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## *Team writing for team building: a collaborative writing approach for use in traditional and online classrooms of English language learners.*

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This article explores the possibilities of team writing for team building activities in classes of second language learners. Both face-to-face and online collaborative writing activities are discussed. These activities stem from a whole language approach to literacy acquisition including process writing and other interactive collaborations among learners. Team writing for team building activities include the characteristics of cooperation and collaboration among learners, the use of the four language skills, peer editing and reviewing, publication and display, both online and offline are presented. A step-by-step detailed example of one such activity is given, for use either in the classroom or through distance learning. The use of team writing activities promotes a sense of group belonging and collaboration in classrooms and encourages learner interaction and collaboration. It is expected that by building a sense of togetherness among learners, writing in the second language is encouraged and becomes less threatening and more interactive and purposeful.

Research indicates that writing in a second language is considered by many learners and language teachers to be among the most difficult of language skills to master (Byrne, 1979). The lack of body language, heavy dependence on linguistic abilities, and the necessity of combining a variety of interrelated components while writing have all contributed to this perception (Raimes, 1983; Walters, 1983). Those of us who have studied a second language are aware that writing in that language is a difficult challenge that can be frustrating and unrewarding. This seems particularly true when the writing projects promoted in the classroom have little real meaning to the learner and are overly difficult.

Furthermore, writing is often thought of as an independent activity that is best handled through individual tasks rather than cooperative ones. With the emergence of distance learning formats and online teaching of language, the potential for writing to become further isolating to learners is great.

However, this need not be the case when it comes to second language learners and their needs in the communicative / interactive classroom, whether face to face or online.

Team writing for team building activities come from a whole language approach, emphasizing the holistic nature of writing through collaboration (Freeman & Freeman, 1992). Process writing is included in team writing with the stages of pre-writing, drafting, revising, editing, and publishing as an important aspect of team writing (Peregoy & Boyle, 1997). Team activities contain certain characteristics that distinguish them from other writing activities practiced in many foreign language classrooms. These characteristics include: cooperation and collaboration among learners, the use of the four language skills if possible during each activity, peer editing and reviewing processes, and publication or display of team written products. The final product that emerges from each writing activity belongs to the group as a whole and has been created by the group. The difference between a straight process writing approach and team writing, is that the final product always belongs to the whole team or group rather than the individual. The use of these kinds of writing activities promotes a sense of belonging and cohesiveness among learners in the classroom.

The first characteristic of team writing/team building activities mentioned, cooperation and collaboration, is essential to the idea of a communicative classroom environment that promotes interaction. The interaction which is so often practiced and promoted during speaking activities can tend to break down during writing activities unless the teacher employs a teaming or collaborative process to teach writing. The cooperation needed among learners in order for a writing project to be successful must be carefully controlled by the teacher so that some learners don't become monopolizers, while others remain passive. In order to have all participate in the writing activity, each learner must have a specific role that is necessary for the completion of the written product.

These roles vary among activities and may also vary due to the different linguistic abilities of the learners in the classroom.

Use of the internet as a learning tool is rapidly increasing (Crossman, 1997). Since online exchanges are conducted mainly through written interaction, it seems natural that teachers of writing would use this versatile tool. Cooperation and collaboration among learners in an online environment is even more essential to the successful completion of a written product. Whereas in the face to face classroom it is conceivable that one learner could monopolize a project that wasn't carefully controlled by a teacher, in an online environment, everyone's words potentially carry the same weight (Kitchen & McDougall, 1998-1999). Electronic collaboration encourages students to put their ideas into written words that are expressed as clearly as possible (Chan, 1999). When using email or chat room collaborations, learners rely completely on one another in order to be able to converse and complete assignments. The writer who does not receive feedback from classmates cannot continue the written conversation, and therefore cannot write. Research in second language acquisition has suggested that the negotiation of meaning is an essential component of the acquisition process (Long, 1983). Collaborative writing online is a continuous negotiation of meaning through which learners actively participate in order to be part of the classroom environment. Therefore, the online systems that allow for collaborative writing essentially rule out the possibility of non-collaborative writing, and therefore work nicely in order to promote team building among language learners.

