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SWELL: A Writing Method to Help English Language Learners

Collaborative writing has been a trend in composition research and pedagogy since the 1970s. Collaborative writing encourages social interaction among writers through activities such as peer response (Ferris and Hedgcock 1998). The social interaction and dialogue with others are considered crucial by social interactionist theorists, such as Vygotsky (2000), who states that learning involves the internalization of social interaction processes, which helps the learner progress from complex to conceptual thinking.

In collaborative writing students are encouraged to brainstorm ideas in pairs or groups, to give each other feedback, and to proofread and edit each other's writing. However, although increasing numbers of classroom teachers have begun to encourage students to write in collaboration, Topping (2001) points out that many find it frustrating to implement the practice because the collaborative writing models available to them lack structured guidelines for students to follow.

Researchers have pointed to other problems associated with collaborative writing in the English language classroom. For example, although collaborative writing increases interaction among students, Lew (1999) and Scarcella (2003) found that the process did not significantly improve students' writing because they often lacked the skills to critique each other's writing. Peregoy and Boyle (2001) emphasized that students in peer response groups need explicit guidelines on what kinds of things to say and how to say them if they are to benefit group members.

In response to the need for structured guidelines to make collaborative writing more effective, Topping (2001) developed a clearly defined, structured and replicable system for peer-assisted learning that he called the Paired Writing method. Studies of the method on students whose first language is English showed positive results (Sutherland and Topping 1999, Nixon and Topping 2001, Topping 2001, Yarrow and Topping 2001). Thus, I decided to implement

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this method in my English as a second language (ESL) class at a public elementary school in California, where non-native English language learners receive daily intensive instruction to develop their second language literacy in English. Subject matter is taught entirely in English and is organized to promote second language acquisition while teaching cognitively demanding, grade-appropriate material.

When I implemented Topping's method in my class, I trained my students to carefully follow the suggested steps as they wrote, and, as Topping suggests, I paired up the students according to their English proficiency levels. During the writing process, students with higher writing levels were assigned the role of *Helper*, and those with lower writing skills were assigned the role of *Writer*. I videotaped the students so I could review their interactions and cognitive writing processes after each writing lesson.

I anticipated that after a semester of practicing Topping's method, which included structured guidance, my students would have higher motivation to write and would show improvement in their writing skills. What I found, however, was that they felt frustrated by the method and showed little interest in following Topping's flowchart. In fact, many of the students spent their time chatting instead of using the provided guidelines.

Frustrated by the disappointing results, I spent hours reviewing the videotapes and reflecting on the method. Eventually I realized that, although Topping's model was effective in helping students whose first language was English, it was not effective for my students. Since most of them were novice writers, they found the directions for each step of the process vague, insufficient, and confusing. The method confused them more than it helped them to write. In addition, by leaving the student to evaluate their own written products, I had done more harm than good for the students.

I decided to revise Topping's method to better meet my students' needs. I call the modified method *SWELL*, which stands for *Social-interactive Writing for English Language Learners*. I will describe the *SWELL* method and the procedures used to implement it.

Topping's Paired Writing method

As indicated earlier, in Topping's Paired Writing method writers are paired prior to the writing activities. The student who is at a higher writing level plays the role of a *Helper*, and the student who is at a lower writing level is a *Writer*. Specific tasks need to be done by the Helper and the Writer when they write collaboratively. These steps are briefly described below:

Step 1: Idea generation

In the first step, the Helper stimulates ideas by raising a one-word question with the writer, such as *Who*? Eight other one-word stimulus words are listed under a section called "Questions" that includes a blank option to indicate that Helpers can ask their own questions. Topping's model also features a "What Next?" loop that includes three suggested conjunction questions (*And? If? But?*) for the Helper to use. Before moving on to Step 2, the pair reviews their notes to determine if the order or organization should be changed.

Step 2: Drafting

The Writer dictates sentence by sentence what he or she wants to communicate in each sentence, choosing among five levels of support from the Helper for the writing itself. These levels of support, called *stages*, can range from Stage 1, in which the Helper writes everything—with the Writer merely copying what the Helper has written—to Stage 5, in which the Writer does all the writing. The pair may apply a stage to the entire writing session or to just a small part of it, and the pair may go back one or more stages if they encounter difficulty. For example, if the Writer struggles with a word for more than 10 seconds, the Helper can go back from Stage 5, in which the Writer writes everything, to an earlier stage, in which the Helper identifies a difficult vocabulary word or helps the Writer spell it. There is great emphasis on keeping going. As confidence grows, the Helper's support can be reduced.

