

# **Low-proficiency L2 Collaborative writing to enhance individual writing and grammatical accuracy**

Carla H. Consolini<sup>1</sup> and Irene Soto-Lucena<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>*University of Oregon*, <sup>2</sup>*University of Pittsburgh*

## **Introduction**

Within second language acquisition (SLA), collaborative learning as a pedagogical technique has been reviewed for its effectiveness in writing (e.g. Bikowski & Vithanage, 2016; McDonough & De Vleeschauwer, 2018; Storch, 2019; Wigglesworth & Storch, 2009), while grounding its basis in sociocultural theory (Vygotsky, 1978). However, authors such as Storch (2019) argue that much of the results from these studies are still inconclusive. Consequently, the need for more research is twofold. First, to sustain the claim that collaborative writing helps learners advance their individual writing skills. And second, to assess the possibility of aiding learners in their acquisition of specific grammatical elements. This research study focuses on the effectiveness of collaborative writing for English L1 speakers learning Spanish as a foreign language. Specifically, it examines the use of collaborative writing to enhance individual learners' writing skill and accurate use of the Spanish preterite/imperfect. Results support collaborative writing as a means to foster writing skills and grammar accuracy in individual writing after engaging in collaborative work.

## **1 Literature Review**

### **1.1 The Preterite/Imperfect Past Distinction in Spanish**

The bifurcation in the Spanish simple past between the preterite and imperfect tenses is a common struggle for native speakers of English learning Spanish (Baker & Quesada, 2011; Frantzen, 1995). This is “because their L1 does not mark this aspectual distinction morphologically” (Baker & Quesada, 2011, p. 2). The grammatical aspect of a verb accounts for the temporal structures of events, a property that denotes whether an event is complete. In Spanish grammatical aspects can be marked by using perfective or imperfective aspect morphemes. These morphemes represent contrasting ways of observing the “internal temporal constituency of a situation” (Comrie, 1997, p. 3). However, while Spanish represents [-/+perfective] options morphologically with one

specific tense, the [-/+perfective] viewpoint in English is not represented by a single tense. Instead it is represented by a combination of activities in conjunction with the past tense, or by adding the modal verbs *would* or *used to*. This clearly poses a challenge for L1 English learners of Spanish (Montrul & Slabakova, 2000). Referring to (1) in the example below we can see the morphological changes required in both English and Spanish for the preterite perfect. Examples (2) and (3) both use the preterite imperfect and highlight the differences in its use in English and Spanish. In (2) it is conveyed in English using a modal verb and in (3) through the use of the past progressive. Yet, in the Spanish version of both examples it is conveyed through a tense change. This illustrates the challenge English L1 learners face with regards to the preterite and imperfect. In this study we use this challenge as the basis for our examination of the effectiveness of collaborative writing in language learning.

- (1) a. El verano pasado **viajé** a la playa con mis amigos.  
 b. Last summer, I **travel-*PRET*** to the beach with my friends.  
 c. Last summer, I **traveled** to the beach with my friends.
- (2) a. Cuando era una niña **iba** todos los veranos a la playa  
 b. When I was a kid, **go-*IMP*** to the beach every summer  
 c. When I was a kid, I ***used to go/would go*** to the beach every summer
- (3) a. Laura **construía** una casa  
 b. Laura **build-*IMP*** una casa  
 c. Laura ***was building*** a house

## 1.2 The Benefits of Collaborative Writing in Second Language Learning

The collaborative learning approach argues that working collaboratively to achieve a goal promotes critical thinking among the collaborators (Gokhale, 1995). Such an example in SLA is collaborative writing in the L2 (e.g. Fernandez Dobao, 2012, 2014; Storch, 2019; inter alia). The theoretical basis supporting collaborative writing draws primarily on Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory. In it he argues that learning happens first at the social level and then moves to an intra-mental level through the use of collaboration. Learners collaborate by using language (L1 or L2) to create a framework through pooling their linguistic knowledge. This helps the learners to mediate their cognition and articulate their thinking (Storch, 2019). In accordance with these claims, collaborative writing has been a widely researched topic in the field of SLA. Findings show that peer to

peer dialogue results in better language performance, and suggest that the internalization that happens during social interaction in collaboration outweighs any possible negative effects (Swain, 1998; Swain & Lapkin, 1995; Swain & Tocalli-Beller, 2002).

