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Concepts, Community and Collaboration

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Reflections on the Dynamic Nature of Academic Co-writing

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Caroline Payant & Michael Zuniga

Abstract

Collaborative writing (CW) is a writing process that encourages language learners to share the responsibility of planning, producing, and providing on-going feedback on a text. CW, however, does not always capture the dynamic interactions that unfold when working with peers. The aim of this paper is to discuss how we negotiated a Dynamic Co-Writing stance, one which captures the interactive dynamics of our cooperative/collaborative relationship, as we engaged in an intensive writing project. In this reflective paper, we describe Dynamic Co-Writing and share how embracing such a stance not only fostered positive emotions but also benefited our own academic writing experiences.

Introduction

Collaborative writing (CW) is a commonly researched and implemented practice in first (L1) and second/additional language (AL) classrooms. It invites learners to share the responsibility of generating ideas, producing a coherent and organized text, and providing ongoing feedback (Lowry/Curtis/Lowry 2004; Storch 2013). In AL contexts, CW implies that authors work simultaneously on the writing task, which contrasts with *cooperative writing*, whereby authors work independently and asynchronously on separate sections of a text (Roschelle/Teasley 1995). This cooperative approach characterized most of our academic co-writing experiences until a recent tight manuscript deadline of three weeks incited us to also adopt CW practices in the name of efficiency. We simply did not have time to only work cooperatively on the text one at a time. What emerged from this intensive writing experience was an awareness that collaborative and cooperative writing are not alternate strategies as they are often depicted in AL writing literature, but in fact have the potential to be dynamically related in important ways. We also perceived this co-writing experience as being one of the most positive we have had in our academic careers to date. We attribute such positivity to our Dynamic Co-Writing stance, which captures the unpredictable and evolving nature of interactions as well as the social dynamics of the collaborative relationship that emerged during this writing project. In this reflective paper, we share how embracing such a stance not only fosters positive emotions but also benefits experienced writers' academic writing knowledge base. In what follows, we will define collaborative, cooperative, and dynamic co-writing, and consider some difficulties

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and strategies that emerged from the experience, before concluding with a discussion on how such a dynamic co-writing stance may enhance existing CW models.

Collaborative and Cooperative Writing

CW practices are implemented in L1 (i.e., language arts) and AL contexts (Svenlin/ Sørhaug 2022). In AL writing research, collaborative and cooperative writing are discussed as distinct dynamics. CW is operationalized as learners interacting in dyads or groups as they jointly make decisions, solve problems, and contribute to the production of a single text for which all members share equal responsibility (Storch 2019: 40). In contrast, *cooperative work*, as an umbrella term, "is accomplished by the division of labour among participants, as an activity where each person is responsible for a portion of the problem solving" (Roschelle/Teasley 1995: 70). When applying this lens to AL writing, each contributor is responsible for a given section of a text (Kozar 2010: 17).

