

## ONE WON'T FIT ALL: DESIGNING A COLLABORATIVE WRITING MODEL TO PROMOTE L2 WRITING FOR LOW-LEVEL LEARNERS

**Ngan Leng Mak**

*School of Education, University of Saint Joseph (China)*

### Abstract

L2 writing has always been a challenge for language learners and even a stumbling block for low-level EFL learners. This situation is salient in Macau, China where L2 writing and teaching researches receive little attention and local college students' English writing performance is not satisfactory. Additionally, motivated by the fact that low-level EFL learners requires special-designed assistance to succeed in their English learning, and that collaborative writing (CW) has been practiced in language classroom for decades but provide no operational model or guidelines for and (or) imposed limited effect on the less capable EFL learners, the current mixed research adopts the design-based research paradigm to design a CW model for the low-levels to meet their needs and challenges during the co-writing process. A total of 46 low-level EFL learners were involved in the four iterations. The first 3 iterations required participants to finish several co-writing tasks with the proposed CW model, including pre-and post-interviews and post-questionnaire conducted before and after each iteration. The 3<sup>rd</sup> iteration observed possible significant improvement in the participants' English writing followed by the final round which distinguished itself by operating a control and experimental group to further examine the effectiveness of the CW model on the learners' writing performance. Results showed that 1) the prescriptive CW model has significant contribution to the English writing performance of low-level EFL learners in terms of organization and vocabulary, and 2) participants are positive to the CW model and feel more confident in English writing. Moreover, the study also arrived at further conclusions: the CW model could weaken the observed low-low effect between less able learners as well peer feedback should be skillfully applied to the low-levels as they reported limited appreciation on such practice.

**Keywords:** *Collaborative writing, low-level EFL learners, design-based research.*

---

### 1. Introduction

As an emerging approach in second language writing, collaborative writing (CW) has been around and employed for decades in language classrooms with students completing written tasks in groups or pairs. In a majority of cases, there are little guidelines or no model of this joint practice to apply and students are often left unattended during the task. Low-level learners, who are linguistically and psychologically inferior to their more capable peers, indeed encounter challenges and suffer during the collaborative process. Existing CW practices could not cater to the less capable EFL learners' needs and a CW model is needed to scaffold them through the journey of mediation, negotiation, socialization and production.

Cooperative, peer-learning, interactive, and sociocultural qualities demonstrated in CW have been proved to be valuable and conducive to L2 learning (Elola & Oskoz, 2010; Yang, 2014, etc.). Interestingly, bodies of CW research at large are framed and being elucidated from a socio-cultural perspective. Perspectives from collaborative learning as well language socialization are missing. There is thus a need to include these theories to better interpret the phenomena within CW as well to develop a theoretically solid model.

The researcher proposed a CW model on the basis of the findings of a pilot study as well a synthesis of the three theoretical perspectives: collaborative learning (CL), language socialization (LS) and socio-cultural theory (SCT). In the pilot study, the observed 10 low-level learners were not in the habit of "planning" before writing, unable to find a way to start and behaved passively in corroboration and discussion. The findings echoed to observation discovered in earlier studies (e.g., Bereiter & Scardamalia, 1987; Raimes, 1985; Zimmerman & Bandura, 1994 etc.) and assumption that "low proficiency students may not benefit much from CW tasks" (De la Colina & García Mayo, 2007, p.95).

The present model was framed under the 3 prerequisite L2 writing stages—planning, generating and reviewing. A fourth stage “feedback” was added to perfect the CW process and more importantly, to meet the needs of the low-level EFL learners. It is believed that teacher feedback could serve as an effective interaction between teacher-student and student-student, which subsequently triggers revisions and mediation and fosters language improvement (Hyland, 1998; Ferris, 1997; Shvidko, 2018 etc.). In line with this notion, the feedback provided in this model no longer focuses only on the language and mechanics (of the writing) but also on the learners’ interaction pattern (with their writing partner). Regarding the content of each stage, operational strategies were elucidated from crucial features of CL, LS and SCT. Table 1 showed the designed strategies disposed at each stage.

*Table 1. Strategies disposed in each stage.*

<i>Stages</i>	<i>Strategies</i>
<i>Stage 1 Planning</i>	<i>CW guideline; Teacher-class brainstorming</i>
<i>Stage 2 Generating</i>	<i>CW guideline; Teacher-pair talk</i>
<i>Stage 3 Reviewing</i>	<i>Peer-peer talk</i>
<i>Stage 4 Feedback</i>	<i>Feedback on interactional pattern and language use</i>

## 2. Methodology

The current study was a mixed research adopting a design-based research (DBR) approach. The researcher hypothesized that common CW practices might not be effective or suitable for less capable EFL learners and that a prescriptive CW model could be the remedy. In response, this study answered the following research questions: 1) How is the CW model designed? and 2) Is the CW model effective to low-level EFL learners’ writing performance.