Spanish is a growing language with more than 570 million speakers globally, from which 21 million are learners (Fernández Vítóres, 2017). As such, there is great relevance in examining the effects of collaborative writing to aid learners of Spanish in enhancing their grasp of the language. The existing body of research (e.g. Elola & Oskoz, 2010; Fernandez Bobao, 2012, 2014; McDonough, De Vleeschauwer & Crawford, 2018; Storch, 2019 Wigglesworth & Storch, 2009) shows a potential for L2 acquisition in collaborative writing that needs to be further investigated in order to find evidence of whether working collaboratively can help elementary learners of Spanish with the acquisition of complex concepts. The differentiation and proper use of the perfect and imperfect preterite is one of these complex concepts. Furthermore, the research studies that investigate collaborative writing in Spanish (Fernandez Dobao, 2012, 2014) have failed to assess participants' writing skills and proper grammar usage individually after engaging in collaborative writing. Therefore, there is a need to conduct research which can assess the development of both individual writing skills and of the acquisition of specific elements for elementary-level learners after engaging in collaborative writing tasks. Moreover, there is a need to investigate the connection of the results after engaging in collaborative writing and the learners' perception of collaboration based on their own performance to better understand what drives collaborative writing success. This study seeks to contribute to these areas through its' examination of collaborative writing with L2 Spanish learners.

## **2 This Study**

### **2.1 Participants**

A sample of 30 US undergraduate learners of Spanish at a Midwestern university participated in this experimental study. The participants were divided into a control group (N=15) and an experimental group (N=15). The criteria included learners that were native speakers of English who were taking Spanish for the second semester at the university level. They were not heritage speakers, nor did they know other languages or have a linguistics background. The participants were from two different sections of a Spanish elementary 2 (second 15-week semester of novice level according to the ACTFL criteria) course.

## **2.2 Instruments**

Both control and experimental groups were given a pre and post-test. The tests consisted on 40 minutes to write 200 words with pen and paper. In order to elicit the different past tenses, the prompt in the tests asked participants to look at a series of pictures and describe what the person in those pictures did last week. They were not allowed to use any resources or ask questions during the tests, and both tests were completed individually.

After both groups completed the pre-test, the control group engaged in three different individual writing tasks during three different class sessions, and the experimental group did the same but collaboratively in pairs. The same format as the pre-test was used for these exercises, but they contained different pictures, characters, actions and locations. During these practice tasks, participants in both groups were allowed to ask questions to the instructor and to use dictionaries, as well as their textbooks.

After completing the post-test, all participants (N=30) were asked to complete an anonymous exit questionnaire that inquired about their perception and experience on all the writing tasks they completed. It included both open-ended and Likert-scale questions

## **2.3 Procedure**

The preterite and imperfect were explained and practiced between week #2 and the end of week #5. The explanations and exercises followed the guidelines from the Spanish as a foreign language textbook selected by the department of the university. The participants' Spanish course consisted of four 55-minute classes per week within a 15-week semester. The pre-test took place on day 4 of week #12. During days one, two, and three of week #13, three different writing practice exercises were administered. On day one of week #14, the participants were administered the post-test. The same instructor (and researcher) was in charge of both groups when all the tests and exercises were administered. Lastly, on week #15 an exit questionnaire was administered.