Step 3: Reading

The Helper reads the completed draft out loud while both members of the pair look at the text together. This activity gives the Writer the opportunity to become the audience without the burden of having to read. The Writer then follows the example of the

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Helper and reads aloud. If the Writer reads a word incorrectly the Helper provides any needed support.

Step 4: Editing

Helper and Writer look at the draft together and consider what improvements might be necessary in any of the four editing levels: (1) meaning, (2) order, (3) spelling, (4) punctuation. Meaning is the most important indicator of the need for improvement; punctuation is the least important one. After offering some words of praise for the Writer's efforts, the Helper marks any problem areas the Writer may have missed. The Writer can then make additional suggestions for changes. They discuss the best corrections to make and modify the text accordingly.

Step 5: Best copy

The Writer copies out a neat or best version of the corrected draft and turns it in to the teacher. It represents a joint product of the pair.

Step 6: Evaluate

Using the editing criteria levels in this final step, the pair inspect and evaluate their best copy. The Helper should make more positive evaluative comments than non-positive ones; the latter should be expressed with sensitivity. Evaluation is carried out initially by the authoring pair and subsequently by another pair in a process of peer assessment, using the four criteria given in Step 4.

SWELL method modifications

As indicated earlier, strictly following the steps in Topping's Paired Writing method did not yield satisfactory results in my ESL class. I decided to revise that method to make it better fit the students' linguistic and instructional needs. I call my modifications the SWELL method. The SWELL modifications are described below.

Modification #1: Use students' linguistic and cultural knowledge in L1

The effects of Topping's Paired Writing method were examined only in classrooms where the majority of students were from a mainstream, middle-class background (Sutherland and Topping 1999; Nixon and Topping 2001; Yarrow and Topping 2001). In this context, the outcomes were positive. As noted above, however, in the context of the ESL program where I taught, the Paired Writing method did not work very effectively. This suggests, as some researchers (Gutierrez 1992; Reyes 1992; Lucas and Katz 1995) believe, that it is not the underlying ideology of peer response or collaborative writing that is responsible for problems, but rather the way such activities are implemented in non-mainstream classrooms.

Specifically, the activities need to meet the social and cultural needs of students from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Dyson and Freedman (1991) stressed the importance of considering such needs in writing activities for English language students, noting that their educational requirements differ distinctively from those of native speakers of English. Lucas and Katz (1995) emphasized that teachers should ensure that the students' native languages have a place in the classroom even though the design of the program and teachers' limited linguistic resources suggest an English-only learning environment. They stated that teachers should be receptive to their students' use of their native language, particularly to serve instructional purposes, and the native language should be used as a tool to establish rapport with students. In this way students will not only feel comfortable using their native language to work together or exchange social information but will also feel that their native language is respected in their classroom.

Some of the additional instructional modifications Lucas and Katz (1995) suggest for meeting linguistic needs of English students include pairing less fluent with more fluent students of the same language during classroom instruction. This enables the less fluent student to better understand instructions. Lucas and Katz also suggested that teachers encourage students to use bilingual dictionaries when there is no one to translate for them.

Adopting the ideas of Gutierrez (1992), Reyes (1992), and Lucas and Katz (1995), I modified Topping's Paired Writing method by allowing my students to use their L1 for discussion activities during each step of SWELL and encouraged them to use bilingual dictionaries for translation purposes.

Modification #2: Provide timely, explicit, and direct intervention

In Topping's Paired Writing method, students evaluate each other's writing in the final

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step and are expected to proofread and edit each other's writing on their own without the teacher's intervention. I strongly believe, however, that this step needs to be modified when used in an ESL setting. My belief is supported by researchers in the field of second language learning. For example, Susser (1994) says that an essential component in writing pedagogy is timely intervention by the teacher so that students can generate ideas for better content or correct grammatical errors at the appropriate time during the writing process.

Scarcella (2003) also recommends a balanced approach with respect to teacher intervention in English language classrooms. She points out that many teachers have the misconception that learners can effortlessly pick up English by simply communicating in some fashion in the language. She warns against the danger of overemphasizing so-called "meaningful" communication and using it to replace teaching specific aspects of language, labeling the misplaced emphasis "educational deception" (Scarcella 2003, 6). English language learners' knowledge of English grammar, she stresses, does not emerge simply through exposure to English input; it requires explicit instruction.

