

# Transformation of traditional vocabulary exercises into collaborative writing activity\*

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**Abstract:** In the reading course, especially the so-called intensive reading course or integrative English reading course, there are some vocabulary exercises which intend to consolidate the active vocabulary emerging in the reading passages. Mostly, these exercises are in the form of blank-filling or rewriting sentences with the words given. The problem with such exercises lies in the de-contextualization of the sentences. On the one hand, without the proper context, it is not easy for students to fill in the blanks, even though they know the meanings of the words. To finish the exercises, most students have to resort to the teacher's reference book for help. On the other hand, students will forget the words soon after they have finished the exercises for lack of the context to aid their recalling of the vocabulary. The author therefore finds that doing such exercises in class is unproductive and time-consuming. In order to solve this problem and make the vocabulary exercises more productive, the author attempts to reform the traditional exercises by transforming them into collaborative writing activities. Students are required to work in groups to write a short passage with the words given. After a 2-year practice, the author has concluded that the collaborative writing activities not only help students learn to use the words in a discourse, but also offer the opportunity to learn interdependently and help each other. Students have learnt to negotiate meanings in the course of the activity, which is a necessary skill in their daily life. Moreover, they have learnt to monitor their production in the course of revision and edition.

**Key words:** traditional exercises; writing activity; transformation; collaborative

## 1. Introduction

In the Chinese EFL (English as a Foreign Language) context, intensive reading course (now is often called *Integrated English*) is always regarded as a very important component of English learning. In most universities and colleges, this is considered the only resource of English learning. Students spend a lot of time previewing the reading passages and doing the exercises following the reading passages. According to the syllabus designed for the English major students, students will have a 4-teaching-hour arrangement for studying this course in the classroom each week and it usually takes at least 6 teaching hours to finish one unit. As this is the course aiming to cultivate students' comprehensive competence, a lot of exercises are designed after the reading passage to help consolidate students' comprehension and production in English. Among them there is a "language work" column,

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in which most exercises are related to the active vocabulary appearing in the reading passage. These exercises mostly take the form of either “filling in the blanks with the words or phrases given” or “making sentences with the words given” or “rewriting the sentences with words or phrases given”. One of the common features of these exercises is that the sentences offered are not related to one another and students have to practice the words or phrases without any suitable context. As a result, students usually find it hard to finish these exercises. They sometimes have to refer to the teacher’s handbook for the right answers. Moreover, even after they have finished the exercises, it is very difficult for them to recall the usage of these words or phrases, so in the end of the term, they need to do the exercises again to help them recall these words or phrases. To sum up, the “language work” exercises are time-consuming and lack of efficiency. To cope with such a problem, the author attempts to reform the traditional exercises by transforming them into collaborative writing activities. This paper summarizes the reform and its effect on students’ English learning and the improvement of their learning behaviors.

## **2. Differences between collaborative learning and cooperative learning**

Recently, much emphasis is laid on the cooperative learning of language learners. However, researchers have distinguished cooperation and collaboration. Cooperative learning is defined as “working together to accomplish shared goals” (Kozar, 2010) and collaborative learning is defined as “a method that implies working in a group of two or more to achieve a common goal while respecting each individual’s contribution to the whole” (Kozar, 2010). Some researchers described cooperative work as a task that is accomplished by dividing it among the participants, where “each person is responsible for a portion of the problem solving” and they saw collaborative work as “the mutual engagement of participants in a coordinated effort to solve the problem together” (Roschelle & Teasley, 1995, p. 70). That is to say, cooperative learning is more focused on working together to create an end product, while successful collaboration requires participants to share in the process of knowledge creation. They compared cooperative learning to assembly line in that each person is doing his/her own assigned parts separately without interaction with others. Collaboration, on the other hand, involves negotiation, discussions and accommodating others’ perspectives. As a result, collaborative learning may lead to a deeper information processing and more meaningful psychological connections among the participants.