The second characteristic of team building/team writing proposed is that of the incorporation of all four language skills into every writing activity. This is promoted through the design of activities that call for a listening, speaking, reading and writing component in order to be completed successfully. The idea is that learners do not immediately jump into writing together without having first listened to one another, discussed ideas, perhaps read something together, and finally joined together in order to write. The integration of writing within interactive language activities tends to make it more feasible for learners and may work to encourage them to write more quantity, and more freely.

In an online environment, the skills of reading and writing are readily promoted and practiced on a regular basis. However, the skills of listening and speaking may not be as easily fulfilled. Some courseware tools do allow for conferencing with students in order to have real time dialogue and conversations. Also, audio clips may be used by the instructor in order to give directions or writing prompts to students even in a virtual environment.

However, it is the use of real time written chat that probably most closely mimics a speaking and listening interaction, even though it is in written form.

This may be the best solution for instructors who are serving learners who are not able to access audio clips or who do not have the necessary tools to engage in real time conferencing.

The third characteristic of team writing for team building suggested, that of peer editing and reviewing, is an important element in promoting the idea that the process of writing can be a team effort. This active collaboration among learners is essential in promoting a true sense of community in the classroom, while framing the writing process as an interactive group endeavor (Lefevre, 1987; Tobin, 1992; Peregoy & Boyle, 1997). The teacher must first teach all learners how to act as editors and reviewers in order to avoid the possible negative consequences of these 'teaching' acts by learners. The first stage is to model the process of editing and reviewing through examples by the teacher, and through exercises in which the teacher asks the whole class to suggest edits to a written piece created by a non-class member. The learners should become comfortable with suggesting edits and revisions, and need to learn the language of the editorial process. Many times learners are afraid to hurt the feelings of their classmates and therefore say that the written product is fine 'as is' and needs no revisions. It is the job of the teacher to point out that not editing and reviewing carefully leads to the writer not having a good product in the end, and to promote peer editing as a helpful and essential act that helps rather than hurts classmates. By modeling polite language chunks that editors can use to make their comments, teachers help students get over the feeling that they are being intrusive and gain the feeling that they are being helpful.

When working with students in an online environment, the same type of teacher modeling and student editing can and must exist. The teacher may give all students access to a page of possible comments to make on one another's papers, and to possible responses to comments. These can be available to learners at all times, so that there is no danger that they will forget how to make their comments, or that they will be stuck for something to say. Furthermore, the fact that the online environment is negotiated mainly through reading and writing, reinforces the idea that the written product is a team effort undertaken through written dialogue.

As in traditional process writing (Peregoy & Boyle, 1997), writing for team building should usually end with a finished and 'published' product. The best type of product is an effort of all of the team members and contains content, modification, and revision created by all. The best type of product should also contain all of the names of all of the team members to reinforce the idea that the product belongs to the group and came from the group. These written products can take many forms, and depend largely upon the language level of the students and the creativity of the teacher. These forms may include stories, books, scripts, letters, action plans, slogans, manifestos, directions, reports, and any number of other possibilities.

When working in an online environment, all of the above types of written products can easily exist, and be accessible to the whole group simultaneously.

Furthermore, in an online environment, a homepage could be created by the group that would house all of their different written products over time, and that could be in a constant state of revision and addition. The nature of the internet allows for continuous updating and expanding of information, so that the team writing process never needs to end and always has a way to be displayed.

Anyone who has faced a blank sheet of paper while being told to write a paragraph or two in a second language understands the overwhelming nature of this task. The following team writing activity is designed to make the writing process more manageable for the second language learner while concurrently enhancing interactive speaking, listening, reading and writing opportunities both within the classroom

and/or through online interactions. This idea of team building for writing and interaction is beneficial in that it creates a sense of community that can lead to friendship building among learners, while breaking writing down into manageable chunks (Boyle, 1982). Numerous research studies have indicated that second language learners who develop friendships with other learners and with native speakers tend to be more receptive to learning the language, and to seek out more language practice opportunities (Nieto, 1996; Valdez, 1986).

The team writing activity described below includes a speaking, reading, and listening component. This activity promotes cooperation and collaboration among learners while giving a framework for the acquisition of language skills. Good team writing activities are designed to be adaptable in order to work with any level of learner from beginning to advanced language proficiency levels. The particular version of the activity described in this article is an intermediate level. More modeling, explicit directions and pre-activity vocabulary building exercises would be needed in order to make this activity work with beginning levels of learners. More lengthy writing opportunities with more complex topics would be appropriate for a higher level of learner.