A total of 46 freshmen volunteers from two universities in Macao took part in this 3-year study. All participants’ writing proficiency belonged to the lowest level, scoring 10 or below out of 20 in their first writing task before inviting to participate in the study. Following the process of DBR study (Dolmans & Tigelaar, 2012), four iterations were conducted in four separate periods to test and refine the model. A pre-and post-test were carried out in the 3<sup>rd</sup> iteration whereas participants in the final iteration were randomly put to a control group and experimental group to evaluate the effectiveness of the proposed CW model. To ensure triangulation of data, semi-structure interviews, transcripts and field notes were collected for analysis.

## 3. Findings

### 3.1. RQ1

Subsequent to a comprehensive analysis of theories for collaborative writing as well four cycles of testing, a prescriptive CW model for low-level EFL learners was established. Table 2 showed the summarized findings and refinement of the four cycles. A L2 writing class employing the model would appear like this: before task, the teacher randomly paired up the students and gave out the CW guideline. The guideline was an essential visual aid to reduce the anxiety level of the low-achievers. Next the teacher led the brainstorming and provided language uses as “scaffolds”. Moving on to stage 2, the teacher attended to each pair to check learners’ understanding of the task and on top of it, to guarantee they “practiced” planning and organizing. Teacher-pair scaffolding is vital for low-level learners yet should be understood as “passive assistance” (offered help when asked). Stage 3 was the period when learners put effort to co-finish the written task, and teacher kept “silent” and “some distance” from them. Finally, teacher offered feedback on language and on interactional pattern to facilitate a collaborative learning environment and motivate learners to learn through this guided interaction.

### 3.2. RQ2

The prescriptive CW model has significant contribution to the English writing performance of low-level EFL learners. The post-test results from two batches of participants involved in the 3<sup>rd</sup> iteration and the final iteration respectively were averagely higher than the pre-tests; the participants in the experimental group outperformed the control group in terms of the total score, organization of text as well the use of vocabulary. As seen in Table 3, the mean score of the post-test (M=61.08) was higher than the pre-test (M=58.67), showing a significant difference in the participants’ L2 writing performance after weeks of CW task ( $p < 0.01$ ). As a matter of fact, 83% (10 out of 12) of the participants had a raise in the total score with a positive difference ranged from 1-6 points.

Table 2. The summarized findings and refinements of the 4 iterations.

	No. of participants/Duration	abstract of results and findings	abstract of implications and refinement
1 <sup>st</sup> iteration	12/8 weeks	overall: 58% expressed positive perception towards CW; 42% were skeptical	Working in pair might be more preferable than group for the low-level EFL learners in a CW task; Teacher-pair talk should be of flexibility and purpose; Teacher-class brainstorming should be lengthened to allow participants to contribute their ideas in L1 as well as well teacher to provide corresponding output in L2
		on designed strategies: More than 50% welcomed the strategies and regarded them as necessities in their co-writing tasks	
2 <sup>nd</sup> iteration	10/10 weeks	overall: 70% favored the idea of writing in pairs and all expressed positively towards CW	Included a peer feedback session to enhance writing skills and language awareness from an outsider perspective
		on designed strategies: Designed strategies A, B and C worked effectively and were perceived positively among all participants; Designed strategies D (feedback on interaction pattern) was deemed helpful in the aspects of "fostering confidence", "getting along in teamwork" and "self-understanding"	
3 <sup>rd</sup> iteration	12/14 weeks	overall: 83% favored writing in pairs and all agreed that the CW practice would be helpful to their English writing	No refinement on the 4 strategies for no negative feedback or critical suggestions were received from the participants; Peer feedback would be better done individually rather than collaboratively
		on designed strategies	
		pre-test and post-test All participants offered positive comments on the model and the 4 strategies	
Final iteration	20/8 weeks	overall: 83% had an increase in the total score with a positive difference ranging from 1-6 points; Participants improved significantly in the writing component-- organization	
		on designed strategies	
		pre-test and post-test All in the experimental group believed that CW model was conducive and beneficial to their English writing All in the experimental group affirmed the necessity and function of the 4 strategies The experimental group showed significant improvement in the post-test The experimental group demonstrated a significantly positive difference on both organization and vocabulary The control group showed no significant difference in neither the total score nor the writing components	

Table 3. Mean total on the pre-and post-test.

	M (pre-test)	SD (pre-test)	M (post-test)	SD (post-test)	Sig.
Total	58.67	3.473	61.08	4.055	0.001**

