
THE IMPACT OF COLLABORATIVE WRITING ON KUWAITI HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS' WRITING DEVELOPMENT

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ABSTRACT: *This study investigates the frameworks in which Kuwaiti high school students studying English as a foreign language engaged in collaborative writing exercises to determine the impact on the content of their independent and collectively written texts. Participants included final year high school students with an intermediate level of English proficiency (i.e., upper-intermediate or B2 on the CEFR index). This research paper examines the mechanisms in which participants engaged as part of their collaborative writing exercises and the effect of such engagement on their independent and collective writing content. The research adopted quantitative methodology for data collection through holistic proficiency sources. Empirical ranking of participants' scores led to two conclusions on how teamwork in small groups influenced the content of student texts produced collaboratively and independently. In addition, collaborative writing tended to increase output in both classes. Although both groups of students improved in various learning areas, they scored higher overall on the second writing challenge.*

KEYWORDS: impact, collaborative writing, Kuwaiti high school, students, writing development

INTRODUCTION

Over the last 20 or so years, we have seen the emergence of peer-to-peer and collaborative group activities in English as a foreign language (EFL) learning environments (Shehadeh, 2011; Storch, 2013). Collaborative writing as an avenue for language practice promotes participation and teamwork during the writing and has been progressively implemented in L2 classrooms. Individuals are likely to see this type of writing at work and in universities (Ede & Lunsford, 1990; Leki, 2007). Although collaborative writing experiences in L2 have been explored through previous research, little information is available about its practical application in EFL classrooms. Previous research concentrates on oral discourse whereas collective literature's written development is not thoroughly investigated (Storch, 2011). When analyzing the results of collaborative writing, studies tend to concentrate on the outcome of collaborative writing instead of the process itself (Storch, 2005). Although students create collaboratively written assignments, the nature of the collaboration itself remains unclear. As research

investigates students' learning, they concentrate only on one writing type (e.g., preparation, peer review; Jones et al., 2006). It is unknown how individuals collaborate, groove, and compose during the process of writing. Research that analyzes collective writing learning outcomes often relies on the restricted concept of benefits (Watanabe & Swain, 2007). Research should also consider ways to enhance proficiency and sophistication in student writing. Previous experiments have been carried out briefly and have failed to make long-term progress.

LITERATURE REVIEW

An analysis of academic literature on collaborative writing showed that the meanings and principles of collaborative writing differed. Storch (2011), a specialist in collaborative writing in L2, defined it as “the joint production or the co-authoring by two or more authors of a text” (p. 275). Her consideration of the joint ownership of the paper created and the peers' cooperation throughout the writing period differentiated this concept from others' definitions. Storch further developed her concept by stating that this practice is an event where the group works in unison and engages during the writing process, preparing, generating ideas, discussing, editing, and revising the text (Storch, 2013). Storch's definition represented the fundamental elements of this specific activity: joint accountability, cooperative participation, co-authorship, and shared ownership, expertise, and responsibility. Collaborative writing typically requires students to engage with each other on a written assignment in groups or pairs. Consequently, spoken conversation and writing are two important elements of collaborative writing. The socio-cultural intellectual philosophy encourages collective writing (Storch, 2013). Acknowledging the frequent occurrence of collaborative writing tasks in real-life contexts, researchers have begun to investigate cognitive facets of face-to-face collaborative writing, understandings of collaborative writing results, and—most recently—computer-mediated collaborative writing practices (Dobao, 2012; Kuiken & Vedder, 2002; Watanabe & Swain, 2007; Wigglesworth & Storch, 2009; Yang, 2014). These findings typically show that collaborative writing contributes to the growth of L2 learning and writing. Collaborative scaffolding, immediate feedback from peers, decreased cognitive load, engagement and social interaction with others, enhanced language production opportunities, improved written ability, understanding of linguistic structures, and the fostering of knowledge are all potential positive effects of collaborative learning.