Lew (1999) argues that it is a disservice to allow students learning English to write without the close supervision of teachers, pointing out that students who do not speak standard English have little confidence that their friends can help them with grammar or usage. When Lew was implementing the process writing approach in her classroom, she imparted her knowledge directly to the students. Doing so, she says, helped her realize that students in her class not only showed more fluency in their writing but also looked more closely at their own work. One participant in Lew's case study said she appreciated her teacher's direct corrective feedback and explicit instruction, commenting: "Newcomers have a hard time trying to learn the grammar structures…the only thing the teacher could do is constantly remind them and correct them and try to be more strict at it" (Lew 1999, 175). Lew concluded that close supervision of students' language use—via the red-pen and other methods—in a caring and language-rich environment is crucial in helping them achieve proficiency in English.

In Topping's Paired Writing method, the last step (Evaluate) requires the pair to inspect and evaluate their best copy using editing criteria levels given in Step 4 (Editing). The students are expected to do this on their own without teacher intervention. However, because of the students' linguistic needs in L2 writing, I decided to employ the balanced approach that Scarcella (2003) proposed by providing the writers with direct instruction. Instead of having other pairs evaluate the written products of their peers, I met with the students to give them explicit instruction and corrective feedback. Afterward, the paired students were required to review my feedback together. I had therefore changed the last step of Topping's method to *Teacher Evaluate* under my SWELL method (see Appendix). Specifically, I changed Topping's procedure to "teacher comments on meaning, order, style, spelling, and punctuation." Doing so allowed the students to receive corrective feedback on their written products directly from the teacher.

Other modifications

Other SWELL modifications to Topping's method are as follows:

1. Where Topping uses single-word questions (e.g., *Who? Do? What?*) to generate ideas, SWELL uses complete structured and directive questions beginning with *wh-* words, such as "Who did what to whom?" This modification helps learners generate ideas for their writing and provides the temporary support, or "scaffolding," that Peregoy and Boyle (2001) believe is necessary to permit learners to participate in a complex process before they are able to do so unassisted. Once proficiency is achieved, the scaffold no longer is needed and may be dropped.
2. Topping's Paired Writing method has the *students* choose among five stages of support for writing on their own during Step 2 (Drafting). SWELL has the *teacher* choose the appropriate stage for the pair. This modification is based on my belief that most English language learners are novice writers, still struggling with L2, and might not be able to choose for themselves an appropriate stage. Teachers are thus encouraged to

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play an active role in their students' writing process by choosing a stage for each pair based on the teachers' understanding of their students' writing levels. An additional advantage of having the teacher choose a stage for each pair is that the students can focus solely on the writing task without having to worry about whether they chose the appropriate stage.

3. Topping's method has the Helper in Step 3 serve as a reading model for the less proficient peer. To help novice writers, SWELL has the Writer read the draft with as much expression and attention to punctuation as possible, while both the Helper and the Writer look at the text together. This gives the Writer the opportunity to see if the writing is clear to the audience.
4. In Topping's Paired Writing method, the words *meaning, order, spelling,* and *punctuation,* which are the editing criteria, are listed in the box in Step 4 (Editing) as a reference for the students as they edit their own and their peer's writing. However, since English language learners' proficiency in English is limited, SWELL provides four complete questions incorporating these terms to help the students better understand their meaning.
5. SWELL adds the editing criterion *style* to the four described above. Style is defined as "the clarity of sentences," which includes making appropriate word choices and using correct sentence structure. Style was added to help students ensure that their sentences are clearly written in their final draft.

To conclude, modifications made to the Paired Writing method include taking into consideration the students' linguistic needs in L2 writing by:

- allowing the students to use their mother tongue for oral discussion;
- adopting a balanced approach that focuses on writing fluency and explicit instruction in mechanics;
- simplifying the steps of the writing process by making them more concrete to the students;
- providing teacher intervention in the final step of the writing process as one way to increase interaction with the students at a crucial stage in the process.

SWELL method procedures

The following describes in detail the procedures that teachers of English language learners can use to implement SWELL in their classrooms.

