Collaborative Writing Activities in the University EFL Classroom in Japan

John GALINDO

The purpose of this article is to explore collaborative writing (CW) activities in the L2 classroom. This practical article attempts to offer suggestions for evidence-based educational practices surrounding CW activities as they might apply to the tertiary level EFL classroom in Japan. The subsequent sections explore what counts as collaborative writing, some considerations from the literature when implementing CW activities, potential challenges of CW activities, and a description of some face-to-face CW activities.

Social constructivist theories of learning posit that learning is a social phenomenon (Vygotsky, 1978). Social constructivists hold that cognitive and linguistic development result when the learner is given an appropriate level of assistance. Previous work has shown that this development may also be present in an L2 context when learners work in pairs and groups with their peers (Shehadeh, 2011). As such, Collaborative Writing activities are supported by practitioners of social constructivism. The following characteristics of collaborative learning have been incorporated into collaborative writing: "1) joint intellectual effort and commitment by learners to produce common tasks, 2) involvement in learning or group process, and 3) individual learning as a result of group process" (Coffin 2020, p.179).

For the purposes of the present article, a "collaborative writing activity" is any activity in which pairs or groups of students work together with the goal of written output. The length of this output can be anything from a single sentence to an essay, depending on the objective of the particular activity. Crucially, there is an inherently social aspect associated with CW tasks in which students use their own knowledge to negotiate with their peers in order to successfully achieve the task. It is this

collaborative aspect that is the focus of the present article.

Recently, there has been a push, both internationally and in Japan, to adapt communicative and collaborative approaches in the classroom. In Japan, due to students' familiarity with lecture-style classes in English classes, as well as other factors, this can be challenging. Macwinnie and Mitchell (2017) comment that pressure from the Japanese Ministry of Education to reform classroom dynamics, the implementation of constant change in the classroom, increased pressure to perform, and a number of expectations lead to anxiety in Japanese learners. While Japanese learner anxiety is negatively correlated with oral participation in class (Brown and Rosenkjar, 1996), teachers can focus on learners' positive outcomes and foster an L2 learning experience that reduces fear of negative evaluation. Doing so could help to reduce anxiety and increase L2 motivation and proficiency (Macwinnie and Mitchell, 2017).

Macwinnie and Mitchell (2017) report that students with a developed sense of their own learning goals and a positive L2 learning experience were indicative of lower anxiety in the classroom. They note that helping students to understand their own goals and providing an L2 learning environment that reduces fear of negative evaluation may lead to lower student anxiety and increased motivation and proficiency. Motivation, they posit, is a much higher predictor of language ability than anxiety in Japanese EFL university students. To this end, it could be useful to have a discussion or writing assignment to have the student think about their own goals. Traveling, wanting to be an English speaker, wanting to teach English, and getting credit for the required English class are all valid learning goals. Such conversations can be helpful to learn more about the students and increase student-teacher rapport.

There have been many reported benefits of CW activities. In working with other students, learners are able to hold a dialogue that helps them notice gaps in their own L2 output and test assumptions about learning a language and literary skills (Talib and Cheung, 2017). Due to the inherently social nature of collaborative activities, CW can help to improve the social rapport between students in a classroom, as well as with the teacher, with service to create a positive social atmosphere in the classroom (Shehadeh, 2011; Mulligan and Garofolo, 2011). In working with a partner or group, learners are able to see mistakes that they might not notice when working individually. Since

students have a strong tendency to remember the knowledge constructed collaboratively, whether correct or not (Shehadeh, 2011), collaborative writing activities offer an additional opportunity to retain concepts. This also reinforces the need for feedback by the teacher (discussed below). CW activities can lower student anxiety and increase confidence (Mulligan and Garofalo, 2011). Storch (2005) noted that pairs as opposed to individuals produced better L2 writing tasks in terms of task fulfillment, even if the text were shorter. Storch and Wigglesworth (2007) state that in participating in CW activities, students were able to give each other feedback, and as a result, were able to produce texts of greater accuracy than students who were writing individually. Students are shown to have given positive feedback for CW activities and felt that it contributed to their learning (Shehadeh, 2011).