\*\*P<0.01

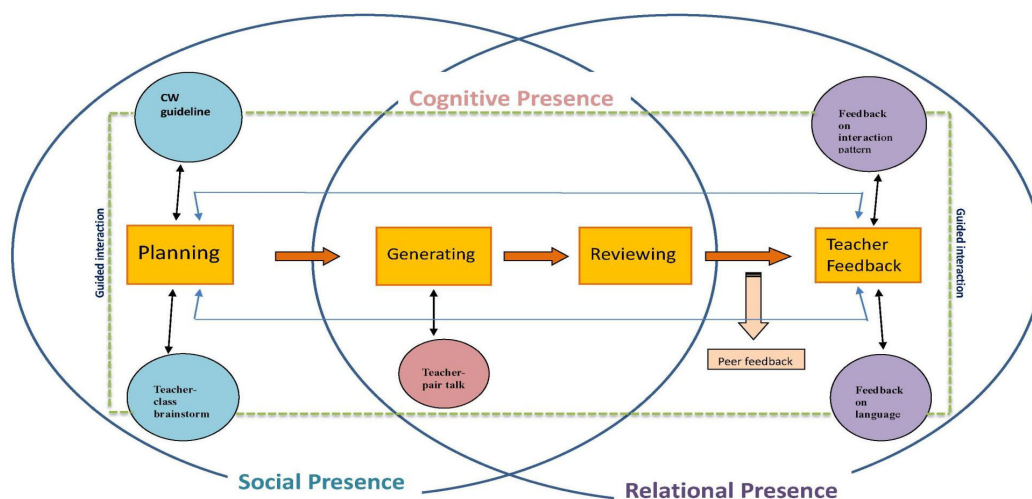
#### 4. Discussion and conclusion

The CW model is pillared by the four requisite activities (planning, generating, reviewing, teacher feedback) and composed of four strategies—the CW guideline, teacher-class brainstorming, teacher-pair talk and feedback on language use and interaction pattern. The strategies do not function independently but instead, work among themselves in a reciprocal fashion. Their interrelation and the interplay amongst allow guided interaction and effective collaboration to take place and eventually offer effect to the learner’s performance. The CW guideline is likened to a map in the writing journey, instructing the learners how to start and navigating along. Teacher-class brainstorm and teacher-pair should not be regarded as a step backwards to teacher-centered approach, but rather, they are purposefully-designed scaffolds to enable “guided interaction” and could be reduced or removed when students are psychologically ready and (or) intellectually equipped. Teacher’s feedback on students’ interaction pattern presents itself as an effective means of addressing the relational factors that are frequently discussed in recent second language studies.

Moreover, the CW model could weaken the much observed low-low effect – a frequently mentioned problem by the participants. The less proficient showed “difficulty in accepting that collaborative learning with peers is real learning” (MacGregor, 1992, p.54) for they may be so used to a “teacher-is-source-of knowledge” (p.54) learning routine. Within the four iterations, participants who are aware of the low-low effect are unsure of their capabilities and at the same time question their partners’ abilities. It is through a supportive CW environment as well as teacher’s deliberate engagement that low-levels become more assured of themselves and their partners, and that the low-low effect gradually relapses. Finally, the CW model (Fig 1) coheres with the values of collaborative learning, attending to low-level EFL learners’ needs and promoting their social, cognitive and relational qualities. The two big outer circles could be understood as the learning environment contributed by the CW model yet critical to collaborative learning tasks of all kinds. At the early stage of co-writing, learners are forced to mingle and aware of the presence of socialization. As they proceed to the mid-stage, cognitive gains are expected as learners are scaffolded to interact and conduct peer-learning. Towards the final stage of the collaboration, teacher feedback not only presents students with their language limitations but also draws their attention to relational effects.

To conclude, the finalized CW model conforms to the principles of collaborative learning, integrates the key features of L2 writing process and comprises of repeatedly proved strategies that cater to and fix the needs of the low-level EFL learners in collaborative writing.

Figure 1. The CW model.



## References

- Bereiter, C., & Scardamalia, M. (1987). *The psychology of written composition*. Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- De la Colina, A. A., & García Mayo, M. P. (2007). Attention to Form Across Collaborative tasks by low-proficiency learners in an EFL setting. In M. P. García Mayo (Ed.), *Investigating Tasks in Formal Language Learning* (pp. 91-116). Bristol, Blue Ridge Summit: Multilingual Matters. <https://doi.org/10.21832/9781853599286-008>
- Dolmans, D. H. J. M., & Tigelaar, D. E. H. (2012). Building bridges between theory and practice in medical education. using a design-based research approach. *Medical Teacher*, 34(1), 1-10.
- Elola, I. & Oskoz, A. (2010). Collaborative writing: fostering foreign language and writing conventions development. *Language Learning & Technology*, 14(3), 51-71.
- Ferris, D. R. (1997). The influence of teacher commentary on student revision. *TESOL Quarterly*, 31, 315-339.
- Hyland, F. (1998). The impact of teacher written feedback on individual writers. *Journal of Second Language Writing*, 7(3), 255-286.
- Raimes, A. (1985). What unskilled ESL students do as they write: A classroom study of composing. *TESOL Quarterly*, 19(2), 229-258.
- Shvidko, E. (2018). Writing conference feedback as moment-to-moment affiliative relationship building. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 127, 20-35.
- Yang, L. (2014). Examining the mediational means in collaborative writing: Case studies of undergraduate ESL students in business courses. *Journal of Second Language Writing*, 23, 74-89.
- Zimmerman B. J., & Bandura A. (1994). Impact of self-regulatory influences on writing course attainment. *American Educational Research Journal*, 31(4), 845-862.