Thai EFL University Students:
The Collaborative Nature of L2 Learners' Verbal Interactions

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Abstract

The majority of second language (L2) studies on participant verbal interaction during collaborative writing have been restricted to the planning stage and/or the revision stage of writing rather than the collaboration of participants during the entire writing process, from initial brainstorming to final revisions. To better gauge the true nature of verbal interactions over the entire writing process this study examined, among 24 Thai undergraduate students, their negotiations concerned with grammar, lexis and mechanics and their discussions of essay organization (specifically, paragraph and rhetorical structures). This analysis revealed the following: (a) when the participants negotiated grammar, lexis and mechanics, they engaged in language related episodes (LREs) that contained elements suggestive of effective collaboration and evidence of learning within the ZPD; (b) most of the participants' negotiated resolutions appeared in their jointly written text; and (c) when the participants negotiated how to organize their essays (organizational related episodes (OREs)), they came to resolutions that usually appeared in their final writing.

1. Introduction: Verbal Interaction as a Mediating Tool in Didactic Dialogue

Hirvela (1999) pointed out that writing is an activity that is situated in a larger social context; and as a result, writers are involved in a continuous dialogue, usually internalized, with their audience and the context in which

their writing will be read. Swain (1997) suggested that when this dialogue is externalized, in the form of collaborative negotiations among peers, it is possible for researchers to understand the processes of language learning that are occurring. Swain added that to obtain a full understanding of this phenomena, it is necessary to focus on learners' output as they attempt to make their communications comprehensible: " [to] produce [speaking or writing], learners need to do something: they need to create linguistic form and meaning and in so doing, discover what they can and cannot do" (Swain, 1997, p. 117). Swain and Lapkin (2002) view output as part of a sociocultural theoretical perspective of learning, that is, output acts not only as a message of communicative intent but simultaneously as a tool for cognitive engagement with the self and others. As such, speaking is an externalization of thought, an utterance that becomes an object, which can be "scrutinized, questioned, reflected upon, disagreed with, changed, or disregarded" (p. 286). Swain (2006) argued that in a sociocultural theory of mind, the individual's speech not only becomes a tool that when externalized affects changes in cognition with the self and others, but also through subsequent processes of internalization, comes to regulate mental activities. "In a sociocultural theory of mind, verbalization is conceived of as a tool that enables *changes* in cognition. Speech serves to mediate cognition" (Swain, 2006, p. 100).

Swain argued that verbalization in the form of *collaborative dialogue* (Swain, 2000) mediates L2 acquisition, as it is a social as well as a cognitive activity. She described collaborative dialogue as "dialogue in which speakers are engaged in problem solving and knowledge building. It heightens the potential for exploration of the product (Swain, 2000, p. 102). Swain argued that according to a sociocultural theory of mind perspective, collaborative dialogue is viewed as an important semiotic tool that mediates cognitive functions "such as voluntary memory, reasoning or attention" (p. 103). For

example, Swain and Lapkin (1998) showed how through collaborative dialogue learners were able to understand what they know and do not know, it allowed them to focus their attention on problematic language aspects, and it guided them to consolidate existing knowledge and build new knowledge.

In conjunction with the Vygotskian sociocultural perspective are the notions of the *zone of proximal development* (ZPD) and *scaffolding*. Vygotsky defined the ZPD as the distance between a child's "actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving" and the higher level of "potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers" (Wertsch, 1985, p. 68). According to Wertsch, Vygotsky felt that is was just as important to measure learners' potential development, as it was to measure their actual level of development. Lantolf (2000) characterized the ZPD as a useful metaphor for capturing or "observing and understanding how mediational means are appropriated and internalized" (p. 17).

