Storyboarding as a Prewriting Activity for Second Language Learners

Nathan A. Toister*
Napa Valley College

Abstract

This paper provides a short literature review for background on effective collaborative pre-writing activities for students studying second or foreign languages. The focus is on using illustrations and peer discourse to map out written compositions. Additionally, this paper offers observations of the implementation of an instructional unit using storyboarding as a prewriting activity in an ESL class of international students.

Introduction

A major objective among L2 instructors is pinpointing techniques that can assist students in exploring their language skills as efficiently as possible. How to identify the most effective techniques can be challenging, as individual learners have differing degrees and rates of cognitive development; even within a similar proficiency level, the L2 students might be categorized differently at a given point in time. Consequently, it is important to incorporate strategies that are flexible enough to include and engage diverse populations of multilingual students in multiple combinations of constituents of language learning, including, but not limited to speaking, listening, reading, and writing.

Finding the most effective approach that allows students to achieve the best possible outcome on writing tasks is an area for educators that can prove to be challenging. Writing in a second language can be a very daunting operation for some. Language learners may have a lack of lexical or syntactical resources, an inability to transfer language correctly from an L1, fossilization of improper linguistics, and so on. Therefore, textual output in the L2 might lack significant structural components, such as organization, coherence, cohesion, etc., necessary to satisfy certain compositional requirements, particularly in academic writing.

Due to the fact that academic writing for L2 learners can be overwhelming in the scope of assessment criteria, developing proper textual compositions puts additional burden on a learner, potentially impacting their *affective filter*—affective variables related to success in second language acquisition such as anxiety, motivation, and self-confidence—in a negative fashion (Krashen, 1981, p. 56), further limiting their language productivity. Therefore, allowing for procedures that provide socializing and scaffolding opportunities for writing among L2 learners should reduce those effects, decreasing anxiety and increasing motivation and ultimately open up more channels for cognitive development (Krashen, 1981). In addition, according to Rossetto and Chiera-Macchia (2011), working with others is also beneficial for learning how to use vocabulary in writing and enhancing creativity of content, particularly through the use of imagery.

One effective mode of imagery for mapping out concepts is through the use of *storyboarding*. This paper will attempt to explore the benefits and challenges of collaborative storyboarding as a prewriting activity and subsequently demonstrate practical application of this technique in a teaching unit (Appendix) for a college level ESL classroom. Observations of the implementation of this teaching unit will be provided.

Theoretical Background

Storyboarding

Storyboarding is a multimodal tool that can be used to explore the plot and characters of a story line through sequenced illustrations of a given context (Eiserman & Blatter, 2014). As a pedagogical tool, it is implemented in classrooms to aid learning and productivity across a wide-spectrum of genres; particularly with comprehensive language input comprehension, such as reading or extensive dialogue, and output of collective thought processes, such as writing (Caldwell & Moore, 1992; Rossetto & Chiera-Macchia, 2011; Sinatra, 1990).

Collaborative storyboarding strategies can be implemented in a variety of learning conditions, depending on the objectives of the activity. Eiserman and Blatter (2013) maintain that drawing and storyboarding is a means to support understanding of the concepts around story creation, story-telling, story presentation and planning in a team oriented environment. They describe it as a distributed process, involving the expertise of many people negotiating meaning through different stages of development and organization. Applying storyboarding to prewriting activities can provide learners an opportunity to improve organizational and transitional skills by plotting out the main ideas of their writing through image sequencing. It is also evident that such an interactive environment has extensive scaffolding potential. Accordingly, using collaborative storyboarding should foster cognitive development in the L2 and as a prewriting activity, offering significant resources for articulating a text.

Collaborative storyboarding may be more beneficial in groups than in pairs, and is not limited to a specific subject. Dobao (2012) conducted a study which involved participants in an intermediate level Spanish as a foreign language class in a U.S. university. The learners were given a set of illustrations to rearrange into sequential order and create a story associated with the images. It assesses and compares written works of individuals, pairs, and groups of four. The experiment found that group collaboration produced shorter and more accurate texts than the others. Dobao (2012) also determined that through collective scaffolding, the groups focused more of the discourse on the target language and were thus able to solve more problems associated with developing the writing. Moreover, in pairs, learners often either repeated or complied with errors of their partner, or offered no reflection on mistakes made. In incidents where not all group members were willing to participate, the benefits of group collaboration had less or no effect. The results of Dobao's study indicate that collaborative measures help to improve the quality of written text among members. In addition, the experiment utilized graphic components to help shape a narrative among the student groups; therefore, the article provides insight into an effective method for collaborative writing strategies capitalizing on the use of

visuals that can be applied similarly to a prewriting exercise that includes storyboarding. A study by Moore and Caldwell (1993) found that when compared to traditional language arts discourse, students who used drawing as planning activity scored consistently higher on writing quality scores (p. 107) and they propose that integrating illustrations with written text to outline the writing has great potential for narrative compositions (p. 109). Using drawing in the creative process of composition planning can benefit the articulation of written output, as it will be further discussed in the next section.

