# The potential of writing for second language learning

## Collaborative writing

**María Maeso Cano**

**Degree in English Studies**

Departamento de Filología Inglesa, Alemana y Traducción e Interpretación

Área de Filología Inglesa

Supervisor: María del Pilar García Mayo

Academic year: 2015/2016

# Abstract

The field of writing in a second language (L2) has generally focused on the learning-to-write (LW) dimension which defends that, in learning an L2, writing is the ultimate skill to master. Nevertheless, most recently researchers in the field of L2 acquisition have started to pay attention to the so-called writing-to-learn (WL) dimension, which claims that writing is an excellent tool not only to master the writing skill but also for language learning. This paper will explore the latter dimension and, in particular, a specific way of writing, namely, collaborative writing, i.e. the production of a text by two or more writers. Collaborative writing is grounded in various hypotheses that are usually grouped into two main strands: the cognitive or psycholinguistic strand, which focuses on language related episodes (LREs) - instances in the students' production of a text when they deviate their attention to the formal aspects of the language-, and the socio-cultural strand, which claims that by writing in collaboration, L2 learners pool their resources together in order to overcome their linguistic problems.

The aim of the present paper is to analyze a number of collaborative writing studies within the WL dimension and to assess how L2 teachers might use their findings efficiently in the L2 classroom in order to enhance their students' learning opportunities. To that end, I have selected six research articles that investigate how different variables affect collaborative writing, namely, proficiency, feedback type, task type and number of participants. After the review of each study, I will discuss how its findings could be applicable in the L2 classroom.

The paper shows that collaborative writing fosters a number of processes deemed to be conductive to language learning. Research carried out so far has shown that several variables need to be considered when assessing L2 learners' written products and it seems that only high (and to a lesser extent, intermediate) proficiency learners benefit from collaborative writing. Thus, L2 teachers should bear these results in mind when preparing a collaborative writing activity for their students.

*Keywords:* second language (L2), writing-to-learn (WL), collaborative writing, language related episodes (LREs)

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

# 1. Introduction

Writing in a second language (L2) is generally regarded as a challenge for both second and foreign language learners, since it is commonly considered the hardest area to master during the process of language acquisition. This problem has been noticed by a large number of researchers in the field of second language acquisition (SLA) and therefore, research has been conducted to learn more about the process of writing itself and about whether it could be turned into a learning opportunity. Foreign and second language teachers have also voiced their concerns about the challenges of writing, especially the former ones, as the quantity and quality of input their learners receive is clearly different (Pinter, 2011). As a future teacher of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) I wanted to have more information about research conducted in this area that I could incorporate in my classroom activities.

Focusing on the studies conducted to date in the field of writing in a second language, two major research strands can be distinguished: the Learning-to-Write (LW) dimension and the Writing-to-Learn (WL) dimension. As for the former, it concerns how "second and foreign language users learn to express themselves in writing" (Manchón, 2011a:3). This perspective is quite traditional in that it considers that L2 writing can only be taught once the process of SLA has been (almost) completed, hence, it is the ultimate skill to master (Williams, 2012). The vast majority of the studies in the field of LW has been carried out following mainstream L2 writing research and has essentially been based upon the findings in first language (L1) writing research (Manchón, 2011a).

In contrast, the WL perspective sees L2 writing as a tool for mastering not only L2 writing itself, but also other areas such as speaking or grammar (Manchón, 2011a). Moreover, research conducted within the WL approach belongs to the domain of SLA and it has basically focused on L2 writers from both cognitive and socio-cultural perspectives (Manchón, 2011a).

In the present paper, I will focus my attention exclusively on the WL dimension and, in particular, on "collaborative writing", which is the type of writing that emerges when two or more writers participate in the production of a written text, and it presents two fundamental advantages, namely, collaborative dialogue and *languaging* (Swain,

2000). On the one hand, Swain (2000) defines collaborative dialogue as the conversation in which two or more learners are involved during a problem-solving task. On the other hand, *languaging* is the name given to the means by which language is used to create meaning and build knowledge and experience (Swain, 2006). It is true that collaboratively produced texts tend to be shorter than those produced individually; still, the former are frequently linguistically more accurate, more complex and, when assessed, are given higher scores (Adams & Ross-Feldman, 2008).

Despite its undeniable upsides, collaborative writing is rather infrequent in the L2 classroom, since teachers prefer collaborative speaking instead. Yet, writing exercises are more likely to benefit students as these encourage them "to process language more deeply, notice gaps in their interlanguage and reflect upon language use" (Storch, 2011:276).

Nowadays, a number of empirical investigations are being devoted to the study of collaborative writing, specifically to the task types that are more or less favorable for L2 development (e.g. Alegría de la Colina & García Mayo, 2007; Azkarai & García Mayo, 2015; García Mayo & Azkarai, 2016) or the form of corrective feedback that can improve the learners' L2 writing skills most effectively (e.g. Wigglesworth & Storch, 2012a; Wigglesworth & Storch, 2012b), among others. Therefore, the aim of the present paper is to present some of the main findings represented in WL studies that consider collaborative writing in an attempt to discover how this pedagogical tool can be used in the L2 classroom.

The paper is organized as follows. First of all, I will provide an account of the theories that support the WL approach, and specifically, collaborative writing. I will then move on to explain a number of empirical investigations dealing with collaborative writing and, after each of the investigations, I will discuss their main findings so as to observe how they could be beneficial in the L2 classroom. The final section will conclude the paper and suggest future research lines.

## 2. Main theories supporting the Writing-to-Learn approach

In this section I will briefly review the theoretical approaches supporting the instructional dimension of collaborative writing in an L2, that is, the theoretical background that supports the use of writing as a trigger to L2 learning and development. Some approaches fall into the so-called cognitive or psycholinguistic strand while others fall within the socio-cultural strand to L2 learning (Manchón, 2011b).

## 2.1. The cognitive or psycholinguistic strand

Among all the theories that focus on the cognitive processes that occur while performing collaborative writing, three hypotheses should be highlighted: the Noticing Hypothesis, the Output Hypothesis and the Focus on Form paradigm.