## **3. Definition of discourse competence**

Among the components of communicative competence is discourse competence, which is defined as “the ability to combine ideas to achieve cohesion in form and coherence in thought, above the level of the single sentence” (Oxford, 1990, p. 7). McCarthy and Carter (2004, p. 105) viewed language as discourse, rather than a layer or level of language. This view is revolutionary as it opposes the dominant paradigm which tends to concentrate on de-contextualized units of language, stressing isolated single sentences and practice of forms of language. The discourse-based view of language suggests that patterns of language extend beyond the words, clauses and sentences, which have been the traditional concern of language teaching. It focuses on complete spoken and written texts and on the social and cultural contexts in which language operates. Great emphasis is placed on the interpersonal, variational and negotiable aspects of language in contrast to conventional concerns with more ideational, content-based and stable relations between forms and meanings.

On the basis of such theoretical guidance, the author has carried out the reform on the traditional vocabulary exercises by transforming them into discourse-based collaborative writing activities.

#### **4. The attempt to reform the traditional vocabulary exercises**

As is mentioned in the Introduction, most “language work” exercises have the drawback of de-contextualization, which makes it difficult for students to finish them on their own and to recall them when they review the course. The directions of one of the exercises are as:

Make a sentence of your own for each of the given words with meanings other than those used in the text. You may change the part of speech of these words.

In a certain unit, the words given are: present, capital, pack, move, counter, drop (HE, 2007, p. 9).

Another type of “language work” exercise requires students to “Filling in the blanks in each sentence with a word or phrase taken from the text, using its appropriate form”. Although these words or phrases have appeared in the reading passage and may have been taught as the language points when the reading passage is being studied, students still find it difficult to finish as the sentences are not related to one another. In other words, students are not provided with a context larger than the sentence itself to use these words. What is worse is that these sentences are not related to the students’ life at all. If students are left to do the exercises according to the directions, they will make isolated de-contextualized sentences individually. Some students may just copy the sentences from the dictionary. It is evident that this way of dealing with the exercises does little to help students learn to use these words when they need to use them in real communication. What is more, it hardly leaves any traces in their memory.

To make the “language work” exercises more effective and enduring, the author has attempted to transform such exercises into collaborative writing activities.

For the first type of exercises, the activity usually takes the following steps:

Step 1: Students are divided into groups of 5 or 6 according to their seats.

Step 2: Each group is required to choose the meanings of the given words.

Step 3: Having determined the meanings of the words, students are asked to make a story with the meanings they have chosen.

Step 4: After finishing the story, a reporter from each group will read the story aloud to the class.

Step 5: After class, students of each group are required to edit the story they have written and print it before handing it in to the teacher.

The blank-filling exercise also takes the form of group writing activity in which students work in groups and each group is to make up a story with the words or phrases given. The only difference between these 2 exercises is that they do not need to choose the meanings of the words or phrases given in group writing activity. An alternative to this activity is the chain story. Each student selects a word or phrase from the list and makes a sentence with it. The sentence made by the first student determines the topic of the story and other students have to follow it and contribute to the development of the story. In order to do that, they must pay close attention to the sentences already written. After all words or phrases have been used, students are required to read the story from the beginning to the end and make necessary modification when they are reading.

## **5. The features of the discourse-based collaborative writing activity**

### **5.1 Learning by doing**

The collaborative writing activity is based on the Communicative Approach (CA) which suggests that learners can learn the language by using it and language activities should follow such principles as being purposeful, meaningful and useful. The traditional vocabulary exercises fail to observe these principles as the isolated sentences lack intrinsic logic and have no connection with the students' life. Therefore, students' interest will not be aroused and they will not be motivated to work. When they are required to make up a story with the words or phrases given, they may activate their prior experience and draw from their background knowledge. In that sense, they are using the language for real communication.

### **5.2 Unpredictability**

As the students are left to make up stories without any improvisation, what they will turn out is mostly unpredictable. That is, even the teacher or students themselves will not know what they will produce and there will be different versions as many as the number of students, unlike the traditional vocabulary exercises which usually have only one correct answer. The feature of unpredictability strongly stimulates students' interest and it also gives them the chance to practice their imagination and creativity.

### **5.3 Negotiation of meaning**

In the process of writing, students will pool information from each other by brainstorming and determine the theme and the organization of their story. This is the process of negotiation. Sometimes in order to seek the most adequate expression, they will argue heatedly until they have reached an agreement. During the discussion, they have created new sights and are moved closer to an understanding of alternate perspectives. They build new understanding by challenging others' ideas and defending their own. In the end, they create a product that is different from any others' through the combination of different perspectives, talents and ideas.

