# Practicing Collaborative Writing in L2 Classrooms: Techniques and Achievements

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## Abstract

Teachers are often unwilling to do writing in L2 classrooms perhaps having a notion that it should be done individually and privately. However, if writing is incorporated in collaboration, it can facilitate the benefits of group activities in a mixed level L2 classroom. According to Vygotsky's theory of ZPD (Zone of Proximal Development) working in collaboration can provide the learners with an opportunity of working at a level which is slightly above their regular capacity. Moreover, working in a group consisting of members of mixed ability often boosts the achievements in the L2 classrooms in a non-threatening environment. The aim of this article is to suggest that if the collaborative writing activities are carefully designed and monitored, it can foster the way of enhancing the writing proficiency. The article considers some directions for incorporating collaborative writing in L2 classrooms through certain activities which avail learners with the opportunity to pool ideas and provide each other with feedback in an interactive way and thus paves the way of achieving the desired goal.


**Keywords:** Writing proficiency, ZPD, interaction, group work, pair work,L2 proficiency, low-proficiency L2 learners, high-proficiency L2 learners.

## Introduction

Collaborative writing involves interacting in pairs or small groups on a writing task. When an individual writer composes with a certain reader in mind or seeking assistance from others at some stage of their writing can be said to engage in collaborative writing. So writing is no longer an individual activity but an interactive process through which social abilities of the learners are reinforced. To promote interaction in the writing class, collaboration has been

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suggested to be advantageous. The benefits of practicing collaborative writing in L2 classrooms have been investigated by several ELT practitioners. In university courses the use of collaborative tasks are very common as they are believed to reflect the team writing often undertaken in the real world (Strauss, 2001).

**What is Collaborative Writing**

Collaborative writing describes an activity where there is a shared and negotiated decision making process and a shared responsibility for the production of a single text. The joint production or the co-authoring of a text by two or more writers through connection, communication and cooperation is known as collaborative writing. Different definitions of collaborative writing have come into concern. According to Stillinger. et el. (as cited in Karell, 2002) collaborative writing is a piece of text where more than two writers are engaged with equal or unequal amount of contribution.

In an article on the technology and processes of collaborative writing, David Farkas (1991) offers four possible definitions useful in approaching collaboration through an analysis of processes. For his purposes, collaboration is:

- two or more people jointly composing the complete text of a document;
- two or more people contributing components to a document;
- one or more person modifying, by editing and/or reviewing, the document of one or more persons; and
- one person working interactively with one or more person and drafting a document based on the ideas of the person or persons.

Since the act of collaborative writing is related to collaborative authoring, it includes establishing an agenda or goal of the collaboration effort which require effective communication between the members of the writing group. The effective communication depends on identifying writing tasks properly along with distributing the tasks equally among the group members,

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tracking individual idea generation, defining rules for document management, identifying roles for group members, communicating ideas and managing conflicts.

Ede and Lunsford (1990) identify three distinguishing features of collaborative writing: (1) Substantive interaction in all stages of the writing process; (2) shared decision-making power over and responsibility for the text produced; and (3) the production of a single written document. From this point of view, collaborative writing is a distinct process and product. In the process the participants work in groups and interaction among the participants goes on throughout the whole writing process. They themselves can plan, generate ideas, edit and revise. This process is not merely an exchange of ideas but negotiations which often arise as a result of a struggle to create a shared understanding and shared expressions (Schrage, 1994). The product of the collaborative writing process is the jointly produced and shared text, a text that cannot easily be reduced to the separate input of individuals (Stahl, 2006).So the text is a joint production and the ownership of the text is shared by all the writers.

Based on the results of the study conducted by Ede and Lunsford (1985) seven organizational patterns for collaborative authoring were identified. These patterns are:

1. The team plans and outlines the task, then each writer prepares his/her part and the group compiles the individual parts, and revises the whole document as needed;

2. The team plans and outlines the writing task, then one member prepares a draft, the team edits and revises the draft;

3. One member of the team plans and writes a draft, the group revises the draft;

4. One person plans and writes the draft, then one or more members revises the draft without consulting the original authors;

5. The group plans and writes the draft, one or more members revise the draft without consulting the original authors;

6. One person assigns the tasks, each member completes the individual task, one person compiles and revises the document;

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7.    One dictates, another transcribes and edits. Results from the study indicated that the percentage of writing groups that use these methods often or very often range from 3% (method 5) to 31% (method 3).

