Title: Comparing two collaborative writing strategies in the L2 Chinese writing: A case study

Abstract

During the last decade, Collaborative Writing (CW) has developed from an uncommon practice to a promising instructional task in second language (L2) teaching, gaining much attention and interest in L2 writing research. CW strategies are overall approaches CW teams use to coordinate their writing (Lowry, Curtis & Lowry, 2004). By adopting different strategies, collaborators may vary in the ways of dividing work load, distributing roles and responsibilities, and crediting contribution. However, very few studies (e.g., Onrubia & Engel, 2009; Mayordomo & Onrubia, 2015) examine the effect of different strategies on the CW process and product.

This case study is aimed to compare the effects of the reactive writing and the parallel writing, employing the taxonomy of CW writing strategies proposed by Lowry et al. (2004), on the L2 Chinese writing process and the written products. The reactive writing occurs when a team create a document in real time and interact substantially throughout the whole writing process; while the parallel writing occurs when a team divide the work load, beginning with individual work, and then assembling the separate pieces into a whole through discussion and negotiation (Sharples, Goodlet, Beck, Wood, Easterbrook & Plowman, 1993; Dillenbourg, Baker, Blaye & O'Malley, 1996). These two CW strategies are selected for this study among all the five types in the taxonomy because they involve both verbal interaction and writing, the two key components in L2 CW that would facilitate its ultimate goal of L2 learning (Storch, 2013).

This study assigns an intermediate L2 Chinese class of 8 students into 4 pairs to complete 2 essays on the computer, respectively using the reactive writing and the parallel writing strategies. The data comprises the audio recordings of the pairs’ collaborative dialogues, the video recordings of their computer screens, and their writing samples. The
collaborative dialogues are transcribed verbatim, and coded into several categories based on recurring patterns. The writing samples are rated by the measurements of accuracy, fluency and complexity, as well as overall quality according to a holistic rubric.

The preliminary findings show that the written products do not differ significantly between the two strategies, but the writing process yields qualitative differences in terms of the depth of deliberation on the language. In the parallel writing, as a more efficient strategy, the pairs produce fewer total collaborative dialogues, especially fewer shallow-level collaborative dialogues, e.g., search for words, compared with the reactive writing. On the other hand, the reactive writing provides more opportunities for syntactic restructuring than the parallel writing. It is also found that all the pairs demonstrate certain discourse-level competence in their writing, although they engage little in discussion about discourse-level language problems, such as the use of cohesive devices or coherence issues.

The significance of the study is three-fold: first, it extends our conceptualization of L2 CW by taking into account different strategies used by L2 learners, which has not been well discussed in the current literature; second, it connects L2 CW research and general CW research by employing Lowry et al.’s (2004) interdisciplinary taxonomy of CW; and finally, it sheds light on pedagogical issues of designing, organizing and guiding L2 CW activities.

References