There is still debate of which skills are affected by CW activities for students at different proficiency levels. The learning goal may vary depending on the proficiency level of each group of students. Shehadeh (2011) states that CW had an overall significant effect on improving L2 writing. However, this study did not find significant effects for CW for grammar and mechanics. This is in contrast with another study who did find significant differences in favor of collaborative writing for grammatical accuracy (Storch, 2005; Storch & Wigglesworth, 2007). In a study reviewing the methodologies employed in 94 collaborative second language writing tasks in the face-to-face setting, their results indicate there was substantial variability in the measurements of written output (Zhang and Plonsky, 2020), which might account for this discrepancy. Surely, continued research is warranted in the area of CW for L2 writing, and specifically with respect to the interaction of proficiency level with the effects of CW on different aspects of writing (e.g.: grammatical accuracy, content, mechanics, and organization).

Acknowledging that there is no catch-all solution for teaching writing, given the range of possible tasks, as well as the variation of both teachers and learners, principled eclecticism is a pluralistic pedagogical approach that stresses there is not a one-size-fits-all solution for teaching, and so likewise, teachers should be able to adapt a variety of exercises and activities to the skill level and language background of the learners (Alharbi, 2017). Using this approach, Alharbi (2017) suggests that in order to focus the lesson on the learners, the choice of topic during activities can be left up to the learners

as they engage with each other. While leaving a completely open-ended prompt might prove difficult for many learners, scaffolding with a pre-writing activity might provide some direction for the learners, such as allowing pairs/groups to discuss questions related to the prompt, or giving the pairs or groups time to brainstorm words associated with the prompt. Another strategy might be to encourage students to write ridiculous examples. This is to help low-level students break the habit of beginning sentences with the first person pronoun and add variety in ideas. While ridiculous, it allows playfulness and by positioning expectations in the imaginary.

In fulfilling the role of facilitator, one should note that the quality of peer interaction affects outcome of CW activity (Talib and Cheung, 2017). Some factors affecting peer interaction that should be considered by the instructor include the number of students in each group, the proficiency level of the students in the group, student motivation, L1 use when performing activities, and rapport between the students.

One factor that teachers might consider is the proficiency level of the members of the group. In pairs and groups in which there are students with mixed levels of proficiency, lower levels can manage and learn organizational skills from higher proficiency peers in mixed groups (Talib and Cheung, 2017). It might be productive for a struggling or lower-level student to be paired with a higher-performing student, although there are other factors that might contribute to success in a CW task.

When pairing students for a CW activity, teachers should be aware of member compatibility. Since the success of a CW activity depends on the individuals in the group, teachers should be aware of certain factors affecting member compatibility. For example, the teacher should be aware if a student does not appreciate working in groups. Another reason that a certain grouping of students might not work could be due to member motivation. One form of extrinsic motivation might be the relationship between the members. Students might be unmotivated working with people they are not familiar with (Meyer, 2014).

Another factor that instructors might consider while students perform CW tasks is the use of L1 during the activities. Zhang (2018) has suggested that L1 use is not debilitating in CW tasks, and might even help students produce more syntactically

complex texts. The level of L1 use during the task instead of L2 and its effects on L2 learning and task fulfillment does not seem to be grounds for concern (Shehadeh, 2011). Especially if the task is aimed at eliciting written output from the students, instructors might opt let students choose the language of interaction during the task for themselves (McDonough and Vleeshauwer, 2015) although CW activities do afford students the opportunity of L2 languaging (Storch, 2021).

Alharbi (2017) suggests that teachers should be careful about imposing too much on the learner during the writing process in collaborative activities, so as to give space to the learners while also communicating that the teacher will help them develop. Ultimately, it is left up to the instructor to determine the best course of action for the students in each particular situation.