As Manchón (2011b) states, all three hypotheses share in common that they are aimed at exploring how L2 learners focus their attention on the type of language employed while carrying out a writing assignment or coping with the corrective feedback received. Particularly, researchers are interested in investigating "Language Related Episodes" (henceforth, LREs), a construct that refers to the specific moment during the (collaborative) writing task in which learners talk about the language they or their interlocutor(s) are producing, make reference to the language questions they might encounter, or even deal with the feedback they have been provided (Swain & Lapkin, 1998). Research conducted to explore LREs has revealed that they help learners solve their language problems efficiently since students pool their own resources together; besides, LREs enable students to collaboratively build up new knowledge in the L2 (Fernández Dobao, 2012). Consequently, they have been claimed to be evidence of language learning in progress (Swain & Lapkin, 2000).

LREs have been generally classified into different categories depending on their nature (form-related, meaning-related, mechanical-related) and outcome (resolved correctly, resolved incorrectly or not resolved) (García Mayo & Azkarai, 2016; Wigglesworth & Storch, 2012a; Fernández Dobao, 2012, among others).

As this classification, or at least a similar one, will be employed to code LREs in the majority of the articles that will be summarized in section 3, each type will be

briefly explained and illustrated below. Thus, regarding their *nature*, LREs can be classified as form-, meaning, and mechanical-related:

(i)     Form-related LREs: they are defined by Wigglesworth and Storch (2012a) as those instances in the participants' conversation when they focus on morphosyntactic problems, such as, verb tenses, articles or sentence structure. In the following example, Candela points at a problem related to the verb *be*, especially whether it should take the gerund instead of the present (García Mayo & Azkarai, 2016).

(1)     Paz: He is the most…

Candela: Yes. Or being *igual, ¿no?* [maybe, don't you think?]. Despite be the most famous Englishman in the word, little is known for certain about Shakespeare's…

Paz: Shakespeare's private life.

(García Mayo & Azkarai, 2016:251)

(ii)    Meaning-related LREs: these take place when learners ask about the meaning of a word, look for a new one, or deliberate about the choice between two or more possible words (Fernández Dobao, 2012a). In (2), speaker 2 asks his partner about the meaning of the word *spaceship*, which the latter answers with a paraphrase.

(2)     S1: And they have the spaceship

S2: The what?

S1: The spaceship

S2: What does it mean?

S1: Like a car to travel to the space

S2: Ah

S1: The astronaut use it to go to the moon

S2: Oh *nave especial* [spaceship].

(Alcón Soler, 2002:360)

(iii)    Mechanical-related LREs: these occur when the participants discuss their problems with spelling and punctuation, like in (3) where learners realize that there is a semicolon missing (Wigglesworth & Storch, 2012a).

(3) Written version (and editing): four cities, however …

>    F: hmm and this one maybe should be a semicolon
>
>    M: mm hmm semicolon
>
>    F: yeah.
>
>        (Wigglesworth & Storch, 2012a:80)

As for their *outcome*, LREs can be correctly resolved, incorrectly resolved, or left unresolved:

(i)    Correctly resolved LREs: when the linguistic problem that is being considered by the learners is correctly solved. In (4) Rosie and Tori, English learners of Spanish, are able to choose the correct linguistic item for their written text (Fernández Dobao, 2012):

(4)    Rosie: *querían:* e:h… e:h… *querían ir en un:* ship? [they wanted  eh…        they wanted to go by ship]

>    Tori: *barco?* [ship?]
>
>    Rosie: *barco!* Heh *sí* [ship! heh yes]
>
>    Tori: *sí* [yes]
>
>        (Fernández Dobao, 2012:45)

(ii)    Incorrectly resolved LREs: they generally occur when learners try to come up with a solution to their problem but they fail to do so. In (5) there is an example of one of these LREs, where the participants have a problem with cohesion for which they suggest a solution that turns out not to be the right one (Cánovas Guirao, Roca de Larios & Coyle, 2015).

(5)     S1: A ver… Second May, ¿no? [Let's see… Second May, no?]

S2: The, the, the, the, the. The second May.

S1: ¿The second? ¿Y por qué no has puesto aquí the first May? [The second? And why haven't you put here the first May]

S2: No sé. [I don't know]

S1: The second May no? Paula

(Cánovas Guirao et al., 2015:67)

(iii)    Unresolved LREs: these are segments in the conversations in which participants try to find a way to solve their problem and they cannot. Example (6) illustrates that, when the learners are unable to find the correct verbal form they want to use, they choose an alternative one (Fernández Dobao, 2012). García Mayo and Azkarai (2016) also considered that unresolved LREs could be non-addressed when participants just ignore the problem.

(6)     Mae: uh *cómo se dice u:h volar en el… pretérito?* [uh how do you say uh to fly in the" . preterit?]

Carla: u:h *vu-* [uh fl-]

Beth: *vu:l-* [fl-]

Mae: *volió?* [he flew? (incorrect verbal form)]

Carla: *vulió?* [he flew? (incorrect verbal form)]

Mae: *vulio?* [he flew? (incorrect verbal form)]

Beth: *vuelió? Volió?* [he flew? He flew? (incorrect verbal forms)]

Carla: *vo-* [fl-]

Beth: *vo- vuelió* makes no sense, *pero…* [fl- he flew (incorrect verbal form) makes no sense, but…]

Carla: heh hehheh

Beth: *o salió… la ciudad* [or he left… the city]

Carla: *salió sí* [he left yes]

(Fernández Dobao, 2012:46)

This section has presented one of the crucial constructs within the cognitive-psychological strand to WL, namely, LRE. In what follows I will summarize the theoretical positions informing this strand of research.

2.1.1. The Noticing Hypothesis

Schmidt (1990) proposed the Noticing Hypothesis, which states that during the process of L2 acquisition "noticing" is a fundamental cognitive process in that it directs the learners' attention to the linguistic items they have yet to master (García Hernández, Roca de Larios & Coyle, forthcoming). Such noticing can occur while the student is engaged in either a written or a spoken task and frequently shows difficulties in conveying the target meaning (Adams & Ross-Feldam, 2008).

