COLLABORATIVE WRITING IN EFL CONTEXT: A LITERATURE REVIEW OF RESEARCH REPORTS IN THE LAST DECADE*

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ABSTRACT

The 4 Cs 21st century skills framework has included collaboration as one of the critical skills for now and future generation living. In EFL context, studies about collaboration are often connected with collaborative writing (CW). This strategy has been more popular especially in higher education as academic writing and collaboration skills development strategy. Numbers of studies reported not only the outcome but also the process of collaborative writing. This paper synthesizes research reports in the last decade collected from online publication including unpublished thesis and dissertation as well as articles in journals related to language education. Inspired by Dillenbourg (1996), this synthesis report is organized into four dimensions; focus on effect, condition, interaction, and technology use. Finally, some possible future research questions are pointed out.

Keywords: collaboration, academic writing, Collaborative Writing, EFL, higher education

Introduction

Collaboration has been more familiar in education since it's one of the skills in 21st-century living (Mercier, 2015). There are two main factors contribute to the popularity of collaboration skills. First, research advises that people with outstanding collaboration skills perform better in school. For instance, an experimental study exploring the effects of team-skills training in university context concludes that college students trained how to work together (e.g.,

planning, decisions making as a group, objectives setting, time management, roles agreement, and a positive group environment creation) show more effective collaboration performance (Prichard, Startford, & Bizo, 2006). The other study reports that undergraduate students involved in web-based collaborative writing tasks achieved statistically significant more learning results in their writing score than did the single writing. Bikowski & Vithanage, 2016). Thus, developing collaboration

skills contribute to better learning gains.

Second, research suggests that people with more collaboration skills are more recognized in the workplace. For instance, Chen (2002) found that in Taiwan self-reported skills in adaptability, coordination, decision-making, leadership, and interpersonal skills were confidently linked with performance appraisal scores, salaries, and bonuses. The skills to work in teams are significantly needed in most of the work organization. Therefore, Salas, Shuffler, Thayer, Bedwell & Lazzara (2014) synthesized studies about teams in the organization and provide a practical guide to understand and improve teamwork quality. In other words, having better collaboration skills lead to better recognition in the workplace and also contributes to the organization development.

Therefore, because of the good value of collaboration skills in the students' future education and work, it looks prominent to believe that social interaction skills should to be highlighted in schools and need be explicitly taught rather than self-learning. Familiarity and involvement to collaborate in schools may characterize the development of learners' social interaction skills. As written by Brown (1994: 159) that

"the best way to learn to interact is through interaction itself."

In EFL context, collaboration often appears in writing skills learning. While writing is traditionally considered as an individual activity, it is quite common that collaborative writing tasks are instructed in higher education context for example in forms of peers or group work for an essay or academic writing assignments. Not only in the classroom, in real life have most people recently done collaboration in producing written works.

Storch (2005, 2011) defines collaborative writing (CW) as a joint production or co-authoring of a text by two or more writers. She notes that CW emphasizes on the joint ownership because the writers engage in the whole writing process or on partial writing activities such as group planning or peer editing. The typical use of CW is much informed by both theoretical and pedagogical justification.

From the theoretical consideration, the use of the use of CW in L2 learning refers to the Vygotsky's social constructivist perspective in human cognitive development. According to Vygotsky (1978: 88) "human learning presupposes a specific social nature and a process by which children

grow into the intellectual life those around them.” The concept of Zone Proximal Development (ZPD) introduced by Vygotsky (1978: 86) suggests that ZPD is the gap between the actual independent developmental level and the level of potential development as scaffolded through problem-solving under adults’ supervision or collaboration with more capable peers. This perspective highlights that social interaction is central to contribute the learners’ cognitive development.

Inspired by the Vygotskian perspective, Thorne (2005) and Lantolf and Thorne (2007: 216) explain the basic constructs of sociocultural theory (SCT) called mediation and regulation, internalization, and the ZPD in Second Language Acquisition (SLA). In line with SCT conceptualization, Swain (2006: 106) asserts that the process of interaction is mediated by psychological tools, of which language is one of the most important; cognition and recognition of experience, as well as knowledge, are mediated through speaking and writing.

