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Why Are We Here? Analog Learning in the Digital Era

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Why are we here?
Analog learning in the digital era

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Writing Across Borders: Panel Findings on Collaborative Writing

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With over seventy years of combined experience, this panel offers innovative ideas that incorporate collaborative learning and technology into the teaching of ELT composition courses. The first section offers first-hand evidence that showcases the value of collaboration in the writing process. The next section explains the use of Google's G Suite for Education and Zotero in junior high and pre-sessional college classes in Japan. The concluding section reviews an online collaborative writing project between two universities in Okinawa, Japan. Though limitations are noted in each section, we believe that the ideas presented in this article not only improve the students' skills in written and social communication but also enhance their employability in an increasingly digital world.

INTRODUCTION

Throughout the world, the teaching of English as a second/foreign language remains grounded in methods where students sit through hours of explicit instruction. Our contexts, Japan and South Korea, are no exception (e.g., see Choi, 2008; Hadley, 2002; Harumi, 2011; Walker, 2017a). Rather than presenting students with opportunities to express themselves, it is not uncommon for teachers to opt for tepid course books, which oftentimes are replete with obscure grammar and vocabulary items. In theory, such methods and content are intended to help students develop communicative skills. In practice, however, students often learn in solitude, devoting more time to memorization strategies as opposed to interacting with others and applying these skills (purportedly) learned in class.

With over seventy years of combined experience, the ideas presented in this article serve as an alternative. This article suggests helpful ways to incorporate collaborative learning and technology into the teaching of English composition courses. Following this introduction, the first section offers evidence that showcases the inherent value of student-to-student collaboration. The next section explains the use of Google's G Suite for Education and Zotero in junior high and

pre-sessional college classes in Japan. The concluding section reviews an online collaborative writing project between two universities in Okinawa. Taken together, we are united in our belief that the ideas presented in this article not only improve the students' skills in written and social communication but also enhance their employability following graduation.

WALKER: THE CASE FOR COLLABORATION

The context of this report takes place in a beginner-level written composition course at a mid-sized university in Seoul. Designed for students majoring in the university's Department of English Language and Literature, the course aims to introduce students to ways in which different types of sentences form different types of paragraphs. Over the 16-week semester, students composed four 200-word paragraphs: (a) an imperative paragraph (i.e., giving instructions on how to cook a meal with a grammatical focus on countable and non-countable nouns), (b) a descriptive paragraph (i.e., describing one of Korea's many subway stations using adjectives that describe the human senses, such as sight, smell, touch, and hearing), (c) a narrative paragraph (i.e., telling the story of an emotionally significant moment with a grammatical focus on complex sentences and climatic writing), and (d) an opinion paragraph (i.e., student's choice with a focus on structure, cohesion, and logic).

The course syllabus did not include a midterm exam, which allowed for a minimum of five classes for each written assignment. In the first two classes, students analyzed, critiqued, and in some cases, ridiculed sample paragraphs from Folse et al. (2014), the course textbook. Through this collaboration, the teacher spent two classes reviewing compositional structure (e.g., word count limitations, formatting, and cohesion) and key grammar items were identified (e.g., countable and non-countable nouns, adjectives, complex sentences, punctuation). Next, students were briefed on the written task topic and grading rubric. The remaining three classes were devoted to peer-review, in which students proof-read, edited, and offered comments on each other's writing.

Similar to the collaborative teaching methods introduced in Walker (2017b), the class began by arranging students into pairs. At the beginning of each class, students drew a card. Next, each student had to find the other student with the matching card. If a student drew a Red-9, for instance, s/he would have to locate the person who drew the Black-9. Once found, these two students would sit beside each other and be partners for the class. This process of arranging partners randomly was done repeatedly at the beginning of each class over the course of the semester. The intention behind this method was to provide students with opportunities to collaborate and interact with fellow students. In doing so, it was hoped that students could be presented with a rich diversity of insights and perspectives.

I was pleasantly surprised to see the level of student engagement after just a few classes. Though many of the students had not been previously introduced to each other, the majority of the students could be seen looking up vocabulary/grammar items on their smartphones, asking thought-provoking questions, writing comments, and brainstorming ideas. In the twelfth week of the

course, the students were asked to complete an anonymous course evaluation using Google Forms, which included thirteen Likert-scale items that were taken from the university's course evaluation and two open-ended questions: (a) What do you like most about the course? and (b) What are your suggestions for improvement? This data was collected from two separate course sections (N = 23), one in 2016 and the other in 2017, and coded to identify relevant themes.