Language instructors at the Kuwaiti Ministry of Education are expected to produce and practice different educational activities, each focused on a specific aspect. The English instructors should try to use activities that incorporate as many aspects of communication skills as possible so that students get a well-rounded education in all of them. Nevertheless, only three approaches are used in the Kuwaiti EFL curriculum: controlled writing, guided writing, and free writing. These approaches incorporate activities such as writing using keywords as a guide, sentence completions, the reordering of words to create a story, dictation exercises, translations from Arabic to English and vice versa, and comprehension exercises (Al-Mutawa & Kailani, 1989).

As stated in the Kuwait Ministry of Education's (1999) Teachers' Guide, secondary school teachers in particular focus on spelling, grammar and syntax, and vocabulary in writing activities. As a result, students seem to concentrate on the basic "puzzle pieces" instead of developing their overall writing skills (such as developing content, organizing content, paraphrasing, and summarizing). For example, Al-Mutawa and Kailani (1989) mentioned that Kuwaiti English instructors follow a certain series of steps, starting with a monthly writing assessment modelled after required exams. Each month students are required to write a piece of one or more paragraphs. In the beginning, students read about the topic using information prepared by the teacher. They then review the list of keywords prepared by the teacher and use them as a guide when writing the essay. Students complete individual work to structure their essays. The requirement to work individually is strictly enforced to avoid plagiarism. Finally, students have to write either an exam in a formal setting in the classroom or a non-formal setting outside the classroom for practice, considering all the known writing features (e.g., vocabulary, grammar, and spelling). Students' writing is corrected according to a pre-established scale.

Limited linguistic aspects, such as grammar and lexical items, can be developed using procedures like those mentioned earlier to develop students' "linguistic knowledge about text" (Badger & White, 2000, p. 156). However, students are more concerned with memorizing rules of English (which they note on a separate piece of paper for reference, like a dictionary) and spelling than developing the content. This obsession with grammar and vocabulary makes them forget about any other writing skills. Moreover, learners are not given the chance to develop their writing strategies, such as using appropriate rhetorical strategies to develop content, improving organization skills, paraphrasing, understanding different genres, developing summaries, and choosing appropriate wording/phrasing. Such skills are highly significant for secondary school students seeking to develop their EFL writing skills (White & Arndt, 1991). In addition, the Ministry of Education in Kuwait supports the creativity of the English language instructors by authorizing them to create their own activities and lessons. However, some instructors' lack of experience in English language teaching and many other challenges faced by EFL instructors have resulted in underdeveloped or weak EFL writing skills (Al-Mutawa, 1997).

Nevertheless, relying on various usually interrelated variables during collaborative writing practice encourages students to improve their writing competency (Storch, 2013). Important factors to consider include the type of assignments, participants' L2 proficiency, group size, and group dynamics. It is critical to consider the concepts and approaches used in past research to examine collaborative writing in L2 classrooms. There are four approaches: (a) pre/post test study designs (Nassaji & Tian, 2010), (b) comparison of collaboratively generated writing with those developed independently (Dobao, 2012, 2014a, 2014b), (c) process-product research model (Brooks & Swain, 2009; Watanabe & Swain, 2007), and (d) experimental research (Shehadeh, 2011). These small-scale studies were conducted in university settings and used hybrid approaches (qualitative and quantitative). Although not expressly stated, it is clear that these experiments used a convenience sampling approach.

Nassaji and Tian (2010) utilized pre-test/post-test models to determine the form and degree of language learning that takes place to cooperate with others in an attempt to write a letter. These studies examined and compared the utility of two types of production activities for acquiring phrasal verbs, in light of the increasing need for collective production tasks in current L2 teaching. The goal of this study is to ascertain whether students who worked together on verbs performed better than those who worked independently. The impact of task type on student achievement was yet another area of concern for the authors.