The Noticing Hypothesis may refer to "noticing the hole" versus "noticing the gap". When learners notice a hole in their interlanguage (IL), they are unable to produce a target form on their own. When they notice a gap, their attention is drawn to the production of a form that they will be able to produce with the help of another learner or a native speaker (Izumi, 2003). As pointed out by Williams (2012), if learners encounter a hole/gap while completing a writing task, they have the chance to immediately fill it in by requesting help to an expert, looking it up in a reference book, or relying on their explicit knowledge; yet, this is never the case in speaking.

Moreover, the holes or gaps students might potentially notice lead to a reassessment of their existing L2 knowledge, and this happens by means of testing hypotheses and metalinguistic reflection (Swain, 1985 *et passim*). Nonetheless, not until

learners obtain corrective feedback do these partially (or not) acquired forms become consolidated and the gaps between the IL and the target language (TL) are bridged (Williams, 2012).

## 2.1.2. The Output Hypothesis

This hypothesis was developed and put forward by the Canadian researcher Merrill Swain. Her main inspiration were the findings from research on Canadian immersion programs (Swain, 1993), which advanced that students would be able to attain native-like levels of proficiency in an L2 only through exposure to "comprehensible input"[1] (Swain & Lapkin, 1995). In this way, content should be taught through the L2 and this would result in a high academic level in content, and a high level of proficiency in the second language (Swain & Lapkin, 1995).

Nevertheless, although immersion students did perform in a native-like manner in listening and reading, they failed to do so in speaking and writing. Swain and Lapkin (1995) claimed that this happened because the learners did not have opportunities to produce the language and proposed the Output Hypothesis, which stated that "through producing language, either spoken or written, language acquisition/learning[2] may occur" (Swain, 1993:159). Such acquisition/learning occurs when the speakers find themselves unable to express certain information in the TL, thus, they notice a gap or linguistic problem which forces them to modify their output (Swain & Lapkin, 1995). This proposal is based on the Noticing Hypothesis and presents output as a "noticing-causer", even if no feedback, be it implicit or explicit, has been provided (Swain & Lapkin, 1995).

What is more, Swain (1998) claims that output fulfils the function of hypothesis formulation and testing; put differently, output may encourage learners to produce linguistic forms and structures to communicate their intended meaning, and hence, to test them against the "rules" of the L2. So, sometimes their formulations will be correct, as in (7); whereas other times they will be incorrect, as in (8).

---

[1]Comprehensible input was a notion developed by Krashen (1985) and it refers to the language that is both comprehensible and meaningful for the L2 learner.
[2] According to Krashen (1982), language acquisition involves an unconscious process, while language learning occurs consciously. Swain and many other researchers do not adhere to this distinction.

(7)     Hiroko: a man is uh drinking coffee or tea with uh the saucer of the uh uh coffee

        set is uh in his uh knee

        Izumi: in him knee

        Hiroko: uh on his knee

        Izumi: yeah

        Hiroko: on his knee

        Izumi: so sorry, on his knee

                        (Gas &Varonis, 1989:80-81)

(8)     Learner 1: John arrive, arrove, arrive or arrove?

        Learner 2: arrove is in the past

        Learner 1: arrove airport. Or arrived.

        Learner 2: arrove is in the past

        Learner 1: I mean arrove or arrived

        Learner 2: arrove the airplane

        Learner 1: arrived or arroved?

        Learner 2: arrove

        Learner 1: arrove the airport at 8.30 am

                        (Adams, 2007:48-49)

2.1.3. Focus on Form (FonF)

The Focus on Form (FonF) paradigm is based on the assumption that comprehensible input, though necessary for acquisition, is insufficient for acquiring the L2 grammar. Research indicating that some type of attention to form was necessary for language learning provided an argument to the relevance of form in the L2 classroom (Nassaji & Fotos, 2011). FonF emphasized the need to draw the learners' attention to

formal aspects of the language they are learning, but within a communicative framework (Long & Robinson, 1998).

This paradigm is based on the Interaction Hypothesis, whose main tenet is that interaction plays a facilitative role in L2 learning and acquisition, be it interaction between learners or interaction between learners and native speakers of the language (Long, 1996; Pica, 2013). When there is a breakdown in communication, negotiation of meaning occurs, which enhances learners' comprehension of the input and makes them aware of the relationship between the forms and functions of the L2 (Long & Robinson, 1998). Finally, negotiation of meaning elicits negative feedback too, and such feedback focuses learners' attention on the forms they have not yet acquired (Long & Robinson, 1998).

While learners are engaged in a meaning-focused task, FonF is likely to take place and it is primarily embodied through punctual deviations of attention to a certain linguistic item whose comprehension or production has caused difficulties (Long & Robinson, 1998). Usually, the L2 teacher or another student points at the problematic linguistic item, and the latter is very likely to occur while learners are engaged in a collaborative writing task. Example (9) illustrates a FonF episode in which Student 1 is unsure about the gender of the Spanish noun *persona*. Student 2 provides the correct answer and Student 1 accepts it:

(9)     S1: Ah.... ¿muchOS personas o muchAS personas? [many (masc. plural) persons or many (fem. plural) persons?]

S2: muchas personas [many (fem. plural) persons]

S1: sí, muchas personas [yes, many (fem. plural) persons]

(Leeser, 2004:65)

## 2.2. The socio-cultural strand

Following Vygotsky's work (1978), socio-cultural theory is central in the field of L2 learning since language learning is considered a social activity (Wigglesworth & Storch, 2012a). This means that human knowledge of language is shaped through interaction, be it with an expert or a novice, and afterwards, it is internalized. Vygotsky

(1987) proposes that L2 learners display two main levels of development: on the one hand, the developmental level of a novice refers to all that an L2 learner can do on his/her own; on the other hand, the potential level of development is stage an L2 learner can reach with the help of an expert. The Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) refers to the distance between these two levels. A process that narrows down the ZPD is known as "scaffolding" and it is characterized by the social and affective support that participants provide to each other during interactive tasks (Ellis, 2000). In addition, that support usually comes from a more competent speaker of the L2 (Wigglesworth & Storch, 2012a).

