Rapport de recherche
PROGRAMME ACTIONS CONCERTÉES

Utiliser les tâches collaboratives pour promouvoir le développement de l'écriture en français langue seconde

Using collaborative tasks to promote the development of L2 French writing

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Part A. Context of the research

1. Problem

The research project investigated the role of social interaction in facilitating the writing development of second language (L2) French students. The project addressed an important social issue in Quebec, which is the literacy rate. Besides affecting the general population, low literacy can be particularly problematic for newcomers to Quebec who need to develop the French language skills necessary for education and employment so they can fully integrate into society. The foreign-born population accounted for more than 21% of the Canadian population in 2011 (Statistics Canada), with 14% living in Quebec and 72% of those residents speaking neither English nor French as their L1. As evidenced by these numbers, it is of crucial importance to understand how instructors can best help students quickly and efficiently acquire the French literacy skills they need for success.

By investigating the role of social interaction in French as a second language (FSL) classrooms, the research project tackled a key challenge in L2 teaching, which is how to engage students in conversations that are useful for language development. Although instructors readily recognize the benefits of social interaction for the development of students' oral communication skills, fluency, and self-confidence, they have many concerns about whether it is useful for helping students acquire new linguistic knowledge and skills, particularly grammatical aspects of academic literacy (Burrows, 2008; Carless, 2003; Douglas, 2014; Hu, 2013; McDonough & Chaikitmongkol, 2007; Ogilvie & Dunn, 2010). Furthermore, L2 students have

voiced similar concerns about whether social interaction with their peers is an effective way for them to acquire linguistic knowledge (McDonough, 2004; Peng, 2012; Rao, 2002).

The main concerns that instructors and students in these studies have expressed include (a) same-level peers cannot provide each other with advanced knowledge, skills, or feedback, (b) students simply speak their first language during social interaction, (c) students simply engage in off-topic conversation, and (d) individual students cannot learn from group interaction. As a result of such concerns, instructors may regard tasks as "fun" activities to be used only when students need a "break" from the regular curriculum and textbook. And when faced with time pressure, instructors may avoid implementing small or group tasks in favor of explicit, teacher-fronted instruction to make sure that students are prepared for their exams (McDonough, 2004). To directly address this pedagogical challenge, this project explored how to elicit social interaction in L2 classrooms in ways that help students improve their writing skills.

2. Main research questions

This project had two research questions. The first research question was about the aspects of writing (e.g., content, organization, language) that French L2 students talk about when they interact with peers at different phases in the writing process. The second research question concerned the degree to which social interaction in French L2 classrooms facilitates writing development.

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3. Objectives

The first objective was to compare the nature of student talk that occurs when L2 French students interact to interact with their peers at different stages in the writing process (e.g., before, after, or throughout). To gain a complete view of social interaction for writing, this project compared student talk about the same topic, text, and writing prompt, but as it occurred at different points in the writing process.

The second objective was to examine the effectiveness of peer interaction at different phases in the writing process at promoting L2 writing development. Previous comparative studies have either focused on collaborative versus individual writing or prewriting discussions versus collaborative writing tasks using "one-shot" designs. In other words, researchers simply collected a single text from students at one point in time, but they did not explore whether students improved over a longer instructional period. In contrast, this project explored the longer-term impact of three different kinds of peer interaction on individual writing development.

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Part B. Benefits and implications

1. Audience

The main audiences for this project are language teachers, administrators, testing experts, and scholars in the field of applied linguistics, composition studies, and French.

2. What the findings mean

For decision-makers in French language programs, the findings mean that it is valuable for teachers to ask students to work with a partner before they begin to write. Consequently, decision-makers in the areas of curriculum development and assessment should consider adding prewriting discussions to course activities and writing tests to facilitate positive washback.

3. Benefits

The benefits for FSL students are that they can improve their writing by discussing their ideas with a peer prior to writing their texts. Our participants were not given training in how to interact, which suggests that the activity is transferable to other French students.

