A Qualitative Exploration of Iranian Learners' Writing through Face-to-Face Collaborative Writing Tasks

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ABSTRACT

The present experimental study takes a qualitative look at collaborative writing (CW) tasks through the written texts produced by Iranian EFL learners to seek learners' proficiency in writing skill and also their percepts and their teachers' perceptions toward nature of face-to-face (FTF) collaborative task in pair group. Data collection was implemented by the researcher who was an observer, interviewer, and interpreter of the findings of the present study. As many studies might devote their focus on quantitative approach a qualitative approach to such case can be regarded as one of the unique views that consider to learners' percept as well. The findings determined that both EFL learners and their teachers found CW tasks effective and innovative approach to writing tasks particularly in the context of Iran which writing tasks was assumed as a single-author activity traditionally. The replication of face-to-face CW tasks with the design of grounded theory approach of this paper can suggest new insights and understanding to the practitioners of CW. The findings of this paper might be beneficial for L2 practitioners particularly curriculum designers and teachers who seek for a more effective method of L2 teaching.

It can be said that the Globalization and increasing use of English as a lingua franca contributed to the increase of use and value of L2 writing particularly for people in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) context. Matsuda et al. (2003) identified that the research on L2 writing has increased significantly. They also mentioned the evolution of L2 writing into an interdisciplinary field of inquiry which is replete with a journal, a book series, graduate courses, and conferences etc. With the growing importance of writing in second language learning and its broad functions (e.g. essay writing in academic settings), practitioners have been persuaded to explore finding new ways through which second language learners can improve

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their writing skill (de Oliveira & Silva, 2016). In addition, according to Limbu and Markauskaite (2015), L2 writing skill is significantly related to success in academic context.

By the late 1970s and the beginning of the 1980s, under the influence of "Interactionist" attention, the shift toward sociocultural issues of writing tasks happened (Martínez-Flo & Usó-Juan, 2006). In fact, Long's (1996; cited in Rouhshad, Wigglesworth & Storch, 2016) claimed that negotiation of meaning helps L2 learning process after that different studies sought the influence of negotiation and interaction on language learning finally the impression of constructivism in English pedagogy determined that when learners collaborate with each other in pairs or small groups can get different results. Among different approaches to teaching writing, collaborative writing has gained popularity in recent years, as it enjoys some seemingly good theoretical foundations which have been derived from an interactionist approach to writing. By collaborative writing, we mean "mutual engagement and a coordinated effort by all members of the group or pair throughout the composing process" (Storch, 2013, p.3).

One of the early versions of collaborative writing tasks is face-to-face (FTF) mode in which learners are working in a pair or small groups involved in text construction through negotiation. Wigglesworth and Storch (2009) reported about Anton and DiCamilla's study of five pairs of adult learners of Spanish as a foreign language. According to them, the results showed that learners used their L1 (English) to assist them in their writing process. Wigglesworth and Storch (2009) suggested the importance of L1 in serving a number of functions in developing the strategies that can be applied to CW tasks and might contribute to ease the task of writing. L2 writing traditionally was regarded as a single-authored task even nowadays in which interactionist approach is growing in every field of Second Language Acquisition (SLA). Collaborative writing attracts many researchers' attention for more investigation but the domain still deserves more investigation in terms of different aspects such as task types, contexts and other variables. In fact, CW tasks may be applied at different levels of writing the task in the classroom: According to Neumann and McDonough (2014) which are regarded as a framework of this paper, prewriting discussions are commonly used activities in collaborative activities. Although some researchers might consider replication studies as useless and not prestigious ones, researchers such as La Porte (2012) reported that, although replication in SLA studies is not like meta-analysis which is well-established, they should be used more in SLA research together because they can provide more reliable results. Vaughn et al. (2015) found that replication studies increase the confidence and generalizability of findings, which is a necessary point to be sure of the practical value of findings. The emphasis on the role of replication studies particularly in SLA and in addition the increase of interest in CW studies contributed this paper to investigate in the domain.

The paper aims to present an interpretation and analysis of data gathered by the researcher. Exploratory nature of this paper or in other terms the qualitative design with grounded theory approach of this study, according to Strauss and Corbin (1990) facilitates extending and elaborating present theories of CW can be regarded as a significant of the study which might not have been done before through such design. This study tries to clarify the comparison and contrast between the performances of an experimental group who were instructed EFL writing through CW tasks with the control group that was instructed to produce writing through traditional approach to writing. This study also aims to seek how CW tasks could make possible changes on learners and their teachers' perception toward EFL writing.