Storch (2001) looked at the nature of ESL dyadic dialogue to determine whether the participants were working together collaboratively or not. Other researchers (Guerrero & Villamil, 1994; McGroarty & Zhu, 1997) have argued that the study of the mediating functions of collaborative dialogue makes it possible to determine the extent of learners' *collaborative orientation*. Storch defined collaborative orientation as the degree to which participant pairs or small groups are fully collaborative, fully non-collaborative, or somewhere between the two points on a continuum. Storch (2001) used *language-related episodes* LREs as the unit of analysis, defining an LRE as an episode "where learners talk about or question their own language use or that of the other" (p.40). She analyzed the learners' LREs for "grammar (e.g., verb tense), lexis (e.g., word choice, word definition); and mechanics (e.g., spelling, punctuation)" (p. 40).

Storch (2001) showed the importance of understanding the nature of collaborative interactions. Results of her analysis of the participants' LREs revealed that the most collaborative pair engaged in many LREs initiated by request, they responded to each other in an interactive manner, came to resolutions that they incorporated into their joint text, and showed evidence of scaffolding. Conversely, the least collaborative pair had few LREs initiated by request, tended to respond in non-interactive ways, and on occasion made revisions to their text without consultation. Storch was unable to make direct links between the collaborative nature of the dyads' interactions and the quality of the texts, as measured by fluency, complexity, and accuracy, but encouraged future research that would link collaborative orientation with text quality.

The current study assumes a two-prong approach to the analysis of the participants' LREs. The first approach is to gain insight into how collaborative the participants are in their pair work. The second approach is to describe the ways in which learning occurs as a result of the participants' collaborative dialogue within the ZPD. The condition for the current study is one in which dyads verbally interact in an EFL context while composing essays over the entire writing process.

2. The Study

2.1. Participants in the Study

The study presented in this article was conducted at a Thai government funded university. Twenty-four undergrad students, who had successfully completed the required four general English courses, and the university's required English academic writing course with a grade of B+ or higher, participated in the study. The 14 female and 10 male Thai students were either engineering or information technology majors, in their third or final year of full-time study at the university. Data was collected in a study room located within the physical boundaries of the university's English Department

2.2. Tasks

The study design incorporated two writing activities that required all 24 participants to work together in a collaborative writing condition in which each participant worked with a randomly assigned partner to produce one essay on one of two writing topics.

2.3. Writing Topics

The two writing topics chosen were selected from the list of 100 writing topics used in the 2000-2001 Test of Written English (TWE) portion of the TOEFL (ETS, 2000). The two topics were considered sufficiently general for the participants to answer without requiring them to have any specialized background knowledge:

(1) Do you agree or disagree with the following statement? Television has destroyed communication among friends and family. Use specific reasons and examples to support your opinions.

(2) Do you agree or disagree with the following statement? Self-confidence is the most important factor for success in school or at work. Use specific reasons and examples to support your opinion.

2.4. Data Collection

The participants worked together for 85 minutes under the collaborative writing condition. They had five minutes at the beginning of each session to read the guidelines that described the activities they would do under that writing condition. After that they spent the next 80 minutes working under the collaborative writing condition. The paired participants were given 20 minutes to plan their essays, 30 minutes to write their first drafts of the essays, 20 minutes to read, revise, and edit their essays, and 10 minutes to write their final drafts. As a result, the

verbal interactions produced by the 24 participants under the collaborative condition consisted of 12 sets of recorded dialogue. The participants had the option to speak in Thai or English during their collaborative writing because the researcher believed that they would have insufficient verbal abilities in English to effectively discuss their work. To collect participants' verbal interactions, the researcher tape-recorded them when they worked collaboratively during the various writing stages of the collaborative writing condition. Afterwards the audio recordings were transcribed by three graduate students at the university after which a Thai interpreter translated the Thai into English.

