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Does Collaborative Prewriting Discussion Always Help?

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Collaborative prewriting discussion (CPD) is one of the most popular activities in L2 writing classes. With the CPD task, students can discuss their writing plan with each other before they start to write. As a language teacher, however, I ask myself: does CPD always help? In fact, without providing instructions, EFL students typically talk about their ideas when they are asked to discuss, and they seldom provide feedback and discuss the organization of ideas on one another, which results in a meaningless discussion (Do, 2023; Huang et al., 2021; Li et al., 2020; McDonough et al., 2018; Neumann & McDonough, 2015; Tatiana, 2021). Considering this important issue, I conducted a small CPD project and will share what I found from the two discussions. I hope that these explorations bring some valuable information about the CPD task to writing teachers teaching in similar EFL or ESL contexts.

INTRODUCTION

Collaborative prewriting discussion (CPD) is one of the most popular activities in L2 writing classes. With the CPD task, students discuss their writing plan with their friends before they start to write. As a language teacher, however, I ask myself: does CPD always help? In fact, without providing instructions, EFL students typically talk about their ideas when they are asked to discuss, and they seldom provide feedback or discuss the organization with each other, which results in a meaningless discussion (Do, 2023; Huang et al., 2021; Li et al., 2020; McDonough et al., 2018; Neumann & McDonough, 2015; Tatiana, 2021). Considering this important issue, I conducted a small project of CPD before I brought this activity to my large writing classes to find out what instructions I could develop to provide to students before their discussions. The project includes two discussions implemented by two volunteer Vietnamese EFL students named Sao and Hang (pseudonyms) at different English levels (high-intermediate and low-intermediate levels, respectively). They were third-year college students at the time they joined the project. In the first discussion, I asked students to discuss the given writing topic (Appendix A) without providing instructions (natural discussion) in order to see whether the outcomes were consistent with those of previous research conducted in other EFL contexts. Accordingly, the discussion between Sao and Hang was recorded using Zoom, and one of the students sent it to me after the discussion. I watched the recorded video and took notes on what they talked about. I also collected their written papers (consent was obtained) and had an individual meeting with them when the process was done. Based on the results from the first discussion, I developed guidelines and instructed two students before they participated in the second discussion with a different writing topic (Appendix A). The process of this discussion is the same as the first discussion. Of note is that students were

allowed to use Vietnamese for both discussions because of their different English proficiency levels. I will share what I found from the two discussions and hope that these explorations bring some valuable information about the use of CPD task in L2 writing classes.

REFLECTION

First Discussion: Unstructured Collaborative Prewriting Discussion Task

When students were asked to discuss the given writing topic in pairs naturally, the two students talked more about their ideas. They occasionally offered feedback on one another's ideas; however, they did not discuss it thereafter. It is called “non-reflective content” (Neumann & McDonough, 2015), where students talk about ideas without evaluation or justification. For example, Hang suggested Sao add numbers (data) to support her statement regarding the impacts of tourism on water and air, but Sao did not share her thoughts about or engage critically with Hang's suggestion, and she instead moved on to other ideas (Appendix C – first discussion). When I talked to students one-on-one after the discussion, I recognized that they were not aware of the purposes of discussions. They thought that sharing their ideas about the writing topic with their partner was their main responsibility. In addition, throughout the discussion, they did not talk about the organization of ideas (how they gather and organize their ideas into their written papers) (reflective organization). As a result, Hang (at a lower level) found it hard to turn her ideas into written prose since she was unsure of where to begin. These findings are in line with those of other EFL students, such as Chinese and Thai students (Huang et al., 2021; Li et al., 2020; McDonough et al., 2018; Neumann & McDonough, 2015; Tatiana, 2021), indicating that students focused on talking about their ideas but ignored the organization of content and evaluating ideas when they were asked to discuss without providing instructions.

Second Discussion: Structured Collaborative Prewriting Discussion Task

Based on the findings from discussion 1, I developed a structured collaborative prewriting discussion adapted from Neumann and McDonough (2015). Accordingly, students were required to pay attention to two important components of writing: content and organization of ideas. In particular, students provided their ideas and commented on each other's, indicating whether they are relevant to the writing topic. Following that, students commented on the organization of ideas and whether they are well-organized (writing rubric – evaluation adapted from Weigle, 2002). Furthermore, learning from discussion 1, I asked students to prepare those two elements and questions they wanted to ask their partner before the discussion. At the same time, I reminded students to take turns during the discussion and provide feedback right away in order to avoid missing ideas (Appendix B).