Using Visuals
When writing in a second language, there potentially exists composition barriers due to lack of linguistic knowledge and understanding of organizational patterns in the target language. Creating visuals can help to reduce those barriers by primarily transferring concepts to images that the writer can subsequently work out more thoroughly in the writing process. Rossetto and Chiera-Macchia (2011) showed evidence to support the view that knowledge of visual cues or images can assist in the production of written text targets in the L2; in this case, it was the narrative genre. What should be recognized in creative images, such as drawings, is the conveyance of meaning in a socio-cultural environment. Drawing as an interpersonal communicative tool has been taking shape in classrooms involving children and English language learners (Adoniou, 2013). Similarly, when exploring practices for communication of second language learners, drawing has the potential to expand the exchange of ideas between L2 interlocutors. Hence, the scaffolding potential of drawing as a collaborative prewriting activity holds opportunities for students to share concepts through images that might otherwise be inhibited by lack of verbal ability in the L2, and subsequently, applying it to text. Such a concept gives weight to cultural relevance in collaborative efforts. When learners can utilize background knowledge through culture references, they can build agency through a native-like expertise of the context. Even if students do not share the same societal background, images may nonetheless carry similar meaning across culture lines. Moreover, with the supplementation of cooperative scaffolding, the learners can transfer this knowledge to their peers in the discursive process. In regards to the information sharing, written compositions in the L2 will have the potential to result in a more developed fashion than if learners are working independently.

Drawing has the potential to improve learner scores during evaluations. Exploring drawing as a preparatory activity for narrative writing, Caldwell (1992) makes a substantial point that rehearsal through drawing may help to overcome some of the problems encountered by novice writers, enabling them to gain control of the process of generating and organizing content prior to writing. In their study, students were divided into an experimental group and a control group, which were allocated lesson time for story planning through sketching and language arts instruction, respectively. Each of the writing samples were scored on composition and on organization, ideas, style and content, with the overall scores used as the comparative markers. The drawing group's overall score gains increased throughout the time period, whereas the control group gains remained stable. Furthermore, the drawing group consistently received higher overall scores than the control group. Adoniou (2013) explored drawing as a prewriting

activity and the effects it had on written production of procedural and exploratory text composition. Her study involved ELLs of different cultural backgrounds who were divided into control and treatment groupsto complete the same writing task. The control group had no instruction prior to the writing and were left to read silently, while the treatment group was asked to draw sketches or images related to the writing topic beforehand. The treatment group scored better results than the control group in almost all writing assessment categories, such as syntax, organization and appropriate content. According to the research results, the treatment group also provided more detail in the writing, suggesting that drawing serves as an effective memory prompt and helps with conceptual development. Additionally, despite differences in cultural background, similarities existed in the representative drawings. Such findings might imply that drawing can elicit like-minded cognitive processes that align with a target genre among diverse populations of second language learners; this concept supports potentiality for scaffolding through collaborative storyboarding as a prewriting activity in second language learning environments with students of various sociocultural backgrounds.

Collaboration
Group discussions offer a social context in which the content of the writing task is explored more freely. Talking sessions, especially peer discussion, seem to help students develop a greater variety of verbs to be used in their writing. Additionally, prewriting discussions seem to help students develop more vocabulary to be used in writing, indicating cognitive development between the prewriting and writing stages (Shi, 1998) and thus implemented as part of the storyboarding teaching unit of this paper.

Students who elude to more social discussions and less on the structure of the paper in group discussions are not necessarily acquiring more compositional skills from the benefits of collaboration. On the other hand, when explicit directions are laid out by the instructor, and thus the prewriting activity is more structured for students to discuss content and organization, students are more engaged during the collaborative process for evaluating and giving feedback on ideas and organization (Neumann & McDonough, 2015; Moore & Caldwell, 1993). Consequently, providing more elicit guidelines in the collaborative process should be an appropriate further step when conducting such activities and can be seen in the ordered instructions in the sample teaching unit provided.