Working collaboratively to write a text appears to be an exceptional opportunity for L2 learners in that they interact with peers or with more competent speakers. Hence, they can pool their linguistic resources and use collective scaffolding to produce a text that will probably be more appropriate than a text written individually (Donato, 1994).

In this section I have summarized the main theories that support the WL approach. To recapitulate: the main claim made by researchers in the WL approach is that it is by writing, i.e. producing written output, that learners notice gaps/holes in their IL and that they focus on the formal aspects of the system. On the other hand, it is by writing in collaboration that they pool their resources together and come up with a more accurate product than working individually. The next section will focus on some recent work carried out from this perspective.

## 3. Collaborative writing and some variables affecting it

The study of collaborative writing in L2 acquisitionis still quite a new initiative, and, therefore, there is not much research to date investigating this area. Among the few studies in the field, I have selected some that I consider worth mentioning due to the effects they investigated and the results they obtained. Thus, the aim of the present section is to briefly explain each of the selected studies. Apart from that, after the summary of the research studies, I will comment on how their findings could be useful and applicable in an EFL class. It is true that, due to space constraints, I am only examining six pieces of research, hence, much more information would be needed to make relevant generalizations.

They are going to be presented according to the variables they investigate, namely, the effect of proficiency, the effect of feedback, the effect of task type, and the effect of the number of members performing the task in collaborative writing (in this order). Whenever there is more than one study exploring the same area, they are going to be presented chronologically.

## 3.1. The effect of proficiency

The first study I am going to summarize explores how proficiency level can impact L2 acquisition in collaborative writing tasks. Leeser (2004) examined a group of 42 L1 English L2 Spanish learners who attended a fourth semester content-based course on Latin American geography in the United States. All of them were divided on the basis of their overall proficiency in Spanish and classified into three types of dyads: dyads with two high proficiency learners (H-H); dyads with a high proficiency and a lower proficiency learner (H-L); and dyads with two lower proficiency learners (L-L).

The type of task that the participants were asked to complete was a dictogloss (Wajnryb, 1990). This is an activity which has been shown to favor collaborative writing, in that learners focus on form and reflect on their output while completing it (Swain, 1998; Swain & Lapkin, 1995). During a dictogloss task, a short text is read aloud twice: in the first reading, the students are meant solely to listen; in the second, they are asked to take down some notes that will be helpful for them to remember the whole text. Afterwards, the students gather in pairs and pool their resources in order to write the text they have heard. This activity is particularly beneficial since it encourages learners to notice the gaps in their IL (Swain, 1998).

The conversations of the participants were recorded during the dictogloss activity, so that the researcher could examine them to study the LREs they had produced. The investigation of LREs is particularly beneficial in this kind of pieces of research, since, as mentioned before, they show language learning in progress (Swain & Lapkin, 2000) and they might indicate the extent to which students are learning the L2 during collaborative writing activities. The LREs were investigated taking into account their number, nature and outcome.

Considering the overall number of LREs, the researcher concluded that the participants did focus on form. Yet, they did so more or less depending on the dyad's proficiency, in particular, H-H proficiency pairs produced more LREs than H-L or L-L proficiency pairs. Concerning the nature of LREs, lexical and grammatical LREs were also dependent upon the pair's proficiency since H-H proficiency pairs focused more on grammatical aspects; H-L proficiency pairs focused equally on lexical and grammatical aspects; and L-L proficiency pairs focused mainly on lexical aspects. As to the outcome of LREs, all dyads seemed to be able to resolve the majority of LREs correctly, but those with higher proficiency resolved more LREs correctly than the rest.

These findings might point at the fact that groups made up of two high proficiency learners seem to benefit much more from collaborative writing activities than the rest of the groups. First, because, at least in this case, they have been able to produce a greater amount of LREs, which indicates that they have focused on the language they were using to a higher extent and, therefore, they have had more opportunities to learn from those episodes than their counterparts. Second, as they also had the required tools to solve their language problems in more occasions, they have been in an advantageous position to acquire those forms correctly, whereas the other two groups had fewer chances to do so. This way, the gaps in their IL have been successfully bridged, and this is very likely to have led them to a more native-like L2 outcome.

## 3.2. The effect of corrective feedback

Corrective feedback is the feedback that follows an incorrect (ungrammatical) response to a learner's oral or written output. In the SLA field, corrective feedback is one of the most important research issues (Sheen, 2011). The following three studies will provide an account of investigations conducted to explore the influence that the type of (corrective) feedback in collaborative writing has on L2 acquisition.

The first of the studies was carried out by Wigglesworth and Storch (2012a) with a sample consisting of 72 participants who came from an Australian university and whose English level was advanced. In this experiment, the participants first had to collaboratively write a report based on a picture prompt and, some days later, they received feedback. Nevertheless, not all pairs received the same type of feedback,

instead one group received a reformulated version of their text, a second group an edited version, and the control group received no feedback at all. At the end of the experiment, the participants were asked to rewrite the reports individually.

As already stated, these students were provided with two different types of feedback: reformulation and editing. As described by García Hernández et al. (forthcoming), reformulation is a form of feedback in which a native or near native speaker of an L2 corrects a learner's text in terms of cohesive, rhetorical, stylistic, grammatical and lexical problems. Yet, the learner's intended content is preserved. After that, the student is given back both the original and the reformulated texts and is expected to compare them in order to reflect upon the changes. Wigglesworth and Storch (2012a) define editing as a feedback technique where an expert indicates the learner's errors by means of symbols and abbreviations. Whereas the former is a direct form of feedback, the latter is an indirect form.

In the article, Wigglesworth and Storch (2012a) exemplify both feedback types with the following fragments coming from their own study:

- *Reformulation*:
    - o *Original*: This chart illustrates **an average rainfall** in each season in the year 2000.
    - o *Reformulated version*: This chart illustrates **average rainfalls** in each season in the year 2000.
- *Editing:*
    - o *Original:* The rainfall in Lagos city is 240 mm on average in summer, which the highest amongst the other season.
    - o *Edited version:* The rainfall in Lagos city is 240 mm on average in

$$C \qquad\qquad F$$

summer, which ₍the highest <u>amongst</u> the other <u>season</u>.

*C* stands for an error in the word choice and *F* indicates an error in the word form.