The team writing activity suggested here comes from a series of activities that fall into three general thematic categories. These are described as: writing about what was, writing about what is, and writing about what could be (Perez-Prado, in process). Because of the differences in the categories, each writing activity lends itself to the practice of a different set of grammatical structures. For example, the writing activities housed within the writing about what was category, naturally feature the use of the past tense, present perfect tense and the past perfect tense to a great extent. This is convenient in that the teacher will quickly determine what grammar areas learners need most practice on, and can concentrate activities in that direction.

The example activity below is written up to display the possibilities of using such an activity in both a face to face and an online learning environment.

First, the description is given as it would be used in a traditional face-to-face classroom. Later, the activity as it could be delivered online is described. For those instructors who are able to use both

traditional and online delivery systems of instruction, a combination of the two is suggested as a best case scenario.

### **Activity One: Regrets**

Category: Writing about what was

Level: Intermediate

Offline Materials    Online Materials

Pens or pencils    Index cards    A board or large pieces of paper,    Markers

Access to Computers with internet access    Computer courseware tool, such as WebCT ([www.webct.com](http://www.webct.com))

### **Procedure:**

#### **Step One**

Offline                      Online

Divide the class into groups, or teams. This can be done in a variety of ways, from random divisions to controlled divisions based on language levels for heterogeneous grouping, as supported by the literature on cooperative learning.

The instructor may divide the class into groups manually by grouping students together based on his or her own criteria for grouping, or the computer can Randomly generate groups using a coursetool such as Group Generator in WebCT.

#### **Step Two**

Offline                      Online

The teacher should start by writing the word 'regrets' on the board and brainstorming with the students to see if anyone knows the meaning of this word.

Different student contributions to explain the word should be recorded around the word on the board, in the form of a semantic web. All contributions should be recorded, and when finished, the teacher should circle those that best clarify the meaning of this word. The instructor can start a threaded discussion in the discussion forum available online. This works like a bulletin board.

The teacher can write a prompt, such as: “ In this forum we will be talking about regrets, reply here and share with the class what you think this word means.” The students all reply with their definitions of the word. Students should be encouraged to read one another’s postings so that they build on ideas and add to the discussion rather than simply repeating ideas

### **Step Three**

Offline                      Online

Next, the teacher reads the following passage aloud to students. – Is there anyone who doesn’t have regrets? Is there anyone who doesn’t think back to something they should have done differently in their lives? Probably not. Most of us can remember times when we had to make a decision, and chose to do or not to do something that we later regretted. Sometimes this choice affected our relationship with another person, our job or school possibilities. Once students have had a chance to brainstorm the meaning of the word “regrets” through their discussion forum, the teacher can send out an email with the prompt above to all students. They each receive this email in their personal mailbox, and are encouraged to submit their ‘virtual’ index cards to the teacher by replying to the email. The teacher can then create virtual cards through online icons in the course, that each feature a regret and that are accessible to all students in teams, or to all students in the class.

### **Step Four**

Offline                      Online

At this point, the teacher should circulate in order to provide one on one assistance or clarification as needed, so that the activity can proceed. The reading aloud to students provides for a listening dimension to the activity that is helpful in incorporating the different sub-skills of language. In an online situation the teacher cannot circulate the way he or she would normally do so in a classroom.

Therefore, the email tool must be used again, with the teacher writing a mail encouraging students to ask questions or seek help from her if they need it. If audio clip technology is available, the teacher may put this in the forum in the form of an audio message that all students can listen to. An advantage to using audio clips is that students are able



to replay the clip as many times as they desire, thereby reinforcing listening and controlling their own learning to a certain extent.

### **Step Five**

Offline                      Online

Have students pick an index card from the box in the middle, and discuss what is on this card one at a time. They should generate vocabulary associated with this regret, and write it on the back of the card. For the example of 'not going to college' vocabulary such as : studying, working, books, opportunities, careers, etc. Students may wish to identify those regrets they wrote or not, but they are all responsible for contributing to the discussion of each regret.

This step adds an interactive speaking element to the activity before extensive writing takes place. Students meet with their team in a chat room provided within the coursetool. They pick from the virtual index cards in order to discuss and generate vocabulary on the regrets chosen as above. The chat log can be recorded for the students to keep track of the vocabulary, and the teacher may or may not wish to be a part of the chat. If virtual conferencing software is available, this could be done through oral interaction as well.