It is important that during the collaboration process, interlocutors exchange ideas and share contribution efforts. Negotiating meanings provides the necessary and sufficient conditions for acquisition and mastery of a second language, and that negotiated interaction is the most vital source of data (Donato, 1994). Such actions can lead to the assumption of collective scaffolding occurring, not only through the lens of idea generation, but also using those ideas for L2 development, as the learners are working together to resolve an issue in the context of a second language.

Ferris and Hedgcock (2014) point out the objection that collaborative writing may discourage student writers from claiming their voices and owning less-than-satisfactory contributions that undermine the quality of the final product (p. 84). While this may hold true

for a holistic writing approach, this paper supports collaboration during the prewriting process only in order to assist in the prewriting stage of idea generation, not when the writing task takes place. As laid out in the sample teaching unit, the composition is performed independently, consequently giving agency and ownership to the individual student for developing more in depth content.

Summary

Imagery and drawing as a means of context and language comprehension is apparent and shown to be efficacious in language learning. Storyboarding includes not only the benefits of imagery but also of discursive engagement among students to plot and organize information. It can be associated with two key concepts of acquiring a language: cognitive development through creative output, and peer scaffolding of task oriented language features; in this case, creating prewriting outlining, exchanging information, negotiating meaning, and critiquing ideas. The collaborative process of storyboarding allows for students to communicate non-verbal messages through images to supplement verbal discourse and to lay out and organize a story in sequenced illustrations, with potential for second language acquisition. Further research should be done to measure the effectiveness of storyboarding as a prewriting activity in an L2 context, with consideration for multiple writing genres, effectiveness of the activity for the related assignment and the willingness of learners to participate. Objective writing gains ought to be assessed, as well as more subjective evaluations of the collaborative process. To do so could help provide insight into the flexibility of storyboarding as a writing technique for L2 learners and also other pedagogical methods across multimodal forms of L2 education.

Practical Application

Class and Course Description

Informed by research that has been conducted in this area, I chose to utilize this collaboration strategy to assist in writing tasks, as drawing to stimulate production of ideas and collaborative efforts among peers show to bear significant advantages for learners to improve language composition. I implemented a teaching unit in which collaborative storyboarding techniques were used as a prewriting activity. Included in the teaching unit was an optional stage that provided students an opportunity to present the creative verbally to practice organization, coherence and cohesion and make revisions accordingly.

The teaching unit (Appendix) was used in an academic reading and writing course for multi-cultural college aged English language learners in the United States. Proficiency levels vary; however, cohorts were created and placed in respective classes based on level assessment. The course was focused on developing awareness and comprehension of a determined genre of writing (problem-solution, argument, cause-effect, classification, narration, process, etc.), as well as developing composition skills of standardized 4-5 paragraph essays. Varying by session (4-week instructional periods), the genre of the essay would change. This class met four days a week, for approximately two hours each meeting. Typically, the lesson would be split equally between

reading and writing activities, although it was subject to change depending on the pedagogy of the day. The course related to this study considered narrative writing as the target writing genre with a population of high-intermediate learners. By the time this lesson took place, students had already had exposure to and understanding of the narrative genre and written structure. The teaching unit took place over a three-class period: Day one was the creative and collaborative process; day 2 was presentations of the creative material; day 3 was essay composition.

Preliminary Observations of Practical Application

Facilitating a collective storyboarding activity turned out to be quite a success. By providing low stakes, low anxiety contexts of freedom to express themselves without care of consequence, students blossomed more than even they themselves might have thought that they could. Peer scaffolding definitely took place and this case offered such a Vygotskian perspective quite vividly. Thorne, Black and Sykes (2009) argue that when participating in a socially constructed learning environment, at the very least, motivation for interaction and communicative practices can increase, and that engaging in multiple forms of authentic communication can develop a sense of accomplishment as language users (p. 803). This experience proved that concept. With the incorporation of drawing in scenes to lay out the procession of a story in poster format and digital formats (Figures 1 and 2), a new sense of language meaning and interpretation seemed to take hold. Students were willing and eager to communicate their ideas; the inspiration was contagious among students as they all wanted to contribute to the unfolding of their creative stories (Figure 3).

Figure 1. *Poster story board*

Figure 2. *Digital story board*

Figure 3. *Story Board Presentation*

Monitoring the approach of storyboarding in creating a short tale as a group, I witnessed first-hand productive peer scaffolding through cooperation, negotiation, and collaboration. Different students have different skill sets when it comes to communication or language use. For

example, one student might have more vivid imagery of a scene or situation and can transfer that imagery via drawing. Another student has the lexical resources to elaborate information verbally or textually. Yet another student has grammatical and syntactical mastery of the language beyond what his or her peers have and can construe meanings in a more accurate way. These skills are not exclusive of each other within one learner; however, by exchanging knowledge between learners, the most appropriate choices can be extracted and applied.