**The Impact of Practicing Collaborative Writing in L2 Classrooms**

In second language (L2) classrooms, the use of collaborative writing tasks has been relatively rare. In the 1980s and 1990s, the use of pair and group work in language classroom was initially started. According to interaction hypothesis of Long (1996) and communicative approaches to L2 instruction most of these peer activities were only about oral tasks rather than writing task. As informed by interaction hypothesis (Mackey & Gass,2006),by working in small group inside the L2 classroom the learners can engage themselves in negotiations of meaning which helps them to make their output comprehensible and more target-like. So, if the students of L2 classrooms are given the opportunity to practice collaborative writing, they can distribute information through discussions and debates. Collaborative writing not only helps them to learn bridging their ideas, but they get ample opportunities to negotiate the ideas. Hence, it creates room for their cognitive development. It should be noted that the outcome of a collaborative writing activity is not just the jointly produced text. It is also collective cognition, emerging when two or more people reach insights that neither could have reached alone, and that cannot be traced back to one individual's contribution (Stahl, 2006). In the context of L2 learning, it is cognition, related to language learning, for example, learning new vocabulary and improved ways of expressing ideas, gaining a greater understanding of certain grammatical conventions or greater control over the use of a particular grammatical structure.

**Sociocultural Theory of Vygotsky**

According to Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory, all learning is fundamentally a social process, the result of interaction among humans in the social milieu. The main focus of this theory is on children's cognitive development. The Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) is the best known Vygotskian concept. This concept is widely used to study children's cognitive development as it relates to education. We have tried to find out the connection between collaborative writing and Vygotsky's ZPD.

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According to the theory the child's cognitive development arises in social interaction with the more able member of the society. The more able member (expert) by providing the novice with the appropriate level of assistance stretches the novice beyond their current level towards their potential level of development. ZPD is the difference between what a learner can do without help or she can do with help. Vygotsky stated that a child follows an adult's example and gradually develops the ability to do certain tasks without help. ZPD is the distance between the actual development level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problems solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers and thereby encouraging and advancing their individual learning. Skills and understandings contain within a child's ZPD are the ones that have not yet emerged but could emerged if the child engage in interactions with knowledgeable others (peers and others) or in other supportive contexts (such as make-belief play for preschool children). To successfully apply it in a classroom it is better to examine not only where a child is functioning now and where that child will be tomorrow but also how best to assist that child in mastering more advanced skills and concepts. This is where **Scaffolding** plays a great role.

Although Vygotsky himself didn't use this concept of Scaffolding, it was developed by other socio cultural theories applying Vygotsky's ZPD in educational concepts. Scaffolding is a process through which a teacher or more competent peer helps the student in his or her ZPD as necessary. It helps them understand how aiming instruction within a child's ZPD can promote the child's learning and development.

According to Vygotsky the most effective instruction is the kind that is aimed not the child's level of independent performance but is instead aimed within the ZPD. This instruction does more than increase a child's repertoire skills and understanding; it actually produces gains in child development. To aim instruction at child's ZPD, the teacher should know the child's current developmental level as well as what skill and concept will be developed next. To know these, the teacher needs to understand the developmental trajectories for these skills and concepts.

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Successful instruction within the child's ZPD also involves making sure that the child be eventually able to function independently at the same high level at which he or she was previously able to function with adult assistance. Once this is accomplished, the teacher can start aiming instruction at the new ZPD. For most children, the transition from assisted to independent learning is a gradual process that involves moving from using a great deal of assistance to slowly taking over until no assistance is needed. To facilitate this transition, the teacher needs to scaffold student learning by first designing and then following a plan for providing and withdrawing appropriate amounts of assistance at appropriate times.

**Techniques and Achievements**

Writing is both a process and a product. The writer imagines, organizes, drafts, edits, reads and re reads. This process of writing is often cyclical and sometimes disorderly. Ultimately what the audience sees is, whether it is an instructor or a wider audience, is a product – an essay, letter, story, or research report. In terms of collaborative writing, as the writing is done collaboratively, the planning of the whole process should be done in such a way that all the members of the writing team gets ample time for thinking, generating ideas, sharing , negotiating, writing and revising. Before moving on to the process of writing, the team members should plan properly as planning plays a very important role in any successful writing process. There are seven important steps that can be incorporated in the writing process:

- **Pick a Task:** Give students tasks which are difficult for them to accomplish alone.
If the students are given such tasks that they find challenging to complete alone, they will find it justified to take help from others and share their own ideas with them. Here Vygotsky's theory of ZPD can be applied properly where the less capable members of the team can get proper assistance from the more capable members of the team by positive interaction among them.

- **Choose Teams:** Let students choose their own team or make the selection in a planned manner.

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In case of choosing teams two things can be done: first, the students can be given chance to choose the members of their own teams. Here the students can be in comfortable surroundings where they can share their ideas or take assistance from others very easily. Second, the facilitator can select the members of the team in a very planned and constructive manner. Here the facilitator can make a perfect balance by keeping less capable and more capable members in a same team.