(Wigglesworth & Storch, 2012a:78)

Wigglesworth and Storch (2012a) focused on LREs so as to observe when the participants were paying attention to form. Moreover, they also considered the level of accuracy and complexity of the texts. The results of their study showed no significant differences between the groups in terms of complexity but there were great differences when comparing accuracy in both groups. However, the differences were even more important in the reformulation group, which points to the fact that this technique might be more effective. Moreover, the results also revealed that the group with editing as feedback technique accepted the changes more frequently. This could be explained because students are generally more familiar with this technique than with reformulation, which is more challenging. In any case, both groups performed better in the rewritten version and, in general, the reformulation group did better.

As far as LREs are concerned, the editing group produced more LREs than their reformulation counterparts. Furthermore, the researchers also examined the level of engagement with the feedback in each group and discovered that both engaged with the feedback with a relatively high frequency, but the editing group displayed a higher level of engagement. According to the Wigglesworth and Storch (2012a), the reason why the editing group engaged more with the feedback could be that as their mistakes were not explicitly corrected, they were forced to guess what exactly the problem was and find a solution.

In this study, we can observe that both feedback types lead to a more accurate L2 output and trigger discussions about the problems the learners encounter when they embark on a collaborative writing activity. Yet, the study seems to provide more support to the use of reformulations instead of text editing as a corrective feedback technique, since the participants doing reformulation performed better than their counterparts, that is, the reformulation  group was capable of producing more native-like versions of the texts. However, at the same time, the text editing group engaged with the feedback and focused on form more frequently since they produced more LREs. Hence, text editing can help learners' learning of the L2 as well. Thus, a teacher could make a combination of both techniques during a collaborative writing activity since both of them seem to be beneficial for learners. Yet, if the teacher only wants to use one of these feedback types, the choice might depend on what his or her goal is with the activity. In other words, if s/he wants the students to engage with the feedback and

discuss formal aspects, editing will be a better alternative but if s/he prefers that the students improve their written product, reformulation will be the right option.

Coyle and Roca de Larios (2014) also compared two different types of corrective feedback, but this time the comparison was established between the so-called "model texts" and "error correction (EC)". The participants in their study were EFL children, a clearly under-research group in the SLA field (García Mayo, forthcoming). This difference between focusing on university students (as in the studies above) and on primary school children is very important since adults have already fully acquired their L1 and have more metalinguistic awareness whereas children are developing both their L1 and their L2 at the same time.

To begin with, each feedback type must be defined: model texts can be defined as pieces of writing provided to the participants where they obtain an "ideal" version of the text they have composed according to their age, proficiency and also the content and the genre (Coyle & Roca de Larios, 2014). On the other hand, EC basically means correcting the participants' errors throughout their written texts.

Coyle and Roca de Larios (2014) had a sample of 23 child dyads, which was later reduced to 20 due to some unexpected problems. The children, aged 10-12, were divided on the basis of their proficiency level (high, medium and low). The dyads had to produce a collaborative text based on a picture prompt and, some time afterwards, they received corrective feedback. Here they were divided into two groups, the EC group and the 'models' group, which were given two texts, one written by a researcher who was a native speaker of English, and the other by their EFL teacher. The children had to spot and note down the differences they noticed between their own version and the feedback. Eventually, the dyads rewrote the story.

The results showed that, while writing the first version, the two groups noticed lexical features to a great extent when compared to grammatical features, but the latter were spotted by the EC group in significantly more occasions. Furthermore, regarding the modifications both groups made, more lexical than grammatical mistakes were corrected, and the EC group changed grammar aspects with more frequency. Finally, as far as spelling features are concerned, very few were identified and changed in the rewritten versions.

Thus, the findings supported the assumption that children and adults focus their attention on different aspects while writing collaboratively and being given feedback. Children mainly focused on the lexical aspects of their text, whereas adults were more prone to considering grammatical features. According to Coyle and Roca de Larios (2014), these results happen mainly due to the fact that children are usually more concerned with finding the exact words to express what they intend to mean, rather than with producing a grammatically accurate text, and that is not the case with adults. Nevertheless, the experiment by Lesser (2004), which explored the effect of proficiency in collaborative writing, revealed that adult low proficiency learners show the same tendency as low proficiency children. Therefore, this tendency does not only apply to children, but it appears to be consistent in low proficiency learners.

This might suggest that these feedback types could not be applicable to low proficiency students since they do not seem to boost the noticing of the gaps in their IL to a high extent. Therefore, either the already existing techniques should be adapted to proficiency level and, in the case of young learners, their age, or new techniques should be adopted instead. Nonetheless, the EC group did notice some grammatical features and modified the errors in the final version, so this feedback type could be used as a starting point to create a more adequate one at least for kids.

The third and last piece of research I am going to present investigates the effect of feedback on collaborative writing and it was conducted by Cánovas Guirao et al. (2015). As in Coyle and Roca de Larios (2014), the researchers also focused on EFL children (10 pairs, aged 10-11). The main aim of the study was to explore the way in which the participants noticed and processed the feedback from a model text during a collaborative writing activity at three different levels of proficiency. Although the children's proficiency level was beginner, they were divided into high, average and low proficiency pairs according to their grades in the English class.

In addition, there was an experimental group (EG) and a control group (CG) and both had to conduct a collaborative writing task based on a picture prompt. After that, the EG received a model text as a form of feedback written by their teacher, and both the EG and CG were asked to rewrite the story.When analyzing the data, the researchers focused their attention on content-related episodes (CREs) and in LREs. The former are

defined by Yang and Zhang (2010) as those moments in the participants' conversation where ideas are clarified or generated.

The findings showed that both groups concentrated on LREs but not on CREs while composing their texts. Besides, most of them showed the ability to correct half of the language problems they came across. Moreover, when comparing their texts to the models, the EG mainly identified lexical problems and did not pay so much attention to formal or sentence-related problems. In general, few changes were found when comparing the two versions, but the EG groups performed better in terms of lexical items. Apart from that, the investigation was also concerned with the impact that the dyads' proficiency would exert on the rewritten version. The high proficiency pairs noticed considerably more features in the models than the average and low proficiency learners.