Consequently, both students managed their discussion better than the first discussion. They discussed each part of a written text separately: introduction, body, and conclusion. After finishing all three parts, they also discussed a little bit about language use (grammar, vocabulary) before they ended the discussion. In particular, Sao started the discussion by sharing how she wrote the introduction. Then Hang provided her feedback, and they took turns discussing it. After that, they moved on to discuss their paragraphs (how many ideas they had for the body parts and what examples to support their ideas) and finally came to a conclusion. However, the interactions between students were not the same. Sao did not actively discuss her own ideas more deeply with Hang. As before, all her ideas shared during

the discussion were written in the subsequent text with no change. She agreed with the writing topic that children are better suited to learning foreign languages at a young age, and she had two main ideas to support her statement, which would be explained in her body text. Hang, meanwhile, astonished me by being more engaged than she had been in the first discussion. Importantly, she had not yet decided on her final outline for her writing before the discussion. Hang shared all her ideas and options (total agreement/half agreement) and tried to ask Sao to think about her plans (*“what do you think?”*) and the organization for those ideas (sample discussion in Appendix C – second discussion). When I watched their discussion via recorded video, I realized that Sao had already determined which ideas she was going to include in her written text because she did not ask Hang much about her ideas. Thus, I could easily visualize what her written text would look like. In contrast, it was difficult for me to predict what Hang might write in her individual text because of the uncertain ideas (*I am wondering there?*) that she brought to the discussion. I was therefore eager to read their written performances.

Surprisingly, Hang presented a clear structure in her text, and her ideas were relevant to the writing topic, whereas Sao had some misunderstandings. Accordingly, Hang finally chose to agree with the idea that children are more successful in foreign language studies than adults. In the body of her written text, she provided factors to support children learning languages better than adults. She pointed out, for instance, that children have better memory abilities and are seldom afraid of making mistakes as opposed to adults (Appendix D). Meanwhile, Sao wrote about the reasons why children should learn languages at a young age. One of the reasons she mentioned is for a better future (having a good job with a good salary if knowing more languages) (Appendix D). This expression does not support her statement that children are more successful than adults in learning languages. It would be preferable if she clarified that youngsters have more time than adults to prepare and learn languages.

Hang told me about what she learned through the two discussions in the one-on-one meeting. She mentioned that she listed all her ideas (disagreement or agreement or partial agreement) that could be used in her later written text before participating in the second discussion. In other words, she had not yet decided on her final outline before the discussion because she planned to ask her partner in the discussion and then figure out which way was better. She shared her experience from the first discussion, saying that she found it hard to listen to her partner’s comments, discuss them further, or change some ideas because she had already determined her final outline of ideas for what she was going to write later before the discussion. Then she just shared ideas with her partner as her responsibility for the discussion and started to write about them right after. Taking this experience into account, Hang did not act the same way in the second conversation. She asked more questions and interacted more with her partner during the discussion. This also helped her learn from her partner. After receiving her partner’s suggestions, she decided on her final ideas and outlined them. As a result, she did well in her written text in terms of idea development, which is relevant to the writing topic. She was so happy based on what she had learned. On the other hand, Sao (higher level) kept her ideas the same as before and after the discussion. She seemed confident about her ideas, so she might not have needed to discuss them further with her partner. This could be a reason why her second idea expressed in her written text was not relevant to the writing topic, which was not analyzed thoroughly. Sao recognized this mistake when I explained it to her in the one-on-one meeting. All in all, the explorations from the two discussions lead me to the conclusion presented in the following section.