Research on CW with language learners has focused extensively on learner-learner interactions (Svenlin/Sørhaug 2022) and shown that by creating mutual scaffolding opportunities throughout the writing process, CW boosts confidence, which results in performance-supporting positive affect and motivation (Fernández-Dobao 2020; Zhai 2021). Compared to individual writing, CW leads to the production of higher quality texts (Fernandez-Dobao/Blum 2013; Wigglesworth/Storch 2009 2013), characterized by greater grammatical precision (Fernandez-Dobao 2012; McDonough/De Vleeschauwer/Crawford 2018), improved argumentation (Cuevas et al. 2016) or improved structure and organization (Shehadeh 2011). CW also contributes to language learning. Indeed, the written and oral output of such activities exposes gaps in learners' developing linguistic systems and facilitates *collaborative dialogue*. Collaborative dialogue, operationalized as language-related episodes, is a form of metalinguistic discourse aimed at solving language-related problems that emerge during production (Swain/Watanabe 2012) and allow for focalized attention to form about language and discourse in a meaningful context. In contrast, cooperative writing, because of the division of the writing responsibilities, we obtain a product constructed in parallel. This reduces opportunities for mutual engagement and the co-construction of knowledge that typically unfolds during collaborative interaction. Despite its numerous benefits, CW also presents some challenges. First, its benefits can be impacted by learners' differing language proficiency levels and willingness to collaborate, which can create both dominant and passive postures in writing tasks (Storch 2002). Indeed, Zuniga and Payant (2021) found that learners believe that unless they are the ones in control of the pen/keyboard, their contributions are merely simple suggestions. Furthermore, CW may deprive authors of the time and space needed for silent reflection on writing problems.
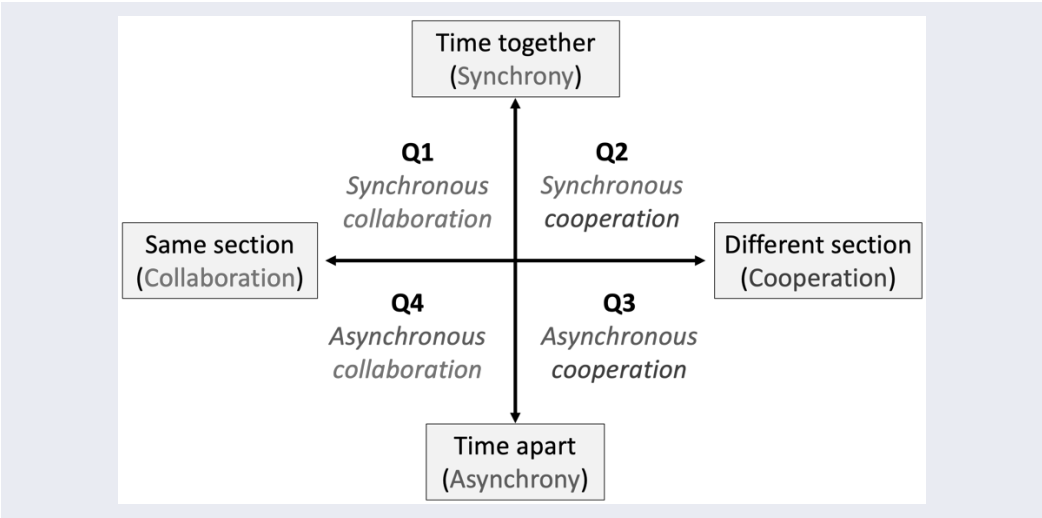
From a Dichotomous Stance to a Dynamic Co-Writing Stance

As mentioned above, time constraints related to a tight manuscript deadline incited us to integrate CW into our usual cooperative practices. As a result, we negotiated our own flexible form of *collaboration*, one that organically responded to the evolving needs and constraints of the writing task at hand. Indeed, throughout the writing process, we constantly shuffled between *collaborative* and *cooperative* writing stances. These terms, we felt, failed to capture the true nature of our interactions, which has motivated us to propose a *Dynamic Co-Writing* (DCW) stance. The term "dynamic" allows us to depict the unpredictable nature of interactions between contributors and the ensuing fluctuations between the collaborative and cooperative stances. This position stands in contrast to a rigid adherence to a particular stance and responds to evolving needs throughout the writing process. More specifically, while CW allows for efficient joint problem solving, cooperative writing affords contributors time to reflect without the distractions of collaboration and the ability to continue working when collaborators are unavailable. In the following, we describe this term and the insights we gleaned from this experience.

As we prepared to write the manuscript, we negotiated that Caroline would take the lead as the first author. During this first week, Caroline wrote a very rough first draft of the introduction, literature review, and methodology sections whereas Michael worked on the data analysis. Once Caroline shared her work with Michael, he initiated a one-day individual writing session where he expanded on the text and added the results section. Over the course of the next few days, we engaged in multiple writing sessions, flowing between cooperative and collaborative writing stances during synchronous and asynchronous timeframes. To best capture these fluid relationships, we mapped our interactions along two dimensions: 1) the time we were working on the manuscript (i.e., synchronous and asynchronous), and 2) the section of the manuscript on which we were working (i.e., same or different section). This two-dimension dynamic writing relationship is illustrated in Figure 1.

In Quadrant 1, we wrote during identical timeframes on the same section of the manuscript, communicating directly through Zoom videoconferencing, using either its shared screen function or working simultaneously on the live version of the OneDrive document. Working with the live version of the manuscript using OneDrive in a synchronous relationship, we were both able to modify the text directly and see the changes in real time, thus facilitating collaborative problem solving and the co-construction of ideas: *synchronous collaboration*. In Quadrant 2, we wrote during identical timeframes connected through videoconference, but on different sections (without shared screen): *synchronous cooperation*. Since we were both online, we could consult each other when needed which facilitated the simultaneous development in two sections of the manuscript. In Quadrant 3, the more cooperative stance, we wrote individually during different timeframes, on different sections: *asynchronous cooperation*. Finally, in Quadrant 4, we wrote individually, but on the same section: *asynchronous collaboration*. This implied the use of

