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Relay Writing Tasks in the EFL Classroom: When Second Language Learning Encounters Collaborative Interactions

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Abstract: This study presents how EFL learners benefit from the classroom relay writing as a pre-activity in collaborative writing tasks that involve various simultaneously collaborative interactions. An intact 42-student class of freshmen majoring in accounting is divided into four groups. Each group is assigned with a relay writing task with the first sentence available only. The sequential writer of each group writes while checking the previous single sentence. Each group accomplish the task by three steps: individually independent sentence relay writing, in-group text reading, adjusting and reshaping, and between-group text appreciation and evaluation. The composition process is audiotaped and all texts (including both the first and final drafts) are collected and analyzed. And a random interview is followed. The data showed that 1) the writing turned out to be more vivid and inspiring when the participants only know the first sentence and the final drafts appeared in a more logic way with less grammatical and lexical errors, indicating the powerful effect of dialogues between group writers; 2) it could be even more successful when there is a relay writing task as a pre-activity as each individual was assured to make contributions to this writing task no matter how passive or subservient he/she is when involved in a group task; 3) The collaborative writing could be more fulfilling when there were initiator-participants scaffolding the whole task. Furthermore, by observing the accuracy and fluency of the written texts, the pedagogical implications of simultaneous in-group and between-group interactions are illustrated.

Keywords: Relay Writing, EFL Learning, Collaborative Interaction

1. Introduction

Relay writing is the joint production of a text by two or more writers working in a sequential way and it is mostly applied among online community writing [21] and online collaborations via wikis [11, 15] or chats [8]. Collaborative writing (CW) has obtained great popularity among language teaching researchers as an instructional activity. Derived from socioculturalism [19], CW involved two or more writers in the writing process, during which a lot of interactions occurred from time to time. Throughout the collaborative interactions, the writers, who collectively shoulder the decision-making process and corresponding responsibility for the task, present one single writing [5, 14]. CW benefiting language learning mostly lies in the collaborative interaction when it fosters deliberation on language form and meaning, inspires students to scaffold positively, and promotes reflection on the writing process [7, 9, 10, 23]. Relay writing occurs when the sequential writer perceives the existing previous writing. And the final single writing outstands when all the writers collaboratively interact with each other. This study presents how EFL learners benefit from the classroom relay writing tasks that involve various simultaneously collaborative interactions.

2. Literature Review

Donato [4] proposed that the collaborative interaction between group members is essential when it comes to understanding the potential of group work for second language learning. Based on what learners perceived about group work and the degree of teachers' scaffolding, Donato further argued that the collaboration work usually occurred in two different types, namely, the loosely knit groups and collective groups, with greatly varied amount of mediation. Besides, three types of collaboration, i.e., peer tutoring, cooperative learning, and peer collaboration, were identified by Damon and Phelps [3] while examined collaboration in the L1 context. During the language learning cooperation process, learners equally and

automatically made efforts to and manipulated over task while mutually interacted with each other.

Collaborative writing (CW) has increasingly drew the attention of many researchers, shedding new lights on second language writing [1, 2, 6, 20, 22-25]. When two or more learners interact with each other and produce one single writing, they are promoted to reciprocally communicate and inspired to deliberate on the language use, thus further second language learning occurs intuitively [10, 13, 14]. However, effective learner interaction in CW doesn't necessarily occur all the time. The relationship that learners form (i.e., interaction pattern) during collaborative writing tasks does have a say in the quality of the written document [16]. Learners may benefit a lot in the later individual writing tasks from the CW activity as the mutual interaction influences the amount of scaffolding and linguistic knowledge that are transferrable [12, 17, 20]. Storch [16] distinguishes four collaboration types in CW tasks, which offers researchers a way to assess the collaboration interaction among learners. While Li and Zhu [11] investigated how the texts were produced collaboratively in computer mediated communication (CMC) settings, Zhang [23] examined quantitatively the collaboration types and the text quality in face-to-face settings. However, the prior studies mostly focus on the collaborative interaction, the individual efforts are slightly neglected. Besides, the previous researches are mostly carried out based on given titles. Therefore, this study aims to examine (a) how individual efforts are integrated into collaborative work when given first sentence instead of a designated topic; (b) how the students perceived the collaborative interaction towards the generalization of co-constructed texts.