In the findings of this study we can again observe a tendency to focus on lexical aspects instead of on grammatical aspects after the feedback has been provided. Furthermore, the experiment also sheds light on the effect that proficiency plays when performing a collaborative writing activity and dealing with feedback. In particular, it reveals that higher proficiency learners, although they were still young, were able to notice and modify more features in the revised versions than medium or low proficiency learners. Thus, even within same-age children there are differences across proficiency, which is a clear complication for L2 teachers when it comes to deciding the type of feedback that most suits their students.

Consequently, in light of the findings of research on collaborative writing summarized so far, L2 teachers should try to use them with higher proficiency learners, because they are capable of producing a much more accurate product after the feedback has been provided. Besides, they are also able to engage with the feedback and discuss their problems more accurately, which is highly beneficial for their L2 acquisition. On the other hand, concerning low proficiency learners, teachers should avoid these activities until more suitable task and feedback types are created for them, in that they introduce very few changes in the rewritten versions and do not still have access to the necessary tools to deliberate about their L2 linguistic problems. As a result, collaborative writing does not appear to benefit low proficiency learners as much as it benefits higher proficiency learners.

## 3.3. The effect of task type

Task modality is a variable that is receiving a lot of attention in the SLA field (Gilabert, Manchón & Vasylets, 2016). Researchers are interested in considering whether tasks that elicit oral output will trigger the production of LREs more frequently than those than require both oral and written output.

Against this backdrop, García Mayo and Azkarai (2016) conducted a study with forty-four Spanish-Basque bilinguals. They were all EFL students studying a variety of degrees at the University of the Basque Country (UPV/EHU). The object of the study was to explore the impact of task modality (writing or oral) on the occurrence of LREs in task-based interaction and also the participant's level of engagement during the collaborative tasks. The tasks they had to complete were dictogloss and text editing (collaborative writing tasks) and a picture placement and a picture differences task (oral tasks). Dictogloss has been discussed above and the text editing task is another type of activity in which learners work collaboratively and obtain peer feedback (Storch, 2007). In this task, function words and inflections are removed from a text and students are supposed to arrive at the most accurate solution (Alegría de la Colina & García Mayo, 2007). The text editing activity makes students focus both on form and meaning at the same time (Storch, 2007).

The study investigated the nature, outcome and level of engagement of the LREs produced while the tasks were being completed. Regarding the level of engagement in LREs, the researchers distinguished among elaborate LREs (E LREs), limited LREs (L LREs) and limited+limited LREs (L+L LREs). As for E LREs, they occurred when both members of the group participated in solving the problem; L LREs happened when only the participant who addressed the problem participated, whereas L+L LREs occurred when neither of the members discussed the problem.

The researchers compared the differences between oral vs. collaborative writing tasks and the differences between same-modality tasks, I will only concentrate here on the results obtained after comparing collaborative writing tasks since they are the focus of the present paper.

In general, collaborative writing tasks were the ones generating more LREs and oral tasks generated less. Consequently, the former will probably lead to a higher level of acquisition of the problematic features. Within same-modality tasks, the text-editing task led to the production of more LREs than the dictogloss. As for the nature of LREs, the text-editing task produced more form-focused LREs than the dictogloss. Furthermore, significant differences were found when comparing collaborative writing tasks in terms of their outcome: there were more correctly resolved LREs in the dictogloss. Finally, the dictogloss was the task that initiated more E LREs, and both collaborative writing tasks generated more L LREs than the oral tasks.

These results confirmed that collaborative writing tasks led to a more frequent production of LREs than oral tasks and, therefore, they could be more conductive to learning. However, it is well known that L2 teachers prefer to use traditional speaking or writing tasks in their language classes and rarely do they consider the combination of both of them. It is true that they might have a variety of reasons to do so, the most likely one could be that they are not familiar with the possibilities that collaborative writing offers. In my opinion, teacher training programs should make teachers aware of this type of tasks.

As we have seen, the comparison between dictogloss and text editing revealed that, although both trigger the use of many LREs, there are differences in the nature, outcome and level of engagement of the LREs in each task. Therefore, L2 teachers should consider those differences depending on the linguistic aspects they want their students to focus on, for instance, if they want their students to focus on a formal aspect like the use of the *–ing*, they should choose the text editing task. In contrast, if they prefer that their students discuss their language related problems so as to seek a target-like solution, the dictogloss would be a more appropriate option. In addition, they could also consider combining both task types in a way that they can enhance opportunities for L2 learning.

## 3.4. The effect of number of members

The last study that I am going consider investigates whether collaborative writing boosts L2 learning to a higher extent when the participants work in pairs or when they work in small groups. Although it had been shown that when participants

who write a text in pairs are compared to participants who produce a text individually, the former usually come up with a more accurate product, very little research has been conducted comparing the performance of individual learners, dyads and smalls groups. The rationale for this comparison would be that, from a socio-cultural perspective, working in small groups will pool the linguistic resources of all its members to solve LREs (Fernández Dobao, 2012).

With these ideas in mind, Fernández Dobao (2012) carried out a study in a public university in the United States. The participants were 111 intermediate Spanish L2 learners whose L1 was English, and were divided into three main groups: 21 participants worked individually, 30 worked in pairs (15 dyads) and 60 worked in groups (15 groups of four). The activity that participants were asked to complete involved 15 pictures that had to be rearranged to create a story and write it down. Dyad and group interaction was recorded to investigate the LREs they generated.

The findings showed that the texts produced by the groups were more accurate than those produced by the dyads and individually. In addition, no differences were found between groups and pairs in terms of fluency, and the texts written individually were generally longer. As for complexity, the groups and dyads displayed a similar level, and both were more complex than individually written texts. Additionally, small groups generated more LREs and were capable of correctly resolving a great amount of them, when compared to dyads, who initiated fewer LREs and resolved them correctly to a lesser extent. Regarding the focus of the LREs, there were no differences between the dyads and the groups.

