

Collaborative Writing. SL in the *New Era of Literacy*

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Our aim is to show that writing in SL could benefit from a collaborative approach. If both teachers and students will stop seeing writing as a solitary activity, produced by a romantic genius, isolated from the real world, and would begin to approach writing more as a craft, in the spirit of collaborative work, rather than as a piece of art produced by an individual, writing in SL could become as demanding and motivating as any other communicative activity, and it could also help prepare the student for a world where writing is vital in building and maintaining both professional and personal relationships.

Collaborative writing; creative writing; writing reports; essays.

Seen as “a new era of literacy” (Yancey, 2009), thanks to the technological developments and the unprecedented circulation of ideas, information and opinions, the 21st century reveals itself as an age of written communication rather than face-to-face communication. “For today’s young people, literacy is no longer just a private world of a reader and a book; it is a social world of texting, blogging, and tweeting”, notes Lori Jamison Rog (2008). Nowadays we are talking more and more about a writing-oriented generation – “«writingest generation»” (Rog, 2008) – that not only turns writing into a social activity – their relationship with friends being maintained on social media through writing –, but depends on it to achieve professional success. Under these conditions, the task of teachers in training writing is more difficult than ever in the history of mankind. First of all, because they work with students for whom writing on a sheet of paper may seem a tedious and useless activity, since they are most likely familiar with digital writing from a young age. Secondly, because they have to adapt the types of texts and the aim of their production in line with technological developments.

Given the unprecedented importance of writing in society, the role of the language teacher in training writing skills is all the more important now. The most popular today, communicative approach, rooted in the theories of Noam Chomsky in the 60s, places writing alongside speaking, listening and reading, and establishes the importance of real context in language practicing over the study of the lexical-grammatical contents. Unlike speaking, listening, or reading, which are practiced by native speakers first in the community of origin, and then refined during school years, writing is an activity that is

mainly learned through formal education. Thus, whether we consider the native speaker or the non-native speaker, writing becomes a communicative activity that is learned at school. Same as algebra or the anatomy of the human body, writing needs to be placed in a didactic scenario with clearly articulated rules, which involve progression and repetition. We cannot leave writing to chance.

Therefore, the aim of our paper is to focus on collaborative writing in second language learning. Our option has to do mainly with the resources we have at our disposal, and not with a hierarchical distribution between writing in first and second language. Both writing in the native tongue and in second language should start from the same rule, as stated by Lucy Calkins, in *The art of teaching writing*, namely “teach the writer, not the writing” (1994). Handled properly, writing in SLA can be both a demanding and motivating activity, and can also prepare the learner of any language to face a society for which written communication tends to have an increased weight in building and maintaining both professional and personal relationships.

Given that writing is something that we learn during classes, and practice outside, in the “real” world of virtual interaction, these two media should not be separated from one another. Hence, both teacher and student should acknowledge the importance of teamwork when it comes to writing. The practice of writing has changed today. The writer is not seen as a romantic genius anymore, inspired by muses and isolated from the outside world in the process of writing. The masters, classes, workshops on creative writing show us that writing should be understood in terms of both individual work and collective effort, as any other profession. So, the first change when it comes to writing in SLA should be made in regards to the way both teacher and student perceive the practice of writing.

Writing should start being understood as a teamwork activity – this is the first step. The second one has to do with editing. If we need to read a text at least two times to figure out the details, the same is true for writing: for a text to be well written, writing should be separated from editing. In *Writing on Both Sides of the Brain...*, Henriette Anne Klauser (1987) makes the following confession: “I can write volumes in the midst of confusion, and I can easily write on the run. But I do need solitude in order to edit”. Therefore, for writing to be well handled, it has to be separated from editing. We have to get our students used to the idea that while editing is mainly an individual work, writing can and must be a collaborative activity – both in terms of production and feedback. We think the best way to make writing fit our era of new literacy is to turn it into a social activity.

A Camel is a Horse Designed by a Committee

But how do we do that? How can we turn a tradition of individualism into one of collectivism? How can writing become a team activity? Can we, the teachers of SLA, create a space where writing is not a solitary endeavor, as it commonly is?

“A camel is a horse designed by a committee”, notes the car designer Air Alec Issigonis, according to Jeremy Harmer (2004), trying to highlight the power of teamwork

in creating new forms. Writing is all about new forms, and for those forms to be new, writing should be first and foremost a collaborative effort in SLA. “One way of encouraging drafting, reflection, and revision is to have students involved in collaborative writing. A pair or group of students working together on a piece of writing can respond to each other’s ideas (both in terms of language and content), making suggestions for changes, and so contributing to the success of the finished work” (Harmer, 2004). Harmers’ description works good on paper, but what is to be done in order to achieve such a collaborative atmosphere during writing activities?