3. Analyses of Participants' Verbal Interactions

For analysis of the spoken data, a focus was placed on how the participants made decisions regarding language issues concerned with lexis, grammar, and mechanics and on their discussions concerned with essay organization. Transcripts were coded for language related episodes (LRE). An LRE consists of an instance in which learners discuss or question their own language use or another person's language use in an attempt to reach some kind of consensus or resolution that can be used in their writing (Kowal & Swain, 1994; Storch, 2001; Swain & Lapkin, 1995). After isolating each LRE in each of the 12 transcripts (181 in total) Storch's (2001) methodology was utilized to analyze them. First, in terms of the focus of the LRE, it was noted whether it was concerned with lexis (e.g. word definition, word choice), grammar (e.g. verb tense choice) or mechanics (punctuation, spelling). Second, a determination of form was made in which each LRE was initiated: a request for assistance (requests for explanation or confirmation), counter suggestions, or self-repairs. Third, the researcher made note of the response to each initiation to determine whether it was interactive (IV) in that the initiation led to "negotiations, repetition, and incorporation" or whether it was simply ignored by the other learner; as a result, "non-interactive" (NIV) (Storch, 2001, p. 40). Fourth,

a note was made of whether or not each resolution made during each LRE appeared in the participants' final drafts. Finally, instances in which it appeared that the participants were involved in scaffolding, such as building their writing together as evidenced by their verbal interactions and texts, were noted.

4. Findings

Findings are based on the analyses of the participants' language related episodes (LREs), concerned with language issues (lexis, grammar and mechanics) are presented. Also, participants' organizational related episodes (OREs) related to paragraphs and rhetorical structure (introduction – content – conclusion) are given.

4.1. Language Related Episodes

The researcher tabulated 181 language related episodes (LRE) for the twelve dyads. Table 4.1 summarizes these findings. The greatest number of LREs appeared in dyad 7 (with 47 LREs) and the fewest in dyad 11 (5 LREs). In terms of focus, the participants focused on lexis (word choice, word definition), grammatical decisions (plurals, verb tense), and mechanics (spelling, punctuation). Table 4.1 shows that a majority of the LREs were initiated by requests for explanation or confirmation (105 LREs, or 58 %), but there were numerous suggestions as well (70 LREs, or 39 %).

4.2. Verbal Interactions Concerned with Essay Organization

There were a total of ten organizational related episodes (OREs) for the 12 participants. These OREs were placed into two general categories: (1) OREs concerned with paragraphs and (2) OREs concerned with rhetorical structure (introduction – content – conclusion). Below some examples of such verbal interactions for these categories are presented.

Table 4.1.   Summary of LREs for the 12 dyads

Dyad	Tot	Focus	LRE	Initiate	How request was initiated			Response		Text		
					Reques	Sugg	Self	IV	NI	In	Not	Both
1:Sujittra & Suntareepon	18	Grammar Lexis Mechanics	3 10 5	S:12 Sun:6	12	5	1	11	7	13	4	1
2:Rajinee & Patoomwan	9	Lexis Mechanics	8 1	R:1 P:8	2	7	0	7	2	9	0	0
3:Anu & Duongpen	33	Grammar Lexis Mechanics	10 18 5	A:15 D:18	28	4	1	29	4	22	11	0
4:Yustana& Thongchai	7	Grammar Lexis Mechanics	1 5 1	Y:4 T:3	5	1	1	6	1	5	2	0
5:Prateep & Pattana	17	Grammar Lexis	2 15	P:8 Pat:9	9	6	2	16	1	16	1	0
6:Anon & Sukum	12	Grammar Lexis	1 11	A:6 S:6	9	3	0	11	1	9	3	0
7:Patchara & Anong	47	Grammar Lexis Mechanics	7 32 8	P:36 A:11	28	19	0	37	10	25	21	1
8:Urai & Natenapa	9	Grammar Lexis Mechanics	1 7 1	U:3 N:6	3	6	0	9	0	6	3	0
9:Aurano & Manee	6	Grammar Lexis	3 3	A:5 M:1	1	5	0	5	1	4	2	0
10:Suriya & Kovit	11	Grammar Lexis Mechanics	2 8 1	S:8 K:3	3	7	1	5	6	8	3	0
11:Akara & Narong	5	Lexis	5	A:2 N:3	3	2	0	4	1	4	1	0
12:Wattana & Srikamon	7	Grammar Lexis	2 5	W:4 S:3	2	5	0	6	1	7	0	0
Total	181	Grammar Lexis Spelling	32 127 22		105	70	6	146	35	129	51	2

Note: NIV = a non-interactive response; IV = an interactive response

4.2.1. Organization of Paragraphs

In these OREs, the participants discussed how they should approach the use of paragraphs in their essay writing. The following are two examples.

