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Collaborative Summary Writing and EFL Students’ L2 Development

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Abstract

The current study investigated the effectiveness of Collaborative Summary Writing (CSW) on university students’ second language (L2) development. The study used 86 first year students in three intact classes studying in Urmia University of Medical Sciences. In one of the classes, students were assigned to dyads, and in the second one the participants were assigned to triads. These two classes were used as experimental groups and the third one was the control group in which the students were required to carry out the summary writing task individually. 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 CSW experience had an overall significant effect on all students’ L2 development; however, it was evidenced that students in pairs benefited the most. Considering writing improvement, it was observed that students’ writing ability improved significantly in terms of content, organization, and vocabulary, but not for grammar or mechanics. Finally, a number of theoretical and pedagogical implications for further research are presented.

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1. Introduction

Creating learning environments where language learning is a rewarding and, therefore, an efficient experience has been the focus of various studies (Dornyei & Malderez, 1997; Gaith, 2002; Foster & Ohta, 2005; Naughton, 2006). Gaith (2002), who focused on the psychological factors making the learning environment awarding, stated that one of the important aspects of classroom climate that may influence learners’ achievement in academic settings is social support. In the classroom, those who are able to provide this support are teachers and peers. Group or pair work, which is grounded in research, supported by the social constructivist perspective (Vygotsky, 1978) and implemented by teachers, is the basic premise of collaborative learning and is mainly used for maintaining linguistic interaction in the classroom (Long & Porter, 1985; Brown, 2001; McClure, 2001; Mackey, 2003; Cao & Philp, 2006). As Dornyei (1997) puts it, “giving and receiving ideas and clarification, providing task-related help and assistance, exchanging resources and providing constructive feedback” (p. 484), and positive interdependence in collaboratively learning occasions leads students to encourage and help each others’ efforts while sharing ideas and pooling their knowledge to achieve one common goal. In other words, students are less intimidated when working in pairs or groups, particularly when they see that the others are struggling as much as them to find a suitable word or sentence to express their ideas and as a result their stress and anxiety are reduced which can be claimed to be one of the non-negligible advantages of collaborative learning (Oxford, 1997). All of these statements are in line with Vygotsky’s opinion on human development as an inherently socially situated activity (1978).

Besides its psychological benefits, cooperative learning has proved to be positively effective in cognitive facets. According to Cohen (1994), involvement of students in group discussions has two advantages: first, it is an alternative to the traditional way of teaching, and second, it serves as an active communication in which increased use of L2 is created for students (cited in Gwyn-Paquette & Tochon, 2002). In a comparative study, Pica and Doughty (1985) investigated the difference between the effects of teacher-fronted classes and cooperatively held ones, and saw that more opportunities for language practice are given to L2 learners while assigning them to small groups or pairs since such kind of scaffolding enables learners (both first and second language learners) to stretch their cognitive and linguistic development beyond their current level towards their potential level of development. Moreover, a wider range display of language functions was witnessed in group or pair work rather than in teacher-fronted classes. In the same regard, McDonough (2004) believed that since pair and small group activities provide learners with more time to speak the target language, they promote learner autonomy and self-directed learning. Even in occasions of cooperation of teacher with students, a balanced exchange between them is created, which in turn results in the development of language learning strategies (Anton, 1999).

Accordingly, due to psychological and cognitive pedagogical considerations, it has been concluded that learners should be encouraged to participate in activities that foster collaboration in the L2 classroom.

1.1. L2 collaborative writing

Besides its application to oral/aural contexts of use, group/pair work (in the form of collaborative work) is used in modern writing pedagogy as well (Frazier, 2007; Kung, 2002; Li, 2000; Storch, 1998). As Kung (2002) stated, collaborative writing is a method to deal with the low linguistic level of exchanges as planning, negotiating meaning and reviewing which makes the task goal-directed and the students more reflective. Moreover, collaborative writing fosters the development of second language writing through increasing engagement, confidence, and responsibility on the parts of the learners (Strasma & Foster, cited in Li, 2000). Collaborative writing can be beneficial in different language domains. For instance, Kowal and Swain (1994) and Swain (1995) proposed the use of collaborative writing tasks to direct students’ attention to grammatical accuracy (in Kung, 2002). In another study, conducted by Kuiken and Vedder (2002), it was found that there was a significantly strong relationship between interaction among writers on metalinguistic awareness and text quality in L2 since contemplating and discussing language forms, content, and the writing-rewriting process can work as consciousness-raising mechanisms that lead writers to notice the existing gaps in their language repertoire. In 2011, Shehadeh carried out a study on effects and student perceptions of collaborative writing in L2. Although he found that collaborative work had an overall effect on students’ performance, the results proved that this effect was not significant for grammar and mechanics. His study also revealed that the experience had been enjoyable for the learners. Moreover, Fernandez Dobao (2012) proved...
that collaboration resulted in greater grammatical and lexical accuracy of the texts written by the learners.