Firstly, students must be educated in the spirit of creative writing workshops, where everything is either shared or written together. The teacher should get students used to the idea that the whole class is involved in the process of reflection, planning, revision, and feedback, even if drafting and writing could be individual endeavors.

Training writing is a fundamental component of any successful school curriculum. “To improve writing is to improve thinking” (Langer & Applebbe, 1987), as the act of writing facilitates the linear and logical presentation of ideas, allowing reflection on what has been written. For thinking to benefit from written production, however, the texts produced by second language students must themselves follow a logical structure. Therefore, the teacher has the duty to take planning and drafting seriously. Firstly, starting from some graphic organizers, the students will write down the main ideas. Then these will be discussed both with the teacher, with a colleague or with several colleagues, depending on both the level of language and the topic. At A1 level, it would be easier for the teacher to be the one who discusses the main ideas with the student. Starting with A2, though, a good idea in handling writing activities is for the teacher to create permanent writing groups – meaning that a student will belong to the same writing group for a month, a semester or a year –, so that each time a writing activity takes place, each learner will belong to a community of fellow writers to whom to address the main concerns regarding the process of writing. Although they seem like a trivial thing, writing groups are the best way to teach writing and to create a collaborative atmosphere.

Dividing the class into working groups is the first step towards the transformation of writing from a solitary activity into a collective and collaborative one. This division can be applied starting with the second beginner level and it works well as a space of both drafting, reflection, revision, and feedback. As suggested by Beth Means and Lindy Lindner, group writing is best organized in two notebooks and a folder: “We have our students keep two notebooks and a folder: one notebook is for collecting writing ideas and a second larger notebook for writing practice paragraphs and rough drafts. The folder for final copies we call the portfolio” (Means & Lindner, 1998). Needless to say that the idea of writing we have in mind when we’re thinking at writing as a way of sociability is not the old one, focused on assimilation of grammar and vocabulary in the process of writing, but the new one, promoted both by CEFR and today’s didactics, that emphasizes

the importance of the process of writing, and not the final product – the paper that is going to be graded by the teacher. Therefore, the emphasis when it comes to collaborative writing is not on the final copies, hence on the portfolio, but on the two notebooks of the student: one with collective ideas, and the other one with drafts.

According to Henrietta Anna Klauser, the secret of fluent writing comes from separating writing from editing. Writing and editing are two different brain functions (Klauser, 1987). Beth Means and Lindy Lindner (1998) believe that the work of producing the text belongs to the “artist”, while the editing process is in the hands of the “craftsman”. In our paper, however, we consider that the entire process of writing is in the hands of the craftsman. It is the craftsman who needs a team to search for the necessary tools and building materials (planning), to make arrangements (sketching of the main ideas), and then to finally move to the actual drafting.

It is important that the student starts from the vision of writing as a craft, and not from that of the misunderstood genius, whose inspiration doesn’t come as a consequence of a sustained effort, but is always provided by someone or something. Both non-fictional writing (which should be prevalent in SLA classes at a beginner’s level) and fictional writing involve the domestication of ideas by organizing them in predetermined structures. The best way for the student to become aware of the craft involved in the act of writing is to become familiar with graphic organizers from the beginner’s level. As in the previous stages, and in the actual drafting stage, the student has in front of him some sheets of paper in which the steps he is going to follow emerge from the organization of the document in version 1 (page 1), the editing sheet (page 2), and version 2 (page 3).

According to the CEFR (2001), the production of the written message is divided into two categories, namely “creative writing” and “writing reports and essays”. It is important to note here that both in language teaching and in the CEFR, creative writing generally does not imply fictional writing, but means writing that is not strictly controlled through templates or models, being rather defined as free writing. Writing reports and essays, on the other hand, refers to template writing, that is aimed at a specific type of text, be it an argumentative essay or a postcard. The production of the written message, like any other communicative activity, has its mechanical components. In order to achieve coherence in writing and to make the purpose of writing as transparent as possible, writing according to a template – e-mail, argumentative essay, postcard template etc. – is an important criterion in writing. When the writer is outside the norms of construction of a certain type of text, the risk is that the written production will not be coherent.