The benefits for FLS teachers are that they can easily implement prewriting discussions without needing to create new instructional materials. Simply by asking students to use each other as a resource while they are planning, teachers can help students improve their writing skills.

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4. Limits

The study was carried out at one French Language Centre. While they have similar profiles to students in similar language centres (i.e. those affiliated with universities who provide French classes to enrolled students), these students' performance may not be identical to students in other contexts. The findings related to gender in the collaborative writing group should not be generalized due to the uneven distribution of students by gender, i.e., mostly female students. The findings for prewriting discussions confirm those of prior research, which indicates common trends across settings (e.g., language of instruction, school type).

The findings for collaborative writing failed to confirm prior studies, which raises important questions about the cause of the null findings. It is possible that the difference is due to the target language (English versus French) or the rating rubric. This divergence suggests that it may be necessary to take additional steps to ensure that FSL students benefit from collaborative writing. However, this suggestion should be interpreted cautiously until replication studies with other FSL students can be carried out.

5. Key message

The key message for FSL teachers is that they can help their students improve their writing skills by asking them to exchange ideas with a classmate before they begin writing. The key message for FSL students is that interacting with a classmate to brainstorm ideas and decide what ideas to write about is a simple and easy strategy for becoming a better writer. For assessment professionals, the key message is that

writing conditions (interaction, prewriting activities, planning) can affect text quality. If the goal of assessment is to help students perform at their top level, then integrating peer interaction prior to writing into writing assessment might be advisable.

6. Solutions

To help FSL students acquire written literacy in French, it may be helpful for instructors to adopt a broader perspective on writing development. Currently FSL is highly oriented to assessing language use. While accurate language is an important component of writing, other aspects are equally important (such as content, organization, genre awareness, rhetorical purpose), especially in academic and workplace settings. Rather than exclusively direct students to talk about language or fix errors when interacting with peers, teachers might also encourage students to discuss content with their peers. By discussing content with peers prior to writing, students may then have greater attentional resources to focus on language while writing. In other words, content discussions may indirectly support language use.

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Part C. Method

1. Methodological Approach: A quasi-experimental, between-groups design was used. It was quasi-experimental because intact FSL classes were randomly assigned to a writing condition, as opposed to randomly assigning individual students. It was between-groups so that each class experienced a different type of peer interaction (before, after, or throughout writing). The independent variable was peer interaction, which had three levels: prewriting discussions, interactive peer revision, and collaborative writing. The study also adopted a pretest-posttest design to test the impact of carrying out practice writing tasks with different peer interaction on individual writing development.

2. Data collection methods: The following data were collected from the students during their regularly-schedule FSL classes: a) pretest writing task, b) two practice writing tasks, c) audio-recordings of students interacting during the two practice writing tasks, d) posttest writing task, e) biographical information questionnaire, and f) interaction mindset questionnaire. The target genre was an opinion essay that discussed causes of the issue and proposed solutions.

3. Sample: The sample consisted of 72 FSL students enrolled in three B2-C1 FSL classes that follow the same curriculum in the French Language Center at McGill University.

4. Analysis strategies and techniques: The students' written texts were evaluated using an analytic rubric with six categories: content, organization, vocabulary, syntax, grammatical morphology, lexical orthography. Student talk was coded into the same categories on the rubric plus reading/re-reading and off-task talk. Text ratings and student talk (in words) were compared using one-way ANOVA tests.

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Part D. Results

1. Main results

The first objective was to compare the nature of student talk that occurs when L2 French students interact to interact with their peers at different stages in the writing process (e.g., before, after, or throughout). The audio-recordings of the students interacting were transcribed and their talk was coded into the six categories shown in Table 1.