3. The Study

An intact 42-student class of freshmen majoring in accounting is divided into four groups. They are composed of 29 females and 13 males and none of them have any overseas experience. A piece of A4 worksheet with the given first sentence "I woke up in the midnight" is issued to the first student of each group. Each group would accomplish the task by three steps: individually independent sentence relay writing, in-group text reading, adjusting and reshaping, and between-group appreciation and evaluation. The composition process is audiotaped and all texts (including both the first and final drafts) are collected. Namely, with the first sentence available only, the sequential writer of each group writes continually with the previous single sentence available. Upon completion, all the group members would appreciate the co-constructed text together. They would finalize the co-written text after discussing about the reshaping and polishing. During the whole collaborative writing process, no instructions regarding planning, revision, structuring, and text length were given. Then, language appreciation would be carried out between groups. The co-constructed texts are appreciated by accuracy and fluency. And a comparison of the first draft and final text is done. Furthermore, the collaborative interactions between students would be observed by the researcher. And some students are randomly interviewed upon their perceptions towards this writing process.

4. Data and Discussion

4.1. The Writing

The written texts (both original and finalized copies) were analyzed in terms of accuracy and fluency. The total number of words produced was calculated to measure the fluency that refers to the length of the text. Clauses and T-units were identified. The accuracy of the texts was mainly measured by lexical and grammatical problems.

Table 1. *Statistics for the writing.*

	G1-1	G1-2		G2-1	G2-2		G3-1	G3-2		G4-1	G4-2	
Words	58	117	+59	72	57	-15	62	60	-2	98	109	+11
Clauses	2	6	+4	3	5	2	2	2	0	3	4	+1
T-units	9	11	+2	13	9	-4	11	11	0	14	11	-3
Error-free clause	1	3	+2	0	3	+3	0	2	+2	0	3	+3
Error-free T-units	1	9	+8	3	1	-2	3	9	+6	2	7	+4
Grammar errors	1	2	+1	8	5	-3	8	2	-6	8	3	-5
Lexical errors	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	1	+1	3	0	-3

Note: G1-1 refers to Version 1 from Group 1, G1-2 refers to Version 2 from Group 1.
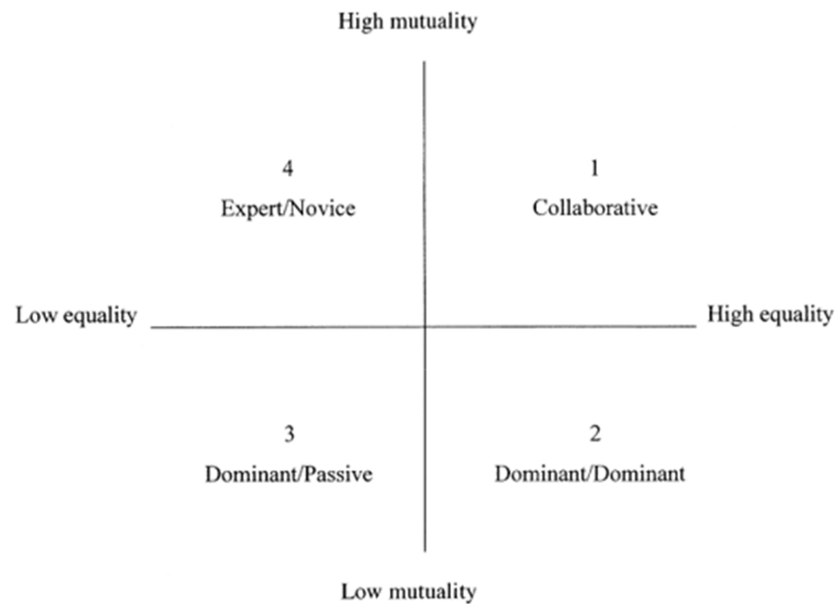
Table 1 exhibited that the four writing copies were improved generally in different degree with less errors. In terms of fluency, both Group 1 and Group 4 produced longer co-constructed texts. While Group 4 wrote a relatively longer draft than the first version, Group 1 even generated a copy twice that of the original one. Besides, more error-free clauses and error-free T-units were added in both texts. Regarding the accuracy, more grammatical errors were corrected in Group 2, Group 3 and Group 4. Surprisingly, one more grammatical error was identified in Group 1's writing.