2. Literature Review

The interactionist approach to teaching and learning the second language evolved L2 practices in L2 writing classrooms. Collaborative learning and collaborative writing, in particular, is a joint activity to learn how to learn and write in the target language (Storch, 2013). Vygotsky's (1980, 1981) sociocultural theory can be considered as the origin for the emergence of collaborative writing. Watanabe (2008) also

pointed to Vygotskian's approach to language learning as generating "social interaction as a site for knowledge construction" (p. 608). Storch as one of the researchers who focused on this topic through many research studies provides a theoretical framework for such studies. In fact according to Storch (2013) collaborative L2 writing activities including a shared process of text production or co-authoring while being involved in verbal interaction and writing task simultaneously as the two main components of the collaborative writing task (Srotch, 2013). Storch (2013) also specified three features to identify the nature 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 perspective, collaborative writing is a distinct process and product" (Srotch, 2013, p.2). Yang (2014) identified collaborative writing to have "two or more writers who work together to produce a joint product" (p.75).

To measure the effectiveness of collaborative tasks, different studies sought to tap into this issue. Swain and Lapkin (2001), for instance, showed the usage of different tasks to generate and trigger dialogues among L2 learners and they pointed that such activities are common for improving both speaking and writing skills. Based on Swain and Lapkin (2001), when learners were involved in communicative tasks, they "worked collaboratively to express their intended meaning and carry out the task at hand" (p. 99). They reported the "negotiation of meaning" as one of the principles that support collaborative activities. In the very beginning of the research on collaborative writing activities, the studies were mainly focused on the comparison and contrasts between learner's performance on either individual or pair/small group work, as an example, Storch (2002), in the investigation of different patterns involved in the collaborative writing tasks on 33 students in one semester with different L1s identified that "certain patterns of dyadic interaction are more conductive than others to language learning" (p.119).

Lowry et al. (2004) stated, collaborative writing, as a writing task in a pair or small group, in fact, helps learners to work together on a single text when the writing process becomes kind of complex in nature. McDonough (2004) examined collaborative writing influence on 16 university students in both lab and classroom settings and reported that more active students in collaborative tasks improved more in L2 production even if they did not perceive the task as a useful one. Although in this study, the number of the participants was very small affecting the generalizability of the results, the study seems worthy in terms of the findings. In another study, Wigglesworth and Storch (2009) compared written texts produced by two groups of the learner: one group (N=48) worked individually, while the other group (N=48) worked in a pair. The final results of the study showed the positive effect of collaborative writing on accuracy; however, the obtained results did not support the effectiveness of collaborative writing tasks on fluency and complexity of the produced texts.

In a more recent study, Neumann and McDonough (2015) studied L2 learners' interaction in collaborative activities and added the aspect of pre-writing to the process of teaching. To examine the possible relationship between the pre-writing and L2 writing itself in an EAP context, they conducted a 13-week study on 24 students and collected their data through audio recording and transcribing. After analyzing that data, they concluded that there is a moderate relationship between structured pre-writing tasks and the writings produced by the learners. Neumann and McDonough (2015) asserted that collaborative pre-writing tasks could provoke learner's negotiation of meaning in terms of content and organization.

Despite the growing increase in the use of such tasks in recent years, FTFCW deserves more attention on the part of practitioners. Understanding the relationship between the nature of the collaborative activity and learning process is the main focus of this paper as it might influence the improvement of L2 writing pedagogy for English as foreign language (EFL) learners who have less access to target language input comparing to English as a second language (ESL) learners. Therefore the research question of this paper can be specified as: "(1) is there any relationship between EFL learners' L2 writing

skill and their level of proficiency? And (2) what's the perception of EFL learners' and teachers toward FTFCW?" One of the possible priorities of FTFCW can be assumed as the ease of implementation in comparison of other approaches to CW such as wiki-based CW. This does not mean to underestimate the importance of wiki-based CW but to identify that FTFCW that does not need particular facilities can be implemented in many situations and of course if it is operationalized properly it can benefit L2 writing skill of the learners. As FTFCW particularly in Iran in comparison to another method of writing such as process and product approaches seem to be less practiced in that few studies have yet addressed different modes of implementing CW tasks in Iranian classrooms.