1.2. Collaborative summary writing

One of the academic challenges that most of the students face, when required to deal with individually, and can be made easier by collaboration is summary writing. It is widely practiced by second language teachers and is one of their tools to enhance written output. Moreover, summary writing is a recursive reading-writing activity that is frequently used in academic settings and imposes great cognitive pressure on students (Kirkland & Saunders, 1991). Difficulty of summarizing and lack of enough guidance on how to summarize leads students to copy instead of paraphrasing or rephrasing the main points of the text which they are summarizing. While the task is challenging for students, it is really easy for teachers to ask their students to give a written or oral summary of a text. Therefore, engaging students in collaborative work that leads to the availability of peer feedback which, in turn, can act either to draw attention to the gaps in language knowledge or provide confirming feedback which consolidates language knowledge (Storch, 1998) is advisable. Accordingly, it is crucial to engross students in collaborative writing that involves planning, drafting, revising, and editing that leads to the enhancement of the social process of writing and as a result enriches the opportunities for learning and writing practice. When working collaboratively, students can provide more comments on their own and their partners’ writing (Li, 2000).

Based on the potential effectiveness of collaborative summary writing in language classes, the following research questions were formulated for the purpose of the present study: (1) Does the number of participants in a collaborative writing task have any effect on the quality of students’ summary writing after a prolonged engagement in such activity? (2) Does collaborative summary writing have any effect on students’ L2 writing development?

2. Method

2.1. Participants

The participants of the current study were 86 female midwifery students studying at the University of Medical Sciences in Urmia. They were first year students in their second semester studying at three intact classes. In one of the classes, 29 students were assigned to dyads, and in the second one, 30 participants were assigned to triads. These two classes were used as experimental groups and the third one was the control group in which 27 students were required to carry out the summary writing task individually. Their age ranged between 18 and 25. They had been given the permission to take the general English course on the basis of their performance in the university entrance examination that required the students to score more than 50% of the English test section in the examination. Prior to the university, these students had studied English in their junior high school and high school (secondary education) for 6 years. They were educated in predominantly teacher-fronted classes and got used to rote-learning and individual work and learning.

2.2. Context of the study

The general English course was a 3-credit course only to be chosen in the second semester as some of the students need to take other prerequisite courses prior to this one. The English course consisted of 3 hours per week that lasted 16 weeks. The syllabus included 8 units of reading passages that were followed by some comprehension questions, grammatical points and some grammar and vocabulary exercises (from the Select Readings book for intermediate levels). The syllabus required students to write a summary of the taught unit in the classroom collaboratively in pairs and triads or individually and be prepared to be assessed on the comprehension of the text and some grammar points the following session. Throughout the course, there were 7 such summary writing tasks as the first passage of the book was used as pre-test. The writing assessment only included a final exam.
2.3. Data collection procedure

A pre-test and post-test design was used to collect data for the present study. Both pre- and post-tests included a summary writing test. Prior to any instructions, the pre-test was administered and the groups were asked to write the summary of a passage (first passage of the book) and were given 60 minutes to carry out the summary task. Then, two trained raters that were MA graduates of TEFL evaluated the summaries. A 0-100 point scale was used to rate the content, organization, grammar, vocabulary and mechanics of the writings that was cited in Brown (2001). To rate the summaries, two raters used the paragraph rating scale suggested by Hedgecock and Lefkowitz (cited in Shehadeh, 2011). The inter-rater reliability was found to be .73 for the pre-test. In the first session of the course, the teacher instructed the students about how to write a summary in English since summary writing is a method employed by the teacher to discover if a student has understood what has been read. In this vein, the teacher asked students to read the article and be sure that they could understand it. Then, the students were supposed to take note of the topic, main ideas and important details. Afterwards, they were asked to identify the topic in the first sentence, use their own words (paraphrase), and not to copy the original sentences. Finally, they were required to conclude by restating the topic, and limit their summaries to ¼ of the original text. Each odd session was dedicated to the teaching of reading passage, vocabulary items and grammar points, and each even session was dedicated to the writing of summaries in the classroom so that students could not copy or cheat or ask someone else to do the task for them. The teacher corrected the work given by the students and checked them for copied and rewritten sentences from the book. Students were encouraged to paraphrase the sentences at least by changing the words and writing their equivalents in English. The summaries were scored and returned back to the students the next session. During the final exam session, students were required to write the summary of a text from another book that was at the same proficiency level since the difficulty of the text was of high concern for the purposes of the study. This time, students were given 60 minutes once more. The necessary instructions were given prior to the beginning of the test. Student writings on the post-test were corrected by the same raters and inter-rater reliability was found to be .84 for the post-test.