Table 1

Student Talk Coding Categories

Category	Definition
Content	Generating and discussing ideas; talking about ideas from the video, the textbook, or their own essays; agreeing and disagreeing with ideas or proposing alternatives
Organization	Discussing the structure of their essays including ordering, moving, or cutting information along with comments about discourse markers that link ideas (e.g., *d'abord, ensuite, par ailleurs, d'une part, de plus, bref, puisque, ainsi*)
Grammatical morphology	Talking about morphology including verb conjugations and tense, past participle agreement, agreement in gender and number for nouns and adjectives, as well as homonyms (e.g., *c'est vs ses, mangé vs manger*)
Lexical orthography	Discussing the spelling of words, including determiners (e.g., *au* vs *aux, des* vs *de, ce vs cet*), contractions, and portmanteaus (e.g., *de le = du*).
Syntax	Talking about sentence construction, including the ordering of words, sentence length, preposition or determiner choice and punctuation

Vocabulary	Talking about the translation, precision, variety, and richness of lexical items, register (e.g., *il* vs *ça*, *vous* vs *tu*), and appropriate translations, including anglicisms and language borrowings
Task management	Discussing what they were supposed to do, task roles, next actions, time remaining, or allocation of time
Reading	Reading aloud from their notes or essays
Off-task talk	Chatting about things unrelated to the writing topic, such as personal information and activities or comments about the classroom, research equipment, or current events

To compare what students talked about during the different interactive tasks (i.e., prewriting discussions, interactive peer revision, or collaborative writing), we summed the number of words in each coding category and divided by the total words to account for variation across pairs and classes. This analysis focuses on pairs rather than individual students. Table 2 shows the proportion of total words that the pairs in all three classes produced while interacting.

Table 2

Proportion of Student Talk by Category and Class

	Prewriting discussions (*n* = 11)		Interactive peer revision (*n* = 10)		Collaborative writing (*n* = 10)	
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
Content	.84	.13	.31	.32	.56	.10
Organization	.03	.07	.03	.04	.13	.05
Grammatical morphology	.01	.01	.09	.06	.04	.02

Lexical orthography	0	0	.04	.06	.02	.02
Syntax	0	0	.06	.05	.04	.03
Vocabulary	.03	.03	.07	.07	.11	.06
Reading/re-reading	.01	.02	.13	.14	.07	.02
Task management	.05	.07	.08	.08	.07	.02
Off-task talk	.03	.04	.20	.30	.01	.01

To summarize the key results of the one-way ANOVA tests, the prewriting discussion group talked about content more often than the other two groups, while the collaborative writing group talked about organization more often than the others. For grammatical morphology, lexical orthography, and syntax, collaborative prewriting had less talk than the other groups. Only the interactive peer revision students spent much time reading or re-reading the texts, and they also had more off-task talk.

The second objective was to compare the effectiveness of peer interaction at different phases in the writing process for promoting L2 writing development. For this analysis, we examined the analytic ratings given to the essays written by each individual student at the beginning and end of the semester. The rubric contained the six subcategories shown in Table 3. The bolded post-test ratings indicate that the change from the pretest reached statistical significance.

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Table 3

Individual Essay Ratings by Class and Time

	Prewriting discussion (*n* = 24)				Interactive peer revision (*n* = 21)				Collaborative writing (*n* = 20)			
	Pretest		Posttest		Pretest		Posttest		Pretest		Posttest	
	M	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*
Content (35)	21.6	2.5	21.7	3.1	22.5	2.7	22.4	2.9	20.4	3.2	**17.6**	2.2
Organization (25)	18.3	3.2	18.6	3.0	17.6	4.2	18.5	3.4	17.6	2.6	**16.1**	1.7
Grammatical morphology (10)	7.9	1.5	8.1	1.1	7.0	1.4	7.2	1.5	6.3	1.3	6.6	1.6
Lexical orthography (10)	8.7	.7	8.9	.7	8.8	.9	8.6	.9	8.4	.6	7.9	.9
Syntax (15)	11.1	1.7	**12.1**	1.4	10.5	1.7	10.4	1.9	10.3	1.7	9.6	1.3
Vocabulary (10)	8.2	.9	**8.7**	.8	7.8	1.0	7.7	1.1	7.8	.9	**6.8**	1.0

To summarize the ANOVA findings, students who participated in prewriting discussion had significant increases in their syntax and vocabulary ratings. There were no significant changes in the ratings received by students who carried out interactive peer revision. Students who did collaborative writing experienced significant decreases in the ratings of content, organization, and vocabulary. In sum, the only students whose scores increased over time for at least some

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categories on the rubric were those who had interacted with peers prior to writing their essays.