Because this preliminary activity was more open-ended, eventually becoming the novel product of the learners themselves, I believe it was easier for students to maintain and elaborate on a topical goal, likely motivated by more ownership of the end results. If, however, as discovered by Shi, topics are narrow and the possibility that the students hold less knowledge in the subject area exists, discourse in the collaborative task may divert to other areas of interest.

Consequently, it is essential that the instructor specify guidelines of the work and encourage note-taking to increase internalization, or at least provide reference to the scaffolding that takes place. In addition, as the students move on to the writing phase of the unit, notes supplemental to the storyboard will allow for much more effective reflection when the students must compose their own writing.

Conducting L2 based topical discursive prewriting activities in the context of multicultural, multilingual academic L2 classrooms, I have undoubtedly observed lexical and knowledge generative scaffolding. The discourse that developed through illustration and story-telling had a significant impact on the students' expansive writing capabilities. However, less peer consultation than I expected took place in the organizational aspect of preparing the written composition, possibly implying that students may prefer to author their own essay more individually.

Conclusion

This paper attempts to make the case through literature and classroom observation that using storyboarding as a prewriting activity is an effective means for composing essays in an ESL classroom. The primary focus of this teaching unit was to facilitate the transfer of the discussed and illustrated components of a storyline into a more proficiently (academically) written composition. Including a presentation activity in the teaching unit has the potential for learners to become more involved in the total outcome of the storyboard and practice their transitional and verbal cues. Overall, collaborative storyboarding allows learners to share ideas and negotiate meaning through illustrations and storyline sequencing in order to better prepare them for the writing process. When implementing well-structured and clearly guided lessons involving storyboarding, students can realize the benefits of coordinating with one another on a complex task such as narration, which might otherwise be more challenging for an individual. Motivation for participation can increase and overall written output can improve from the collective scaffolding that results from imagery communication, storyline sequencing, and the language exchange that occurs from the entirety of the activities involved in this teaching unit.

Further research should be done to measure the effectiveness of storyboarding as a prewriting activity in an L2 context, with consideration for multiple writing genres, effectiveness of the activity for the related assignment and the willingness of learners to participate. Objective writing gains ought to be assessed, as well as more subjective evaluations of the collaborative process. To do so could help provide insight into the flexibility of storyboarding as a writing technique for L2 learners and also other pedagogical methods across multimodal forms of L2 education. Finally, future application of storyboarding in pre-writing activities may reveal its limitations, which can be addressed to improve this technique.

Endnote

[1]If restricted to distance education, there are alternatives to the classroom environment for creative storyboarding activities through online resources, such as https://www.storyboardthat.com/, https://storybird.com/, http://5card.cogdogblog.com/index.php (Five Card Flicker), or https://www.makebeliefscomix.com/, which can be utilized with synchronous or asynchronous communication.

References

Adoniou, M. (2013). Drawing to support writing development in english language learners. *Language and Education*, 27(3), 261-277.

Ahmadian, M., Pouromid, S., & Nickkhah, M. (2016). Improving the quality of second language writing by first language use. *Theory and Practice in Language Studies*, 6(4), 767.

Byrd, D. R. (2011). Putting the writing process into action in the L2 classroom: Pre-writing techniques that work. *The Journal of Language Teaching and Learning*, 1(1).

Caldwell, H., & Moore, B. (1992). The art of writing: Drawing as preparation for narrative writing in the primary grades. *Studies in Art Education*, 32(4), 207-219.

Dobao, A. (2012). Collaborative writing tasks in the L2 classroom: Comparing group, pair, and individual work. *Journal of Second Language Writing*, 21(1), 40-58.

Donato, R. (1994). Collective scaffolding in second language learning. *Vygotskian approaches to second language research*, 33456.

Eiserman, J., & Blatter, J. (2014). Understanding through storyboarding: A study of multimodal literacy in a grade 2 classroom. *Canadian Review of Art Education: Research & Issues*, 41(2), 169-184.

Eiserman, J., & Blatter, J. (2013). Story boarding as instruction and documentation in the classroom. *The International Journal of the Image*, 3(3), 59-73.

Ferris, D., & Hedgcock, J. (2014). Teaching L2 composition: Purpose, process, and practice. New York: Routledge.

Krashen, S. (1981). The "fundamental pedagogical principle" in second language teaching. *Studia Linguistica*, 35(1-2), 50-70.