Step 1: Ideas

To help students understand important components such as character, setting, problem, and solution in narrative writing, SWELL provides complete questions, most of which begin with *wh-* words. They are:

- Who did what?
- Who did what to whom?
- What happened?
- Where did it happen?
- When did it happen?
- Who are the important people (main characters) in the story?
- Why did he/she/they do that?
- What was the problem?
- How did he/she/they solve the problem?
- What happened next?
- Then what?
- Did anyone learn anything at the end? What was it?
- (Ask any other questions you can think of.)

To help Writers stimulate ideas, their Helpers raise the questions stated above in any order that seems appropriate, or the Helpers can put forth their own questions. As Writers respond verbally to the questions, they jot down key words and are encouraged to add any relevant information they might want to write about.

The pairs then review the Writer's key words to establish some kind of rough order or organization for the writing. This could be indicated by numbering the ideas or, perhaps, by observing that they fall into obvious categories. Such categories could be color-coded, with the ideas belonging to them underlined or highlighted with a marker. Pairs may also choose to draw lines linking related ideas,

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thereby constructing a "semantic map." They could also organize ideas using word webs, clustering, and mind maps.

Step 2: Draft

With their amended and reorganized idea notes clearly in sight, and after the pairs receive instruction from the teacher on what they are expected to do in the stage the teacher chose for them, the Writer begins writing.

In this step, the teacher emphasizes that Writers do not have to worry much about spelling as they write their first draft. Rather, the stress should be on allowing ideas to flow. In determining the writing stage for the pair, the teacher should remain flexible, relying on the students' writing development and process (or lack thereof) to guide them. It may be necessary for the pair to go back one or more stages if they encounter a particularly difficult problem. (See the Appendix for the five stages.)

Step 3: Read

The Writer reads the writing aloud. If a word is read incorrectly, the Helper provides support if able to do so.

Step 4: Edit

Helper and Writer look at the draft together, and consider what improvements might be made. Problem words, phrases, or sentences could be marked. The Writer and Helper inspect the draft more than once, checking the following five SWELL editing criteria:

1. *meaning*
2. *order* (organization of the separate ideas in the text, organization within a phrase or sentence, and organization of the order of sentences)
3. *spelling*
4. *punctuation*
5. *style* (word choice and sentence structure)

While editing, the Writer and Helper consider the following questions:

- Does the Helper understand what the Writer wants to say? (idea and meaning)
- Does the writing have a clear beginning, middle, and end? (order)
- Are the words and sentences correct? (style)
- Are the words spelled correctly?
- Is the punctuation correct and in the right place?

The order of each question shows its relative importance in writing. With the questions in mind, the Helper marks areas the Writer has missed; the Helper can also suggest other changes. The symbol ← → used in the Edit step indicates that it is an interactional process between Writer and Helper. The pair discuss and agree on the best correction to make and revise the writing (preferably the Writer does the revision). They use a dictionary to check spelling.

Step 5: Best Copy

The Writer copies out a readable "best" version of the corrected draft and turns it in to the teacher. The Helper may help if necessary, depending on the skill of the Writer. Sutherland and Topping (1999) point out that the physical act of writing is the least important step in the Paired Writing method, so it does not matter who does it. The important thing is the quality of thinking and communication in the process. Because the best copy represents a joint product of the pair, both students should have their names on it.

Step 6: Teacher Evaluate

In this final step, the teacher meets with the pair and, based on what she or he observes in the product they turned in, provides explicit instruction in writing and grammar or provides other corrective feedback associated with the five editing criteria of Step 4. The pair then review the teacher's comments together.

Conclusion

I implemented the SWELL modifications to Topping's Paired Writing method to determine if SWELL would increase the proficiency and confidence of the writers in my ESL class. By taking into consideration the students' linguistic needs, providing for explicit teacher instruction, and taking a balanced approach that focused on fluency and writing mechanics, as well as clarification of the steps in the Topping model, I found that it did. In addition to improving their writing skills, the students enjoyed using the SWELL method and actively participated in discussion with their partners while writing. Moreover, because the students were allowed to use their first language in their interactions, I found them more involved in in-depth discussion and better able to generate higher-level ideas. By relying more on each other and less on

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their teacher, they also became more independent thinkers and learners.

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Appendix The SWELL Method Flowchart

SWELL: A Writing Method to Help English Language Learners • **Adeline Teo**

Based on Topping's "Paired Writing" method: http://www.scre.ac.uk/rie/nl67/nl67topping.html

H = Helper, W = Writer

Step 1: IDEAS

H asks W Questions:

Who did what?
Who did what to whom?
What happened?
Where did it happen?
When did it happen?
Who are the important people (main characters) in the story?
Why did he/she/they do that?
What was the problem?
How did he/she/they solve the problem?
What happened next?
Then what?
Did anyone learn anything at the end? What was it?
(Ask any questions you can think of.)

