Maximizing Language Growth Through Collaborative-Creative Writing

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Introduction

In her recent book entitled *Scaffolding Language Scaffolding Learning*, Australian educator Pauline Gibbons provides clear examples of how language changes depending on the context of the communication and the modality used, be that speaking or writing. Face-to-face interaction during a hands-on learning activity produces a substantively different kind of language when compared with written text produced as a report about the learning task (see examples below).

Text 1: (spoken by three 10-year-old students carrying out a science experiment)

> this…no, it doesn't go… it doesn't move… try that… yes, it does… a bit… that won't…won't work, it's not metal… these are the best… going really fast.

Text 2: (written by the same students later about the science experiment)

> Our experiment was to find out what a magnet attracted. We discovered that a magnet attracts some kinds of metal. It attracted the iron filings, but not the pin.

<div align="right">(Gibbons, 2002, p. 40)</div>

Text 1, orally produced as students participated in a discovery science project, is marked by multiple two-to-three-word phrases, frequent use of informal contractions (e.g., "doesn't" and "won't") and verbal pointing with demonstratives such as "this" and "that," as well as simple present tense verbs. Text 2, in contrast, makes use of more complex sentence structures with embedded and dependent clauses, simple past and present tense verbs, and subject-matter specific vocabulary, for example, "experiment," "magnet," "discovered," and "attracted." These examples illustrate how language varies and increases in lexical specificity, grammatical complexity, and structural sophistication as students move from orally produced text to written text.

From the examples above, it is clear that planning for writing tasks across the curriculum is essential for the development of a more complex, lexically explicit language variety, the kind that is necessary to become academically literate in the immersion language. Moreover, recent research carried out in immersion language classrooms indicates that writing tasks, when carried out in collaborative groups of two or three students, promote second language acquisition in other important ways as well. There is evidence to suggest that as 5th and 8th grade immersion students engage in jointly constructing written text their oral language use qualitatively improves. Verbal interaction with peers displays more frequent use of the immersion language (as opposed to English), lengthier communications, as well as lexis- and form-focused metatalk in both English and the immersion language (Broner, 2000; Fortune, 2001; Swain & Lapkin, 1998).

Research Review

In a recent article, Canadian researchers Merrill Swain and Sharon Lapkin (1998) argue that language learning is situated within student talk. This idea stems from the Social Learning Theory of Vygotsky (1978) which highlights the critical role of social interaction in a learner's cognitive and linguistic development. To investigate the relationship between language learning and talk, these researchers analyzed two adolescent French immersion students' dialogue during a jigsaw task. The task required that the students collaboratively work out the specifics of a story and reproduce the story in written form. It is interesting to note that these researchers opted for a research design that audiotaped student dialogue during a joint writing task to facilitate their examination of student talk and its relationship to language learning. It appears they were cognizant of the way collaborative writing activities can influence students' oral language production.

During data analysis, language-related episodes (LREs) or "any part of a dialogue where the students talk about the language they are producing, question their language use, or correct themselves or others" (p. 326) were identified and counted. Swain and Lapkin found a positive relationship between the number of LREs and students' post-test scores indicating that language-focused metatalk resulted in language learning. In fact, this learning occurred even when the student-negotiated language form was inaccurately expressed. In such cases, what was learned, albeit incorrect, was retained and reproduced on the post-test. These data provide support for the important role of metatalk or verbally co-constructed knowledge about a particular linguistic form or word in language learning. These authors go on to argue that the language students produce during collaborative dialogue in the classroom assumes even greater importance because it appears to facilitate both language and cognitive development.

More recently Broner (2000) and Fortune (2001) independently carried out classroom-based studies to examine the oral language practices of 5th grade Spanish immersion students. Broner did not originally seek to identify the curricular contexts in which her three focal students might produce more of the target language. However, a subsequent, more detailed analysis of her data uncovered a relationship between language-related tasks carried out among peers, in particular, creative writing and reading tasks, and an increased use of the immersion language. She also found that students' oral language use, embedded within collaborative literacy-based tasks, included several instances of metatalk in the children's native and immersion language, a finding similar to that of Swain and Lapkin's (1998) earlier study.

Fortune's research study set out to describe immersion student output in terms of interrelationships and patterns among a broad range of linguistic, interpersonal, and contextual features. Data involving four 5th grade focal students as they interacted with the 20 remaining classroom participants again showed that the activity of writing elicited notably more linguistically-rich interaction among peers when compared with other activity types. Interaction identified as linguistically-rich contained desirable features for second language acquisition, such as student-student use of the immersion language, an extended amount of language, and language focused on some aspect of language learning. These output features occurred with greater frequency during joint writing activities, especially creative writing tasks (see following writing activity).

