Collaborative Writing: A Solution to the Problems in Writing in L2 Classrooms

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Abstract
Writing has always been considered as one of the most challenging skills to be developed in L2 classrooms. In most of the cases the students fail to show their expected competence in writing as their proficiency level is unsatisfactory and disproportionately low. One major problem that can be addressed in this regard is that, in L2 classrooms the students do not get enough time to get involved in writing. Again, all the writing activities that are done in the classrooms are individual works.As the students do not have strong grip over English language, they do not take any risks or challenges in writing by experimenting new ideas or techniques. They tend to limit themselves to copy the models or the writing samples provided by their teachers. As a result, the outcome is not satisfactory. The aim of this article is to bring about the solutions to the difficulties the students generally face in L2 classrooms on the basis of Vygotsky's theory of ZPD. According to this theory, working in collaboration can facilitate the students with an opportunity to boost their regular capacity. Therefore, if writing is considered as a collaborative work and done in a mixed level group, the students will be able to enhance their level of proficiency in writing. This article also presents some directions for the facilitators in terms of providing constructive feedback and processing the writing activity as more engaging for the students.
Keywords
Writing proficiency, ZPD, interaction, group work, pair work, L2 proficiency, low proficiency L2 learners, high-proficiency L2 learners.

I.   INTRODUCTION

It is important to note that most of the studentsin L2 classrooms face a lot of difficulties in writing as writing is mostly considered as a solitary activity. David Nunan (2003) addressed writing as both a physical and mental act. It is the physical act of committing words or ideas to some medium and also a mental work of inventing ideas, thinking about them and organizing them into statements.However, it has always been observedthat the teachers as well as students have a very rigid set of assumptions about writing. They have a tendency to consider writing as a product approach where the students are encouraged to duplicate the models provided by their teachers. Their main motto is to produce an error-free coherent text. In any case, it might be valuable to both the teachers and the students concentrating on the way toward composing and not simply on the product itselfas Brown quotes Elbow (1973:14-16) says that writing should be thought of as an organic, developmental process not as a way to transmit a message but as a way to grow and cook a message.The writing teachers should provide the students with flexibility, practicalityand applicability offered byprocess writing. Besides, more often in writing classes the students work separately without interacting with each other. As a result, they cannot engage themselves in sharing ideas with each other. As research shows that collaborative writing influences students' writing performance, social skills, self-confidence and creativity (Storch, 2005; Fung, 2010; Mulligan &Garofalo, 2011; Shehadeh, 2011; Mirzaei&Eslami, 2013; Trajtemberg&Yiakoumetti 2011; Chaoa& Lob, 2011; Houat, 2012; Lee & Wang, 2013; Cullen, Kullman, & Wild, 2013; Lin &Maarof, 2013; Dobao& Blum, 2013). The students who take writing as an individual act do not get the opportunity to explore, discuss, cooperate and develop learning capabilities. As a result, they sometimes might get good grades in the exams but in the long run fail to prove themselves as proficient writers.

According to the sociologists and psychologists human beings are social creatures with a necessity to be a part of a group and/or an institution. This need has both biological and social roots(Sarvaiya, 2013). Both our sense of security and mental growth require the presence of people around us. According to Vygotsky (1978), our cognitive development mostly depends on the socio cultural contexts where we interact with others who are more skilled than ourselves, be it a teacher or a peer. In this regard, one way to deal with writing in classrooms through social interaction is "collaborative writing". By practicing "collaborative writing", which

will lead the students to "the production of a text by two or more writers." (Storch, 2016), the students will be able to focus more on learning reciprocity, perseverance and engagement with fellow classmates as well as the instructors. One approach to teaching writing skills through social interaction is "collaborative writing", which has gained considerable support in recent years. Storch (2016) [4, p. 387] provides a simple definition of it: "the production of a text by two or more writers." What distinguishes it from other types of writing like peer response activities is that interaction is not limited to the pre-writing or post-writing stages, but engages student partners in all stages of writing from decision-making to construction and editing of the text.

WHAT IS COLLABORATIVE WRITING?