## **3 Results**

### **3.1 Quantitative Results**

The writings of both groups from the pre and post-test were compared by running independent sample T-tests for the following categories: word count, number of T-units, number of error-free T-units, number of verbs properly conjugated in the past, and number of verbs improperly conjugated in the past. There were no statistically significant

differences in the pre-test results between the control and the experimental group in the categories of number of words, number of T-units, and number of verbs conjugated incorrectly. This indicated that the groups started at the same level in these categories. However, the control group outperformed the experimental group in the pre-test in the categories of error-free T-units, and verbs conjugated correctly, as seen in Table 1.

Table 1						
<i>Results from independent-sample t-test for pre-test results between groups</i>						
	Control group			Experimental group		
<u>Category</u>	<u>Mean</u>	<u>SD</u>	<u>Sig</u>	<u>Mean</u>	<u>SD</u>	<u>Sig</u>
Word count	123	31	0.38	111	27	0.38
T-unit	22	4.0	0.32	20	6.5	0.32
Error-free T-unit	6.7	6.6	0.03	3.5	3.1	0.03
Correct verbs	8.5	3.3	0.04	5.9	3.5	0.04
Incorrect verb	8.6	2.9	0.80	8.8	3.0	0.80

The results from the post-tests that compared the groups showed no statistically significant differences between the groups for the categories of error-free T-units, and verbs conjugated incorrectly. However, significant differences were found between groups for the categories of word count, number of T-units, and number of verbs conjugated correctly, as shown in Table 2.

Table 2						
<i>Results from independent-sample t-test for post-test results between groups</i>						
	Control group			Experimental group		
<u>Category</u>	<u>Mean</u>	<u>SD</u>	<u>Sig</u>	<u>Mean</u>	<u>SD</u>	<u>Sig</u>
Word count	88.5	33	0.02	122	44	0.02
T-unit	16.3	4.6	0.01	22.3	7.8	0.01
Error-free T-unit	5.2	4.2	0.40	6.4	4.0	0.40
Correct verbs	5.7	3.6	0.00	10.4	4.9	0.00
Incorrect verb	7.9	4.7	0.21	6.13	2.8	0.21

When conducting the analysis within a group for the control group, in the categories of word count, number of T-units, and number of verbs conjugated correctly, the statistical difference was given because of the low results of the group on the post-test.

Additionally, in the categories of error-free T-units and number of verbs that were conjugated incorrectly, there were no statistically significant differences (Table 3).

<u>Category</u>	Pre-test			Post-test		
	<u>Mean</u>	<u>SD</u>	<u>Sig</u>	<u>Mean</u>	<u>SD</u>	<u>Sig</u>
Word count	122	27	0.05	88	33	0.05
T-unit	21	4.0	0.02	16	4.6	0.02
Error-free T-unit	6.67	4.06	0.30	5.2	4.3	0.30
Correct verbs	8.53	3.54	0.05	5.73	3.67	0.05
Incorrect verb	8.6	2.94	0.50	7.93	4.7	0.50

The experimental group outperformed itself in the post-test in the categories of error-free T-unit, number of verbs conjugated correctly, and number of verbs conjugated incorrectly. However, in the categories of word count, and number of T-units, the group did not present a statistically significant change in performance between tests, as shown in table 4.

<u>Category</u>	Pre-test			Post-test		
	<u>Mean</u>	<u>SD</u>	<u>Sig</u>	<u>Mean</u>	<u>SD</u>	<u>Sig</u>
Word count	110	31	0.19	122	44	0.19
T-unit	19.5	6.5	0.09	22.3	7.8	0.09
Error-free T-unit	3.4	3.4	0.00	6.7	4.1	0.00
Correct verbs	5.9	3.3	0.00	10.4	4.9	0.00
Incorrect verb	8.8	3	0.00	6.1	2.8	0.00