Significance of the Study

This research is significant on many grounds. The results could show proof of the impact of cooperative writing on learners' writing progress and proficiency in an EFL context. Furthermore, it encourages creative learning to promote student communication and writing skills, in agreement with modern era discourses. This work meets the demand to expand English as a second language (ESL) writing studies outside of ESL contexts (Manchón, 2009; Ortega, 2004, Ortega, 2009; Shehadeh, 2011). It aims to widen the scope of writing instruction and study in Kuwait. Ultimately, the research purpose supports both EFL instructors and learners in recognizing collaborative writing as a possible approach for empowering learners in writing and improving their abilities. In theory, the research could help us comprehend how collaborative writing influences the growth of learners' writing and language skills. It specifically explores the advantages of collaborative writing by looking beyond precision and concentrating on consistency and proficiency.

Research Objective

This research aims to determine whether collaborative writing activities contribute to EFL high school students' overall performance in their writing.

Research Question

Do collaborative writing activities contribute to EFL high school students' overall performance in their individual writing?

Research Design

A pragmatic study was conducted to investigate the aforementioned issues. The research focused secondary students' work in the classroom in the last year of school. Participants were told to collaborate in small groups to compose two essays: a comparison essay and a narrative essay. Participants were also asked to include independent writing, which was compiled for analysis. Recordings of participant conversations were reviewed to determine the stages of the writing process. To complement and clarify the composition stage of participants, supported recall records were used. The pre- and post-activity individual writing tasks were assessed to analyze whether any change occurred in students' writing after participating in collaborative writing tasks. A ranking system was used to assess the consistency of the written content, both independently and collaboratively, as well as evaluate the precision, complexity, and proficiency. Writing efficiency was also assessed using objects from collaborative compositions. Observation reports, pre-/post-task activities, supplemental handouts,

curriculum, collaborative writing drafts, preparation papers, writing outlines, and peer correction notes were all used as data sources. The content of pre- and post-task independently written texts and collaboratively written texts was assessed in two ways to address the research question. Initially, the tasks were graded, and the writing instructor used an objective rating system modified from Wu (2015) and Ferris and Hedgcock (2005). In an analysis of collective writing in a related setting, Wu (2015) used this ranking system. The ranking criteria rated six elements of writing on a 5-point scale (1 = lowest, 5 = highest): material, continuity, cohesion, syntax, lexicon, and mechanics. All of participants' submitted texts were graded separately by the writing teacher and the researcher. The teacher participated in a training program in which the ranking rubrics and ranking process were explained; model essays were also graded in preparation. The accuracy of the inter-raters was calculated. Tests of precision, complexity, and proficiency were used in the second cycle of review of collaborative and independently written texts. The holistic proficiency sources method was applied by comparing the data elicited from participants against a special rubric developed especially for rating the writing samples (Chen, 2016) for accuracy. The total amount of terms, clauses, and T-units per letter and the word-to-total clauses (W/C) ratio were used to evaluate proficiency. Lexical and syntactic ambiguity was used to determine the level of difficulty. The ratio of material terms to the total amount of words (type-token ratio [TTR]) was calculated regarding lexical density. The proportion of different words to the total amount of words was calculated in reference to linguistic variance.

The mean averages of T-units, clause per T-unit (C/T), and the proportion of dependent clauses to total clauses (DC/C) were used to quantify syntactic difficulty. The pre- and post-task questionnaires provided additional knowledge about learners' backgrounds and perceptions of whether their writing had changed, in what respects, and why. Participants' answers were documented in an Excel spreadsheet. Participants' responses to short-answer questions were closely evaluated, and core details were noted regarding participants' prior experience in English learning, expected writing competence, and perceived progress in writing. With this information, patterns and experiences were examined.

Pre-Task and Post-Task Individual Essays

Participants were instructed to compose a short piece of English writing individually in response to prompts for the pre- and post-task independent assignments. Both assignments were descriptive in nature. The stimuli for the two writing assignments were chosen by the teacher as follows:

- Before collaborative assignment: Write down who your favorite footballer is.
- After collaborative assignment: Describe your favorite country in detail.