↓

W answers and takes notes. W can add things that are not in H's questions.

↓

Then both H & W read the notes. Are ideas in proper places? Make changes if needed.

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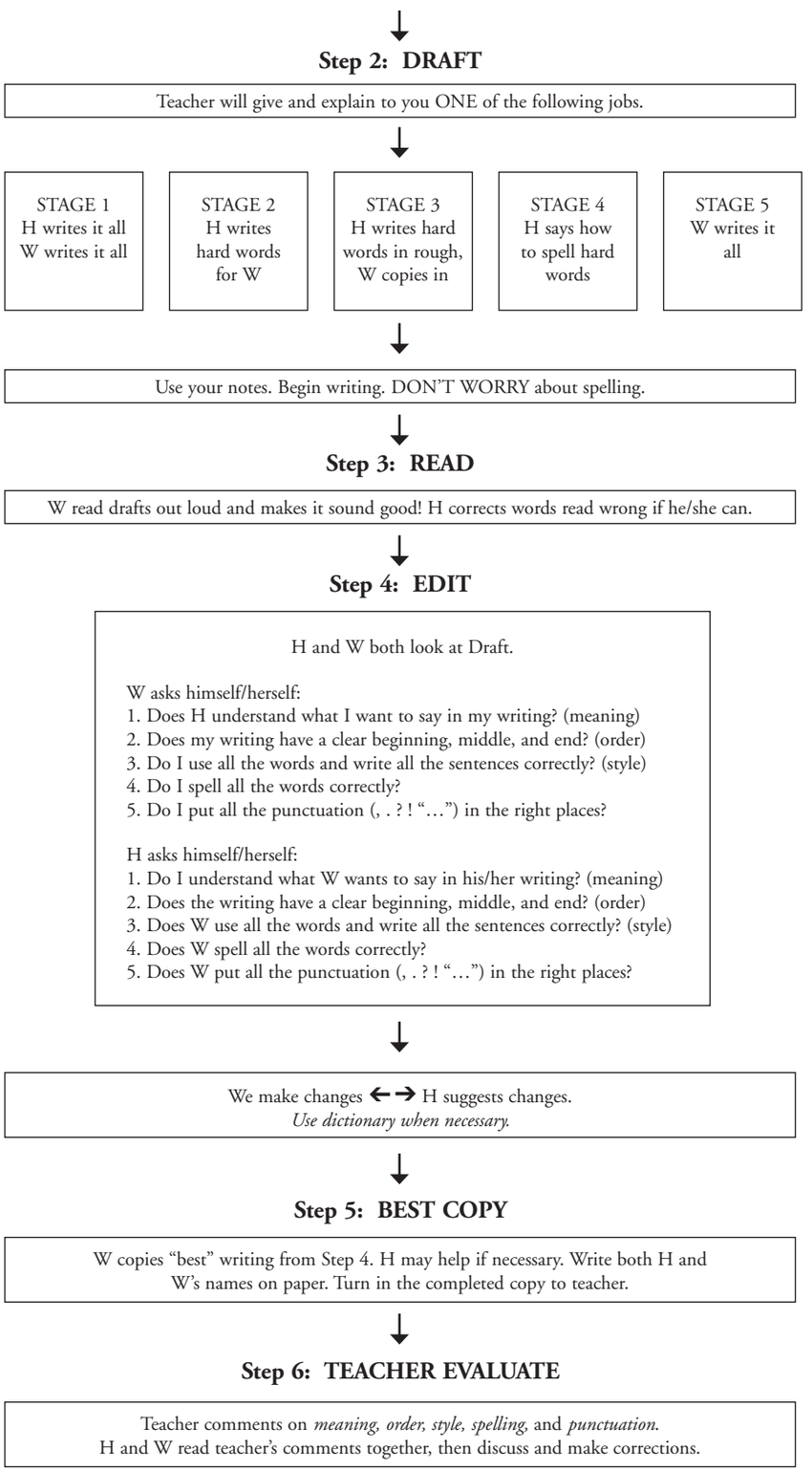
The SWELL Method Flowchart *(continued)*



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