McDonough, K., & Neumann, H. (2014). Using prewriting tasks in L2 writing classes: Insights from three experiments. *TESL Canada Journal*, 31, 132-143.

Moore, B., & Caldwell, H. (1993). Drama and drawing for narrative writing in primary grades. *The Journal of Educational Research*, 87(2), 100-110.

Neumann, H., & McDonough, K. (2015). Exploring student interaction during collaborative prewriting discussions and its relationship to L2 writing. *Journal of Second Language Writing*, *27*, 84-104.

Rossetto, M., & Chiera-Macchia, A. (2011). "visual learning is the best learning--it lets you be creative while learning": Exploring ways to begin guided writing in second language learning through the use of comics. *Babel*, *45*, 35-3), p.35-40.

Shi, L. (1998). Effects of prewriting discussions on adult esl students' compositions. *Journal of Second Language Writing*, *7*(3), 319-345.

Sinatra, R. (1990). Combining visual literacy, text understanding, and writing for culturally diverse students. *Journal of Reading*, *33*(8), 612-617.

Thorne, S., Black, R., & Sykes, J. (2009). Second language use, socialization, and learning in internet interest communities and online gaming. *The Modern Language Journal*, 93(focus issue), 802-821.

Appendix
Teaching Unit: Collaborative Storyboarding as a Prewriting Activity

Objectives
Students will be able to compose a well-structured process essay in a narrative genre. As a pre-writing activity, students will collaborate on story lines through graphic story-boarding and discussion. Students will be able to articulate the graphic design in a process method through the graphics of the storyboard, first verbally, and ultimately in writing.[1]

Materials Needed
- Example story board
- Poster paper and markers or digital variations (slides, online resources, etc.)
- Note paper
- Writing (binder) paper and pens or pencils or digital application (Microsoft Word or Google Docs)
- Essay composition rubrics for student reference of writing expectations and scoring

Lesson 1: Storyboarding

   Activity 1: Getting ready
   1. Teacher will provide an example of what a storyboard looks like
   2. Teacher will describe how students can collaborate on the story
      1. Each student is responsible for a section of the story (including the art work) that is built upon preceding scenes
      2. Students should discuss and agree upon the overall framework / theme of the story, as well as transitional components between parts
      3. Students will be placed in groups of 3-4, depending on class size
      4. Groups should be constructed of diverse sociocultural backgrounds to the best ability
   3. With class, brainstorm narrative story themes (ex: fantasy, adventure, sci-fi, etc.) and possible brief plot lines to start generating ideas

   Activity 2: Student collaboration
   1. Students will determine what type of theme will set the story line
   2. Students will collaborate and take notes on a story line that includes at least 6-8 graphic frames, with each student to contribute drawing to an equal amount of frames
      1. Students will sketch out and complete illustrations on poster paper
      2. Divide the poster into at least 8 equal parts (frames)
      3. In each frame, students will draw a segment of the story that corresponds to the sequencing of the frames
   3. Students will coordinate transitions and dialogue between scenes and overall succinct, cohesive, and coherent connection of the story from introduction to conclusion

Lesson 2: Group Presentation
Activity 1: Preparation
1 Teacher will set up necessary resources for presentations: tape/whiteboard clips for posters, multimedia equipment if student group is presenting a digital, etc.
2 Groups will display story board

Activity 2: Presentation
1 Groups will narrate storyline based on their collaborative composition. Narration should be divided equally among group members. Ideally but not necessary, students may take charge of the narration for their contribution to the story board
2 Following end of each presentation, audience will ask follow up questions for clarity

Lesson 3: Essay Composition
Activity 1: Outlining
1 Students will outline a narrative essay based on the organization of the story board their group had created
2 Students may use story board illustrations to assist them in the process

Activity 2: Composition
1 Individually, students will compose a narrative essay based on the story created by their groups
    1. Students should follow the writing parameters outlined by the rubric
    2. Writings do not have to be limited to the story board creative process – students may adopt a more personalized rendition or redirect the story if so desired
2 Students may revisit the story board illustrations when reviewing essays before submission

Assessment
Students will be evaluated in two categories. The first will be based on participation. How well students interact with classmates during the collaboration process and contribution in the presentation activity will be considered. Scores will be based on a communication rubric and determined by several categories: conceptual input, critique, and eliciting others for ideas and opinions. The second assessment will use the writing rubric as a basis for scoring the written composition.

About the Author

Nathan A. Toister holds a MA TESOL from Sonoma State University and has been teaching English as a second or foreign language for over 10 years. He began his teaching career as an EFL teacher in Japan and currently teaches academic and other ESL lessons in California.