Example 1: Anu and Duongpen

A: paragraph.

D: we need next paragraph.

A: we need four more paragraphs.

(Dyad 3. P8 and P4. Session 2. Topic 1. Page 3. 7-9)

Example 2: Narong and Akara

N: do you have any ideas? are we required to write just one paragraph?

A: I don't know. I wrote one paragraph for English 5. how should we start?

(Dyad 11. P22 and P2. Session 2. Topic 2. Page 1. 3-4.)

In Example 1 Anu showed that he was aware of the stylistic or rhetorical need to divide their essay into paragraphs. They eventually constructed six paragraphs in total: an introduction, four body paragraphs and a conclusion. In Example 2 Narong and Akara discussed how to separate their essay into paragraphs. In the final draft these participants completed an essay that consisted of three paragraphs, an introduction, one body paragraph and a conclusion. As a result, the pair did not limit themselves to what Akara had claimed he had learned in English 5.

4.2.2. Organization of the Introduction

The participants engaged in discussions related to the organization of the introduction of their essay. The following ORE consists of two parts.

Example 3: Patoomwan and Rajinee

P: after the introduction, then …

R: we have to write the first paragraph?

P: amm…similar to paragraph.

R: do we write just one paragraph?

P: we should plan how many supportive details we need. the introduction.

R: we should mention the reasons in the first paragraph. shouldn't we?

P: yes, we should say them in the first paragraph. because it will include idea.

R: why do we think it is important? we need reasons.

<div align="center">(Dyad 2. P9 and P13. Session 2. Topic 2. Page 1. 21-28.)</div>

Note: Below the same participants discussed the introduction while they were writing their first draft.

P: I will write the introduction. I think this should be the first paragraph…and then we write supportive ideas in the second paragraph, third, and fourth. introduction we should say about studying.

R: will we write now, or should we plan about the supportive reasons first?

P: we should write the supportive reasons.

R: in the intro, we just write…

P: yes, say we are agree, and then body1, body2. I will write.

R: write the first reason, okay.

<div align="center">(Dyad 2. P9 and P13. Session 2. Topic 2. Page 2. 11-16.)</div>

In Example 3, Patoomwan and Rajinee were planning their essay at the time when they began to discuss the need to include supportive details in the introduction. When they were writing the first draft they revisited the issue of constructing the introduction and discussed creating one supportive argument per paragraph. In their final draft Patoomwan and Rajinee constructed an introduction that consisted of their position and list of their reasons supporting their position.

They also dedicated one supporting argument per body paragraph through the essay.

    Example 4: Narong and Akara

A: do we have to write a page?

N: yes, write a page or half a page. write as much as we can.

A: first, start with the introduction. we should follow the writing steps.

              (Dyad 11. P22 and P2. Session 2. Topic 2. Page 1. 12-14.)

In Example 4 Narong and Akara were also planning their essay when they began to discuss how they should start it. Akara suggested that they should begin their essay with an introduction as well as follow the writing steps. In their final draft these participants wrote an introduction that included a thesis statement.

4.2.3. Organization of Content

Participants also discussed how to organize essay content. The following two-part ORE shows this kind of interaction:

    Example 5: Sukum and Anon

S: should we divide our content into group and give reasons?

A: what?

S: we should talk about school in the first two paragraphs.

A: we talk about school, which examples should we mention on students work in groups.

              (Dyad 6. P19 and P3. Session 1. Topic 1. Page 1. 12-15.)

Note: Later the participants discuss content while they are writing their first draft.

S: what are the main topics we mentioned?

A: we divide them into <u>at school</u> and <u>at work</u> and then for the school we give reasons.