Constrained by space, I wish to discuss the theme that was easiest to identify in the results of the data. Of 23 responses submitted, 12 students directly commented on the value of collaboration. Here are a few of the responses:

The most enjoyable part of the class is that we advise each other about [the writing] task. (Student 7, 2016 Fall Section, 15/11/16 14:12)

Interacting with classmates. Fantastic! Helping each other rather than competitive study. (Student 17, 2017 Fall Section, 08/11/17 15:24)

I found that people were really active on what they are assigned to do, especially when they were evaluating peer to peer. [This] made me participate in the class with more enthusiasm. (Student 18, 2017 Fall Section, 09/11/17 18:44)

Peer review. It was interesting to find out how other people write. And I could also learn from the others. (Student 20, 2017 Fall Section, 11/11/17 20:50)

To evaluate my partner's paragraph. I can learn new expressions, and get appropriate feedback. (Student 21, 2017 Fall Section, 12/11/17 17:26)

From these excerpts, we can see the inherent value in having students collaborate in class. Student 7 and 17 commented on how collaboration in class fostered a positive learning environment. Student 18 remarked on how collaboration in class was a means of being held accountable to others. Students 20 and 21 suggest that collaboration plays a key role in the learning process. Taken together these findings are particularly relevant to contexts like Korea and Japan where researchers (e.g., Choi, 2008; Hadley, 2002; Harumi, 2011; Walker, 2017a) have observed the tendency for teachers to inundate students with hours of lecture and memorization in preparation for standardized exams.

Though these findings are encouraging, it is worth noting much of the collaboration took place in the student's L1, Korean. For teachers who are limited in their ability to communicate in their student's L1 (such as myself), this might be unsettling. However, the students intense focus and body language observed during the collaboration processes in class leads me to believe that much of the students' oral discourse are what scholars (e.g., Creese & Blackledge, 2010; García & Wei, 2014) call *translanguaging*: "the act performed by bilinguals of accessing different linguistic features or various modes of what are described as autonomous languages, in order to maximize communicative potential" (García, 2009, p. 140). I am of the camp that believes this sort of discourse serves a valuable purpose in the language classroom. A more pressing area of interest is to evaluate the quality and accuracy of their comments during the peer review process. One way in which this can be done is through collaboration online. And to that end, my fellow panel members have some thought-provoking ideas to share.

PATERSON: DIGITAL COLLABORATION IN JUNIOR HIGH AND PRE-SESSIONAL COLLEGE CLASSES

This section examines the approaches taken and results gleaned from an action research collaborative writing project with two different groups of students. The first was a pre-sessional course for Japanese and other Asian students at a Japan branch campus of a U.S. university: Lakeland University Japan (LUJ). The second was a pair of classes from an International Baccalaureate IB Middle Years Program at Tokyo Gakugei University International Secondary School (TGUISS), where the students included Japanese returnees and mixed heritage children. In both cases, students were taught how to use Google Docs and Google's G Suite for Education. Freely available and easy to access, G Suite for Education comes with multiple applications that allow users to comment, revise, and edit documents online.

In addition, students were taught how to use Zotero, a reference management tool that allows users to collect, organize, cite, and share research sources. Although there are many online referencing tools available, an increasing number of researchers and teachers have endorsed Zotero (see Clements & Guertin, 2016; Duong, 2010; Lisbon, 2014; Winslow, Skripsky, & Kelly, 2016). In addition to its user-friendly interface, Zotero works with a range of word processors and will run on Apple, Linux, Chromebooks, and Windows computers. Zotero has a notetaking and note sharing function for items and collections, which can all be synced via the cloud for usage on multiple devices and by multiple users. For teachers who work with students with varied linguistic backgrounds, Zotero comes with multi-lingual support documentation (Zotero Documentation, n.d.). This, along with the other benefits mentioned above, led me to choose Zotero over the other available referencing applications.

Studies have shown Japan to be one of the most risk-averse societies (Aspinall, 2010; Peltokorpi, Allen, & Froese, 2015), which has had an effect on the speed of change in adopting technology. Regarding use of information communication technologies (ICT), Japan has scored poorly amongst OECD nations (OECD, 2016), and was situated in the lower extreme of ICT usage when compared with schools internationally according to the 2015 PISA Report (OECD, 2015). Therefore, there is an overarching need to examine the impact of low ICT usage in the educational sector in general and the state school system in particular. Based on these findings, it was not surprising to see that all my students had little or no previous exposure to any kind of writing applications before taking my class, with the exception of basic skills in Microsoft Word.

