

# LSIS Practitioner Enquiry: Collaborative writing in an ESOL classroom: Are two heads better than one?

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## LSIS Research

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### Background

Newham College of Further Education is located in east London and attracts a wide diversity of ESOL learners from different backgrounds. The class I focused upon for my enquiry was an ESOL Level 1 group of adults with the majority of learners progressing from Entry Level 3. There were 18 students enrolled, with an average attendance of 15. The learners were from Afghanistan, Angola, Bangladesh, Brazil, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Pakistan, Portugal and Somalia and ranged in age from early twenties to mid-sixties. There was a marked variety in the lengths of time each person had spent in the UK, with some having been here as little as five months and others over 20 years. The learners were from a range of socio-economic and educational backgrounds.

### Starting point

A great deal of research points to the value of collaborative learning in the language classroom. Breen (1985), for example, argues that 'The language I learn in the classroom is a communal product derived through a jointly constructed process'. The language construction process is supported by, for example drawing learners' attention to the emergent language, modelling it, eliciting examples from learners' personal experiences and thus making the learning process more relevant to them and also encouraging them to co-construct the knowledge in collaborative learning situation (Breen, 1985). Ellis (2004) believes that to acquire language a learner needs interaction with another speaker in order to negotiate input,

e.g. by eliciting adjustments in speed, pronunciation, grammar and vocabulary, or rephrasing, repetition or more information<sup>1</sup>. The more a learner can 'negotiate' meaning by interacting with the other speaker – interrupting the conversation to query and check the meaning of what has been said – the more comprehensible the input that is available to him/her.

I decided I would introduce a collaborative setup for writing with my ESOL Level 1 class to see if the approach would help them to progress from Entry Level 3 (the level most of the learners were working at when they started on the course) to Level 1.

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<sup>1</sup> Native speakers do this by offering 'confirmation checks ('Is this what you mean?'), comprehension checks ('Do you understand?'), clarification requests ('What?') and so on.

My initial diagnostic assessments showed that they were able to produce texts which included all the necessary information. Most of the learners were able to employ the semi-formal or formal register and used grammatical structures expected at Entry 3 to present information succinctly, with quite a wide-ranging vocabulary, and mostly accurately spelled. They were able to structure the main points in short paragraphs, but only a few learners demonstrated the ability to structure a paragraph by topic sentence followed by expansion through examples. Most learners used basic sentence grammar correctly, including subject-verb agreement, but only a few were successful in using complex sentences with relevant linking words.

Despite these skills, talking with the learners revealed that most of them rarely engaged in writing outside the classroom. They said they felt there was no need for them to write and if they had to compose a text they relied on someone's help most of the time. Their perception of their writing skills seemed to lead them to avoid writing outside of the classroom: quite a few learners said they were uncertain about grammar when composing a text and some pointed out that they were not sure about organisational features.

Research also highlights the importance of reading for improving learners' writing skills. Harmer (2001) for example, noticed that learners who read a lot seemed to

acquire English better than those who did not. Another study (Nation, 1997) found that extensive reading improved learners' competence with language, particularly writing. On talking with the learners, I found that most (14 out of 15) liked reading, but spent less than three hours a week doing so. Interestingly, most of them simply read to get information, for example, they read a letter from their child's teacher, a letter from a bank or a bill. Only two learners attempted reading in English for pleasure. The reasons for this included that learners found reading challenging because there were too many unknown lexical items or simply because they 'didn't

get it' as they lacked historical and cultural background. Some learners said they did not read because of the lack of time or because they had no one to share their thoughts about what they had read.

Consequently, I set out to further support my learners in developing their writing skills through getting them to read, and to read extensively. I wanted to find a way of both encouraging my learners and helping to move their language skills forward. Again, I made use of a collaborative learning approach. Furr's article 'Why and How to Use EFL Literature Circles' inspired me to introduce weekly reading circles together with guidance that would enable them to employ cognitive reading strategies and activate relevant schemata to help them make sense of texts.

## Teaching and learning process

### Reading

Furr advocates regular, weekly meetings in learner-directed groups with each learner taking on a specific role: discussion leader, summariser, connector, word master, passage person, culture collector. The discussion leader acts as a facilitator in the group and keeps the discussion flowing. The summarizer presents the summary early in the discussion so that everyone can remember the plot of the story. The connector tries to find connections between the text and the real world in which they live. The word master focuses on single words or very short phrases and looks for special uses of common words. The passage person makes a very close reading of the text and looks for well-written or key passages in the story. The culture collector looks at the story and notes both differences and similarities between the culture represented in the story and their own culture. Each learner is assigned a different role each week. Furr points out that the text should be a level lower than the learners' current level to ensure only two or three unfamiliar words per page.