According to modern didactics, one of the essential activities in the preparation of writing, the one that anticipates the actual planning moment, is the analysis on the type of text to be written. In this sense, it is not enough for students to be exposed to a postcard before the actual writing of a postcard, but also to read and observe along with their colleagues the structure and content of several postcards built on the same template. On the one hand, writing according to a template is encouraged especially in the elementary

linguistic stages, when the students' knowledge is not yet extensive enough to have at hand the tools necessary to write freely. On the other hand, it is not recommended that the only writing activity be the one with a given model. If free writing is also practiced, with requirements adapted to the student's level of competence, it is easier for the student to overcome writer's block.

The master of collaborative writing – the teacher

It is important to teach “what” to write, but also “how” to write. In order for writing to be assumed by students, the teacher himself must treat writing as a conscious act, that follows three mandatory stages in language teaching, namely (1) familiarization with the subject – input, (2) planning and (3) knowledge consolidation – output. If in the case of planning, teamwork implies methods through which we can get students used to sketching out their ideas, reflecting on them, and then revising them, in the case of input, the major role is played by the teacher. He is the one whose mission is to build the motivation and to awaken the students' enthusiasm. So, despite the new theories that state that language learning should be student-centered, we think that for writing to be a collaborative activity, the SL teacher should be at the center of the writing activity. The teacher not only finds methods to outline and “divide the piece into several major categories” (Means & Lindner, 1998), he is also the master of collaborative writing.

In this role, the teacher needs to know how to train both “creative writing” and “writing reports and essays”, starting, as we mentioned before, from the beginner's level. When it comes to writing reports and essays, we think the best way to make it collaborative is through group works. Let's take for example writing a postcard on WhatsApp at A2 level. Here the role of the teacher is two-fold: he is both a master of the group world he created, but also the students' assistant – she/he puts herself/himself in student's service, provides materials, gives suggestions, answers questions etc.

Firstly, the teacher discusses with the students on two models of postcards, then creates as many groups as the number of writing groups in the class. After the groups are created, he asks students to start talking via WhatsApp, and to choose a destination, a place for accommodation, which they can search on the internet –, how long are they going to stay there, the period they choose, and the activities they are doing. After planning and drafting ends, the teacher will switch groups as follows: the first group is moved in the second WhatsApp group, the second into third and so on. The purpose is for the students to exchange the notes, so that when it comes to actually writing the first version of the postcard, the groups won't be using their own notes. In this way, the students don't get bored, and writing can be a demanding activity.

After writing the first draft, the teacher will project on the screen some criteria for feedback, so that the students will be able to evaluate their colleagues' papers. Groups exchange first versions this time and evaluate them according to the teacher's criteria

through WhatsApp messages for fifteen minutes. After that, the groups will receive their feedback in the form of shared message, and each group will have ten minutes to discuss the observations and then, after the time is up, to ask their colleagues to justify their observations. In the end, each group will write the second version of the postcard, under the teacher's supervision, on a sheet of paper this time. When they are done, they will place the paper in the writing group's portfolio, where it will stay until the end of A2 level, when they are going to re-evaluate all the papers in the portfolio by themselves, according to teacher's criteria.

When it comes to creative writing, though, the atmosphere should be more relaxed than in the previous example. The teacher is meant to ensure a medium similar to the one used by writers/teachers in creative writing workshops or seminars. A very good example of such nature is provided by Jeremy Harmer (2004), in a chapter entitled *Building the writing habit*, where the author provides numerous ways in which teachers could use music in order to stimulate writing. The main idea is this: "students can write stories on the basis of music they listen to. If the music conveys a strong atmosphere, it will often spark the students' creativity and almost tell them what to write". Hence, starting at A2+ or at B1 level, the teacher plays a song of his choice and asks students to write down on their paper words, sentences, expressions, anything that pops up in their mind while listening to that song. When the music stops, students will start discussing their notes for ten minutes in order to select the topic of their story. Then the teacher writes down on a blackboard the first line of their story, asking whoever feels inspired to write the next one and so on and so forth until the writing gets its flow. When (and if) the students feel that they have no ideas left, then the teacher plays another song and repeats the process, and so on, until the story seems to write itself.

We can use ChatGPT or other apps in order to explore our artistic nature, or to learn another language, we can also practice speaking with native speakers and improve our language level, but when it comes to witting in second language and collaborative writing in particular, we think the role of the language teacher is indisputable. He is the key to both creative writing and writing reports and essays, as well as to the way students acknowledge the process of writing.

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