Some critical research has also been done on how younger students use applications (Gardner & Davis, 2014). This is seen as an important aspect of non-native English speakers' use of digital communications (Meurant, 2010). However, Igari (2014) has commented on Japan lagging behind in its ICT usage in general, a comment that is borne out by other sources when in-school ICT usage is examined (OECD, 2015). Additionally, the importance of digital literacy and ICT usage in the modern classroom has attracted attention elsewhere (Jones & Hafner, 2012; Knobel & Lankshear, 2007; Kress, 2003; Lankshear & Knobel, 2008), although this has not lead to any widespread ICT implementation in Japan

(OECD, 2016). My classes aimed to address this lack of digital literacy and promote ICT usage by facilitating collaboration in the students' written assignments.

Students were given a Google Document template for academic writing, containing five sections: an introduction, three body paragraphs, and a conclusion. Students were given a deadline for preparing a draft for each section and then engaged in peer review where they edited, proofread, and commented on each other's work. These groups were set up thematically so that students writing on similar topics could share resources and ideas via Zotero and their Google Drive accounts. Theoretically, this draws upon Lave and Wenger's (1991) widely cited communities of practice, which has evolved into online communities of practice (see Lewis & Allan, 2004).

Reactions to this writing process (and to the introduction of Zotero and G Suite for Education) in an end-of-course questionnaire at LUJ were overwhelmingly positive with many students asking why no one had ever shown them this way of writing before. At the end of my TGUISS courses, students were asked to write a reflective blog post on what they had learned. These questionnaire responses and blog posts not only showcase development in their writing but also highlight the benefits of collaborative learning. The word limits of this short entry preclude a deeper examination of this. In general, however, I would whole-heartedly recommend the ideas mentioned in this section to other teachers looking to introduce their students to the benefits of online collaborative writing.

MACLEAN AND FEWELL: A COLLABORATIVE WRITING PROJECT BETWEEN TWO UNIVERSITIES

This section describes a collaborative writing project involving students from two public universities in Okinawa, Japan. After learning how to use the G Suite for Education (GSE; see Google for Education, 2014) and other information communication technologies (ICT), students completed an online writing collaborative project. Since the tourism industry is a primary source of employment in this prefecture, we asked our students to write a travel guide describing one of Okinawa's tourist attractions/destinations. After writing the travel guide, students were asked to give a Google Slides presentation. Students intensively used the GSE to complete this assignment, including Google Drive, Docs, Sheets, and Slides. After completing the projects, students from both universities were asked to complete a follow-up questionnaire.

Aim, Participants, and Procedure

This study aimed to introduce students to ICT, promote collaborative learning, and help students improve their writing. The participants for this project involved EFL students from compulsory entry-level university English courses taught at two public universities in Okinawa. Altogether, the average age of the students was 18.6 years old; there were 39 (39%) males and 42 females (61%). The procedure is described in five steps.

Step 1: Students were arranged into groups of four. First, they were randomly divided into groups of two within their class, and then they were paired with two students from the other university. Their contact information was entered onto a Google Sheet. Next, students were required to send a greeting email to their partners at the other university.

Step 2: Students communicated with each other and chose a topic relevant to tourism in Okinawa. Topics were chosen either geographically (e.g., Miyako-jima Beach) or thematically (e.g. Okinawan cuisine such as *champuru*, a stir fry with local ingredients). Once they decided on a topic, they entered the information into the Google Sheet mentioned in Step 1.

Step 3: Students' names were color coded on the Google Sheet, and an additional column was added with a hyperlink to a shared Google Document. They were told to write a 200-250-word paragraph about some aspect of their chosen topic. They were encouraged to proofread and comment on their partners' writing.

Step 4: Once the writing was complete, another column was added to the Google Sheet with a hyperlink to a common Google Slides presentation. In total, each group's presentation had an introduction slide, a conclusion slide, and eight slides (i.e., two from each student). During this time, we looked carefully at both the quality and quantity of the students' online collaboration.

Step 5: Students at each university presented their group's presentation, including the information from their partners at the other university.

Findings

In comparison to individual writing assignments, we observed that this collaborative writing method revealed noticeable improvements in the students' content, organization, grammar, and mechanics. As teachers, we were impressed with the students' level of interest and were entertained by some of the topics, which included expressions from the local dialect, Okinawan TV personalities, and differences between Okinawa and the mainland. As an exploratory project, however, there is room for improvement. A small minority of the students did not complete their assignments. We suspect this could be attributed to the social dynamics of the group. For some groups, cultural differences in group behavior (e.g., see Peak, 1991), behavioral norms, personality types, and perhaps limited English proficiency are factors that may have led to limited online correspondence as shown in Figure 1.