What this experiment shows is that working in small groups when writing a text collaboratively seems to be more beneficial than working in pairs, since groups could create more accurate texts, produce more LREs and solve more problems. Consequently, L2 teachers should also bear in mind the results of this study when preparing a collaborative writing activity, because if the characteristics of the group of students allow it, working collaboratively in small groups could improve the learners' language learning opportunities. However, my personal opinion as a future teacher and as a current student is that if students work in pairs, it guarantees that both members are going to collaborate, whereas, if they work in groups, it is more likely that at least one student will not contribute to the written production. Therefore, it is of utmost

importance that teachers control the active participation of all the members in the groups while they are working, otherwise, not all the students will equally benefit from the collaborative writing activity.

## 4. Conclusion

The main goal of this paper was to review some recent studies that consider the potential of collaborative writing for L2 learning. More specifically, it has explored how collaborative writing could be an appropriate learning tool in an L2 class and how some variables, namely, proficiency levels, feedback techniques, activities and number of students affect that collaboration and the potential L2 learning. I have reviewed the main theories that support collaborative writing as a technique that reinforces SLA, and this has led me to review six research articles in the field, one dealing with the effect of proficiency, three concerning the effect of different feedback techniques, one studying the effect of task type and the last one investigating the effect of the number of participants in the writing activity.

From the findings reported in those articles I can conclude that collaborative writing activities are preferable than traditional speaking or writing activities, in that they make students discuss more linguistic issues and produce more LREs and, therefore, they are given more learning opportunities. In addition, both reformulation and text editing appear to be helpful feedback techniques, especially the former, in the case of university students. However, neither EC, nor model texts seem beneficial for primary school students and even less when their proficiency is low, and the same happens with low-proficiency adults. Therefore, on the basis of the studies carried out so far, one could say that at this point, collaborative writing seems to improve the performance of adult learners with an intermediate or high proficiency in the language they are studying as they have the capacities needed to cope with the activities and the feedback in a way that they bridge the gaps between their IL and the TL. Moreover, the number of participants who are working collaboratively also plays a relevant role, since small groups perform better than pairs, so if it is possible, working in groups of four would be ideal for an adequate SLA. Bearing those findings in mind, there are many aspects that the any L2 teacher must control for before conducting a collaborative

writing activity. Still, if they observe their group of students and realize that its conditions are favorable, collaborative writing will be an interesting pedagogical tool.

Before concluding, I must admit that I have faced some limitations because my first goal was to examine the effects of task type, feedback type and proficiency in primary school children exclusively. Yet, I was forced to change the focus of my study since there is still very little research conducted with children. Besides, another difficulty I had to overcome was the fact that there are also very few studies carried out to study the effect of proficiency and this is one of the reasons why I have only included one piece of research. However, as already mentioned, more studies are necessary in order to be able to determine whether or not collaborative writing could also benefit lower proficiency learners in some way. Finally, I was also interested in the effect of individual differences, such as motivations, self-esteem or writing expertise, in collaborative writing and I could not find any piece of research investigating that issue.

In my opinion, more research should be carried out to study collaborative writing from any perspective in primary education, since it has been claimed that this period is the one in which children can generally acquire an L2 most efficiently (Singleton, 1981) given the right input conditions. Therefore, we need as much information as possible that would be helpful to design the most beneficial activities for children. Furthermore, more research is also needed to study how collaborative writing interacts with proficiency, so that different task types or feedback types could be used for different proficiency levels. To conclude, I consider that individual differences play a significant role in every aspect of SLA, thus we also need studies that could shed light on how these influence students' performance in collaborative writing.

I would like to finish this paper by acknowledging that working on this topic has been incredibly instructive for me as a future EFL teacher. The main reason is that now I know that I will have to take many aspects into account when, in the future, I conduct a collaborative writing task with my students, which I will definitely do. Now I am aware of the fact that I cannot choose a given task or feedback technique randomly and that I should not treat all my students as if their level were equal, as in most cases that will not be true. But apart from instructing me, the topic has certainly been of much interest and I am sure that I will carry on reading research articles dealing with collaborative writing.

# References

Adams, R. (2007). Do second language learners benefit from interacting with each other? In A. Macky (ed) *Conversational Interaction in Second Language Acquisition*, pp. 29-52. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Adams, R. & Ross-Feldam, L. (2008). Does Writing Influence Learner Attention to Form? In D. Belcher & A. Hirvela (eds) *The Oral-Literate Connection: Perspectives on L2 Speaking, Writing, and Other Media Interactions*, pp. 243-266. Michigan: The University of Michigan Press.

Alcón Soler (2002). The relationship between teacher-led versus learner interaction and the development of pragmatics in the EFL classroom. *International Journal of Educational Research, 37*: 359-378

Alegría de la Colina, A. & García Mayo, M. P. (2007). Attention to form across collaborative tasks by low-proficiency learners in an EFL setting. In M. P. García Mayo (ed) *Investigating Tasks in Formal Language Learning*, pp. 91-116. London: Multilingual Matters.

Azkarai, A. & García Mayo, M. P. (2015). Task-modality and L1 use in EFL oral interaction. *Language Teaching Research*: 1-22.

Cánovas Guirao J., Roca de Larios J. & Coyle, Y. (2015). The use of models as a written feedback technique with young EFL learners. *Journal of Second Language Writing, 52*: 63-77.

Coyle, Y. & Roca de Larios, J. (2014). Exploring the role played by error correction and models in children's reported noticing and output production in a L2 writing task. *Studies in Second Language Acquisition, 36*: 451-485

Donato, R. (1994). Collective scaffolding in second language learning. In J.P. Lantolf and G. Appel (eds) *Vygotskian Approaches to Second Language Research*, pp. 35-56. Westport (CT): Ablex Publishing.

Ellis, R. (2000). Task-based research and language pedagogy. *Language Teaching Research 4 (3)*: 193-220.

Fernández Dobao, A. (2012). Collaborative writing tasks in the L2 classroom: Comparing group, pair, and individual work. *Journal of Second Language Writing, 21*: 40-58.

García Hernández, J., Roca de Larios, J. & Coyle, I. (forthcoming). Reformulation as a problem-solving space for young EFL writers: A longitudinal study of learning strategies. In M. P. García Mayo (ed.). *Learning Foreign Languages in Primary School: Research Insights*. Bristol: Multilingual Matters.