The tasks were assigned to the entire class by the instructor. Participants' responses to assignments were then retrieved for data processing. Participants had 50 minutes to finish their in-class pre-task activity, which was handwritten. They had extra days after class to complete their post-task activity, which was word-processed. When the participants were writing their assignments, no limitations were given.

Collaborative Writing Tasks

The first assignment (CW 1) was narrative in nature, while the second (CW 2) was a comparative in nature. The following were the instructions for the two CW assignments, which were taken from course books used in class.

- Collaborative writing 1: *Share a story about a dispute you had with a friend and how you fixed it.*
- Collaborative writing 2: *Describe your last trip to the desert with your family.*

The teacher chose these styles of writing to assist learners in exploring and becoming acquainted with various types of simple EFL writing. The students participated in CW 1 for 4 weeks and CW 2 for 3 weeks.

RESULTS

This study attempted to describe the impact of collaborative writing on Kuwaiti high school students' writing development. Based on the assumption that writing proficiency depends on collaborative writing proficiency, the analysis of the data considered to be zero as the linear regression line is taken to be a constant parallel line on the Y-axis with the average of the speaking scores as the constant value for Y. In addition, the observed values of Y were plotted in correlation with the writing scores on the X-axis of a coordinate plane predicting the value of Y produced a positive linear regression line. The analysis is based on the fact that a correlation exists between the writing and collaborative writing scores in tune to the slope of Y when it is constant with the average of speaking scores and the claim that a positive correlation exists between the acquisitions of both skills.

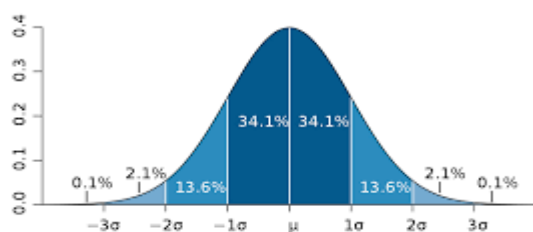


Figure 1: Bell curve showing rejection region for 99% confidence interval at a significance of $P = 0.000$

According to the findings, there is a strong connection between the majority of participants' writing abilities and collaborative writing. Furthermore, the results of this study, which agree with Cleland and Pickering (2006), who claim that adults during their first language use similar syntactic encoding mechanisms in both speaking and writing, found that the students generated the same grammatical structures in both speaking and writing with varying degrees of accuracy. Their written texts, on the other hand, seem to be more accurate.