In this study follow-up one-on-one interviews were also conducted during which the students viewed videotaped excerpts of their earlier classroom interactions and then explored the meanings they assigned to these language use behaviors with the researcher. Student reflection on their own language use behaviors indicated an awareness of the influence of writing tasks on their use of the immersion language with peers. As students talked about their observed language use practices they indicated that the act of constructing written text in the immersion language encouraged their use of the immersion language.

Student Reflections:

Interviewer: What did you just do? What were you doing?
Michael: I was thinking out loud when I was writing.
Interviewer: You were thinking out loud when you were writing. What language were you using?
Michael: Spanish.
Interviewer: Why do you think you were doing that?
Michael: Because I was writing in Spanish.

(SRI1.M.581-590)

Interviewer: Why do you think you were using Spanish when you were using it?
Brian: Well, we were mostly using Spanish because it was a Spanish project–
Interviewer: Okay. Mmm, mm.
Brian: Like, written, written Spanish.
Interviewer: Mmm, mm.
Brian: So we– we might have to talk in Spanish to get ideas for it for correct grammar maybe.
Interviewer: Okay. So you had to talk in Spanish to get ideas for a written project in Spanish.
Brian: Yeah. Los rocas tienen derecho a nadar aunque van a morir. *[Translation: "The rocks have a right to swim even though they will die." This excerpt relates to the creative writing project as described below.]*
Interviewer: Okay. And, so when you were saying your– your ideas. You think you were using Spanish why?
Brian: To try them out. See if they sound right.

(SRI1.B.762-772)

On occasion, prolonged engagement with a writing task resulted in the students describing themselves as "thinking" in the immersion language.

Interviewer: Do you ever think in Spanish?
Brian: Sometimes. But barely ever. [Pause.] Usually when we're like, like, we're usually talking Spanish a lot before that. Gotta be really involved in the Spanish.
Interviewer: Can you tell me more about that?
Brian: Well, it's usually when I'm writing something down in Spanish, when I'll just like, well, when I was writing the biography *[earlier student biography project based on an interview with a student]…*
Interviewer: Mmm, mm.
Brian: I was thinking which words to write, which was thinking in Spanish.

(SRI2.B.1337-1377)

Interviewer: Why do you think you chose to use Spanish there?
Michael: Um, maybe because I was thinking in Spanish. Because I was trying to find another *derecho [Translation: "right," this reflection relates to the 13 rights creative writing project]* to write.

(SRI1.M.556-560)

Together these research findings suggest that the activity of writing, particularly collaborative and creative writing, pushes students' use of the immersion language in ways that promote language growth. Students increased their use of the immersion language with peers (a context in which 5th graders often choose to use English), the length of their language output was greater, and their interaction contained many language-related episodes during which students jointly negotiated the words and the forms. Capitalizing on these results, immersion teachers are encouraged to design learning experiences that thoughtfully integrate all four language modalities and provide numerous opportunities across the curriculum for collaborative writing that taps student creativity. An example of such a learning activity is detailed in the following section.

The Bill of Rights: A Collaborative-Creative Writing Activity

Overview of the Learning Activity:

This learning activity was designed for a 5th grade classroom in an early Spanish immersion school in St. Paul. Minnesota. At this grade level, the students receive approximately 60% of their content area instruction in Spanish. The targeted content areas for this lesson are Social Studies and Spanish Language Arts. The overarching theme of study is the formation of the US goverment, including the creation of the constitution and its amendments—documents developed to prevent the government's potential abuse of power. In this lesson students work in small groups to collaboratively create their own bill of rights for a select group of people, animals or objects. The purpose of this document is to ensure the group's basic liberties considering their unique characteristics.