From pedagogical perspectives, research has demonstrated that learner collaboration facilitates second language (L2) acquisition (McDonough, 2004; Storch, 2004).

This paper reviews several studies in the last decade concerning on CW in the context of (English) second language learning in higher education. The organization of the review follows the four dimensions suggested by Dillenbourg (1996: 195) in explaining the evolution of research on collaborative learning, which is focusing on effect, condition, interaction, and technology use.

CW Studies Focus on Effect

CW studies focusing on effect concern with vocabulary acquisition and the quality of written text as the outcome of the collaboration activities. Kim (2008) and Nassaji and Tian (2010) informed that CW learners got better vocabulary test comparing to that of individual learners. While, it’s been reported that CW has affected the writing accuracy, complexity, and fluency. Khatib & Meihami (2015), Shehadeh (2011), and Utami (2014) reported that the accuracy of the students writing performance is positively affected by the CW activities. These studies confirm that CW influences the quality of five analytical writing aspects (content, organization, vocabulary, grammar/language use, and mechanics), even though Shehadeh (2011) noted that the effect of CW to grammar and mechanics aspect is not statistically significant.

Shehadeh (2011) conducted an experimental study in a large university in United Arab Emirates involving two intact groups to investigate the effectiveness of CW. One group consisted of 18 students was considered as the experimental group, and the other group consisted of 20 students was considered as control group. In this study, the participants had pretest and posttest, which in the pretest the participants were instructed to write 100-word-paragraph about their house, while in the post-test the participants were required to write 100-word-paragraph about their campus. Shehadeh's study lasted for 16 weeks. In the control group, the writing tasks were done individually, while in experimental group the tasks were carried out in pairs. From the study it was found that CW has a significant effect on the aspect of content, organization, and vocabulary; but not significant for grammar and mechanics.

Instead of using an analytical rubric, another study by Wigglesworth and Storch (2009) measured the accuracy of the students writing performance through quantitative calculation on the percentage of error-free T-Units and error-free clauses. Wigglesworth and Storch (2009) compared the result of individual versus pair

writing and found that collaboration impacted positively on accuracy. This means that the pair work writing has a higher percentage of error-free T-Units and error-free clauses.

Different from the accuracy aspect, the studies on the effect of CW to complexity aspect informed that collaboration appears to have no impact on grammatical complexity and there are no statistically significant differences between the texts produced by the pairs and those produced by the individuals. This finding recommends further research to investigate the other construct to measure complexity. Also, the other underexplored area calling for further research is the effect of CW to students' fluency in writing (i.e., length of words) as suggested by Biria and Jafari (2013) and Wigglesworth and Storch (2009).

Along with the investigations of CW effects to vocabulary acquisition and students' writing quality, the influence of CW tasks in shaping the students and teachers' perceptions toward CW has been explored (Al Ajmi & Ali, 2014; Dabao & Blum, 2013; Lina & Maarof, 2013; Shehadeh, 2011). Although some challenges were reported for example unproductive CW group members, conflicting opinions, bossy group members (Al Ajmi & Ali study, 2014) and class size, time constraints, and

teachers' ability to facilitate and guide the CW process (Lina & Maarof, 2013); studies on perception toward CW tend to show that most students and teachers generally have positive views to CW and perceive to get more benefits from CW activities.

CW Studies Focus on Condition

CW studies focusing on condition concern with the role of factors contributing to the quality of collaboration and the outcome of CW for example language proficiency (Ajideh, Leitner, & Yazdi-Amirkhiz, 2016; Watanabe and Swain, 2007), pattern of interaction (Watanabe and Swain, 2007), number of participants (Dabao, 2012; Storch, 2002 a, 2002b, 2004, 2007, 2008), the task variation (McDonough and Fuentes, 2015; Kim and McDonough, 2011; Lassiter, 2014), and member personality, collaboration experience as well as cultural values (Rezeki, 2016).

