strauss, 2007). This is an important concern in EAP settings where course grades count towards students' degrees and may be integrated into their grade point averages in the North American system, for example. Because this is often not the case in pre-university intensive English programs, concerns with the assessment of collaborative writing tasks may be less important in those contexts.

An alternative activity that may harness some of the benefits of working collaboratively but simultaneously addresses EAP instructors' assessment concerns is collaborative prewriting tasks. Little L2 writing research has focused on the effect of planning on writing performance, and the few studies that have done so have investigated individual rather than collaborative planning (Ellis & Yuan, 2004; Kroll, 1990; Ojima, 2006). A few studies, however, have investigated collaborative planning in L1 and L2 writing by comparing different prewriting conditions. These studies found that student-led discussions in L1 writing classrooms led to better text comprehension (Sweigart, 1991), but in L2 contexts there were no advantages for student-led discussions compared to teacher-led discussions or no prewriting activities (Shi, 1998). Other studies have explored the nature of collaborative prewriting discussions and their impact on individually-written texts in L1 (Higgins, Flower, & Petraglia, 1992) and L2 writing classrooms (Neumann & McDonough, 2014). Both studies found that structured prewriting tasks encourage students to engage with others' ideas and elicit reflective comments about the content and organization of texts. However, both studies found a tenuous link between the quality of the collaborative prewriting discussion and the quality of the individually produced texts.

Another important consideration in the use of prewriting tasks is whether EAP students have a preference for individual or collaborative work. This preference for individual or group work is one of the dimensions identified in measures of students learning style preference (e.g., Dunn, Dunn, & Price, 1975, 1991; Griffiths, 2012; Oxford, 1993 in Reid, 1995; Reid, 1984 in Reid, 1995). Although research on learning style preference has not identified a "best" learning style or uncovered clear links between learning style preferences and success (e.g., Bailey, Onwuegbuzie, & Daley, 2000; Dörnyei, 2005; Ellis, 1994; Griffiths, 2012), instructors need to consider that students in a certain course will have a variety of learning styles (Dörnyei, 2005; Nel, 2008; Zhou, 2011). Both Griffiths (2012) and Nel (2008) argue that teachers cannot ignore students' preferences; instead, students should be given the opportunity to work in a style that suits their individual preferences (Griffiths, 2012; Kinsella, 1995; Nel, 2008; Pritchard, 2009). Some L2 writing researchers (e.g., Storch, 2002a; Watanabe & Swain, 2007) agree with this point of view and reason that students should be allowed to work according to their preference and choose whether they would like to work with a partner or alone, although the majority of students feels generally positive about collaborating with their peers on a writing task (Elola & Oskoz, 2010; Fernández Dobao, 2012; Fernández Dobao & Blum, 2013; Shehadeh, 2011; Storch, 2005). Nevertheless, most studies investigating collaborative tasks oblige all students in the study to work collaboratively (e.g., Fernández Dobao, 2012; Fernández Dobao & Blum, 2013; Neumann & McDonough, 2014; Shehadeh, 2011; Storch, 2008; Wigglesworth & Storch, 2009), and only some researchers allow students to choose whether they prefer to work collaboratively or individually according to their preference (e.g., Storch, 2005, 2007; Storch & Wigglesworth, 2007).

In sum, whereas previous research has found that students in general have positive attitudes towards collaborative tasks, there is also evidence that some students prefer to work alone when given the choice (Storch, 2005, 2007; Storch & Wigglesworth, 2007). This raises the question as to whether text quality is impacted by the format of prewriting discussions. It is possible that students write more effective texts when their preference for individual or collaborative prewriting tasks is satisfied. Contributing to this area of investigation, the current study addresses the following research questions:

1. Does student preference for collaborative or individual work impact on their reflection on content during prewriting tasks?
2. Does student preference for collaborative or individual prewriting tasks impact the quality of their written texts?

We expected that students would engage in more evaluation when the type of prewriting task matched their preference for collaborative or individual work, and that text quality would be higher when students carried out prewriting tasks that complemented their preference for collaborative or individual work. In order to address these questions in depth, we adopted a descriptive approach involving two focal students in an EAP class.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

The focal participants were two international students who were enrolled in a six-credit, intensive EAP writing course (two 2¼-hour classes per week for 13 weeks) taught by the first researcher. The course focuses on helping students develop the language skills necessary to function well in an academic context through an integrated program of grammar, vocabulary, reading and writing. Each of the eleven units in the course begins with a reading text that contextualizes the target vocabulary followed by the review of certain grammatical structures and finishes with a theme-based writing task. Students often work in pairs or small groups to discuss reading texts and compare answers to grammar or vocabulary exercises. All students in this

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