Due to the social nature of CW activities, there are many possibilities to give and receive feedback. Certainly, learners might be reticent to provide feedback to peers. In this case, Alharbi (2017) suggests giving students specific guidelines for interacting with other students. While students are working in groups, teachers can go around and provide oral feedback to students in each group. The teacher can provide feedback that supports the students but still allows them to find the error themselves. Narciss (2008) cites informative tutoring feedback (ITF) strategies that optimize learning opportunities in interactions with tutors and tutees. She explains that, "in contrast to elaborated feedback strategies which provide learners with immediate knowledge of the correct response and additional information, ITF strategies do not immediately present knowledge of the correct response. Additionally, ITF-strategies offer the opportunity to apply the feedback information to another try" (p.1290). In this way, the knowledge of the group as a whole can help to resolve the particular error. while still allowing for the students to reach the conclusion by themselves. In being familiar with the individual skills of each student, the teacher can ask questions which are appropriate for the level and background of each student.

The issue of fair grading is also a challenge when collaborative writing exercises are used as formal assessments. In a study investigating the perspectives of learners and teachers with regard to CW writing assignments, concerns were voiced about fairness of teamwork contributions and assessments (Coffin, 2020). Additionally, this study

echoed the opinion of previous studies (Elola and Oskoz, 2010) that high-achieving students were penalized in the CW process in larger projects, preferring to make decisions on their own regarding text content, organization, and project scheduling. Another challenge for instructors is the issue of classroom management (Coffin, 2020). Conflict of learning styles is another issue that might arise (Mulligan and Garafolo, 2011). There might be students who prefer to work alone.

Description of Collaborative Writing Activities

Group Paragraphs

This activity involves learners using the target language. In pairs or groups, students are able to monitor each other and give each other feedback. Students alternate writing one sentence of a paragraph each. This activity allows for a great formative assessment for the teacher to see the progress of the students. If the classroom allows, this activity works great on white boards. Students are able to stand, walk around, and also see the work of other groups around the classroom at the end of the activity.

Variation: Paragraph Writing - Freeze Frame

Similar to the previous activity, pairs or groups of students are at different stations (at the whiteboard, on different tables). At a pre-specified time (for example, every 3 minutes), groups change stations and continue the work of the other paragraphs. This offers students an opportunity to work on content and paragraph organizational skills.

Variation: Popcorn Writing

In this activity, students collaborate to write a paragraph together. However, each word is written by a different student. Students alternate in this manner until all members of the group have written a word, at which point this repeats. This is a good activity for students to remain constantly engaged, since they need to pay attention and think relatively quickly to complete the sentence. This activity places focus on individual student's word choice, showing functional knowledge of vocabulary, grammar, and sentence mechanics. Students often help each other with what word to write, and offer help if editing is needed, especially with grammar.

Additional constraints could be offered depending on the focus of the lesson. For example, if you are focusing on subordinate clauses and offering more descriptions to produce longer sentences, you could offer a sentence word count minimum.

Student-generated Cloze Activity

This activity utilizes student-generated sentences to practice vocabulary use. This might be an extension of homework or another activity in which students create their own sentences using vocabulary. Once their sentences are written, students write them on the whiteboard, leaving a blank instead of writing the target vocabulary. Then students from different groups attempt to fill in the blank with their partner or group, looking around the room. It's helpful if the list of possible answers are displayed or referenced, in order to help the students succeed. In this way, they are effectively student-generated cloze exercises. Training students to use extra information to ensure adequate context for students to successfully choose the correct word.

Sentence Dictation

In this activity, one student is in the "hot seat" and is tasked with writing a sentence. This one student has their back to the board where a sentence is displayed. The rest of their group can see the sentence. The task is for the members of the team to try to get the student in the "hot seat" to write the word by explaining the displayed sentence, without saying the words on the board. Students often give synonyms or other contextual clues to the student. Sometimes students employ explanations with metalanguage to describe the word, so this is a good activity for students to practice grammar, vocabulary, and mechanics.

Conclusion

The activities described above can be used to leverage social learning for the purpose of practicing writing skills. Many of these exercises are scalable in that they can be used for a wide scope of expected outputs, from sentences to paragraphs. Additionally, the instructor can add additional constraints if certain groups would appreciate more of a challenge. What works for one group of students might be different than another group. Similarly, what works for one teacher may not work for another teacher with a different teaching style. The instructor should decide what is best for each classroom situation in order to be inclusive given the resources available. Some

limitations for these activities might be class size, in addition to the space available for groups to move about in the classroom.