I spent a couple of sessions familiarising the learners with the roles and also revisited and re-established group discussion rules, for example: take turns to express opinions, respect each other's opinions, contribute equally and do not use offensive language if you disagree. I decided to use short stories

from the college's library for the weekly readings. Each learner was given a story to read and discuss in their reading circle according to a schedule over a five months' period. I was a little sceptical at the beginning, anticipating long spells of silence, but the learners quickly grasped what their role required them to do and I listened with fascination to their discussions over the story's content, the memories of past events that the story jogged, and comparisons they made to their own cultures. I encouraged the learners to use quotations from the texts to back up their points of view and also to look out for words that cropped up in the stories in different contexts outside the classroom. Pleasingly, I found many wanted to take the books away with them and they reported sharing the books with their families. Some reported going to the library to borrow and read other books at home. A few learners used words or phrases they had encountered in the texts when speaking and in their writing.

### **Writing**

To start the process of collaborative writing, I ranked learners' writing abilities based on the diagnostic assessment results and then split the learners half way down the ranking list into two groups. I paired the best writer with the learner at the top of the less able group etc. My aim was to ensure that learners whose levels were not too dissimilar worked together, so that a less competent learner could develop with help from a skilful peer. I also wanted the learners to engage to a greater extent in

'reciprocal teaching' (McLeod, 2010) where both of them would collaborate in learning and where my role would reduce over time to being a facilitator, making the process a very much student-centred activity.

Before the learners started writing collaboratively, I elicited their expectations from that form of working in the class. Some learners were enthusiastic saying it would be helpful to pool ideas and seek each other's help. Some learners were concerned. Although they were comfortable about the collaborative reading activity, they were more concerned about receiving help from each other than the teacher for writing.

I took the learners step by step through the process to demonstrate stages the writing process should be broken into: brainstorming ideas, deciding which ones to keep, putting them in the order in which they would be presented including deciding how to link the ideas and how to expand them, drafting and finally proofreading.

Each collaborative writing session took place every two or three weeks over a period of five months. As with their 'regular' writing lessons (when the learners wrote on their own), the writing task was preceded by a whole group discussion of the particular genre features and an opportunity to study examples. We did quite a lot of pair and group oral activities around the topic to activate schemata and

generate ideas and vocabulary, compared and contrasted features of spoken and written language. We also studied grammatical forms.

In my teaching I aim to use my learners' prior knowledge to make lessons more meaningful for them and address areas they find problematic. To find appropriate writing topics, I explored and used situations from learners' personal experiences that they were happy to discuss with the class. For example, one learner's twins had been sent to different secondary schools and she was quite disappointed about it. The learners discussed the situation and listed arguments she could use when talking to a head teacher. They wrote and role played a discussion between the learner and the head teacher. Next we studied a formal letter genre and focused on lexis. Having done this, the learners sat in nominated pairs to plan and draft the letter to the head teacher. I monitored their work and encouraged them whilst reminding them to complete each step of the writing process. I encouraged the pairs to swap their texts. They proofread them and commented on the content, grammatical accuracy, lexis (vocabulary), spelling and punctuation.

### **Impact**

I think that the collaborative writing activity enabled the learners' to develop their writing skills considerably. Since both learners were responsible for creating a piece of text and both came to a class with

considerable cultural, linguistic and life experience resources, they were able to negotiate and clarify forms and lexis and in the process learn from each other. When I analysed pieces of writing they completed on their own at the end of the project I noticed that quite a few of them made a plan and selected the points they deemed valid for their text. Most of the learners had applied knowledge of the genre and used correct register. The majority successfully constructed paragraphs using a topic sentence followed by expansion through examples. Their vocabulary had become richer and more sophisticated.

The learners themselves were divided as to the usefulness of collaborative writing. Some of them said that working with a colleague was 'fun' and 'less stressful'. They felt that working in a pair helped them to 'get more ideas' and stop them from getting stuck. Writing together and sharing a piece of paper taught some of them to compromise as they had to respect their partner's ideas. I also noticed that the way they gave feedback to each other changed. Before it was not uncommon to hear them say, 'It's totally wrong.' After working in a collaborative setup for some time they started saying, for example, 'It's good here. What did you want to say here?' On the other hand some learners reported that they felt they did all the work because their partner was 'lazy' or 'too dominating' thus not allowing any contribution from their colleague. A few learners said, 'I don't think we are learning anything because we are at the same level. We can't see our mistakes.'

## Conclusion

I believe that a collaborative writing approach supports the process of construction of a text as opposed to learning features of a particular genre and then transferring the knowledge to create a piece of writing. Through collaboration the learners become active participants in the process through drawing on their cultural, linguistic and general knowledge, and this greatly supports learning. Two heads really are better than one.

## Further reading

Breen, M. (1985) The social context for language learning – a neglected situation? *Studies in Second Language Acquisition*, 7, pp 135-158

Furr, M. Why and How to Use EFL Literature Circles. Available from [www.eflliteraturecircles.com/howandwhyilit.pdf](http://www.eflliteraturecircles.com/howandwhyilit.pdf)

Harmer, J. (2001) *The practice of English language teaching*, Longman

McLeod, S. A. (2010) Zone of Proximal Development - Scaffolding - Simply Psychology. Retrieved from <http://www.simplypsychology.org/Zone-of-Proximal-Development.html>

Nation, P. (1997) The language learning benefits of extensive reading, *The Language Teacher Online*

## Contact

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