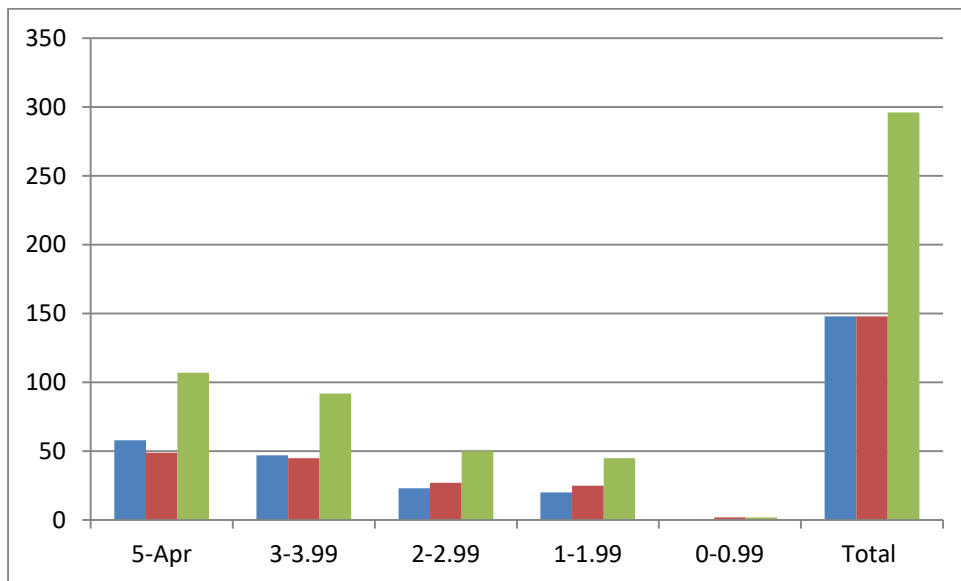


Figure 2: Scores reflecting proficiencies in writing and collaborative writing

Figure 2 shows that participants also manifested a much stronger level of correlation—namely, 84% strength of correlation. The scores reflecting proficiencies in writing and collaborative writing were measured by the Spearman correlation, which is supposed to be the more conservative and appropriate approach for ordinal scales, such as the present proficiency scales measured by Spearman. The fact that the findings revealed a much stronger correlation might look like an abnormally different outcome. The only justification for this overly strong correlation is the design of the EFL writing course from which the participants for the sample of the study were selected. Other similar studies, including courses that had a similar design and delivery, followed a more traditional, grammar-centered communicative approach, whereas in this study the course devoted only half of its time to this traditional approach and the other half to content-based instruction in which no or very little grammar was presented. This may have resulted in abnormally high or low writing scores. Furthermore, participants' scores were not too high. This may stem from the fact that all participants received the same writing assignment and some of them may have found the topic uninteresting and therefore did not respond as robustly.

Collaborative writing was found to have a positive effect on average success in both categories. Specific post-task writing scores were higher for all students than individual pre-task writing scores, with improvements evident in content, cohesion, coherence, lexicon, and mechanics. It was also observed that group work had a positive influence on proficiency and difficulty but had little effect on accuracy. These results are discussed in greater depth below. The empirical ranking scores led to two conclusions on how teamwork in small groups influenced the content of student texts produced collaboratively and independently. Collaborative writing tended to increase output in both classes. Although both groups of students improved in various learning areas, they scored higher overall in the second writing challenge. Furthermore, as previously

mentioned, improvement was seen in all participants' individual post-task writing. The study of the written texts yielded three results in terms of proficiency, precision, and sophistication. First, group writing practices seemed to improve proficiency in both collective and independent composition. This result is consistent with that of Dobao (2012), but it contradicts Watanabe (2014), who observed that students used more vocabulary when writing individually than when composing collaboratively. Second, collaborative writing does not seem to improve accuracy in both group and independent writing assignments. This observation is compatible with the conclusions of Dobao (2012) and Storch (2012), who discovered no statistically essential variations in precision in participants' collaborative writing. This discovery contradicts other research that found teamwork led to more effective writing (Nassaji & Tian, 2010; Wigglesworth & Storch, 2009). The present research suggests that there could be a trade-off between proficiency and accuracy (Foster & Skehan, 1996; Storch, 2005). In other words, as participants decided to compose more extended pieces, accuracy was compromised; a lengthy text allows more space for error whereas shorter texts reduce the space for error.

Although teamwork had little impact on accuracy, the second group produced more accurate essays than the first. This may be because a student in the second group had a firm grasp of grammar. He was primarily concerned with grammatical consistency and was given the power to supervise how grammar was implemented throughout the essays. In both group and independent writing activities, collaborative writing tended to impact syntactic complexity positively. The strong grammatically motivated student encouraged the group to use more complicated sentences in the documents, resulting in the second group specifically appearing to compose more complex sentences. Furthermore, collaborative writing appeared to increase lexical density only in collaboratively written texts, supporting Storch's (2005) claim that pair work can generate more complex writing.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the opportunities for exploring and integrating collaborative writing in group work in EFL/L2 classrooms. It broadened understanding of the complex and nuanced mechanisms that collective writing entails and the feasibility of this practice by concentrating on participants building and finding meaning through dialogues/language and experiences placed in an appropriate social environment. Students were involved in the process of L2 writing during the research and, in turn, became the primary focus of the process by including them in collaborative writing practices. The participants learned to value one another as different sources of knowledge. It is crucial to provide students with various opportunities to write collaboratively, particularly in the diverse classroom of the 21st century, where students are required to collaborate across multiple languages/cultures.

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