### **Step Six**

Offline                      Online

Next, have students look at the regrets before them on index cards and choose one that they wish to write about. More than one student may choose the same regret, or they may all choose different ones. They should be given about ten minutes to begin writing on their regret, as a personal narrative of something that was. The teacher may wish to model a pre-written sample of her own, or generate one or two sentences on the board with an example and input from the class. At this point they may wish to use the vocabulary on the card generated by the group, in addition to any other vocabulary they use in their personal narrative. The online process for this step is virtually identical to the offline procedure above. Students independently write about the regret they choose using the vocabulary generated through the online chat as

well as other vocabulary they may find on their own. The teacher may load up her own sample in an icon available to all team members.

### **Step Seven**

Offline                      Online

Once the above step is completed, have students exchange papers with a partner in the writing team. Students read one another's narratives, and then have a writing conference. At this point, there is reading incorporated into the activity and further practice in listening and speaking. The teacher should model appropriate phrases and comments to use in the conference on the board, and circulate among students in order to give input and assistance as needed during the writing conferences. Students email their writing partners with the contribution. They read one another's pieces and conference through the email or the course chat. The teacher should have an icon or single page available that displays appropriate types of comments to be made during conferences, question types, and other helpful hints for students working in teams.

### **Step Eight**

Offline                      Online

Next, students rewrite their narrative based on the writing conference suggestions and their own ideas. This may be done in class if there is sufficient time and the pieces are short enough, or it may be assigned for homework. For this step the online process is identical to the offline process.

### **Step Nine**

Offline                      Online

Once students have completed their second draft, a peer editing conference takes place in the team. At this conference students pair up with another member of the team and exchange second drafts. They read one another's drafts and make editorial comments on the paper. These comments should follow guidelines given by the instructor, such as focusing on grammar, spelling, transitions, clarity, or whatever the case may be. The instructor should demonstrate editorial marks ahead of time on board or through a handout so all students use the same

type of marks on all papers. During this step, it is important that more than one team member edit each paper, so the papers are passed around clockwise after about five or ten minutes of editing. This way more than one editor has a hand in editing and the student gets a better overall picture of what needs to be revised. Students should also be encouraged to make comments and ask questions for clarity in the margins of the paper. For this step, the online process follows the same format as the offline process with the email used in place of face-to-face conferencing. If the teacher has been able to set up team discussion areas in the discussion forum of the course, the students may use this venue rather than email. The advantage here is that all members of the team could see the writer's contribution, and the edits of each team member as they read, edit and post their responses. Software is available that provides editorial marks and text boxes for comments.

### **Step Ten**

Offline                      Online

Once the student gets his or her paper back there is some time for reading editorial comments and thinking about revisions. The next step is a whole team writing conference in which students share their feelings on the editorial comments, their ideas for revisions, and their requests for assistance or clarification from editors. This is an important step in that it includes all members of the team and therefore makes every piece of writing produced the responsibility of all members on the writing team. At this point, two team members may also choose to combine their narratives into one account written by both.

For this step, the online chat is the most appropriate course tool to use in discussing the feelings and thoughts associated with the editorial process.

Students who wish to work in a team may also participate in a buddy chat following the whole team chat.

### **Step Eleven**

Offline                      Online

Finally, the individual or pair rewrites the narrative to a final draft that gets included with all team members writings into a publication of some type.

This may be a booklet, display, or other, depending on what is most appropriate for every individual classroom. For the purposes of collaborative team writing and team building, all group members' names are included in the final product which is promoted and presented as a team publication. The natural publication area for an online collaboration is probably a homepage created by the team.

This homepage can feature the team's writing contributions in the form of displayed text or through links to various other sites all emanating from the homepage created by team members.

This example of a collaborative team writing for team building activity can be modified in any number of ways by the instructor and students. There is no lack to the amount of topics that are available for students to write on using this basic structure and approach. One of the greatest benefits of using an online format for writing collaboratively is that the writing that goes on during online peer conferencing and editing naturally reinforces the writing for English language development, and enhances the opportunities for students to express themselves through the written word. On the other hand, face-to-face writing conferences and peer interactions have all of the benefits of immediate feedback, the use of body language, and the speaking and listening fluency practice. Ideally, an instructor would be able to use a combination of online and offline learning delivery systems in order to promote team building through team writing and enhance the sense of community that is an essential component of second language acquisition.

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