3. Results

3.1. Research question 1

As stated earlier, the first research question was concerned with the effect of the number of participants in a collaborative writing task on the quality of students’ summary writing after a prolonged engagement in such activity. Table 1 shows the descriptive statistics for individuals (control group), pairs (experimental group 1) and triads (experimental group 2).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Groups</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Control</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>51.65</td>
<td>11.40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experimental 1</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>60.84</td>
<td>12.55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experimental 2</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>50.42</td>
<td>11.86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>86</td>
<td>54.30</td>
<td>12.33</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

For analyzing the data, the Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) was used and the findings are presented in Table 2.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source of Variance</th>
<th>SS</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>MS</th>
<th>F</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Between groups</td>
<td>1096.3972</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>548.1986</td>
<td>3.84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Within groups</td>
<td>11846.4669</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>143.7285</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>12942.8641</td>
<td>85</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p<0.05
As the above table (Table 2) indicates, the results of the ANOVA analysis proved that the three groups are different. However, no information was provided as the location or the source of the difference. Therefore, the Tukey post-hoc analysis was carried out to locate the source of the difference. The results of this test showed that differences were found between individual and dyad, dyad and triad, individual and triad as shown in Table 3.

Table 3. Tukey HSD test.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>Individual</th>
<th>Dyad</th>
<th>Triad</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Individual</td>
<td>*</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dyad</td>
<td>*</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Triad</td>
<td>*</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Pairs where there was a significant difference at the 0.05 level

3.2. Research question 2

The second research question of the current study was concerned with the effect of collaborative summary writing on students’ written L2 development. To find the answer to this question, students’ scores on pre- and post-tests were compared.

Table 4. Comparison of students’ performances on pre- and post-tests.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Paired Differences</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>SEM</th>
<th>Lower</th>
<th>Upper</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>Sig</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Individuals pre-post</td>
<td>-0.419</td>
<td>.7317</td>
<td>0.639</td>
<td>-0.3104</td>
<td>0.2265</td>
<td>-0.319 ns</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>0.752*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pairs pre-post</td>
<td>4.768</td>
<td>12.05</td>
<td>0.671</td>
<td>3.390</td>
<td>6.145</td>
<td>7.101 s</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>0.000*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Triads pre-post</td>
<td>2.272</td>
<td>13.13</td>
<td>0.693</td>
<td>0.853</td>
<td>3.692</td>
<td>3.280 s</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>0.00*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*The significance was set at the 0.05 level.

The results indicated that scores were significantly higher for pairs and triads which show that collaborative summary writing had an overall significant effect for the students in experimental groups. However, it was demonstrated that there was an extremely significant difference between pairs’ pre-test and post-test results which is a proof of students’ higher collaboration in pairs.

As another concern of this study, it was tried to evaluate students’ performance in experimental groups in terms of five components of the given scale (content, organization, grammar, vocabulary and mechanics of writing).

Table 5. Mean total and component scores on the post-test for students in pairs and triads.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Max. Score</th>
<th>Students in Pairs</th>
<th>Students in Triads</th>
<th>t</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>M</td>
<td>SD</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>SD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total score</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>60.84</td>
<td>12.55</td>
<td>50.42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Content</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>20.79</td>
<td>2.73</td>
<td>15.17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organization</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>15.46</td>
<td>2.13</td>
<td>11.30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grammar</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>8.94</td>
<td>1.06</td>
<td>9.70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vocabulary</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>13.86</td>
<td>1.61</td>
<td>12.60</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
As can be seen in Table 5, it is clear that students in pairs benefited from collaboration to improve their scores on content, organization, and vocabulary, but not on grammar and mechanics.