Watanabe and Swain (2007) examined 12 Japanese learners in a non-credit ESL programme at a Canadian university which were grouped based on their English proficiency. They aimed to explore the effects of proficiency differences and patterns of interaction on L2 learning through the examination of collaborative dialogue and post-test performance. The findings suggested that the core-high pairs produced a

higher frequency of language-related episodes (LREs) than that of the core-low pairs. However, the core participants learned more when working with lower proficiency peers than higher proficiency peers, suggesting that there is indeed value for more proficient students to be paired with less proficient peers. Watanabe and Swain (2007) claimed that proficiency differences do not necessarily affect the nature of peer assistance and L2 learning because learning occurs *in* interaction, not *as a result of* interaction. However, different findings on the role of language proficiency are reported by Ajideh, Leitner, & Yazdi-Amirkhiz (2016) and Kim and McDonough (2011). Their study found that language proficiency does affect the problem-solving process during collaboration.

Beside proficiency differences, number of participants in CW has been known as one of the influencing factors. Confirming the previous intensive studies reported by Storch (2002, 2004, 2007, 2008) and Watanabe and Swain (2007) about the role of number of participants and patterns of interaction in conditioning the quality of collaboration, Dobao (2012) compared the writing performance of intermediate learners by groups of four learners, pairs, and individual

learners. This study focused on the effect of the number of participants to the fluency, complexity, and accuracy of the produced written texts. Besides, Dabao's study (2012) also investigated the characteristics of the spoken interaction between the pairs and the groups as they collaborate during the writing process. The analysis of interaction through the language-related episodes (LREs) revealed that pairs produced fewer LREs and a lower percentage of correctly resolved LREs than groups. Finally, the texts written by the groups were more accurate compared to those written by pairs or individuals. These findings are in line with Wiggleworth and Storch (2012) who argue that learners doing pair writing activities can improve learning by providing opportunities for discussing of language.

Beside language proficiency, number of participants, and patterns of interaction, tasks variation may impact the CW process. Kim (2009) argued the role of task complexity on learner-learner interaction. In line with Kim, McDonough and Fuentes (2015) compared the difference between problem/solution and cause/effect paragraphs produced by the students collaboratively and individually. The result showed that cause/effect writing tasks lead to higher complexity paragraphs

performed by collaborative pairs. Another collaborative tasks study found that jigsaw, text construction, and dictogloss were effective in conditioning the students eliciting more language-related episodes (LREs) (De la Colina and Garcia Mayo, 2007 in Storch, 2011). Then, informed by the role of tasks variation in promoting CW, Lassiter (2014) proposes a writing module for undergraduate EFL learners using genre-based and collaborative learning approach. However, the other study found that there's no strong connection between prewriting task discussions and the writing outcome (Neuman and McDonough, 2015). Neuman and McDonough (2015) investigated the relationship between interaction during prewriting tasks and students' written texts in an EAP program at Concordia University in Montreal, Canada. Being informed that some learners may prefer to work individually rather than in a group, Neuman and McDonough (2015) let the learners decide their preferences. While, investigation to group interactions showed that structured collaborative prewriting tasks lead to student talks about the content and organization, but there's a less convincing relationship between prewriting task discussions and the quality of students' written text.

Considering that most factors known are more external, Chen (2015) focuses on the internal factors to approach CW, students' cognitive knowledge, and attitude. In addition, Rezeki (2016) conducted a qualitative study and mentioned several other attributes affecting the process of CW such as member personality, collaboration experience, and cultural values.

In sum, CW studies focusing on condition have informed several internal and external attributes affecting the process and result of CW. However, further exploration of the other psychological factors such as motivation, anxiety, learning styles and strategies (Dornyei, 2005) possibly contributes more insights on CW theoretically and pedagogically. Additionally, within the framework of 21st-century learning (Mercier, 2015), more empirical findings informing the connection between CW process/outcome and classroom facilities/design might be advantageous.