Collaborative writing activities can be low-stakes exercises that engage learners, promote learning, and help students achieve their goals. CW activities offer additional practice other than book activities and provide students multiple opportunities to produce the target language. They can also allow students to remain engaged through social interaction. As such, they can be a valuable pedagogical tool in the EFL classroom in Japan to encourage active student participation, nurture classroom rapport, and support positive learning outcomes.

References

Alharbi, S. H. (2017). Principled Eclecticism: Approach and Application in Teaching Writing to ESL/EFL Students. English Language Teaching, 10(2), 33-39.

Brown, J. D., & Rosenkjar, P. (1996). Personality, motivation, anxiety, strategies and language proficiency of Japanese students, University of Hawaii Working Papers in ESL (pp.33–72).

Chanwaiwit, P., & Inpin, B. (2021). Synchronous Collaborative Writing Instruction in a University EFL Context: Challenges and Solutions. World Journal on Educational Technology: Current Issues, 13(4), 721-739.

Coffin, C., Curry, M. J., Goodman, S., Hewings, A., Lillis, T., & Swann, J. (2005). Teaching academic writing: A toolkit for higher education. Routledge.

Coffin, P. (2020). Implementing collaborative writing in EFL classrooms: Teachers and students' perspectives. LEARN Journal: Language Education and Acquisition Research Network, 13(1), 178–194.

Dörnyei, Z. (2009). 2. The L2 Motivational Self System. In Z. Dörnyei & E. Ushioda (Ed.), Motivation, Language Identity and the L2 Self (pp. 9-42). Bristol, Blue Ridge Summit: Multilingual Matters. https://doi.org/10.21832/9781847691293-003

MacWhinnie, S. G., & Mitchell, C. (2017). English classroom reforms in Japan: A study of Japanese university EFL student anxiety and motivation. Asian-Pacific Journal of Second and Foreign Language Education, 2(1), 1-13.

McDonough, K., De Vleeschauwer, J., & Crawford, W. J. (2019). Exploring the benefits of collaborative prewriting in a Thai EFL context. Language Teaching Research, 23(6), 685-701.

Meyer, L. (2014). Tech Basics for Active, Collaborative Learning. Campus Technology Magazine, 28(2), 5-9.

Mulligan, C., & Garofalo, R. (2011). A collaborative writing approach: Methodology and student assessment. The Language Teacher, 35(3), 5-10.

Narciss, S. (2008). Feedback strategies for interactive learning tasks. In Handbook of research on educational communications and technology (pp.125-143). Routledge.

Shehadeh, A. (2011). Effects and student perceptions of collaborative writing in L2. Journal of Second Language Writing, 20(4), 286–305.

Storch, N. (2005). Collaborative writing: Product, process, and students' reflections. Journal of second language writing, 14(3), 153-173.

Storch, N. & Wigglesworth, G. (2007). Writing tasks: The effects of collaboration. Investigating tasks in formal language learning, 157-177.

Storch, N. (2021). Collaborative writing: Promoting languaging among language learners. Working collaboratively in second/foreign language learning, 13-34.

Talib, T., & Cheung, Y. L. (2017). Collaborative Writing in Classroom Instruction: A Synthesis of Recent Research. The English Teacher, 46 (2), August, 43–57.

Vygotsky, L. S. (1978). Mind in society: The development of higher psychological processes. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Zhang, M., & Plonsky, L. (2020). Collaborative writing in face-to-face settings: A substantive and methodological review. Journal of Second Language Writing, 49, 100753.

Collaborative Writing Activities in the University EFL Classroom in Japan

John GALINDO

Abstract

Collaborative Writing (CW) activities can be low-stakes exercises that engage learners, promote learning, and help students achieve their goals. They can also allow students to remain engaged through social interaction. As such, they can be a valuable pedagogical tool in the EFL classroom in Japan. This practical article explores some factors to consider when implementing CW activities in the classroom. A description of some CW activities is also given.