According to Storch(2011) and Mulligan &Garafalo (2011) collaborative writing is considered as joint writing in pairs or small groups starting from planning to writing the final draft. The base of collaborative writing was constructed on this Vygotskian notion of cooperating others by contributing thoughtsall together for quality learning and development to occur (Heidar, 2016). Thus collaborative writing not only contributes to students' writing performance but also improves their social skills, self confidence and creativity. Collaborative writing makes students work together in groups where they can share ideas which make them involved in other skills too. David Farkas (1991) in his article focused on the importance of collaborative writing where he mentionedit as a joint production by two or more people. In collaborative writing people deal with an agenda or goal where effectivecommunication among the group members is required.

Ede and Lunsford (1990) figured out some features of collaborative writing where substantive interaction in all stages of the writing process; shared decision-making power over and responsibility for the text produced; and the production of a single written document are the most important ones. In the process communication among the group memberscontinues throughout the whole writing process. They themselves can plan, generate ideas, edit and revise. This process helps the participants to organize their ideas constructively and advance with a more accurate piece of writing product.Thuscollaborative writing engages the students in building and maintaining mutually shared cognition and leading to increased perceived performance.

HOW COLLABORATIVE WRITING CAN BE PRACTICED IN CLASSROOMS

The main aim of practicing collaborative writing is bringing forth the cognitive process of learning through associating with others which leads towards a better combination of organization and transformation of previously acquired knowledge with the newly formed ideas.So, undoubtedly collaborative writing activities can be a powerful tool for deep learning. But, its implementation is somewhat tricky and challenging. According to Slavin, R. E. (2011), collaboration between peers does not happen spontaneously, but has to be triggered and guided through the design of the activities. Well-designed activities should place students in situations in which they need to interact to complete the task (positive interdependence) and in which the role and responsibility of each member are clearly identified.

For implementing collaborative writing in classrooms, the first thing that should be taken under serious consideration is considering writing as a process not as a product. Kroll correctly points out: What the "process approach" captures is the fact that the student writers engage in their writing tasks through a cyclical approach rather than through a single- shot approach(2001, p.220)What he wanted to point out here is , the writing activities should serve to encourage brainstorming, drafting, writing, feedback, revising, and editing in a cyclical fashion which will lead the students to learn to write rather than to create a final product.

According to many scholars process writing should be carried out in three different stages. As collaborative writing involves more than one writer in the writing tasks, the instructors should be very careful in giving the students proper time and space to carry out the task in a productive way.

Brainstorming: Brainstorming is often considered as the most important stage in the process of writing.The students should be provided with ample timeto question each other, discuss the topic together,list all the ideas they can come up with related to the topic either in writing or aloud. Proper brainstorming would take the students to the right direction in crafting a text. If the students get plenty of time to get involved in brainstorming, it is much likely that they will get past the clichéd ideas that come early in the process and turn towards more sophisticated and original ones.Brainstorming incorporates all sorts of planning activities including exchanging view points, generating ideas, questioning each other, open discussions and so on.

Drafting: The next step is writing the first draft where students should be given ample time to write. They also should be reminded that they need to focus on the development of ideas and organization at this point. The instructor should concentrate on the content more than the development of perfect grammar, punctuation or spelling. In the case of collaborative writing the teacher can involve the students in jigsaw writing where the members of groupsaregiven different portions to write. After completing their assigned portions they combine all the portions together to complete their writing task. This method not only enhances their cooperative learning but also enables them to gain a new way of learning in groups. At this stage the students can give positive

feedback to each other, get comments from the instructor and revise their writing. The students, if necessary, should also concentrate on the process of reorganizing, developing ideas, and so forth.

Proofreading and Editing*:* At this stage the students should focus more on the form and on producing a final piece of work. The mistakes in spelling, grammar, punctuation should also be taken care of at this stage. The students should learn to proofread and edit on their own which will help them to become independent writers in the long run. So, the teachers should keep their involvement limited here and provide complete freedom to the students to work independently.

