

# Effects and student perceptions of collaborative writing in L2

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## Abstract

This study investigated the effectiveness and students' perceptions of collaborative writing (CW) in second language (L2). The study involved 38 first year students in two intact classes at a large university in the UAE (United Arab Emirates). One class consisted of 18 students and was considered the experimental group, and the second consisted of 20 students and was considered the control group. In the control group, writing tasks were carried out by students individually; in the experimental group, these tasks were carried out in pairs. The study lasted 16 weeks and involved a pre- and post-test. Writing quality was determined by a holistic rating procedure that included content, organization, grammar, vocabulary, and mechanics. Results of the study showed that CW had an overall significant effect on students' L2 writing; however, this effect varied from one writing skill area to another. Specifically, the effect was significant for content, organization, and vocabulary, but not for grammar or mechanics. In addition, most students in the CW condition found the experience enjoyable and felt that it contributed to their L2 learning. Results of the study are discussed in light of the social constructivist perspective of learning. A number of theoretical and pedagogical implications of the study, and limitations and directions for further research, are presented.

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## Collaborative work in the L2 classroom

In the last 15–20 years, collaborative pair and group work has become common in many classroom contexts around the world. Indeed, the current view of language learning and teaching emphasizes instruction in which collaborative pair and group work is central to the language classroom (see, for example, Batstone, 2010; Bygate, Skehan, & Swain, 2001; Ellis, 2003; García Mayo, 2007; Lantolf, 2000; Shehadeh & Coombe, 2010; Van den Branden, Bygate, & Norris, 2009). This view is supported by both theoretical and pedagogical considerations.

From a theoretical perspective, the use of pair and group work in the L2<sup>1</sup> classroom is supported by the social constructivist perspective of learning. The social constructivist perspective of learning, originally based on the work of Vygotsky (1978), posits that human development is inherently a socially situated activity. In first language (L1) contexts, the child's (novice) cognitive and linguistic development arises in social interaction with more able members of society (experts), who provide the novice with the appropriate level of assistance. Such assistance, now referred to as *scaffolding*, enables children to stretch their cognitive and linguistic development beyond their current level towards their potential level of development. Research has shown that such scaffolding can also occur in an L2 context among

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<sup>1</sup> L2 is used in this article to refer to both second and foreign languages.

peers when working in pairs and groups (e.g., Alegría de la Colina & García Mayo, 2007; Donato, 1994; Kim, 2008; Kuiken & Vedder, 2002a; Nassaji & Tian, 2010; Storch, 2002; Swain, 1998; Swain, 2000; Swain, 2006; Swain, 2010; Swain & Lapkin, 1998; Swain & Lapkin, 2001; Swain & Lapkin, 2002; Swain, Lapkin, Knouzi, Suzuki, & Brooks, 2009). In particular, these researchers have shown that dictogloss tasks (tasks in which students reconstruct in pairs or groups a text read by the teacher as closely as possible to the original text) were successfully accomplished by learners as a collaborative or joint activity, and that such jointly performed tasks enabled learners to solve linguistic problems that lied beyond their individual abilities. Further, these researchers have found on delayed posttests that there was a strong tendency for students to stick with the knowledge that they had constructed collaboratively, right or wrong (e.g., Swain, 1998; Swain & Lapkin, 1998).

Consequently, it has been argued that students' collaborative dialogues mediate the construction of linguistic knowledge and that this process of joint accomplishment of a task contributes to L2 learning (Swain, 1998, 2000, 2010; Swain et al., 2009). Swain and her colleagues based these conclusions on similar research findings from a number of studies which analyzed students' pair/group talk (called *language-related episodes*, *metalinguistic talk*, *metatalk*, and more recently *linguaging*) during various tasks in such collaborative dialogues (see Swain, 2010; Swain et al., 2009).

On the pedagogical side, several researchers have emphasized the multiple benefits of collaborative pair and group work in L2 learning. For instance, McDonough (2004, p. 208), citing evidence from pedagogically-oriented research, states that:

Pair and small group activities provide learners with more time to speak the target language than teacher-fronted activities, promote learner autonomy and self-directed learning, and give instructors opportunities to work with individual learners. In addition, learners may feel less anxious and more confident when interacting with peers during pair or small group activities than during whole-class discussions.

As such, due to both theoretical and pedagogical considerations, it has been concluded that learners should be encouraged to participate in activities that foster collaboration in the L2 classroom.

### **Collaborative work in L2 writing**

Compared to research that examined the benefits of collaborative work for the spoken discourse, research investigating the benefits of collaborative work for the written discourse in L2, especially collaborative writing (CW), is scant (Storch, 2005; Storch & Wigglesworth, 2007). For instance, Storch (2005, p. 153) states that “although pair and group work are commonly used in language classrooms, very few studies have investigated the nature of such collaboration when students produce a jointly written text.” Storch points out that most past studies on collaborative work in the L2 classroom “have examined learners' attitudes to group/pair work in general, rather than to the activity of collaborative writing” (p. 155). More important for the purpose of this study, Storch also stresses the novelty represented by the pedagogical strategy of having students composing in pairs (p. 168).

Most existing research on pair and group work in L2 writing has investigated and documented the benefits of group feedback (e.g., Connor & Asenavage, 1994; Hedgcock & Lefkowitz, 1992; Rollinson, 2004; Zhu, 2001), or issues relating to group dynamics, various types of group formations, and how groups function in peer review tasks (e.g., Levine, Oded, Connor, & Asons, 2002; Lockhart & Ng, 1995; Mangelsdorf & Schlumberger, 1992; Mendonca & Johnson, 1994; Nelson & Murphy, 1992; Nelson & Murphy, 1993; Villamil & De Guerrero, 1996), rather than collaborative writing. The studies that have investigated CW in L2 were carried out by Kuiken and Vedder (2002b), Storch (2005), and Storch and Wigglesworth (2007, 2010a,b). These studies are reviewed below.

In a cross-sectional study that focused on collaborative dialogues, dictogloss, and text reconstruction tasks, Kuiken and Vedder (2002b) investigated the role of group interaction in L2 writing. They tested the hypothesis that “text quality in L2 is positively affected by collaborative dialogue: when learners are given the opportunity to reconstruct together a text, which has been read to them by the teacher, their joint product will be better than an individual reconstruction” (p. 169). The investigators collected data from 40 intermediate proficiency level learners of Dutch, English, and Italian as a second language. They focused on the syntactic and lexical quality of the text produced and how it is affected by the degree to which learners interact with each other and the kind of metacognitive, linguistic, and interaction strategies they used. The investigators found that there was a strong relationship between interaction among writers on metalinguistic awareness and text quality in L2. That is, learners' reflection on and

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