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Figure 1

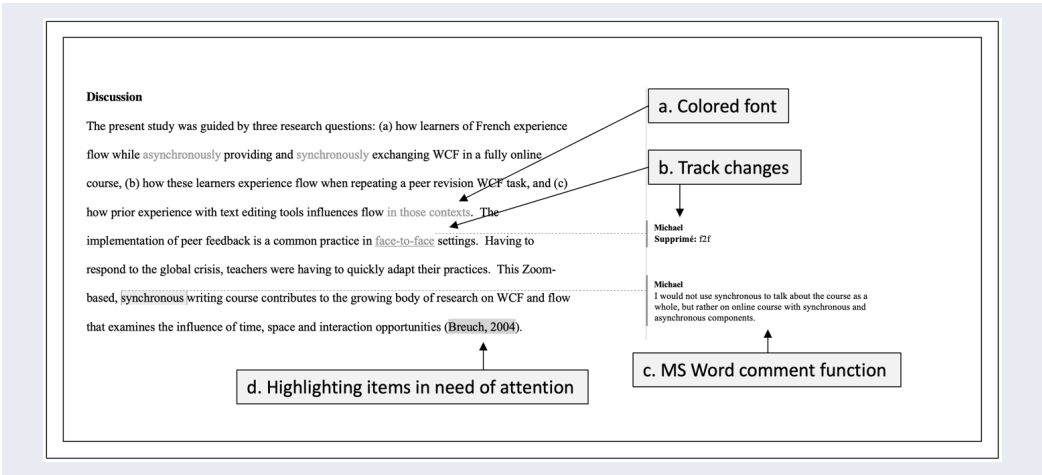Dynamic Co-Writing dimension and quadrants

highlighting, colored fonts, comments or the Track Changes function, which would allow the collaborator to easily see and accept or reject what had been added or deleted since the last interaction with the manuscript. We could also go to the version history pane to see changes if needed. These tools and functions were also used to guide subsequent synchronous discussions about sections in question. Such a bi-dimensional representation (time/space), we believe, offers a more nuanced portrait of the interactive dynamics of a given co-writing project and how those dynamics can evolve over time throughout the process.

Developing Effective Revising Communication Strategies

An important aspect of our successful collaboration was our ability to negotiate effective revising communication strategies *about* the text and *in* the text. At the start of the project, we spontaneously implemented various traditional strategies, namely, direct inserts in the text using colored font (Figure 2a), Track Changes function (Figure 2b), the MS Word comment function (Figure 2c), and highlighting sections in need of attention (Figure 2d). We also had daily discussions via Zoom (with and without shared screens), FaceTime, and/or SMS.

Figure 2

Co-Writing Communication Strategies

As the co-writing project progressed, however, finding the visual result of the Comment and Track Changes functions cumbersome, we settled on signaling changes using colored fonts. We also spontaneously started inserting information about the intended purpose or content of each paragraph between brackets at the start of various sections, which we refer to as *paragraph titles* (see Figure 3a). These titles were not only effective in helping us communicate our writing intentions at the paragraph level, but they also afforded the joint attention necessary for the negotiation and development of the manuscript's emerging macrostructure. Another strategy that emerged was the use of requests written directly into the text in capital letters and colored font to attract each other's attention. In contrast to the bracketing strategy used to highlight the text's macrostructure, this strategy afforded asynchronous joint attention on specific details in the text that needed to be addressed quickly with each other's expertise. We believe it was with such effective communication strategies that we were able to efficiently establish an outline, negotiate co-ownership of the manuscript, and arrive at a final product we were both proud of. In sum, because of the communication strategies and our open and flexible stance, our writing took on a very dynamic nature entailing seamless shifts between all four co-writing quadrants.