Figure 1: Pre-activity Learning Scaffolds to Develop Prior Knowledge and Language
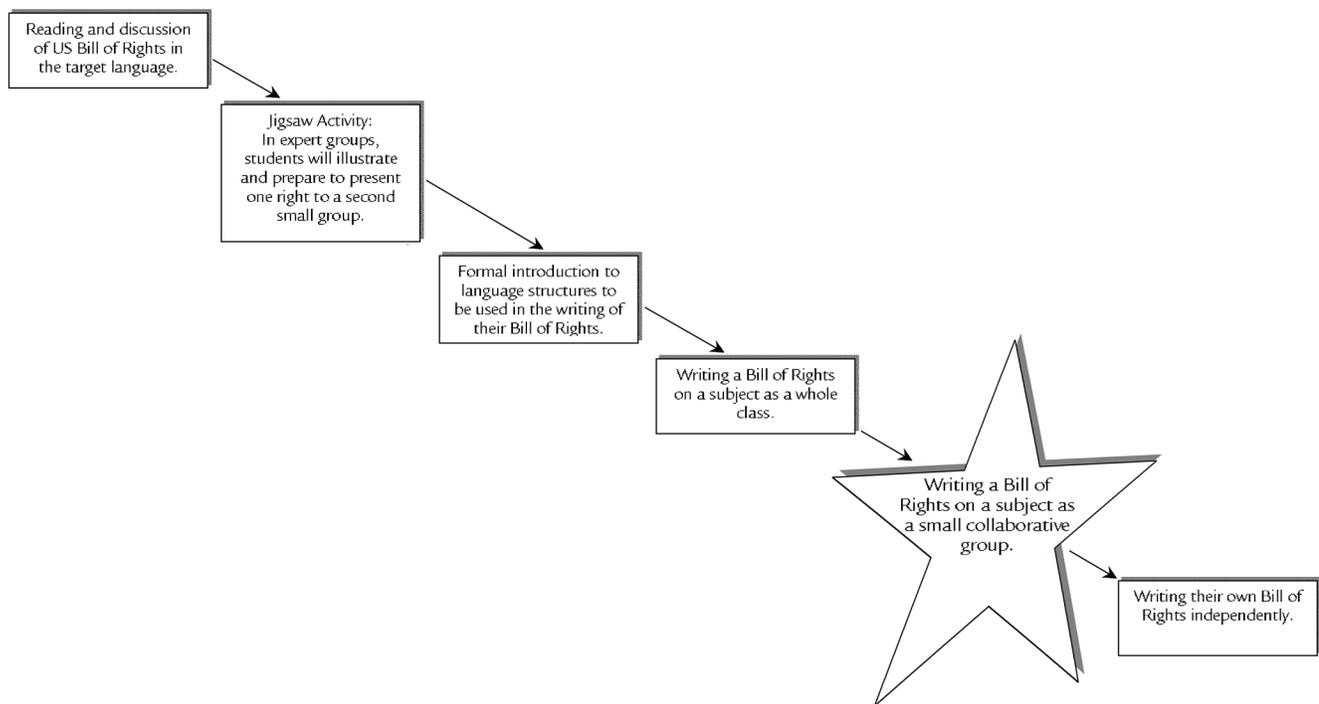
Prior to engaging students in this learning activity, a series of pre-activities are used as scaffolds to build topic knowledge and ensure student success with both oral language and written expression (*see Figure 1*). First, the US Constitution and Bill of Rights are introduced to the students through readings and follow-up discussion in the target language. Second, students work to graphically present and clarify their understandings of the different amendments using a jigsaw activity structure. Once topic knowledge and topic-specific vocabulary is developed, the teacher introduces the language structures students will be asked to use while constructing their bill of rights. Students are then given the opportunity to practice these structures informally as preparation for the creative writing assignment. Finally, students are provided with three back-to-back experiences with writing a bill of rights: 1. A teacher-guided whole class writing of a bill of rights focusing on a subject not typically thought to have rights, 2. A jointly-constructed bill of rights created in small collaborative groups about a topic chosen by the student group, and 3. An independently written bill of rights about a particular group of people such as women, Mexican Americans, or children. The lesson plan below describes students' second experience with creating a bill of rights in collaboration with their peers.

The Lesson Plan

Content Objectives

A. Social Studies: Students will...
- ✓ Apply the concept of " basic individual rights and liberties" as interpreted in the U.S. Bill of Rights while creating basic rights for a group of people, animals or objects
- ✓ Demonstrate their understanding of "rights" as a means to (1) protect the freedom and liberties of a specific group with unique needs and limitations and (2) assist others in overcoming false perceptions about a specific group

B. Spanish Language Arts: Students will...
- ✓ Practice using the writing process in collaborative groups with their peers: brainstorming, drafting, revising, editing, and publishing
- ✓ Advance their Spanish writing skills including the development of vocabulary, complex sentence structures and less commonly used grammatical forms

Language Objectives

A. Content-Obligatory: Students will...
- ✓ Demonstrate their understanding of the topic's unique needs and limitations with topic-appropriate word choice
- ✓ Practice using complex concessive sentences, for example, "Las niñas en quinto grado tienen derecho a llevar puesto lo que quieran sin que nadie les diga comentarios negativos."
  - • Accurately use the prepositional phrase "derecho a" with "tener" in the main clause
  - • Accurately use the subjunctive in subordinate clauses that begin with connecting conjunctions such as "aunque," "a pesar de que," and "sin que"

