Exploring student interaction during collaborative prewriting discussions and its relationship to L2 writing

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Abstract

In second language (L2) writing classrooms, prewriting discussions are one of the most commonly used collaborative activities (Fernández Dobao, 2012; Storch, 2005), yet there has been little research about their relationship to students' written texts. Recent L2 writing research has examined the textual features of co-constructed texts (e.g., Elola & Oskoz, 2010; Kuiken & Vedder, 2002; Storch & Wigglesworth, 2007), whereas the pretask planning literature has focused mainly on the effect of individual planning (e.g., Ellis & Yuan, 2004; Kroll, 1990; Ojima, 2006). The current study investigates the relationship between interaction during collaborative prewriting tasks and students' written texts in an English for academic purposes (EAP) course. The findings indicate that structured collaborative prewriting tasks elicited student talk about content and organization, but there is only a moderate relationships between these prewriting discussions and the students' written texts. Implications for the use of collaborative prewriting discussions in EAP contexts are discussed.

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With the advent of communicative language teaching, collaborative learning has assumed an important role in the second language (L2) classroom, with collaborative activities seen as one of the key characteristics of communicative L2 teaching. The inclusion of collaborative activities in the L2 classroom has been justified through reference to sociocultural theory, in particular Vygotsky's (1978) pioneering claims that speech is an essential part of human cognitive development, and that language and cognitive skills develop through interaction with others and the physical world. Interaction plays an essential role in knowledge-building by creating opportunities for learners to elicit help from experts or simply articulate steps in the problem-solving process through internal or external speech. While it was originally thought that these forms of scaffolding could only be provided by an expert through, for example, guided participation (Rogoff, 1990), numerous studies have shown that learners scaffold each other during collaborative activities in a wide variety of L2 contexts (Abadikhah & Mosleh, 2011; Alegría de la Colina & García Mayo, 2007; Donato, 1988, 1994a, 1994b; García Mayo, 2002; Ismail & Samad, 2010; Kim, 2008, 2009; Leeser, 2004; Suzuki & Itagaki, 2007; Swain & Lapkin, 2001; Watanabe & Swain, 2007, 2008).

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L2 writing researchers have focused more narrowly on the types of scaffolding that occur when learners collaborate to co-construct written texts (DiCamilla & Anton, 1997; Fernández Dobao, 2012; Gutiérrez, 2008; Kuiken & Vedder, 2002, 2005). For example, in a series of studies that investigated the use of collaborative writing in English as a second language (ESL) classrooms, Storch and Wigglesworth reported that peers routinely scaffold each other, especially when collaborative dynamics allow for the transfer of knowledge among group members (Storch, 2002a, 2002b, 2005; Storch & Wigglesworth, 2007; Wigglesworth & Storch, 2009, 2012). In order to better understand the nature of collective scaffolding, learner interaction during collaborative writing activities in both face-to-face and online environments has been studied extensively. The analysis has largely focused on the occurrence of language-related episodes (LREs), which have been defined as ''any part of a dialogue where the students talk about the language they are producing, question their language use, or correct themselves or others'' (Swain & Lapkin, 1998, p. 328). Fewer collaborative writing studies have documented how learners discuss other elements of written texts, such as their content or organization (Elola & Oskoz, 2010; Storch, 2005).

Besides examining the nature of collaborative dialogue, researchers have also analyzed co-constructed written texts, at varying stages of the collaborative writing process, in order to determine the benefits of collaborative as opposed to individual writing. These studies have found that collaboration has a positive impact on linguistic accuracy (Fernández Dobao, 2012; Storch, 2005; Storch & Wigglesworth, 2007; Wigglesworth & Storch, 2009). Storch (2005) found that collaboratively produced texts are not only linguistically more accurate and complex but also better in terms of content: When students wrote a text in pairs, the theses of their texts were more appropriate, and their texts included fewer unnecessary details. Elola and Oskoz (2010) reported that pairs planned more carefully before beginning to write, whereas individuals worked on the structure of the texts throughout the writing process. The authors, however, did not examine whether the different processes had an impact on the quality of texts in terms of organization.

Thus, research on collaborative writing has shown that learners discuss language, content, and organization, and their interaction is positively associated with text quality. This leads to the question as to why these types of activities are not commonly used in L2 writing classrooms. There are at least two practical concerns that instructors, especially at the tertiary level, may have in relation to these activities: group assessment and time constraints. Group assessment can take multiple forms (Roberts, 2006), but at the university level most commonly groups are assessed as a whole (Wigglesworth & Storch, 2009). For this reason, Kagan (1995) clearly finds group marks inappropriate because they inadequately capture the individual group members' capabilities and raise issues in terms of fairness, reliability, and meaningfulness of these types of assessments. Strauss and U (2007) also discovered various challenges faced by instructors in the implementation of group assessments, which may have a negative impact on how fair group assessment can be. Simply put, teachers have difficulty determining what each individual learner contributed to a collaborative text. The second constraint relates to the time required for learners to complete collaborative writing assignments during class. As Storch (2005) reported, when completing the same writing task, pairs spent more time producing a text collaboratively than individuals working alone. In a university writing class, time is often at a premium, and instructors may feel they simply do not have the extra time that is necessary for students to write collaboratively, especially when producing longer texts.

In order to overcome these constraints, researchers have explored whether using collaborative prewriting discussions achieves similar benefits as collaborative writing. Along with peer review, prewriting discussions are one of the most common collaborative activities in the L2 writing classroom (Fernández Dobao, 2012; Storch, 2005). Less is known, however, about the nature of learner interaction during prewriting discussions or its relationship to text quality. Pretask planning research has largely examined individual tasks, rather than collaborative activities, and has investigated the impact of planning on oral performance (e.g., Ellis, 2009; Foster & Skehan, 1996; Ortega, 1999; Skehan & Foster, 2001; Wigglesworth, 1997). Few studies have investigated planning in L2 writing, and most explored the effect of individual planning, rather than collaborative planning, on writing (Ellis & Yuan, 2004; Kroll, 1990; Manchón & Roca de Larios, 2007; Ojima, 2006).

Some insight into the potential benefits of collaborative prewriting discussions is provided by Higgins, Flower, and Petraglia (1992), who examined whether group planning sessions help students in first language (L1) writing classes evaluate their ideas and create writing plans. They found that collaboration allowed students to reflect on their ideas, and this reflection positively contributed to the quality of their writing plans. However, the occurrence of reflection depended on the roles that the listeners assumed when the writers were explaining their plans (supportive listener or critic). Only if listeners challenged the writers to explain their ideas in more depth or evaluate their ideas did both partners—listener and writer—engage in reflection. Their finding parallels those of the LRE studies, which found that