3. Method

3.1. Aim of Study

To describe design of the present study, it worth mentioning that in this qualitative research, "triangulation" in data collection was considered a very important issue therefore the data collection was implemented through observation, documentations and verbal reports (e.g. researcher's memo during observation, learners' feedback and their writings), and semi-interview talks with both learners and their teachers. The present study aims to investigate the effectiveness of FTFCW tasks through pre-test/posttest design with two groups of experimental and control group to fill the felt gap.

3.2. Participants

The participants of this quasi-experimental study were a none-randomized intact class at intermediate-level of written English proficiency. Participants were assigned to two groups of the control group and experimental group. Their age ranged between 14 to 35 years. The participants were studying general English course in "Shokouh" language school in the city of Aran in Isfahan province in the center of Iran. The participant's L1 were all Persian language.

3.3. Instrument

Data collection of this study was implemented through observation, documentation of learners' writings and their interactions in the pair through CW tasks. After operationalization of the tasks and end of data collection, the independent interviews with the participants and their teachers were implemented by the researcher to inquiry their perception toward this new trend in English writing classes. To preserve findings from possible error, the researcher kept the interview far from a structured interview to make the interviewee feel free talking about their experience and ideas. After that, all of the gathered data were put together to be interpreted by the principles of qualitative research studies such as the one suggested by Strauss and Corbin (1990).

3.4. Procedure

The first sample of the study was selecting as the intact classes which were selected according to convenience sampling and EFL learners were randomly divided into two groups of experimental (N=8) and control group (N=5). Then for the sake of confirmation of homogeneity of two groups a pretest was administered by the researcher. Each group to write an L2 writing individually and independently (the topic must be selected based on their level of L2 proficiency and interest) to check their first capability in L2 writing and rate the text based on the rating scheme selected for the purpose of this study. The control group had similar characteristics to the experimental group, in terms of, education, nationality and the

degree of exposure to L2. The researcher was the treatment provider of each session of the treatment, which was not embedded into the curriculum of language school. The experimental group was trained through CW tasks by the researcher while the control group was asked to write the same topics through traditional approach to writing. Learners in the experimental group were assigned randomly to one of their classmates as peer to construct a piece of text collaboratively. Implementation of FTFCW was done for 5 sessions to make sure that the treatment influences the learner's proficiency level and avoid possible effect of learning effect from other sources) as the treatment of the study (attention to the topic selection of the writing sessions).

All of the writing topics were selected from TOEFL introductory book (Barron's). All of the selected topics in the treatment were chosen based on the participant's level of proficiency. The topics included general and interesting topics to motivate the participants and avoid frustration and overwhelming on the part of participants. All of the five tasks had the same three parts: (a) the writing topic, (b) a section of generating ideas, and (c) a section for selecting words and grammatical points into a writing. However, there was not a clear-cut among these parts of the task in practice. The combination of these sections included sharing ideas collaboratively and checking for clarification (if necessary). The instructions emphasized that participants should generate their reasons for each idea. Although participants tended to carry out the prewriting tasks with the same classmates for all five tasks over the treatment course, there was some variation in group composition due to the "participant's lack of knowledge": In some cases, changing the pairs for completing the task was a technique for preventing them from checking the word meaning or spelling in dictionary. In some other cases due to "participant's mortality" or student's absence in the session, the variation in group members was inevitable. However, each group of participants worked independently through the collaborative stages of the treatment.

In each task of the experimental group started planning and brainstorming together and composed their drafts. It was impossible to determine exactly how much time each participant spent for the generating ideas or writing, (because sometimes both of them happened simultaneously). Participant's collaboration included L1 and L2 both according to their preference and their proficiency to express their ideas or questions. One of the structured tasks is provided in Appendix A. as an example.

After the treatment, a post-test was administered by the researcher for both groups and each learner was asked to write individually and independently an L2 writing (careful selection of topic regarding the level of L2 proficiency and interest of learners). Writings were rated according to the rating scheme (see Appendix B.) used for the pre-test. For gathering teachers' and learners' perceptions of CW, separate interviews were conducted while considering that such interview if operationalized in structured and formal format might contribute to biased ideas, therefore, a friendly atmosphere which could provide an anxiety-free context was supported. The recorded memos during observation, learners' writings, results of both pretest and posttest and findings of the interview were all collected and recorded to be analyzed. The student participation rate was very strong and the teachers and learners expressed their interest and willingness toward CW tasks. Table1. presents an overview of the topics for the five writing tasks (in the treatment):