B. Content-Compatible: Students will...
- ✓ Review their sentence constructions to check for gender and number agreement with articles and nouns, person and number agreement with subjects and verbs
- ✓ Edit their writing for spelling, use of accents, and punctuation

Learning Strategies/General Skills Objectives: Students will…

- ✓ Collaborate and jointly construct written text with a small group of peers
- ✓ Assume primary responsibility for editing their writing with the use of a variety of language resources, e.g., bilingual dictionary, teacher-developed checklist, peers, etc.
- ✓ Actively participate in a writing conference with their teacher and receive feedback for appropiate content and correct use of language as part of the writing process

Materials/Resources:
Social Studies textbook
Copy of US Bill of Rights in Spanish
Dictionaries: Spanish–Spanish and Spanish–English
Computers to use as a writing resource or as a research tool

Activity/Task Structure:

Pre-task:

The teacher and students discuss the concept of the Bill of Rights in the formation of the new US government and brainstorm a word bank about possible groups they might create 'rights' for to display in the classroom. Next, the teacher continues with a whole class presentation modeling the sentence structure students will be asked to use for their thirteen rights writing activity (see Figure 2). All the components of the new sentence structure are reduced to their essential linguistic elements and presented as a formula for the students to practice as a class and later incorporate into their writing.

Figura 2: Estructura grammatical

Grupo o sujeto + tienen derecho a + algo + a pesar de que/ sin que/ aunque + oración subordinada concesiva con un verbo en el presente del subjuntivo.

Figure 2: Grammatical Structures Frame

Group (subject) + has the right to (verb – preposition) + something (the right) + even though/ although/in spite of the fact that (connecting conjunction) + subordinate clause (possible limitation).

The new complex sentence structure is first introduced and then practiced repeatedly with sample sentences about situations that relate to students' experiences. For example, students have the right not to do their homework, although their parents think that this is part of their responsibility. [*"Los estudiantes tienen derecho a no hacer su tarea aunque sus padres piensen que es su deber."*]

Now the teacher invites the students as a class to choose a group of people, animals or objects about which they will together create a bill of rights using the model sentence structure provided. Once the class has selected a particular group, students suggest possible sentences following the model and the teacher writes their ideas on the whiteboard or the overhead so that all can see. Together they check each sentence to see that the essential elements are present. A sampling from a whole class bill of rights written for the girls of fifth grade is displayed below (see Figure 3). In this sample text some student errors still remain. Errors such as those displayed are to be expected as students are still acquiring the linguistic structure. However, the teacher may want to review these errors with the whole class and draw attention to the common pitfalls prior to work in their small groups.

Figure 3: Sample Excerpt from Whole-Class Bill of Rights

La carta de los derechos de las niñas de 5ª grado

I. Las niñas en 5º tienen derecho a tomar cuanto tiempo es necesario haciendo su pelo.

II. Las niñas en 5º tienen derecho a hablar cuanto quieron aun que no es momento de hablar.

III. Las niñas en 5º tienen derechs a llevar puesto lo que quieran sinque nadie le diga comentarios negativos.

VI. Las niñas de 5º tienen derecho a decir sus opiniónes sinque alguien les diga que es estúpido.

During task:

For the collaborative writing activity students will work in small groups of three to four students. They are allowed to go anywhere in the room where they wish to create the text. The first task is for the group to decide on a group for which they would like to create a list of thirteen rights. Once they have selected the group, they can begin to brainstorm ideas for the sentences. As the students are negotiating their ideas and talking with each other, the teacher circulates among the groups to observe the process and provide support. The teacher will need to re-teach the sentence structure, highlight the essential grammatical elements, and continue to bring clarity to the concept of a "right" as needed.

Prior to working in their collaborative writing groups, the teacher will elicit a list of potential resources, e.g., bilingual dictionary, native Spanish-speaking peers, teacher's assistant, etc., which students might draw upon for assistance with unknown vocabulary. She should encourage the students to make use of vocabulary resources beyond herself whenever possible to maintain the pace of the task.

Post-task:

Once students have completed the first draft of their thirteen rights, they are expected to sign up for a writing conference with the teacher. During this conference, the teacher assumes the role of an interviewer and poses questions to the students about the content. As an example, Why did you choose this topic? How might you describe some of the basic needs and unique characteristics of this particular group? What are some potential limitations or false perceptions this group might face? Students should be able to articulate in their own words the reasons why they selected this group as well as the reasons for creating the specific rights they did. In this interaction the teacher expects the students to convey a clear understanding of the concept of a "right" as a means to protect the freedom and liberties of whatever subject they have chosen. In addition, students are expected to talk about "rights" as offering their group a way to overcome specific limitations or false perceptions held by others about them.