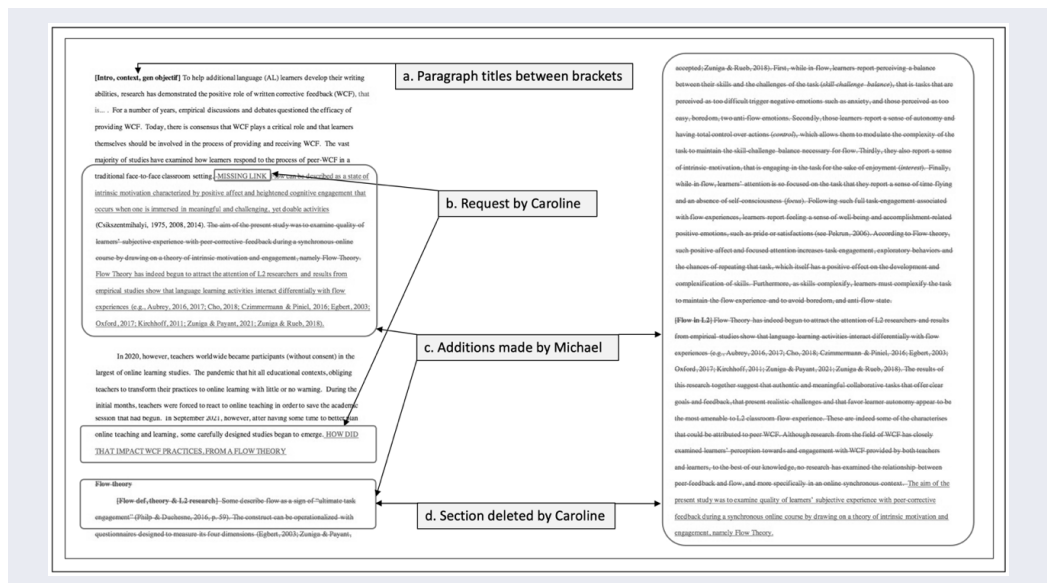## Negotiating Genre and Rhetorical Traditions

Academic writing is a complex process and with each writing project, there are learning opportunities. As a graduate student, Caroline was introduced to Swales' *Create A Research Space* (CARS) model for writing succinct research article introductions in Anglo-Saxon communities of practice (Swales 1990; 2004). Michael, having had training in the

French tradition, was not familiar with this work and tended to favor longer introductions, which are reflective of the French genre known as *la problématique.* Considering the target journal, we decided to use the CARS model as a guide to orient the structure of the introduction.

To establish our expertise in the field, one of the rhetorical moves associated with the CARS model, the addition of a summary of flow-related research was needed in the introduction. To this effect, on the morning of March 20, Caroline wrote the words MISSING LINK, which she thought indicated the need for Michael to add a few sentences about Flow theory (Figure 3b). While working on the manuscript in *asynchronous cooperation* (Q3), Michael actually added an entire subtitled section on Flow theory with nearly a full page of text operationalizing the construct (Figure 3c). On March 21 at 12:06 p.m., Caroline made major modifications to the introduction, by first deleting most of the text added by Michael (Figure 3d) and requesting specific information directly in the text (red font, capital letters): "HOW DID THAT IMPACT WRITTEN CORRECTIVE FEEDBACK PRACTICES, FROM A FLOW THEORY" (Figure 3b).

Figure 3
Major revisions to RA introduction on March 21 at 12:06pm

At noon the same day, we discussed the CARS model and in the revised introduction, we established a gap in the literature by briefly linking feedback and flow, a construct which we felt needed to be briefly introduced (Figure 4).

Figure 4

Revised draft of the RA introduction

Introduction

[Intro, context, gen objective] To help additional language (AL) learners develop their writing abilities, research has demonstrated the positive role of written corrective feedback (WCF) (Bitchener & Storch, 2016). For a number of years, empirical discussions and debates questioned the efficacy of providing WCF. Today, there is consensus that WCF plays a critical role and that learners themselves should be involved in the process of providing and receiving WCF. While the vast majority of studies have examined how learners respond cognitively to the process of peer-WCF in a traditional face-to-face classroom settings (Diab, 2010; Ellis, 2010; Lundstrom & Baker, 2009; Zhao, 2018), there has been growing interest on learners' subjective experience with WCF through the lenses of constructs such as learner beliefs, engagement and emotions (Han & Hyland, 2015, 2019). Recently, L2 researchers have begun exploring the construct of optimal experience, more commonly known as flow (e.g., Aubrey, 2017b, 2017a; Cho, 2018; Zuniga & Payant, 2021), which can be described as a state of intrinsic motivation characterized by positive affect and heightened cognitive engagement that occurs when one is immersed in meaningful and challenging, yet doable activities (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975, 2008, 2014).