(Dyad 6. P19 and P3. Session 1. Topic 1. Page 2. 13-14.)

In the first part of Example 5 Sukum and Anon were in the planning stage when they discussed the idea of dividing the content of their essay into separate groups. In the second part of Example 10 they were writing their first draft when they more specifically discussed the need to separate the essay into two main topics 'at school' and 'at work'. In the final draft, however, Sukum and Anon failed to write separate paragraphs, and contrary to their intentions they did not separate the content of their argument into the sections of school and work.

4.2.4. Organization of the Conclusion

There was one ORE related to the participants' conclusion to their essay.

Example 6: Wattana and Srikamon

W: we should finish the work quickly so that the work will be of better quality.

S: end, what do you want to say?

W: that's right. we just write it down. we just write down the main ideas in our
     conclusion.

S: good idea.

(Dyad 12. P18 and P5. Session 2. Topic 2. Page 2. 17-20.)

In Example 6 Srikamon asked Wattana what they should include in the conclusion. Wattana suggested that they needed only to include the main ideas that they had used in the essay. In the final draft, the participants wrote a separate conclusion and restated the arguments they had used in the essay.

5. Discussion

To study the participants' verbal interactions, analysis was focused on their negotiations concerned with grammar, lexis and mechanics, their discussions of essay organization (specifically, paragraph and rhetorical structures), and the amount of talk that they produced. This analysis revealed the following: (a) when the participants negotiated grammar, lexis and mechanics, they engaged in language related episodes (LREs) that contained elements suggestive of effective collaboration and evidence of learning within the ZPD; (b) most of the participants' negotiated resolutions appeared in their jointly written text; and (c) when the participants negotiated how to organize their essays (organizational related episodes (OREs)), they came to resolutions that usually appeared in their jointly written texts.

5.1. LREs Concerned with Grammar, Lexis and Mechanics

Storch's (2001) argued that few studies have focused on the *nature* of pair or group interactions. By nature, she was referring to their collaborative state and "whether they are collaborative or not" (p.29). Storch proposed that one way to characterize the way that pairs work together was by analyzing certain aspects of their verbal behaviour. At the centre of her analysis was a focus on learners' metatalk, or LREs, that consisted of four parts: 1) the focus of the LRE (i.e. lexis, grammar, mechanics); 2) who initiated the LRE; 3) how the LREs were initiated (i.e., request for assistance, counter suggestion); and 4) the type of response made to the initiation (i.e., interactive, non-interactive).

Following a similar pattern of focus on metatalk, the current thesis study found that 105 of the 181 LREs (58%) were initiated by requests for explanation or confirmation, and 70 of the 181 LREs (39%) were initiated by counter suggestions. When dyads initiate LREs more often with requests as opposed to suggestions it is suggested that the learners are engaged in a more *interactive* method of negotiating

the language. Storch (2001) argued that the use of requests leads to more opportunities for learners to negotiate meaning and make their input and output more comprehensible, ultimately facilitating second language acquisition. Second, 146 (81%) of the 181 responses made by the participants to their partners' initiations were interactive. A response was interactive when it facilitated further "negotiations, repetition, and incorporations" (Storch, 2001, p. 40). Third, 35 (19%) of the 181 responses to the initiations were non-interactive, meaning that the initiation was ignored, signifying a lack of a collaborative orientation. Fourth, 129 of the 181 resolutions (71%) made by the participants appeared in the final texts as had been discussed by the dyads.