### 3.2 Qualitative Results

Data was gathered on the participants' experience with the writing tasks as pairs or individually through a questionnaire. The questionnaire measured their perception on whether they found the tasks helpful for improving their writing skills, and for understanding the proper use of the preterite and the imperfect. The Likert-scale results from the first part of the exit questionnaire showed that 56% of the experimental group

strongly agreed to have enjoyed the collaborative writing tasks in class. It showed 75% strongly agreed that writing in pairs in class helped them understand the preterite and imperfect better, and 68% strongly agreed that writing stories in class helped them write better. Lastly, 87% of the participants in the experimental group strongly agreed that it would be beneficial for them to engage in more collaborative writing tasks in the future. On the other hand, only 18% of the participants in the control group agreed to have enjoyed writing individually in class, and only 6% strongly agreed that writing individually helped them understand the preterite and the imperfect better. However, 68% strongly agree that in-class writing activities help them write better overall.

Moreover, the second part of the questionnaire included open ended questions inquiring about why collaborative writing was helpful, in the case that they found it to be so. Below are examples of the answers that appeared the most in the participants' responses:

- (1) We could explain things the other didn't fully understand and we could each come up with ideas for the story.
- (2) My partner and I were creative and we were able to help each other work through the grammar.
- (3) I think it did help me write better when someone was able to tell me I was making a mistake. When I was writing alone I felt kind of lost and not very sure of myself.
- (4) Having another person helped me come up with better scenarios and write them in a more grammatically accurate manner.
- (5) We had similar struggles so working together was good because we could figure it out together and ask questions.
- (6) We both struggled with the content so it was nice to work off of each other's skill level rather than feeling like one of us was bringing the group down.

## **Discussion**

This study aimed to investigate whether writing collaborative could enhance not only the written final product of the participants, but also the proper use of the preterite and the imperfect past tenses in Spanish when writing individually. The results show that the control and experimental groups started the experiment at a similar level. However, the experimental group did outperform the control group in the post-test, yielding similar results as previous research (Bikowski & Vithanage, 2016; Fernández Dobao; 2014; Ho, 2015; McDonough & De Vleeschauwer, 2018; Storch, 2019; Wigglessworth & Storch,

2009), which claim that the use collaborative writing can enhance learners' output. The experimental group's texts from the post-test had a higher number of correctly conjugated verbs, while also having a lower number of incorrectly conjugated verbs. Nonetheless, their fluency and accuracy showed no significant improvement after the experiment.

The results show that collaborative writing can allow for an environment that is more conducive to learning grammatical aspects of the language. It accomplishes this through the process of metalinguistic conversation in pairs, as shown in previous research (Swain, 1998; Swain and Lapkin, 1995). In this case it was shown to be effective with regards to the use of the preterite and imperfect in Spanish writing. However, the results regarding fluency and complexity of written output are inconclusive. This is due to the fact that no clear evidence was found to support that collaborative writing can enhance the individual writing skills of those participants that engaged in three collaborative writing tasks. These inconclusive results are in line with Storch's (2019) research review that emphasizes the need for more and better designed research studies in this area.

Finally, the learners who found writing tasks useful in the experimental group strongly agreed that the use of collaborative writing tasks enhances their understanding of the preterite and imperfect tenses in Spanish. A smaller, but still significant percentage found collaborative writing useful to enhance their writing skills regarding complexity and fluency, even though no growth was seen in this regard. Most notably, participants that found collaborative writing most useful were those that did not perform the best. This is evidence that they perceived the benefit to their understanding of the subject after engaging in metalinguistic conversations with their peers. In conclusion, collaborative work that allows for peer to peer interaction is favorable for enhancing writing skills and grammar understanding. However, more rigorous research with larger samples is necessary to demonstrate a strong correlation between collaborative writing and language acquisition.

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<sup>1</sup>University of Oregon; <sup>2</sup>University of Pittsburgh

<sup>1</sup>[carlac@uoregon.edu](mailto:carlac@uoregon.edu); <sup>2</sup>[irs28@pitt.edu](mailto:irs28@pitt.edu)

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