It seems still acceptable as the text was expanded to twice longer than the relay writing draft. Generally, all the writings were polished in a more logic way and appeared grammatically better through collaborative interaction. This echoes the results from Storch and Aldosari [18] and Watanabe and Swain [20] that learners with a better collaborative relationship tended to generate a larger number of writing. Additionally, the individual concepts about the whole story were mostly understood after group communication.

4.2. Collaborative Interaction

In this part, descriptions of the collaborative interaction between members are given based on the classroom observation. And Storch's identification of interaction types is theoretically applied. In her investigation, Storch [6] identified four interaction types based on ESL classroom observation, as illustrated from the following Figure 1.

High mutuality

| 4 Expert/Novice | 1 Collaborative |

Low equality ———————————————— High equality

| 3 Dominant/Passive | 2 Dominant/Dominant |

Low mutuality

Figure 1. A model of dyadic interaction (Quoted from Storch, 2002, p 128).

Here, mutuality and equality are two terms describing the efforts made by the individual and mutual cooperation between group members while accomplishing the collaborative task. It seems that pattern 1 is the ideal interaction type where all the partners are devoting enough to all the parts of the task, both the equality and mutuality are high. In pattern 2 there is a high level of disagreement and inability to get consensus though all the partners are working too hard to contribute to the task. That means all the members had tried their own best to complete the task, but every partner insists on his/her own idea and it's hard to compromise and make a final decision. Pattern 3 involves little communication between members when the less dominant participants feel more challenging and not brave enough to express oneself. Thus, collaboration is not fully realized in this case. Pattern 4 demonstrates high mutuality in spite of low equality. There are relatively expert partners shouldering the responsibility to scaffold in the process, actively help the participants to get involved positively in the task.

Of the four groups in this study, more than one interaction types exist within each single group, possibly due to the multi-member groups (2 10-member groups and 2 11-member groups). The collaborative interactions exhibited vividly and informatively.

Firstly, almost all the members in each group actively took part in the writing task. During the individual relay writing stage, they wrote down the lines with much care upon understanding the previous sentence available and double checked before passing to the next partner, hoping to put all the attention into it.

Secondly, more equality and mutuality turned up in each group. During the in-group text reading, adjusting and reshaping stage, it seemed that everyone just couldn't wait to share with each other what he/she had in mind about the whole picture. It presents a picture much more positive than Zhang's [23] conclusion that one partner dominated the conversation with the other one merely accepted the decision without any critical thinking in the noncollaborative pattern. The communication were both boisterous and fruitful. The following examples demonstrated well.

Example 1. (Conversation episode of group 2)

Li: I tried to construct it a fairytale because I noticed the previous writing "I saw a boy".

Jing: Oh, that's why you mentioned 'princess' and 'tiger'.

Mao: No, but I understand it a zoo story hahaha……And I add a lion.

Example 2. (Conversation episode of group 4)

Wang: I thought it a nightmare, people usually woke up in the midnight due to a nightmare. Then I add "I feel scared"

Lu: So I guess the script is about overcoming the scaring feeling.

Yuan: But the latter part has nothing about that "I continue to sleep after playing games"

Ding: Ah ha interesting! Let's end like this "And I have a nice dream."

From the conversations, we may see the participants acted very positively and willingly made their contributions to the task. More possibilities about the writing are discussed. The students obtained more about language application as they shared more possible versions of the writing with the single initial sentence available.

Thirdly, during the collaborative interaction, some

"grammar policemen" turned up and initially offered the corrective suggestions. Some examples were transcribed as following:

Example 3. (Conversation episode of group 3)

Liang: I think here 'feel' should be changed into 'felt', because it happened in the past, as we may see from the first sentence "I woke up in the midnight".

The rest voice: Yes, correct / sound reasonable.

Ma (the original writer): Oh, I didn't realize that. Yes (energetically scrabbling on the paper and writing down 'felt').

Example 4. (Conversation episode of group 4)

Yin: I am not sure whether the infinite 'to' is correct? "I want to go to shopping" (reading repeatedly).

Liang: Oh, yes it should be omitted. 'go shopping', sorry, this is my part.

The rest voice: Ya, seems better

With the help of these 'grammar policemen", most of the lexical and grammatical mistakes were picked out and corrected properly. Each member was trying to be helpful to make the final draft better. Besides, no embarrassment occurred at all. Instead, the 'mentioned' participants behaved 'enlightened' and eagerly accepted the corrective action. This again contradicts with the results from Zhang [23] where the "cued" writer just passively agreed with the corrective action in the noncollaborative pair.