4. Discussion

With respect to the first research question, ANOVA results demonstrated that the number of people doing the collaborative activity (1, 2, and 3) had a significant effect on their performances and the post-hoc test revealed that individuals performed differently from dyads and triads on the test, pairs did differently from individuals and groups, and triads performed differently from dyads and individuals. These findings are in harmony with previous research (Storch, 1999, 2005; Storch & Wigglesworth, 2007; Shehadeh, 2011; Fernandez Dobao, 2012). Regarding the second research question, t-test results indicated that the performance of students in pairs and groups of three improved significantly on the post-test. Therefore, it can be understood that the collaborative experience had a beneficial effect on students’ L2 writing development. Previously conducted research (e.g., Long & Porter, 1985; McDonough, 2004) attributed the improvement to the meaning negotiation during collaboration. Negative or corrective feedback as part of the meaning negotiation process is considered one of the salient features of conversational interaction by which the interlocutors detect the existing discrepancies in their output and try to resolve the communication breakdowns. Lyster and Ranta (1997) believed that corrective feedback encourages self-repair involving accuracy and precision as well as comprehensibility. Lyster, Lightbown, and Spada (1999) by criticizing Truscott’s recommendations (that had been published in the same year) evidenced that “corrective feedback is pragmatically feasible, potentially effective, and, in some cases necessary” (p. 457). In support of such claims Lyster’s arguments (2001) can be taken into account; he argued that this type of feedback, or simply the act of signaling mismatches between target language production and nontargetlike production facilitates peer- and self-repair. Moreover, Gass and Varonis (1994) stated “that the awareness of the mismatch serves the function of triggering a modification of existing L2 knowledge, the results of which may show up at some later point in time” (p. 299).

Considering the quality of writing, the results of this study are similar to Shehadeh’s findings. Shehadeh (2011) investigated the effectiveness and students’ perceptions of collaborative writing in second language. He used 38 first year students in two intact classes at a university. One of the classes consisted of 18 students and was considered the experimental group and the other one consisted of 20 students and was considered the control group. Shehadeh found that collaborative work improved students’ writing quality in terms of content, organization, and vocabulary.

Gallego De Blibeche (1993) compared the post-treatment compositions of two groups of elementary level college students of Spanish. The first group was involved in prewriting discussion, free writing, pair work, drafting and peer review, whereas a control group received direct grammar instruction, including written grammar exercises, and wrote drafts of their compositions which were marked for grammar errors. The experimental group outperformed the control group in terms of the improvement on composition length and quality of organization but the groups made equal gains in content, language use, grammar and error-free production (cited in O’Brien, 2004).

In another similar study, Fernandez Dobao’s findings indicated that there was a significant difference among the performance of individuals, students in dyads, and students working in groups of four. Moreover, in Dobao’s (2012) work it was witnessed that students working in groups of four reached a higher percentage of correctness in their writings than students in dyads (pairs) while in the present study, it was observed that students working in pairs did better than those writing individually and the ones working in groups of three. Here, it can be resulted from reduction of defensiveness and encouragement of openness by the nature of the pair work as Blue and Grundy (1996) put it. On the other hand, it was shown that collaborative problem-solving activities are more likely to occur when all the learners adopt a collaborative orientation and are willing to share ideas and engage with each others’ contributions. When at least one of the group members tries to dominate or adopt a passive attitude, the resulting
pattern of interaction tends to be less cooperative and collaborative (Fernandez Dobao, 2012; Furnham, 2005). In such a similar vein, it can be concluded that students in pairs cooperated more willingly since they knew that their cooperation and collaboration would benefit both of them while students in groups were less willing to work together.

In general, dissimilar language backgrounds of the participants, varying language skill levels, differences in age, gender, motivation and cognitive abilities of the students, different task types, and dissimilar language settings, such as ESL, EFL, private or immersion contexts, may justify these diversities.

5. Implications of the study and suggestions for further research

The present research study along with so many other empirical findings is heavily loaded with empirical and pedagogical implications most of which can be used directly or indirectly in L2 classes. The findings of this study lend more support to the previous studies in literature that assigning students to dyads or groups and involving them in dyadic interactions and pair work (dyadic work with peers) or group work provide ample opportunities to negotiate meaning (Van den Branden, 1997) more than teacher-fronted classes as in such classes there are only limited opportunities for learners to negotiate meaning (Lyster, 1998; Lyster and Ranta, 1997).

The results shed more light on the interactive patterns in the EFL context of Iran regarding pairings and groupings of students, and opportunities for more interaction even in teacher fronted classes. Thus, teachers can help students by placing them in dyads or groups irrespective of their proficiency level, gender, L1, age, and motivation. The outcomes of the study can, too, contribute to materials and syllabus design by indicating that collaborative task types are similarly beneficial in promoting negotiation. In spite of the conclusions drawn here regarding the potential value of involving students in dyadic and group work interactions across genders, more research is needed before a generalization can be made about its efficacy on both theoretical and practical aspects. The researcher could not logically deal with all miscellaneous aspects of this research study due to the limitations of the study. Yet, it is hoped that other researchers may investigate various related topics.

One of the main factors posing limitations on the generalizability of this piece of research is the limited sample size; the data derived from a sample of only 86 EFL language learners and from only one field of study. It is obvious that clearer results on how collaborative work is implemented, and how the type of the writing task influence L2 development would have been obtained with a larger sample size or with a longer observation period and more examples of tasks.

References