The analysis of the LREs also revealed a relationship between those who initiated the LREs and those who were writing the essay. For six of the dyads, no large differences existed between the participants in terms of who initiated the LREs; however, results showed that for the other six dyads one participant generated at least twice as many LREs as the other participant. In addition, in five of these six dyads, the participant who was not writing but contributing more than twice the number of initiations was the weaker writer according to the Global score they received for their individually produced essay. This result suggests that the five weaker writers took on an important role in the collaborative writing process. In this role, the weaker writers contributed to the writing process by generating the bulk of the questions and suggestions while the scribes, who asked fewer questions and offered fewer suggestions, were also kept busy with the actual writing down of the text. For their part, the scribes were receiving their partners' initiations interactively. In all five of these dyads, more responses were received interactively rather than non-interactively. Storch (2001) reasoned that many language related episodes (LREs) initiated by requests by *one* learner and followed by interactive responses by the *other* learner, along with evidence of scaffolding, was an indication of a dyad that had a more collaborative orientation than a dyad who had

few LREs initiated by requests, more responses that were non-interactive, and had revisions to the text that were made without consultation between the learners.

Taking these features of their metalinguistic discussions into consideration, one can assert that at least some of the dyads demonstrated a collaborative orientation at the aggregate level. I say only some because the LREs were not evenly distributed across the 12 pairs of participants. In fact, six of the dyads engaged in fewer that ten LREs over the course of the 80-minute collaborative writing task. It is possible that for these six dyads more of the decisions regarding language were being made by just one of the participants, perhaps the scribe, allowing little if any consultation with her/his partner. Such was the case with Dyad 4: Yustana and Thongchai, who generated only six LREs and the nature of their interaction revealed that they were at the non-collaborative end of the collaborative – non-collaborative continuum. The non-collaborative nature of their interaction might have been associated with a difference between Yustana and Thongchai's L2 proficiency. Yustana scored high relative to the other 23 participants on her individually produced essay, and she was fluent enough to speak continuously with the researcher in English during our interview. Kowal and Swain (1994) suggested that a large difference in language proficiency might reduce the degree of collaboration between learners. However, in the case of Yustana and Thongchai, there may have been additional factors contributing to their non-collaborative effort; in particular, the general attitudes of the participants toward collaborative work might have affected the collaborative nature of their interaction.

In terms of the low LREs generated by some of the dyads, these dyads spent a significant amount of their time trying to generate ideas for their essays (this large investment of time was evident from what they had stated in their interviews), and when combined with the expediency that they said they felt to finish their essays before time had expired, perhaps they were less concerned with discussing language issues than they were with just getting their ideas down in writing and their papers

finished. Another factor that can affect the quality of talk that learners engage in is the kind of task in which they are asked to participate. For example, Storch's (1997) study of the verbal interactions of peer-editing dyads revealed that the majority of their discussions revolved around grammatical choices, such as verb tense. Nelson and Murphy's (1992) study of the verbal interactions of four intermediate level ESL students showed that 70 to 80% of their utterances were related to word order, rhetorical organization, lexical ties, cohesive devices, style, and usage. If the researcher had given the participants different or no time constraints, and had designed a collaborative study that did not span the entire writing process, but rather one part of the process, the participants may have focused more of their attention on surface level language features and not on matters related to idea generation, as it seems they did in the present study.

Looking at the LREs through the lens of the ZPD showed that instances existed in which the participants engaged in dialogue that promoted their L2 learning and text construction. Dyad 1, Sujittra and Suntareepon, reached an area of cognitive space referred to in sociocultural theory as an inter-psychological plane, or intersubjectivity. Anton and DiCamilla (1998) referred to the establishment of intersubjectivity as learners gaining a shared perspective of the task. Sujittra and Suntareepon reached a shared understanding when they began to use their L1 to first establish a shared understanding of the concept that Sujittra wanted to articulate, and second to find the L2 language they would need to articulate the concept in their writing. Anton and DiCamilla (1998) suggested that by using the L1 "learners provide mutual help to each other that will lead to the solution of the problem" (p.5).

5.2. OREs Concerned with Paragraph and Rhetorical Structures

Unfortunately the participants rarely discussed how they would organize their essays, which I found surprising since all of them had recently graduated from

the English V writing course at the university where I conducted the study. However, in the few cases in which the participants did discuss whether or not to have an introduction, how many paragraphs they should have, or whether or not they needed to create a conclusion, they usually transferred these decisions to their final texts.

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