After students have been given an opportunity to communicate about the content of their writing, the teacher will provide feedback on the targeted sentence structure and the accuracy of the grammatical forms. At times, this feedback includes explicit corrections and suggestions for more appropriate word choices. At other times, particularly when it is a grammatical form that is familiar to the students and is likely to be produced accurately if given more detailed attention, the teacher simply draws the students' attention to the need to revisit a section or a word by underlining it. Because these writing conferences are time-consuming, those groups of students that are waiting for their conference with the teacher are encouraged to exchange first drafts, and read and provide feedback on the work of a group of their peers.

Bridge References:

Broner, J. (2000). *Impact of interlocutor and task on first and second language use in a Spanish immersion program.* Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis.

Fortune, T. (2001). *Understanding immersion students' oral language use as a mediator of social interaction in the classroom.* Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis.

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Swain, M. & Lapkin, S. (1998). Interaction and second language learning: Two adolescent French immersion students working together. *The Modern Language Journal, 83,* (3), 320-337.

Vygotsky, L. (1978). *Mind in society: The development of higher psychological processes.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Teacher-Developed Assessment Tools:

Formative:
- Checklist to guide self- and peer-editing of a right based on the sentence structure modeled in the pre-task
- Peer group assessment of cooperative group skills used during the drafting process

Summative:
- Multitrait rubric to assess the final version of the group's thirteen rights (*see sample rubric below*)

	Content	Language Structures and Writing Mechanics	Word Choice
4	Writing reflects thorough comprehension of the concept of a bill of rights as protection of freedom and liberties or a means to overcome limitations or false perceptions about a specific subject.	Excellent control of concessive complex sentences using the connecting words "*aunque*," "*a pesar de que*," and "*sin que*." Consistently displays correct punctuation, spelling, and solid knowledge of grammar rules.	Shows excellent selection of verbs and descriptive vocabulary to describe actions and ideas.
3	Writing reflects good comprehension of the concept of a bill of rights as protection of freedom and liberties or a means to overcome limitations or false perceptions about a specific subject.	Good control of concessive complex sentences using the connecting words "*aunque*," "*a pesar de que*," and "*sin que*." Displays mostly accurate punctuation, spelling, and good knowledge of grammar rules.	Shows good selection of verbs and descriptive vocabulary to describe actions and ideas.
2	Writing reflects some comprehension of the concept of a bill of rights as protection of freedom and liberties or a means to overcome limitations or false perceptions about a specific subject.	Adequate control in the use of concessive complex sentences using the connecting words "*aunque*," "*a pesar de que*," and "*sin que*." Contains some inaccurate punctuation, spelling, and evidences some knowledge of grammar rules.	Shows narrow range of verbs and descriptive vocabulary to describe actions and ideas.
1	Writing reflects limited to no comprehension of the concept of a bill of rights as protection of freedom and liberties or a means to overcome limitations or false perceptions about a specific subject.	Weak control in the use of concessive complex sentences using the connecting words "*aunque*," "*a pesar de que*," and "*sin que*." Contains many errors in punctuation and spelling and displays limited knowledge of grammar rules.	Shows limited or unsuitable use of verbs and descriptive vocabulary to describe actions and ideas.

Some Final Reflections

This lesson idea involves two key features, each of which is important to the richness of the learning activity. First, the activity invites student creativity. In fact, the very idea for this lesson came from one of the students! Tapping student creativity invites fun and motivates students by providing them with an opportunity to express themselves in unimagined ways. The creative give-and-take among the students as they co-construct the various rights is exciting to witness each time this lesson is used. Second, the activity involves writing. As was discussed earlier, the nature of language use changes with writing and students are able to practice and produce a more structurally complex, lexically explicit language variety. This task provides students with a clear task scaffolded by specific guidelines for constructing a sentence structure requiring grammatical forms rarely produced by 5th grade Spanish immersion students. Because the task is carried out jointly in small groups, the students enjoy the additional benefit of increased output of a linguistically-rich nature.

Immersion teachers are often overwhelmed by the amount of curriculum they are expected to develop and the pressures to meet the various content area standards set by district, state and national standards. This activity provided an opportunity for the teacher to creatively address both content area and language objectives in a professionally satisfying way. And she was even able to have some fun while doing it!