

Peer Interaction as a Factor in SLA and its Application to EFL Writing Classrooms

Chang Cheng

The University of Sydney ,NSW 2006 ,Sydney, Australia

c.cheng10@outlook.com

Abstract

Interaction plays a significant role in second language acquisition as it is viewed as a source of language input and output. Also, peer interaction has essential pedagogical values in classroom practice. However, writing classes sometimes seem tedious and demotivated to some students in learning L2 due to the lack of peer interaction. Teachers would be keen to make their writing class active and motivating. Collaborative writing (CW) could be a way to achieve pedagogical aims in terms of encouraging and maximum peer interaction in the EFL writing classroom. This paper aims to explore the influence of peer interaction on SLA and how to apply peer interaction in the EFL writing classroom to maximum interaction and L2 learning outcomes. This paper begins with a review of interaction related theories. The application of peer interaction through CW in the writing classroom will then be discussed based on three current empirical research. Last, the benefit of CW and the evaluation method will be examined.

Keywords

Peer Interaction; SLA; EFL Writing Class.

1. Theories Associated with Interaction in SLA

The interaction hypothesis is an influential SLA theory that assumes face-to-face communication and interaction could promote SLA. It focuses on input, interaction, and output in language learning. Long's (1983) interaction hypothesis followed Krashen's (1982) comprehensible input hypothesis. Long (1983) emphasised that modified interaction, such as comprehension checks and clarification requests, is necessary for language development and could make input comprehensible. That is, learners' language development is through negotiating meaning with their interlocutors and reaching a mutual comprehension.

In addition, Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory claimed that language acquisition results from interactions with experts in social settings. That is, the experts provide appropriate scaffolding for the apprentices to learn a language. However, researchers in the area of SLA have indicated that peers may provide scaffolding in pairs or group work, where the position of the expert is flexible or shared (Storch, 2019).

However, Swain (1985), who was influenced by Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory, argued that learners' language development is attributed to the comprehensible output. Swain's (1985, 1993) comprehensible output hypothesis emphasised that learners need to be pushed to produce language. The output language needs to be accurate and can be understood by their interlocutors during the communication.

2. Definition and the Theoretical Framework of CW

Li and Zhang (2021) indicated that the interaction hypothesis, comprehensible output hypothesis, and sociocultural theory had shed light on collaborative writing (CW) research. CW

can be defined as an activity that allows two or more learners to work in a small group to produce a common text (Storch, 2019). This type of writing values sustained peer interaction, negotiation of meaning, joint decision-making, and shared responsibility among learners during the writing process.

From the interactionists' perspective (Long, 1983; Swain, 1993), CW tasks provide L2 learners more peer interaction opportunities with modified input/output and corrective peer feedback, which in turn facilitate L2 learning and development (Li & Zhang, 2021). Also, peer interaction in CW could enable learners to recognise the gap between their interlanguage and the target language, test language and focus on form (Torres & Cung, 2019).

On the other hand, from the sociocultural theory perspective (Vygotsky, 1978), peer interaction is a type of social interaction which could accelerate L2 learning and development in learners' Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). Collective scaffolding takes place during peer interaction in CW activities (Li & Zhang, 2021). That is, learners are novices and experts simultaneously and provide or receive adjusted assistance in peer interaction, thereby promoting learners' L2 development in their ZPD. In these senses, collaborative working could outperform an individual's work.

Theoretically, CW seems to be well supported. A number of previous studies have demonstrated that CW tasks are beneficial to learners' L2 development with more learning and peer interaction opportunities in the language classroom (e.g., Bhowmik et al., 2019; Zhai, 2021). Three empirical research with significance for teaching practice has been selected for discussion as follows.

3. Proposed Application

In order to effectively employ CW in teaching practice, four teaching applications in EFL classrooms will be proposed mainly based on the three studies mentioned above. First, CW tasks should be designed to meet students' needs and enhance negotiation meaning and form (Villarreal & Gil-Sarratea, 2020). For instance, CW topics should be relevant to the learners; otherwise, they may not have the motivation to engage in CW tasks. Also, writing materials should be selected or adjusted to fit students' language proficiency levels. This would enhance L2 learners' learning process and push learners to produce both written and spoken language (Storch, 2013) in the EFL classroom. Correspondingly, learners could have more opportunities to engage in the target language.

Moreover, teachers should provide explicit instruction on CW activities and ensure students are aware of the values of this practice. Correspondingly, teamwork skills should also be instructed to the learners as learners work in the same group shared responsibility, co-ownership, and decision-making authority. For example, teachers could introduce CW practice in phases according to the framework of CW (Pham, 2021) to students and have them aware of each member's job in the group writing process. Moreover, teachers should go through the text quality rubric with learners before they start to work collaboratively, as Zhang (2018) did. In order to encourage learners to take the initiative in peer interaction, the teacher could inform learners that all group members would receive the same grade for their CW based on that text quality rubric, encouraging every learner to make a contribution to their writing products.