Although it was not one of our primary objectives, we did consider whether background characteristics played a role in the students' writing development. The background characteristics we considered were gender (reported male or female), first language (English or other), and interaction mindset as measured through a Likert-scale questionnaire. Spearman correlation coefficients were obtained for the writing development gain score with the three background characteristics for each group separately.

For the prewriting group, there were no relationships between writing development and gender, first-language background, or interaction mindset scores. In other words, none of these factors were related to whether a student's writing improved over time. In the interactive peer revision group, there was a negative relationship between writing development and interaction mindset. The more positively a student viewed peer interaction, the lower their writing gain scores were. This negative relationship was due to the tendency for students in this group who value peer interaction to talk about content and personal topics while they were revising, as opposed to engage with organization or language features of their texts. Finally, for the collaborative writing group, there was a negative relationship between writing development and gender, with male students tending to have higher gain scores. However, there was a highly unequal distribution of students by gender in

this class (three men, 17 women), which casts considerable doubt on the validity of this relationship.

2. Conclusions and possible solutions

Based on the results, the main conclusion is that students who talk about content with a peer before writing their essays show improvement in their writing development in terms of vocabulary and syntax. Due to the absence of direct links between talk about language and language improvement, it appears that these students benefit from talking about their ideas before writing, which then allows them to focus on language aspects while writing. There was no evidence that interacting with a peer to revise an essay (i.e., interactive peer revision) or working together throughout all phases of writing (i.e., collaborative writing) led to any improvement in essay ratings.

The high rate of off-task talk in the interactive peer revision group (20%) suggests that it may be necessary to provide students with more scaffolding. Although they received a handout that listed various aspects of their essays to discuss and revise, these students may not have had sufficient experience with revision to successfully carry out the task. Modeling how to revise texts and directing their attention to a narrower range of features may help these students benefit more. The decrease in ratings (content, organization, and vocabulary) experienced by the students who did collaborative writing suggests that any benefits of co-constructing texts during the practice tasks did not transfer to individual writing. To foster greater transfer, it may be necessary to help students document the aspects of writing or language

features they learned while interacting with a peer so that they have access to this information in the future when writing individually.

3. Contribution to knowledge

A main contribution of this research is to the knowledge about prewriting discussions. Several studies have found a link between student talk about content, organization, and language and text quality. Our findings extend this relationship to individual writing development over time. As prewriting discussions are frequently used in writing classrooms, the findings provide instructors with evidence that their practices are effective are promoting writing development. The findings also contribute to current debates about the allocation of attentional resources during planning time and how having opportunities to plan during writing helps writers focus on language while writing.

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E. Future research

1. New avenues of research

There are two primary new avenues of research. The first avenue is pedagogical to identify ways to make interactive peer revision and collaborative writing more beneficial for FSL students. This will entail eliciting more information (a) from students to determine how they perceive these types of peer interaction and (b) from teachers to explore how often they implement them in FSL classes. The second avenue of research is to obtain greater insight into the relationship between prewriting planning and writing development. Research to date has not found robust evidence that asking students to plan individually prior to writing positively impacts the text quality or writing development. However, prewriting discussions have been linked to learning outcomes.

2. Main solutions

The main solutions for the pedagogical line of research include modeling (e.g., live or video), scaffolding (e.g., handouts, teacher feedback), and self-monitoring (e.g., learning journals, audio-recording). Future research should test the effectiveness of these activities for helping FSL students develop their writing skills. The main solutions for the planning line of research include collecting concurrent and retrospective protocols from students. This data would help researchers identify how the student talk from the prewriting discussion relates to the writing process. It could test the hypothesis that talking about content during prewriting frees up resources to attend to language while writing. If participants typed their essays, keystroke logging could shed light on how they edit while writing.

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