Regarding subjective experience and WCF, 2020 was a pivotal year as teachers and learners worldwide became participants (without consent) in the largest unplanned online learning studies. The pandemic that hit all educational contexts, obliging teachers to transform their practices to online learning with little or no warning. Suddenly, ordinary classroom tasks like asking learners to pair-up and offer each other feedback on a written text, became logistical challenges requiring careful planning, detailed instructions and tolerance of a certain level of chaos as teachers and learners appropriated new technologies and modes of communication. The aim of the present study was to explore how this sudden radical shift in practices interacts with learners' subjective experience with online synchronous peer-corrective feedback by drawing on Flow Theory.

Final first draft of introduction, March 22 @ 3:04 p.m.

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The process of negotiating the rhetorical and genre structures required a flexible and open posture on our part. Such collaboration resulted not only in a more impactful introduction, but also contributed to the development of genre knowledge and rhetorical skills of both writers. In effect, Michael remarked in a post-writing discussion how this experience impacted his own writing and teaching practices: "The other thing that really helped me out was the CARS model which I did not know about until you mentioned it to me, and now I use it regularly and I use it with my grad students" (April 2, 2021). Although we focused our discussion on developing genre knowledge using the example of the research article introduction, it should be noted that we both continued to develop our knowledge of academic writing and diversify our rhetorical styles.

Conclusion and Future Directions

In this discussion, we shared our positive experience of co-writing and revising a manuscript for publication and illustrated the fluid nature of this collaboration. Through conversations and reflective analysis of our experience, we learned that collaborative and cooperative writing are not distinct tasks, but rather part of a single task characterized by dynamic variation along time and space dimensions. As co-writers, we seamlessly flowed between synchronous and asynchronous collaborative and cooperative spaces.

As a result of this experience, we have reconsidered how we operationalize collaborative writing and proposed a DCW stance and are now able to recognize the unique affordances of this fluid writing dynamic. We learned that communication strategies are essential as writers move through the DCW spaces, and that those strategies evolve in response to personal preferences and to the specific needs associated with the writing task. Finally, we learned that openness and flexibility are of the order when negotiating genres and rhetorical styles in the elaboration of a manuscript's micro- and macrostructures. Throughout our exchanges, we clearly engaged in micro revision practices as we carried out textual changes at the sentence and word level. However, we also engaged in collaborative macro revisions as we forged the manuscript's structure, which positively impacted our knowledge about how texts are constructed in various rhetorical traditions. We can appreciate how, even as *experienced academics*, our knowledge about writing in different communities of practice and cultures continues to evolve.

In addition to the emergence of new revising strategies and genre knowledge, the DCW experience had some unexpected outcomes related to affect and motivation. Indeed, while the daunting nature of some academic writing tasks can trigger negative feelings such as anxiety and frustration, our DCW experience was characterized by enjoyment and vigorous intrinsic motivation. We believe that the social interaction, the reciprocal encouragement, and the dynamic mutual scaffolding in moments of difficulty afforded by DCW bolstered our motivation and helped us successfully rise to the challenge of producing a finished manuscript in a short three-week timeframe. More specifically, DCW helped

us manage the difficulty of the task, bringing it into what Csikszentmihalyi (2014: 147) refers to as the *flow channel*, that is, a mental state that emerges when one is fully engaged in meaningful and optimally challenging tasks (neither too hard nor too easy). It is a state characterized by positive affect, focused attention, and divergent, creative thinking. Furthermore, the ability to periodically shift into the more solitary cooperative mode afforded time for quiet reflection, and a pause from the cognitive and emotional demands of the ongoing interaction associated with CW.

Thinking about the practical classroom implications of our DCW experience, we now feel better equipped, as university professors, to create assignments for our own students that will combine writing opportunities in multiple DCW writing spaces that may contribute to writers' intrinsic motivation. We better understand the importance of exploring communication strategies with students before they begin co-writing tasks, but also of encouraging them to collaboratively modify these to respond to their evolving needs and to stay within their own flow channels. This experience has helped us to appreciate how, despite our respective areas of expertise, our different epistemological stances, and our unique rhetorical styles, we can come together to co-write and revise a text for which, in the end, we can both proudly claim co-ownership. We recognize that our willingness to collaborate and our similar skills and experiences contributed to a positive experience with DCW. Further research will be needed to examine how such an approach would be experienced by learners with varying motivations and preferences. We invite scholars not only to experiment with a DCW stance in their own writing practices but also in their pedagogical practices.

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Focus