Furthermore, as for group formation, teachers could group students into different small groups depending on the size of the class. However, teachers should consider giving students options to select their partners with some warming-up activities, providing learners with opportunities to be familiar with each other (Zhang, 2018). This would encourage all learners to establish a positive bond with their partners, thereby promoting quality of interaction during the CW process. For instance, having students work together on different subtasks (Bhowmik et al.,

2019) would help learners become familiar with their group members and become more comfortable with CW activities.

Last, EFL teachers should change their beliefs about L1 use in the CW process. It is not advisable to expect all learners to use the target language to interact with their partners during the collaboration. As suggested by Zhang (2018), Villarreal and Gil-Sarratea (2020), L1 serves as a metalinguistic function, which is one of the functions of output (Swain, 1993) during the collaboration, allowing learners to scaffold each other in language output. Thus, teachers should embrace L1 use and allow students to choose peer interaction language use in completing CW tasks. This would assist learners in bridging their ZPD and promoting L2 learning.

To sum up, teachers need to consider comprehensively and well-prepared to help optimise meaningful peer interaction among learners and facilitate learners' L2 development.

4. Benefits of the Teaching Practice

Based on Long's (1983) interaction hypothesis, Swains' (1985, 1993) comprehensible output hypothesis and social-culture theory (Vygotsky, 1978), the teaching practice above would benefit EFL learners in three aspects. First, CW tasks could increase peer interaction and make learners' writing more effective, because CW could provide a platform for all group members to negotiate, share ideas and reach an agreement (Pham, 2021; Villarreal & Gil-Sarratea, 2020; Zhang, 2018). Learners who engage in this social interaction in small groups could receive mutual assistance, develop various ideas, and obtain immediate peer feedback from their group members (Bhowmik et al., 2019). Subsequently, students could help improve their text quality and achieve a common goal in a relatively short period.

Second, CW could increase language input and output, which would lead to EFL learners' L2 improvement and become more independent learners. As Zhang (2018) and Pham (2021) indicated, grammatical, syntactic structure, and vocabulary usage were better and more accurate in learners' CW papers. When learners work together in CW activities, they could learn from each other, and even weaker students could learn how to lexical uses, sentence structures and writing styles from their peers (Villarreal & Gil-Sarratea, 2020). Pham (2021) found that students need group members' revision to identify and correct text content, organisation, and idea development mistakes. The knowledge that argued and reached a consensus among learners during the meaning-making process would be stored in learners' long-term memory (Pham, 2021).

Third, L1 use in CW tasks may help learners access complex linguistic forms. L1 may act as a metalinguistic knowledge in the CW process. Thus, L1 may help focus learners' attention on language meaning and form and assist learners to relatively easy to retrieve sophisticated linguistic features, which in turn, contribute to more peer interaction and comprehensible L2 input and output in the classroom (Villarreal & Gil-Sarratea, 2020; Zhang, 2018). Also, lower L2 proficiency learners could employ L1 in collaboration to help discussion and negotiation move forward, thereby successfully completing the CW task (Villarreal & Gil-Sarratea, 2020; Zhang, 2018).

5. Evaluation of the Teaching Practice

Based on the previous studies, a mixed-method approach would be employed to evaluate the effectiveness of the proposed teaching practice from both students' and teachers' perspectives, including students' written texts, peer evaluation, collaborative performance self-assessment, and teacher observations. More specifically, students' writing texts will be evaluated based on the text quality rubric. This rubric was used by Zhang (2018). In order to increase the reliability

and validity of their writing scores, all papers would be marked by two teachers, one is the teacher who teaches that class, and the other is from another class.

In addition, all students could complete a peer evaluation form to give feedback on each group member's work in their group. For instance, in the first part of the peer evaluation form, each student will be evaluated if they contribute meaningfully to the group discussion or demonstrates a cooperative and supportive attitude. In the second part, open-ended questions will be prepared for students to express their opinions on group collaboration. Moreover, the collaborative performance self-assessment form is retrieved from Zhai's (2021) research. Students will rate their self-performance in this form to evaluate their effort and contribution to the CW. Also, the other teachers in the school could be invited to observe students' CW performances in the class. Based on all evaluations from the students and peers, teachers could adjust their teaching practice in the language classrooms.

6. Conclusion

Peer interaction acts as an essential factor in the SLA, and it can facilitate learners to achieve success in language learning. Accordingly, writing has recently been undertaken in various contexts (e.g., EFL, ESL) by a group of learners rather than individually (Storch, 2019), suggesting that CW plays a vital role in the L2 classroom. This is because CW could be considered an effective educational tool to increase the opportunities for meaningful peer interaction and language development in the EFL classroom (Villarreal & Gil-Sarratea, 2020). It is beneficial to L2 learners and makes the writing class more active and motivating. Thus, L2 language teachers could try to make the best use of CW and implement it in the writing classrooms.

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