Table1.
Topics of Five Sessions Assignment

Topic	Writing assignment	Instructions
Education	What are the characteristics of a good teacher?	Write down the main characteristics that you expect a good teacher has them

College/ University	Do you prefer to attend large/ small universities? Why?	Write your preference of the university and list reasons
Holiday	What's your favorite holiday of the year?	Name your favorite holiday of the year and elaborate your reasons
Movies	What is the funniest movie you have seen? Why?	Write the name of funniest movie and express the reasons or your favorite episodes
Lifestyle	Some people like pets while others do not like pets at all. Which type of person are you?	Write down your idea of having pets and elaborate the reasons

3.5. Data Analysis

The researcher analyzed the effect of collaborative tasks on learner's performance on L2 writing. Data analysis is done regarding the Laufer and Nation (1995) suggested formula which is in appendix B. of the present study. This model was chosen for the ease of calculation, especially for novice researchers. Simultaneously, it has a transparent statistical procedure, which can be used as a valid and reliable method. Each writing task was analyzed by the researcher in terms of the total number of the word used in each task and complexity of the lexico-grammatical issues compared with participant's level of proficiency regarding the pre-test. Table 2. summarizes the parameter of Lexical Sophistication (LS) for the experimental group (N=8). The utilized formula for the calculation is in Appendix B. It indicates a significant improvement in participant's proficiency in L2 writing. Each table also can show the sessions in which participant's mortality has occurred.

Table 2.
LS of Experimental Group

	Pre-test	Session1	Session2	Session3	Session4	Session5	Post-test
LearnerA	2.5	10	11.42	9.52	4.87	17.5	7.5
LearnerB	1.21	8.33	4.54	2.5	7.69	6.89	2.27
LearnerC	1.7	15.15	12.9	2.5	6.06	16.66	10.71
LearnerD	5	6.89	6.06	2.04	2.5	2.5	3.92
LearnerE	5.26	7.81	12.5	11.11	9.09	1.36	6.45
LearnerF	12.67	24.24	25.39	4.65	9.37	4.16	12.82
LearnerG	15.38	21.87	11.36	7.14	9.75	4	6.06
LearnerH	10	17.3	11.11	7.69	9.25	3.5	3.17

Table 3. summarizes the same result in control group with a similar topic for writing task individually (N=5). It shows no significant improvement in participant's L2 writing.

Table 3.
LS of Control Group

	Pre-test	Session1	Session2	Session3	Session4	Session5	Post-test
Learner1	13.95	16.27	25.8	8.33	12.12	4.61	5.66
Learner2	3.33	12.5	9.09	2.5	15.38	3.33	3.22
Learner3	3.03	6.09	9.37	6.81	-	6.97	6.52
Learner4	13.04	16.66	12.5	7.5	5.55	3.84	5.4
Learner5	10.25	6.77	7.5	12.72	7.22	2.7	7.14

As table 3. represents learner3 is absent in session 4 of writing the task in control group. This "participant's mortality" was considered in analyzing the total results by the researcher. Results might show that: (1) participants held low-level of written proficiency at the beginning of the study as it was revealed in pre-test, (2) participants improved meaningfully through the treatment of five-session course in written English proficiency, and (3) the participants who received the treatment of collaborative writing task improved faster than those who did it individually. The results suggest that collaborative writing tasks can improve the learner's English written proficiency at a faster rate.

3.6. Reliability of coding

Data were coded by the researcher and a consultation with two experienced EFL expert was also considered and done to provide more valid and reliable results.

4. Results and Discussion

It can be said that nonlinear form of thinking that was used in the interpretation of the findings paved the way for refreshing the perspective of the domain. The empirical justification of the study was the study conducted by Neumann and McDonough in 2014. The rationale of the study was explained to the participants in that it could provide more participation on the part of learners as some of the learners seemed reluctant or shy for collaboration that can be explained regarding their past experience of writing as a single-authored task it seemed natural. To make sure about the accuracy of the final results on CW, the treatment of this study was designed for fives collaborative writing tasks in five sessions. During each stage of the treatment participant's interactions in collaborative tasks were observed carefully. Interactions in collaborative tasks varied in terms of using L1 or L2. Both of them were used by the participants while interacting in collaborative sessions. Participants had the opportunity to practice in pairs. In the case that none of them could provide the correct form of the word, they asked help from the researcher. For getting more accurate and natural results, the researcher asked them to use synonyms or explanations for compensating the lack of knowledge and she did not provide them with the correct word. In other words, when one participant and his/ her partner did not know one or two-word meaning in L2 and she asked the researcher for clarification and asking the meaning. The researcher guided them to elaborate more and try to describe the meaning of that especial word to compensate for the lack of knowledge. Even they were allowed to ask other participants. This decision was made to preserve the collaborative task within participants and prevent any interruption in the course of treatment.