Fourthly, effective collaborative interaction facilitated more intuitive applause from peers and made better learning. During the between-group appreciation and evaluation stage, more applause and laughter flew away throughout the classroom. As the participant representative from each group read the final draft aloud in front of the whole class, the students were surprised to hear different stories with high appreciation. Every group felt proud of their own collaborative work while spontaneously spoke highly of the other's efforts.

The whole writing process presented more positive aspects of collaborative interaction. In the light of Storch's classification, less Pattern 2 existed but more effective collaboration blossomed.

4.3. The Interview

After finishing the writing, the researcher teacher randomly interviewed eight participants about their perceptions towards the whole writing task in terms of personal efforts, peer comments, peer corrective action, and collaborative interactions. The feedback pointed to the significance of peer comments and peer corrective action in the finalizing process. Surprisingly, they especially welcomed the lexical-grammatical corrective actions, finding it an important learning part. In addition, most students felt confident of their own original writing and admitted that they had tried best to make contributions in order to make the writing consistent. Furthermore, participants tended to be braver when they feel equal enough. Thus more mutuality arose as the sense of responsibility was aroused in their heart as a team.

Some interview excerpts are quoted as following (T=teacher, S=student).

Interview excerpt 1:

T: How is your collaborative writing as a group?

S1: Er, I think terrific! (Chuckling)

S2: It's outstanding. I can't finish it like this on my own.

S6: I never thought it could be written in this aspect.

S4: It is ok though a little bit different from my original thinking.

S5: En, better.

It demonstrated that most participants felt satisfied towards the final writing draft. As they mutually appreciated and actively encouraged each other, more collaborations occurred where participants were willing to contribute and engage with each other's views. During the discussion, more acceptable ideas began to pop out, leading to better solutions.

Interview excerpt 2:

T: What is your personal contribution in this part? Little, A little, or much?

S3: I think I chose 'much'. I found some writing mistakes there and helped the polishing.

S8: I offered much efforts today. Especially the whole outline organization part.

S4: Although my original story is changed midway I felt satisfied about the final draft. But I still chose 'much' to mark my efforts, I think I made the story more readable by repeated reading. (Contemplating).

S7: I think I have worked whole-heartedly today. Er, including everything haha.

The above data showed that almost all the group members exerted their own effects during the collaborative writing process. They tended to have a high sense of responsibility while assigned with a team task. When they communicated with each other, alternative ideas were given and negotiated, leading to resolutions that seemed agreed by all the participants.

Interview excerpt 3:

T: What do you think of the peers' mistake picking and correcting actions? Do you feel uneasy?

S4: I think it is a very good part. It makes the writing better and I learned a lot.

S1: No, why uneasy? We are a team. We urgently need such corrective actions to work out the final version.

S6: It's a good thing when there are classmates around to offer help for language learning.

S5: I even didn't recognize the grammatical mistakes until they are pointed out. It's really helpful.

Data revealed that most participants felt it acceptable to have peers pick out mistakes and correct the lexical-grammatical problems. Interestingly, it turned out that the mistakes were better accepted when the problem was inquiringly pointed out. Otherwise there would be unwillingness to engage with each other's contribution during the negotiations. Moreover, the corrective process went even more smoothly when participants actively initiated to consult each other' opinions. Thus, more efforts were continued to offer as the cooperative operations moved forward, leading to further polishing acts.

5. Conclusion and Limitations

Collaborative interaction plays a great role in the writing process. It could be even more successful when there is a relay writing task as a pre-activity. Relay writing task guarantees every individual to make contributions to this writing task no matter how passive or subservient he/she is when involved in a group task. The final draft concerns every group member when all the members had actively taken part in the activity from the very beginning. Moreover, it could turn out to be more fulfilling when there are initiator-participants scaffolding the whole task.

This study is not without limitations. Further research could be done from the following aspects: Firstly, it only covers the writing with the first sentence available, then how about the writing with both the first and last sentences available? In this study, the sequential writer of each group writes while checking the previous single sentence only, how about writing while checking all the previous writing as a whole? Secondly, it is more of a micro illustration from classroom observation, and more comparatively scientific data are needed to probe in this aspect. Thirdly, more factors of the participants would be considered into the experiment, including major difference, gender, language proficiency.

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