### **5.4 Development of discourse competence**

In the writing activity, they not only have grasped the usage of the isolated words and phrases, but also have learned the ways to place ideas in logical ways and thus developed their discourse competence, one of the components of communicative competence. This is the greatest advantage of the writing activity over the traditional vocabulary exercises as it offers students the opportunities to practice the words and phrases in a meaningful context. This coincides with McCarthy and Carter's (2004) view which regards language as discourse rather than an extra layer of language. They insisted that only by doing discourse can learners master the discourse strategies.

### **5.5 Interdependence and team spirits**

As this writing activity is carried out in groups, students learn to cooperate with each other. In order to produce the best product and compete with other groups, students in each group try their best to work in joint effort and make use of any resources they can access to the completion of the task. What is more, the writing activity offers students the opportunity to tutor each other. In other words, students are modeling the language to other group members. When students are engaged in the writing activity, they play different roles according to the requirements of the tasks and their personalities. In each group, some students undertake the role of secretary, whose job is to note down the sentences uttered by other group members. The eloquent students often play the role of reporters, who present the finished product to the whole class. In this process, all students are given

chances to discover their own and others' strengths and make them into full play. Moreover, as they may realize there exists competition with other groups, each of them will spare no pains to contribute to the task. This paves the way to develop team spirits needed in their future life.

### **5.6 Learning strategies**

In the writing activity, first of all, students have to plan the writing. Through association and brainstorming, they set the topic and the sequence of ideas. In the process of drafting, they use such strategies as using resources for sending messages, translating, recombining and asking questions for verification and feedback. In the course of revision, they monitor their production and correct mistakes they have discovered in their writing. Implicitly they have learnt to use meta-cognitive as well as cognitive strategies to cope with the writing activity. What is more, this transformation enables them to learn to use the words and phrases by placing them in the meaningful context, which is a strategy to memorize the new words and phrases.

### **5.7 Stress-free atmosphere**

When students are engaged in the collaborative activity, they no longer feel nervous as they do not need to face the challenge alone and they are not afraid of being laughed at or criticized, which they often encounter in the traditional classroom. In that sense, the negative affects are filtered out and they are better motivated to learn. Moreover, even when they have difficulties, they know their group members will back them up and give them a hand.

## **6. Effect of the reform**

After the practice of 2 terms, the author finds that students benefit a lot from the activity. Through observation of the students' performance, the author can see that students like this kind of activity and they have great enthusiasm in participating in it. When they are working out the story, they all devote themselves to it. Even the weaker students become more confident in using the language for communication. When they present their story to the class, others can see the sense of achievement and satisfaction from their faces. This transformation enables students to practice their creativity which is inhibited by the traditional exercises. The author has discovered many surprising creative versions students have produced. They have learnt to organize ideas into logical and coherent discourse. More importantly, students become more autonomous in learning the language, which is mostly helpful to their study and life. In the process they learn to respect each other and help each other. They have discovered some shining points in others and decreased their prejudice against the underachievers. This is especially important as they may realize that in society people need to depend upon one another and respect each other. Last but not least, the collaborative writing activity changes teachers' and students' roles. Teachers are no longer the authoritative figure in the classroom. They are co-communicators and participate in the creative writing activity by offering help to students and facilitating their writing. Students may even question or challenge the teacher since they are the main body in the activity.

## **7. Conclusion**

The result of the experiment suggests that the discourse-based collaborative writing activity has many advantages over the traditional vocabulary exercises. It is the naturalistic practice of the language and students are using the words and phrases in a meaningful context for real communicative purposes. Compared with the effect

of traditional vocabulary exercises, it leaves a deeper impression on the students and is easier for students to retrieve the words and phrases as a result of the meaningful association they have made in story creation. In this sense, their memory load is greatly reduced and they are better motivated to learn English. What is more important is that they have developed learner autonomy and become more independent and responsible, while monitoring their own performance and that of their peers. Moreover, they have also learned to collaborate with each other and have recognized the merits which their group members possess and they probably lack and may develop later through collaborative problem-solving activities.

As this is just an initial product of the project the author has produced, more subsequent research will be followed as to the enduring effects of the activity, which still needs some quantitative data to back up the author's assumptions.

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