Regarding the interview as it was mentioned before one of the reasons for choosing semi-interview instead of structured interview was that it could minimize learners' anxiety regarding the

interview context that might lead learners to express stereotype ideas that they think they are expected to say in addition according to Strauss and Corbin (1990), having fun is another feature of grounded theory that is followed in this paper as well. It also provides the researcher with going back and forth through the research findings to triangulate, divert from the usual way of thinking, and generating a list of options toward CW (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). As Strauss and Corbin (1990) determined flexibility and creativity as the characteristics of grounded theory studies, this study also was implemented through this approach and it can be said that the approach was very helpful for clarification of different aspects involved in the research and excitement of exploration.

In spite of variation of LS in every session, a glance at LS of pre-test writing, treatment writings and post-test writing, one can easily conclude that collaborative writing had a significant effect on vocabulary use of the participants in the experimental group in terms of t-units and other linguistics elements. In some sessions, the differences are more significant which might be explained by the effect of the collaborative writing treatment. Participant's interest in some topics is another possible interpretation for the observed improvement. The other possible explanation for this finding is that due to "participant's mortality" and changing partners of pairs in some session of the treatment of the experimental group. Therefore, the changes seem natural and inevitable in some part of the study.

When observing participant's performance on each session the differences and variation among students were revealing. Variations concern the extent to which they were able to apply metacognitive awareness to understand the specific purposes of the texts. Most of the students could translate these into procedural knowledge. Some students seemed to possess metacognitive ability from the beginning; some appear to have acquired it during the course. Results might indicate that after learners have worked in the collaborative groups produced longer and more accurately expressed written products than those before in individual groups. All learners who participated in the study felt that collaborative activities through scaffolding improved their writings. It was investigated through informal and friendly talk with the participant after the implementation of the whole of the study. In fact, it was a kind of indirect post-interview which was done both for the ease of participants and obtaining more authentic idea which may not be obtained via formal, planned and structured interviews.

It is not the purpose of the present study to make generalizations based on findings of a single study, which has limitations such as a narrow focus on the small sample size. The present study results would be valuable for encouraging teacher to use pair work tasks in writing classes. It also may be useful and valuable for reviewing purposes and meta-analysis studies which seek for the final conclusion of the effectiveness of collaborative writing studies across different contexts. It might be used as a confirmatory test of the effectiveness of such courses as well.

5. Limitations and Future Study

This study was an independent experimental research which was aimed to replicate the original study by Neumann and McDonough (2014) but it was approximate –replication which was conducted with some innovative changes. Due to the limitations of the implementation of this study, this study can also be conducted with a larger sample and more longitudinal treatment. It is also suggested that to conduct CW tasks for different genders at different levels of proficiency of L2 writing to check and compare the results. In addition, FTFCW tasks can be sought regarding other moderator variables such as participants' age. Replicating this study with larger number of the participants might also improve the generalizability of the final results.

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Appendix A

Writing Topic:

You will write a paragraph about education and a good teacher's characteristics. You know personally a good teacher so describe how you perceive characteristics of a good teacher. In your paragraph, you should write down the main characteristics that you expect a good teacher has them.

- Name each feature and describe/explain it a little bit.
- Explain how you evaluate a good teacher (this is the main focus of the paragraph). If possible, you may want to mention what benefits you obtained as a result.

Part 1: Generating & Evaluating Ideas

(a) Review the list of characteristics of a good teacher and think of your own life and of the people you know about a good teacher.

(b) Tell your group about your good teacher in school/university.

(c) While you listen to your group talking about the good teacher, think about whether it is suitable to write about them for this assignment.

Part 2: Selecting & Organizing Ideas

(a) Considering talks of your group, Make an outline of characteristics of a good teacher, and then write it down.

(b) As you listen to your group's idea of a good teacher, give them feedback about a good teacher.

Appendix B.

According to Laufer and Nation (1995), Lexical Sophistication (LS), is calculated via below formula respectively.

$$LS = \frac{\text{Number of advanced tokens} \times 100}{\text{Total number of lexical tokens}}$$