- **Spell out Expectations:** Make sure the students are clear about the requirements (e.g. deadline for drafts, delays in group work etc.)

The team members should be very clear about their goals and expectations from the very beginning. This will help the team members to plan their tasks accordingly.

- **Anticipate Troubles:** Make students prepared for the hazards they are going to face during the group activity.

The students should be aware of the possible difficulties that they might face during the group activity. This will help them fulfill their target and accomplish their goal in the predetermined time limit.

- **Consider Assessment:** Students need to know how they will be graded.

The facilitator should have a rubric and let the students clearly know how they will be graded. This will help them set up their goal and divide the tasks among the members of the group.

- **Feedback:** Students should be provided feedback both from the students and the peers.

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In case of giving feedback the teacher should be very constructive and positive. The peer feedback also helps the students to get new light in their thoughts and organize their work constructively.

- **Revising:** Student s should be given ample time to revise their work.

Revision can be done alone or the members of the other teams can assist each other in this regard.

The above mentioned steps can be successfully maintained if the students follow some techniques during the group activity. These techniques should serve to encourage brainstorming, drafting, writing, feedback, revising, and editing in a cyclical fashion. This will encourage the idea that learning to write is more than creating a final product; it is the learning of a series of skills leading to the product.

The whole writing process can be divided in three phases:

- Pre writing
- Writing
- Post Writing

- **Pre writing**

Pre writing includes some activities that make the students brainstorm and bring in their schemata into the thinking process which eventually enhance their ideas. Instructors often feel a tension between providing students a topic for writing and allowing students to formulate their own topics. Whichever the instructor decides upon, the students will have to come up with ideas to use in their assignment. These ideas will not come fully formed, so it is helpful to provide activities that allow them to "think on paper." In this way, they can develop their thoughts before spending time writing a more formal essay.

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**Brainstorming:** In collaborative writing the team members can list all the ideas they can think of related to a topic, either in writing or aloud, quickly and without much planning. If no topic is given, then the students can brainstorm possible topics. The students should be given ample time for this activity as the most obvious, and sometimes clichéd ideas, come early in the process. When they have time to get past these ideas, more sophisticated and original ideas often surface. From the list of brainstormed ideas or topics, students can choose those they are most interested in, or feel they can write proficiently about.

**Mind mapping/Word mapping:** Mind mapping orWord mapping is more visual than brainstorming that promotes vocabulary development. When students create word maps, they begin with an idea at the top or centre of a blank piece of paper. In terms of collaborative writing all the members of the group should be given equal opportunity to contribute to the ideas or words. The students think of related ideas or words and draw relationships with a series of boxes, circles and arrows.

**Quick writing:** Quick writing is where students begin with a topic, but then write rapidly about it. The student are usually given a time limit of 10 to 15 minutes, and are instructed not to erase or cross out text, to keep writing without stopping, and to just let the ideas and words come out without concern for spelling, grammar, or punctuation. In the case of collaborative writing the group members can do quick writing individually and then share their writings with each other and from that they can jot down the most constructive ideas from everyone's writing.

- **Writing:** This is the central part of the writing process where students prepare their drafts, get feedback and revise.

**Drafting:** After developing the topics and ideas the students write their first draft. In terms of collaborative writing the group members can divide the task of writing among themselves. Ample time should be given for the first draft, and students should be reminded that at this point they need to focus on the development of ideas and the organization of those ideas than the development of perfect grammar, punctuation, or spelling.

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**Feedback:** After the draft is handed in, the instructor can make comments, but only in keeping with the instructions given to students; make comments more on the ideas and the organization than on the grammar and spelling. At this point the instructor can also utilize peer feedback. Students exchange papers and provide each other with comments on the paper's contents.

**Revising:** After the students have received feedback; they can begin the process of receiving their papers. The students often mistake the idea of revision with "correcting mistakes"(Sommers,1980), so they should spend time talking about the process of reorganization, developing ideas, and so forth, as separate from editing for grammar and spelling.

**Some Collaborative Writing Activities**

There are various types of collaborative writing activities which can be done in the classroom. One type of activity can be the **time-honored circle writing** activity. In this writing process one student writes a line, then passes it on to another who writes the next line and so on. Sometimes in this type of writing activity the teacher needs to monitor whether the students are producing a coherent or cohesive outcome

Another activity can be **Genre Circle Writing**. This works beautifully with more advanced learners who have been learning about the features of different genres. Start by brainstorming different types of narrative genres, such as news article, romance, conversation, fairytale, sci-fi. Ask each student to choose a genre they would like to write in and ask them to think about the features of their genre, e.g. typical vocabulary and fixed expressions, register, word and sentence length. Put the students into groups of 5-6, then ask each of the to write the first paragraph of a narrative in their genre. After an agreed time limit they pass the papers clockwise, read the new story and write the next paragraph, but in their own genre, rather than following the original genre. Continue until the story reaches its originator, who writes the concluding paragraph. Some of the stories can then be read aloud and the students listening have

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to say what genre they think each paragraph is. These texts won't be any more coherent than the usual circle writing texts, but they are really good for raising awareness of genre.

