

LSIS Practitioner Enquiry: Collaborative writing in ESOL

LSIS Research



LSIS, Friars House, Manor House Drive, Coventry, CV1 2TE.
t 024 7662 7900 e enquirescoventry@lsis.org.uk www.lsis.org.uk
Registered in England and Wales Company no 06454450 Registered
charity No 1123636 Registered office Friars House, Manor House
Drive, Coventry CV1 2TE

Ronald Anderson

Background

I teach ESOL and Functional Skills English across Entry Level 3 and Level 2 in a FE College in East London. The learners are from diverse backgrounds, both culturally and linguistically. They are further differentiated by their educational backgrounds, with some having attained degrees in their countries of origin, and others having had either no or limited education, prior to enrolling on a course in the college.

My enquiry was carried out with a group of 24 learners on a Level 2 course and focused on enhancing their writing skills. Most of the learners in the group were at Level 1, two were established Level 2 learners, and a few were Entry 3 writers.

Starting point

Writing at ESOL Level 2 writing is expected to be complex, with few grammatical, punctuation, spelling and word order errors. Since all assignments are handwritten in class, students' writing is also expected to be legible, and organised sequentially to convey clear meaning.

Having taught ESOL learners for six years, I am very aware of the problems ESOL learners typically experience with writing. A consistent pattern amongst higher Level ESOL learners is the absence or misuse of articles and prepositions, for example "I went Westfield and it was closed". This is because of first language interference. This group of learners also had specific problems with the accepted layout and appropriate greetings for a

formal letter of complaint. This manifested itself in some learners not feeling confident in being able to write a formal letter independently.

Teaching and learning process

Having come across research showing the positive impact of collaborative writing (see further reading), I decided to introduce collaborative writing to the group. I arranged the learners into groups of four with the explicit objective of each group producing a piece of writing, such as a letter.

I provided the learners with an example text on the Interactive White Board and elicited phrases and comments on layout from the class, using targeted questions. Each member of the group was given a specific role in the

writing task: one learner was the scribe, another chose the topic, the third learner chose the recipient of the letter, and the fourth learner read out the completed letter to the class. The completed text was produced on flipchart paper and one member of the group was invited to read the text out to the rest of the class. The class was then invited to offer feedback on the text. I also gave feedback and took photographs of it on my mobile phone which I sent via email to the learners as a record of their work.

The process was repeated over a period of three weeks, with roles within the group being rotated (i.e. every learner had an opportunity to be the scribe or reader for the group etc) to maximise the learners' participation in the activity.

From a teaching and learning perspective, all four literacy skills were utilised:

- the learners needed to speak and listen to each other to decide on the topic, style and tone of the writing
- all learners were given the opportunity to write, and
- every learner was given the opportunity to read the text out aloud, providing me with the opportunity to correct stress and intonation individually.

Impact

The learners gained confidence in their ability to change the tone of the letters they produced. As an example, in the first week, one group wrote: *"I demand compensation,*

otherwise I will contact my lawyer" to *"I look forward to hearing from you so we can resolve this problem."* The group came to learn that initial formal letters of complaint should be polite and positive, in order to get a positive response, and that the tone of the letter should reflect this. They understood that if the initial response was negative, then the subsequent letter should reflect a change in tone, and not to threaten the recipient in the first letter.

Feedback from the learners on the collaborative writing approach was very positive, both verbal and via a written survey. Learners felt that their language and writing skills had improved, as these comments show:

"This improved my confidence."

"It developed speaking and listening and confidence."

"I know how to write a formal letter now."

"Every week I made improvements."

"I can see where I made mistakes before."

The learners were clear about what had helped them to improve:

"We got different ideas in the group, and learned appropriate vocabulary to suit the sentence."

"Because everyone had different advice."

"We get more information from each other."

"We get new ideas."

"Learn teamwork skills."

They particularly welcomed the opportunity for changing their roles because it gave every learner the opportunity to

practice and develop their skills.

The learners' improved confidence and writing skills whilst working in groups was also reflected in subsequent individual writing assessments.

The only drawback to the approach was that some learners tended to be highly critical in their feedback of other groups at the start, but this was managed by stressing the importance of constructive criticism.

Conclusion

Collaborative writing has proved to be a highly valuable teaching and learning resource. I will continue to use it, as feedback from learners and the explicit improvement in their confidence and writing, is both measurable and achievable. Learners feel more empowered in their ability to write independently after just a few sessions of collaborative writing, and this boosts achievement.

Further reading

Thornbury, S. (2005) *Beyond the Sentence: Introducing Discourse Analysis (Methodology)*. Macmillan Education.

Mulligan, C. & Garofalo, R. (2011) A collaborative writing approach: Methodology and student assessment. *The Language Teacher* 35(3) pp.5-10. Available online at: <http://jalt-publications.org/tlt/articles/803-collaborative-writing-approach-methodology-and-student-assessment>

Contact

This study was carried out by Ronald Anderson at Newham College of Further Education, London. If you have any questions or comments, please email: Ronald.Anderson@newham.ac.uk