García Mayo, M.P. (ed.) (forthcoming). *Learning Foreign Languages in Primary School: Research Insights*. Bristol: Multilingual Matters.

García Mayo, M.P. &Azkarai, A. (2016). EFL task-based interaction: Does task modality impact on language-related episodes? In M. Sato & S. Ballinger (eds.*) Peer Interaction and Second Language Learning: Research Agenda and Pedagogical Potential*, pp. 241-266. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.

Gass, S. M. & Varonis, E. M. (1989). Incorporating repairs in nonnative discourse. In M. Eisenstein (ed) *The Dynamic Interlanguage: Empirical Studies in Second Language Variation*, pp. 71-86. New York: Plenum Press.

Gilabert, R., Manchón, R. & Vasylets, O. (2016). Mode in theoretical and empirical TBLT research: Advancing research agendas. *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics 36*: 1-19.

Izumi, S. (2003). Comprehension and production of processes in second language learning: In search of the psycholinguistic rationale of the Output Hypothesis. *Applied linguistics, 24* (2): 168-196.

Izumi, S. (2012). *Focus on Form in Second Language Acquisition*. Seoul: In Noon Sa.

Krashen, S. (1982). Principles and Practice in Second Language Acquisition. Oxford: Pergamon Press Inc.

Krashen, S. (1985). *The Input Hypothesis: Issues and complications*. London: Longman.

Leeser, M. J. (2004). Learner proficiency and focus on form during collaborative dialogue. *Language Teaching Research, 8,1*: 55-81.

Long, M. H. (1996). The role of linguistic environment in second language acquisition. In W. Ritchie & T. Bhatia (eds) *Handbook of Second Language Acquisition*, pp. 413-468. San Diego: Academic Press.

Long, M. H. & Robinson, P. (1998). Focus on form: Theory, research, and practice. In C. Doughty & J. Williams (eds) *Focus on Form in Classroom Second Language Acquisition*, pp. 15-41. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Manchón, R. M. (2011a). Situating the learning-to-write and writing-to-learn dimensions of L2 writing. In R. M. Manchón (ed) *Learning-to-Write and Writing-to-Learn in an Additional Language*, pp. 3-14. Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Co.

Manchón, R. M. (2011b). Writing to learn the language: Issues in theory and research. In R. M. Manchón (ed) *Learning-to-Write and Writing-to-Learn in an Additional Language*, pp. 61-82. Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Co.

Nassaji, H. & Fotos, S. (2011). *Teaching Grammar in Second Language Classrooms. Integrating Form-focused Instruction in Communicative Context.* London: Routledge.

Pica, T. (2013). From input, output and comprehension to negotiation, evidence and attention: An overview of theory and research on learner interaction and SLA. In M. P. García Mayo, M. J. Gutiérrez Mangado and M. Martínez Adrián (eds) *Contemporary Approaches to Second Language Acquisition*, pp. 49-69. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.

Pinter, A. (2011). *Children Learning Second Languages*. Palgrave MacMillan, Houndmills.

Schmidt, R. W. (1990). The role of consciousness in second language learning. *Applied Linguistics, 11*: 129-158.

Sheen, Y. (2011). *Corrective Feedback, Individual Differences and Second Language Learning*. New York: Springer.

Singleton, D. (1981). *Age as Factor in Second Language Acquisition.* Dublin: Trinity College.

Storch, N. (2007). Investigating the merits of pair work on a text editing task in ESL classes. *Language Teaching Research, 11*: 143-159.

Storch, N. (2011). Collaborative writing in L2 contexts: Processes, outcomes, and future directions. *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics, 31*: 275-288. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Swain, M. (1985). Communicative Competence: Some roles of Comprehensible Input and Comprehensible Output in its Development. In S. Gass & C. Madden (eds.) *Input in Second Language Acquisition*, pp. 235–253. Rowley, MA: Newbury House.

Swain, M. (1993). The Output Hypothesis: Just Speaking and Writing Aren't Enough. *Canadian Modern Language Review, 50*: 158-164.

Swain, M. (1998). Focus on form through conscious reflection. In C. Doughty & J. Williams (eds) *Focus on Form in Classroom Second Language Acquisition*, pp. 64-81. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Swain, M. (2000). The output hypothesis and beyond: Mediating acquisition through collaborative dialogue. In J. Lantolf (ed) *Sociocultural theory and second language learning*, pp. 97-114. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Swain, M. (2006). Languaging, Agency and Collaboration in Advanced Second Language Proficiency. In Byrnes H. (Ed.), *Advanced Language Learning: The Contribution of Halliday and Vygotsky*, pp. 95-108. London-New York: Continuum.

Swain, M. & Lapkin, S. (1995). Problems in output and the cognitive processes they generate: A step towards second language learning. *Applied Linguistics, 16*: 371-391.

Swain, M. & Lapkin, S. (1998). Interaction and second language learning: Two adolescent French immersion students working together. *The Modern Language Journal, 83*: 320-338.

Swain, M. & Lapkin, S. (2000). Task-based second language learning: The uses of the first language. *Language Teaching Research 4 (3):* 251-274.

Vygotsky, L. S. (1978). *Mind in Society: The Development of Higher Psychological Processes*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Vygotsky, L. S. (1987). Thinking and speech. In R.W. Rieber & A.S. Carton (eds) *The collected works of L.S. Vygotsky, Volume 1: Problems of general psychology*, pp. 39–285. New York: Plenum Press.

Wajnryb, R. (1990). *Grammar dictation*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Wigglesworth, G & Storch, N. (2012a). Feedback and writing development through collaboration: A socio-cultural approach. In R. M. Manchón (ed) *L2 Writing Development: Multiple Perspectives*, pp. 69-99. Berlin: Mouton.

Wigglesworth, G. & Storch, N. (2012b). What role for collaboration in writing and writing and feedback. *Journal of Second Language Writing, 21*: 364-374.

Williams, J. (2012). The potential role(s) of writing in second language development. *Journal of Second Language Writing, 21*: 321-331.

Yang, L. & Zhang, L. (2010). Exploring the role of reformulations and a model text in EFL students' writing performance. *Language Teaching Research 14 (4):* 464-484.