**Jigsaw writing** is another way of structuring collaborative writing, so that the process is clearly defined. This works well with picture stories or cartoon strips. Put students into small groups and give each group one or two pictures from the sequence. They have to write a paragraph describing what is happening or happened in their picture(s), and should have a copy each. Incidentally, make sure everyone is using the same tense. Then regroup the students into larger groups so that there is someone in each group who has written about each of the pictures, and ask them to decide on the correct order of the pictures and make any changes necessary to turn their paragraphs into a coherent whole. Students can then read and compare the different versions.

If students are quite used to working together, and don't need quite so much structure, adding an element of competition can provide some fun and motivation. This activity also comes from Learner-based Teaching. Ask the class to choose a current event or issue. Then put them into small groups (3-4) and ask them to write a short article about it together. They should try to make the article as informative as possible. Once the groups have finished the articles are passed around. Each group should look for pieces of information or facts which their group did not remember. Students can then vote for the most informative (and best written) text.

- **Post Writing:** Post writing activities help students to polish their work. Many writers look at post writing and rewriting as where the real work of writing begins. Teaching the students post writing activities will encourage them to become writers and help them to gain confidence in their writing skills. There are some post writing activities which can be done collaboratively in the classroom:

**1. Group Critiques**

The students should be assigned in writing groups and edit each other's papers. The teacher needs to be specific on how he/she wants the groups to work. For example, one student

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may read his paper aloud and then have the other student comment on the positive aspects of the paper as well as share any areas he could improve on.

## 2. Line Editing

This type of post writing exercise is when the student looks for specific grammar and spelling mistakes in the paper. This is very effective in a partner situation, which allows students to focus on the paper in front of them and work silently. It also provides a fresh set of eyes for the paper.

## 3. Creating an Outline

In academic or research papers, writers often creates outline before writing. This can be done by having another student read the paper and creating an outline for the paper that the student has written. The students should compare the outlines to be sure that they match to correct any confusion that the other student may have experienced while reading the essay.

## 4. Peer Bragging

Partner up the students and tell them to choose a couple sentences from their essays that were difficult for them to write, explain how they wrote them ,and why they are correct.

## 5. Pairing Students

Pair students up If a student makes an error with, say, the passive voice. Look for a student who wrote good passive sentences. Match them up and have them write an essay together. Students are often better at explaining things to each other than you are.

## 6. Editing Rubric

Create an editing checklist for your students to follow while they are completing post writing activities. The whole class can be divided into several groups and each group changes their works with other for checking and this can help make the post-writing experience easier for the students to complete. Before the final draft is turned in for evaluation, students should read for mistakes in spelling, grammar, punctuation, and so forth. The groups can help each other to

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proofread and edit. Here the instructor should keep his/her involvement to a minimum. The teachers should not correct the students' draft by supplying all the correct forms.

**Conclusion**

For successful implementation of collaborative writing tasks in a L2 classroom certain issues need to be taken into consideration such as the nature of task, the L2 proficiency of the learners and the mode of communication(whether face to face or via computer-mediated interaction).In classes with learners of varying L2 proficiencies, practicing collaborative writing tasks may become a bit challenging because some tasks may not be suitable for low-proficiency L2 learners.L2 proficiency is a factor both for choosing the most appropriate collaborative writing tasks and assigning students to form pairs. If the low-proficiency L2 learners are paired with high-proficiency learners and the nature of the relationship formed by pairs of unequal proficiency is monitored (Aldosari,2008) then successful implementation of collaborative writing in a classroom of mixed L2 proficiencies is possible.

Collaborative writing tasks are supportive to language learning as they provide learners with opportunities both for language practice and to language. That is collaborative writing avails learners with opportunities to deliberate about their own and their peer's language use as they attempt to create meaning (Stroch, 2011).Deliberating about their own and their peer's language use is one of the ways to gain new knowledge about a language or consolidate existing L2 knowledge. Learners are involved in deliberating about their own and their peer's language use when they are writing individually but collaborative writing affords learners opportunities to pool their linguistic recourses when encountering problems. Hence collaboration leads to the production of more accurate texts and fosters language learning gains.

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