Although most of the groups were able to complete their projects, the overwhelming majority of the students communicated less than 4-5 times. At this stage, we are unclear on the nature and length of the conversations that took place over the phone or in person. In general, we suspect that there is a positive relationship between the grade they received on their presentation and the number of times they collaborated. The students who received high scores on their presentations seemed to know more about their fellow group members and looked quite comfortable during their presentations.
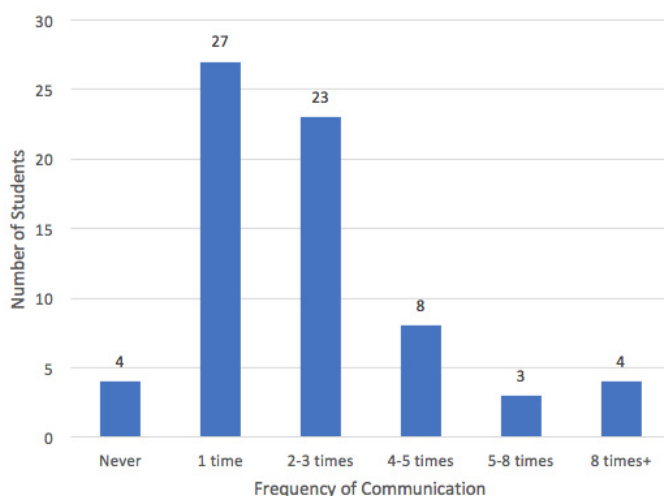
FIGURE 1. Frequency of Communication Between Writing Partners.

A questionnaire was administered to participants at the end of the project from which we were able to derive several useful insights (see Table 1). According to a Likert scale, where 1 indicated strong disagreement and 5 indicated strong agreement, students responded to a series of statements about their experiences during the project. Students liked working in groups (Item 1, M = 4.46) as opposed to working individually (Item 2, M = 2.70). They indicated mild agreement that the project was difficult (Item 3, M = 3.20), although not excessively so.

TABLE 1. Student Responses About the Writing Project

Statement	Descriptive Statistics		
	Count	Mean	SD
1. I liked working in groups	69	4.46	0.81
2. I prefer working individually	69	2.70	1.05
3. This project was difficult	69	3.20	0.95
4. This project helped me to learn English	69	4.04	0.67
5. Skills learned for this project will help me in the future	69	4.36	0.64
6. I want to do this again	69	3.68	0.80

Note. SD = Standard deviation

Regarding educational benefits derived from the project, students agreed that it helped them to learn English (Item 4, M = 4.04), and they indicated a strong sense that the skills they learned from this project will be helpful in their futures (Item 5, M = 4.36). There was some support for the idea of repeating a similar project in the future (Item 6, M = 3.68); however, this was not as strong as we had hoped. Nevertheless, the standard deviation for this item indicated that there was very little strong disagreement with this proposition.

Summary

Analysis of the data revealed that this study made significant strides in not only raising awareness of ICT and collaborative learning but also in helping students improve their writing. Results from the questionnaire coupled with our observations suggest that this collaborative writing project was a success. Considering the limited amount of time available for this project (approximately six classes), we believe these findings are especially encouraging. We are motivated to continue this project and plan to address the limitations mentioned above by providing more explicit instruction on how to write emails, proofread, and leave comments online. On a broader level, we hope that the content and pedagogic methods used in this class will help students develop practical and social skills that will help them find employment following graduation.

CONCLUSIONS

To begin this article, we mentioned that the teaching of English as a second/foreign language remains grounded in methods where students sit through hours of explicit instruction, often in preparation for standardized exams. We find that such methods do not adequately allow students to develop skills in written communication. To address this inefficiency, the innovative ideas presented in this article draw together the benefits of collaboration and technology in teaching composition courses. Drawing from student comments received on course evaluations, the first section identified the inherent value of collaboration. The following section offered insightful suggestions on how students can collaborate using Google's G Suite for Education and Zotero, an online reference management application. The last section reported on the success of a collaborative writing project between two universities in Okinawa. Although more research is needed in understanding the nature and extent to which students collaborate through other means (e.g., in person, in the cloud, and over the phone) as well as ways in which teachers can evaluate student participation, we remain united in our belief that the ideas presented in this article not only help students develop skills in written and social communication but also that they enhance their employability following graduation.

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