CONCLUSION

It goes without saying that the instruction is necessary for students because it helps them have better discussions. However, the unequal proficiency between the two students may be a factor that leads to the problem of Sao's second idea not fitting the topic. First, Hang might not recognize the irrelevance of Sao's idea to the writing topic. Second, at the same time, Sao seemed optimistic about that idea, so she neglected to discuss it further with Hang. Thus, if it is the case that two students at different levels work together, I suggest that students play the same role, especially at a higher level, students should not be complacent about their plans. In case the partner (lower level) is unsure about the suggestions or evaluations, students are advised to seek the assistance of the instructor if necessary. To warrant recommendations for language teachers in widely varied cases, however, I recommend future researchers explore the use of CPD in teaching L2 writing with a greater number of participants under different conditions or factors (some conversing in L1, some in L2, and some at equal proficiency in English).

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APPENDIX A

Writing topics (adopted from the IELTS Test) and teacher's prompt for the composition.

First Discussion:

Writing topic: "Tourism has negative environmental impacts on tourist areas. What are these impacts? How can damaging impacts be lessened?"

After the discussion, each of you writes a short essay individually (300 to 400 words) and sends it to the teacher.

Second Discussion:

Writing topic: “Children are generally more successful in foreign language studies than adults. Thus, it is better to learn languages in childhood. Do you agree or disagree? Give reasons for your answer and include any relevant examples from your own knowledge or experience.”

After the discussion, each of you writes a short essay individually (300 to 400 words) and sends it to the teacher.

APPENDIX B

Pre-discussion instructions

Note*:

The instructions were provided after the first discussion and before the second discussion.

The teacher provided the guidelines first, then picked writing topic 1 as an example for practice.

Part 1: Generating and Evaluating Ideas

List ideas and provide examples as much as you can (this could be done before the discussion).

Tell your partner your ideas one by one.

Listen to your partner’s comments or suggestions about your ideas and discuss them with your partner until everything is clear. At the same time, you should do the same with your partner’s ideas.

Feedback/Evaluation: Consider whether the ideas are:

- Relevant or irrelevant to the writing topic.
- Fully developed with specific facts or examples.

Part 2: Organizing Ideas and Evaluating the Structure

Considering the comments of your partner, choose the ideas that you want to write up and how you organize your ideas.

Providing feedback about whether the outline is well-organized.

Feedback/Evaluation: Consider whether the organization is:

- Logically organized around major ideas, concepts, or principles.
- Develops ideas from general to specific.

Tips:

Be respectful.

Be collaborative.

Be on time.

Turn-taking.

APPENDIX C

Comments made by Sao to Hang and Hang to Sao

First Discussion:

<p>Sao: Ảnh hưởng tiêu cực Uhm ảnh hưởng đến môi trường, đặc biệt là môi trường nước, không khí, đất. Môi trường nước, khi con người đi du lịch, họ vứt rác thải xuống nước (sông) gây ra ô nhiễm môi trường. Về ô nhiễm không khí, lượng khí thải từ transportation, phương tiện giao thông, nó cũng tác động đến môi trường. Về ô nhiễm đất, như chị đã nói ở trên, con người đi du lịch mang theo các chai nước – water bottle làm từ nhựa. Họ sử dụng quá nhiều cũng gây tác động đến môi trường vì nhựa là chất khó phân hủy.</p> <p>Hằng: Trong mỗi ý, chị nên đưa ví dụ dẫn chứng cụ thể để ý của chị dễ hiểu hơn. Nếu tìm được các mẫu thống kê thì chị nên dẫn chứng vào.</p> <p>Sao: Sự tiêu thụ thức ăn quá nhiều (đồ đóng hộp), khi con người ăn xong vứt nó đi thì cũng là yếu tố tác động tiêu cực đến môi trường.</p>	<p>Sao: Negative influence.... Uhm affects the environment, especially water, air, and land. Water environment, when people are traveling, they throw garbage into the water (river) causing environmental pollution. Regarding air pollution, emissions from transportation (transportation), it also affects the environment. Regarding land pollution, as I mentioned earlier, people travel and bring water bottles - made from plastic. They use too much, so it still has an impact on the environment because plastic is difficult to decompose.</p> <p>Hang: In each idea, you should give specific examples to make your point easier to understand. If you can find statistical data, you should cite them.</p> <p>Sao: The excessive consumption of food (canned food), when people finish eating it, throw it away, which is also a negative impact on the environment.</p>
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Second Discussion:

<p>Hằng: Theo quan điểm của chị là trẻ con học tốt hơn người lớn?</p> <p>Sao: Uh. Vậy ý của chị thì sao?</p> <p>Hằng: Em cũng nghĩ vậy nhưng mà khi em đưa ra ý trẻ con học nhanh hơn người lớn, nó có một đề. Ví dụ như em đưa ra là ... trẻ em ít bị tác động bởi nhiều thứ xung quanh. Người lớn họ bị tác động về công việc, gia đình khiến họ giảm sự tập trung trong việc học. Đối với trẻ em, chúng như những trang giấy trắng nên nó dễ tiếp thu hơn, không bị phân tâm nhiều. Nhưng mà nó có một đối lập ở chỗ là người lớn có mục tiêu học rõ ràng hơn. Nên họ có quyết tâm.</p>	<p>Hang: In your opinion, children learn better than adults?</p> <p>Sao: So, what is your idea?</p> <p>Hang: I think so, but when I said that children learn better than adults, it has a problem. For example, ... children are less affected by many things. Adults are affected by work and family, making them less focused on studying. For children, they look like “white pages”, so it's easier to absorb, without much distraction. But it has the opposite effect in that adults have clearer learning goals. So, they have determination in learning languages.</p>
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Sao: Vậy chị trả lời câu đó cả hai ý đúng không?	Sao: So, you answered that question with both sides, right?
Hằng: Em đang phân vân, theo chị thấy sao?	Hang: I'm wondering, what do you think?
Sao: Vậy cũng được. Quan trọng là do lập luận của mình thôi. Nếu chị chọn cả hai, thì phần thân bài, chị phải lập luận cả hai. Chị có thể viết trẻ em sẽ học tốt ngôn ngữ vào lứa tuổi đó nhưng ngược lại người lớn cũng có thể học tốt với một số lí do đặc biệt. Lập luận cần chặt chẽ nếu không sẽ bị lẫn lộn.	Sao: That's fine. What matters is your own explanation. If you choose both, then in the body of the essay, you must argue both. You can write that children will learn languages well at their age, but adults can also learn well for some special reasons. Arguments need to be strong, if not, readers will get confused.
Hằng: Uhm, em đang phân vân ở chỗ đó.	Hang: Yes, I'm wondering there.

APPENDIX D

Examples of Hang's and Sao's composition texts

Hang: After the discussion 2, Hang determined her final idea: She totally agreed with the statement: Children are better than adults at learning languages. Although some ideas and sentences should be reorganized, her ideas are quite relevant to the writing topic.

“First of all, children have a lot of time to become familiar with languages. They do not have to worry about something in life like adults. They are comfortable people, so they can easily learn anything, like languages. Children have the ability to learn quickly, as their brains are still in study time which they have already learned much. This is the time they like exploring new things in life around them. For example, my little brother, who always watches tiktok and mimics some new words from tiktoker although he does not understand them, but in some contexts, he knows them.

Furthermore, adults are always afraid to say wrong things, but children are not. When I speak English, I always care about grammar, and vocabulary in situations, which limit my conversation ability. But with a child, they can say what they think. A character of fearless helps children enhance their second language ability, so they should learn a foreign language when they are children. And especially when they make mistakes, they can easily be fixed if there is anyone who knows how to control them. For instance, as my student, to whom I am a tutor. I said and he repeated everything very naturally. Right or wrong, it didn't put him to shame.”

Sao: Sao did not discuss or ask Hang about her ideas much during the second discussion. She seemed confident about her outline, however, her second idea in her written text seems irrelevant to the writing topic. She supported the idea that children learn foreign languages better than adults, but she talked about the opportunity of getting better jobs and earning good salaries, which are irrelevant to the statement. In fact, she wrote about the benefits of learning languages.

“Another typical reason to prove my opinion is that learning foreign languages will create more good opportunities for children in their future. They can participate in international study and get a high-salary job in the near future. For example, these days, there are a variety of universities that directly recruit entries with a bunch of priorities when they have a good IELTS core certificate. Besides, many companies hire employees with a requirement to have a certificate in another language based on labor marketing of these companies. Therefore, learning foreign languages in infancy is an inevitable part of industrialization and modernization today.”