CW Studies Focus on Interaction

CW studies focusing on interaction emphasize on the interaction during the process of collaboration including metatalk analysis on the produced LREs and the use of L1 language in pair and group discussion. Studies concerning

on metatalk in group interaction during CW activities are reported by Guiterezz (2008) and Storch (2008). These studies observed the produced LREs to know the degree of engagement so that more facilitative interaction pattern could be explained. However, these two studies were conducted in English speaking countries, Canada and Australia. While the study on LREs analysis in non-English speaking is very limited, one of them is Aldosari's dissertation. This study found that there was an extensive use of L1 in pair work activity and that task type had a more significant impact on the amount of L1 used than proficiency pairing. L1 was principally used for task management and to facilitate deliberations over vocabulary. About task management, L1 seems to reflect the kind of relationship the learners made. About vocabulary deliberations, L1 was used to provide explanations to peers and for private speech (Aldosari, 2008 in Storch, 2011; and Storch & Aldosari, 2010). Considering the limitation of LREs analysis studies, further exploration using LREs analysis approach should be encouraged to gain more explanation about the nature of CW interaction, particularly in non-English speaking countries.

CW Studies Focus on Technology Use

CW studies focusing on technology use deal with the utilization of web 2.0 technology to facilitate online collaboration. Different kinds of platform to support collaborative writing tasks are studied such as Blog (Amir, Ismail, & Hussin (2011), Wiki (Aydin & Yildiz, 2014; Chaoa & Lo, 201; Elola, 2010; Larrañaga, 2012), Google Doc (Bikowski & Vithanage, 2016; Handayani, 2012; Kessler, Bikowski, and Boggs, 2012), Viber (Challob, Abu Bakar & Latif, 2016), Etherpad (Brodahl, Hadjerrouit & Hansen, 2011), and Blackboard (Choi, 2014). Although most of the studies give the impression that those platforms are beneficial, it is lack of information on which platform is preferable by students in EFL context within a various degree of ICT literacy.

The studies on web 2.0 technology investigated several aspects for example the students perceptions on how certain online collaborative platform can facilitate language learning (Amir, Ismail, & Hussin, 2011; Aydin & Yildiz, 2014; Larrañaga, 2012), attitudes toward the use of technology for CW (Brodahl, Hadjerrouit & Hansen, 2011), how technology affect the accuracy, complexity, and fluency (Elola, 2010), the constraints

(Handayani, 2012), teachers' ICT familiarization (Cahyono & Mutiaraningrum, 2016), and the role of planning and preparation (Choi, 2014), as well as the interaction nature (Choi, 2014; Kessler, Bikowski, and Boggs, 2012). Even though numerous studies explain the nature of interaction in CW and the outcome of the online collaborative writing task, it seems less information explaining how individual and psychological differences affect the students' engagements to the use of web 2.0 technologies for CW purpose.

Conclusion

Emerged studies on CW in EFL context in higher education in the last decades has been organized into four smaller areas related to effect, condition, interaction, and technology used. Those studies were conducted in various research designs but mostly experimental and case studies. Reviewing those studies shares several possible future investigations. First, studies on the effect of CW to writing quality have focused more on accuracy rather than on complexity and fluency. This synthesis calls more exploration (possibly experimental design) on the other constructs to explain the effect of CW in writing complexity and fluency. Second, there are both

internal and external factors contribute to the process and outcome of CW tasks, however, more explanation (perhaps through causal comparative or correlational studies) seems needed primarily on the role of psychological differences (such as motivation, learning style, and writing anxiety) as well as classroom design / facilities. Third, further studies on LREs quantitative and qualitative analysis in CW interaction in EFL context within non-English speaking countries might contribute to broader understanding of CW interaction pattern. Finally, further exploration through experimental or case studies to understand the role of individual differences in engaging web-based CW seems weighty to elaborate how advance technology has a place in EFL writing skill development.

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