TEACHERS' ROLE

In the area of writing instructions, the major dissatisfaction arises when the teachers' objectives do not match the student's, or when the teachers'objectives do not match those of the schools or institutions in which the students work.Research works of scholars like Peter Elow and Donald Murray state the utter importance of a certain kind of methodology called *expressivism*where the practice of writing can be viewed as a metacognitive process that encourages the student writers *think* through ideas, and write freely and personally.In the process of writing the teachers should consider themselves as facilitators whose duty is to foster the students' metacognitive skills and provide them with ample space and time so that the students can come up with the best of their ideas and write without getting concernedabout any rules and formula. The teachers can set the following principles for themselves for creating a learner-friendly environment in the classroom.

- ***Providing students with ample opportunities***:

The teachers should set some principles while planning for a course. According to David Nunan, writing is a physical act which requires a lot of practice just like the other physical activities. The teachers should provide the students with sufficient time for their practice writing. The teachers should also keep this thing in mind that not every piece of writing needs to be corrected or graded. This will allow the students to be in their comfort zone while writing.This freewriting will eventually make the student writers comfortable with the act of writing.

- ***Introducing peer feedback:***

Peer feedback canbe considered to be a beneficial method of evaluating and in a way incorporating collaboration in the process of writing. Flower et al. (1986) state three specific processes that come into play when a student reviews a text. At first there is problem identification, then comes problem diagnosis and finally there are techniques for revision or concern actions. This feedback process assists the students in gaining experience in identification of various problems in writing and eventually helps them in discovering different revision strategies (Patchan and Schunn 2015). Furthermore, this engages students in taking different perspectives while comparing others' works with their own which leads them to assimilating the new knowledge and creating a platform for reflecting knowledge building (e.g. van Popta et al. 2017; Tsui and Ng 2000).For making this peer feedback process more productive and focus-oriented, the teachers can take an active role in creating a structured feedback form for the students where the teacher can fix up certain criteria where the students will focus on while reviewing their peer's writing. This will guide them to be focused while reviewing texts and come up with more productive feedback.

- ***Making teachers' feedback more significant:***

The teachers should be cautious about the feedback they provide to the writings of the students as this plays the role of assisting students to improve their written tasks from what they have written to what they intend to write(Al-Bashir et al. 2016). If the teachers write comments on students' papers, they should make sure that the students understand the vocabulary and symbols they use (Nunan2013). Feedback should not only involve the corrections for students but also an overall guideline that will assist them to become independent writers.In this regard the instructors can develop a rubric which will help them to evaluate the students' writings more precisely. Moreover, the teachers should take time either to discuss their comments in general in class or they can have individual conferences with the students so that the students find the feedback effective and make necessary corrections in their writings.

IMPLEMENTING VYGOTSKY'S THEORY

Vygotsky's theory of scaffolding on the basis of sociocultural perspective has been engraved in the field of learning and teaching learning development. The zone of proximal development (ZPD) has been defined as: "the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem-solving under adult guidance, or in collaboration with more capable peers" (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 86). This means to assist a person to lead through the zone of proximal development, social interactions with a skilled instructor and more competent peers are important. Wood et al. (1976, p. 90) define scaffolding as a process "that enables a child or novice to solve a task or achieve a goal that would be beyond his unassisted efforts." As far as teaching and learning writing are concerned, practicing collaborative writing in classrooms in a way enables the instructors to implement

Vygotsky's theory of scaffolding and the zone of proximal development where the instructor is the more knowledgeable other (Vygotsky, 1978).The students' interaction with each other contributes a significant role in their learning process as they are involved more in collaborative work (Ammar & Hassan, 2018). For appropriate implementation of this theory the educators must be very methodological in creating groups among the students. The instructors should keep in mind that that proper combination among the students is the key factor in this regard. The groups need to be formed in such a manner where students are selected from different cognitive levels so that the less competent students get a chance to interact with the more competent peers to move through the zone of proximal development.

II. CONCLUSION

Collaborative writing is undoubtedly beneficial for learners in L2 classrooms if it is implemented effectively. This leads the learners through a process where they get opportunities to write through interaction and discussion. The process of collaborative writing keeps the learners actively engaged in the writing activity and helps them sharpen their thoughts by extracting ideas through sharing knowledge. Therefore, the teachers have to create a suitable environment in the classroom where collaborative writing can be implemented properly and the learners can push themselves to reach the Zone of Proximal Development. Thus the appropriate implementation of collaborative writing can turn out to be one of the probable solutions for the problems in writing in L2 classrooms.

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