

Action Research in English Teacher Education series

This publication is part of the Action Research Series of CELT Matters, which started in 2021. The main goal of Action Research is the advancement of English language teaching practice and the personal professional development of (student) teachers: During an extensive Master Practicum (30 ECTS; one semester) accompanied by the university-based Practicum Course, student teachers systematically and critically explore one aspect of their teaching. The studies are thus based on concrete teaching situations. In line with Action Research conventions, the research interest and research questions are partly formulated in a personal way, and conclusions include personal insights drawn closely from the concrete teaching situation. Reading about AR insights thus invites the reader to follow this reflection process and to gain inspiration for their own reflections. Please refer to the [introduction article](#) for further information.

Action Research in English Teacher Education

Planning a technology-based collaborative writing project in an EFL classroom

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This Action Research (AR) report provides

- an overview of current research on the benefits of collaborative writing and its pedagogical design;
- practical suggestions for the implementation of web-based collaborative writing projects;
- recommendations for effective project planning and material design together with selected materials used during the project.

1. Rationale and personal relevance

Traditionally, the task of writing at school is done individually and at home – but it does not have to be that way. “The co-authoring of a text by two or more writers” (Storch, 2013, p. 2), often referred to as “collaborative writing” (CW), is a different approach. The joint creation of a

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text in CW encapsulates both the *process*, in which students work together to brainstorm ideas, plan, structure, edit, and revise their text, and the final co-constructed *product*, which is characterized by shared responsibility and co-ownership (Storch, 2013, p. 2). In this way, collaborative writing encourages peer interaction and team building, two central factors which appear to have been lacking in teenagers' lives since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020.

While conducting my Master practicum with a 10th grade AHS English class in Lower Austria in 2021/22, I was given the task of introducing my students to the new text type "article" (cf. BMBWF 2019b). During some of their English lessons that I had previously observed, I noticed that many of the students were reluctant to speak up during whole-class teaching and that they seemed exhausted by the current situation of COVID-induced restrictions on collaborative work, a lack of special school events including class trips, and weeks of total at-home distance learning.

As a university student during distance learning myself, I was able to relate to the learners' needs and thus concluded that a teamwork project would be ideal to let them experience a sense of (virtual) connectedness and boost their motivation. I was immediately drawn to the idea of designing a motivating, fun, and creative project with the aim of creating a collaboratively produced magazine. This collaborative writing project was intended to help students get together in online work spaces and collaborate on a task with a joint goal to establish a strong group cohesion and reduce the feeling of loneliness in the workspace.

As CW can easily be combined with the use of Web 2.0 tools like the platform *Etherpad*, it can be implemented both in onsite classrooms and at home and enables students to further work on the project without having to meet up in person. Therefore, this collaborative writing project proved to be ideal in this hybrid learning and teaching circumstance, which might also be a great preparation for the new workspaces the students will encounter in their future (cf. Krishan et. al., 2018; Li & Zhang, 2021; Liou, 2016).

2. Focus of the study

The intention of this AR project was to provide insights into my decision-making process while preparing the teaching sequence and its materials in order to draw conclusions for future collaborative writing projects. This article therefore aims to answer the following research question:

"How do I effectively select, adapt, and design teaching materials for an upper secondary technology-based collaborative writing project so that I can gradually introduce my learners to a new text type and a new working format?"

Additionally, the project also involved a survey of students' attitudes towards and reflections on digital collaborative writing before and after the intervention as well as an in-depth analysis of the students' texts. Due to the constraints of this article, these additional aspects will not be discussed.

3. Literature review

3.1 Benefits of web-enhanced collaborative writing

CW in pairs or groups has numerous educational benefits, including improved reader audience awareness, enhanced reflective thinking (Storch, 2011, p. 276), and shared construction of L2 knowledge using language as a cognitive tool (Storch, 2011, p. 284). It is also connected to spoken group interaction while pooling language resources, structuring the text, and giving each other feedback as well as challenging and justifying certain decisions in the process. This not only enables students to access a larger range of language structures but also broadens students' perspectives when collaboratively reflecting on a certain topic (Storch, 2013, p.17). As Ellis puts it, "learning arises not through interaction, but in interaction" (Ellis, 2000, p. 209). This means that the authentic discussions on language use that emerge throughout the writing process may support L2 learning as a whole (Storch, 2011, p. 284).

According to Liou, participating in technology-enhanced CW can enhance students' digital skills and increase their readiness for teamwork in future workplace scenarios. This is achieved by students being more open to peer suggestions and giving each other feedback (Liou, 2016, p. 481). CW projects are easily transferable to the digital space both on site at school and at home with the use of Web 2.0 tools and apps, such as *Google Docs*, *CryptPad*, *Etherpad*, *Padlet*, or *Mural*. Therefore, collaborative writing projects are also ideal in distance learning and teaching circumstances.

3.2 Planning collaborative writing projects

In order to manage an effective collaborative writing project, certain factors such as clear task design, the students' level of language proficiency, and the mode of interaction (face-to-face versus online) need to be considered (Storch, 2011, p. 285). In an effort to reduce possible sources of problems, such as organizational issues, time pressure, or issues with group dynamics, the writing project sequence needs to be carefully mapped out in advance.

To ensure a smooth working process, Bikowski and Vithanage (2016, p. 95) created the Teaching cycle for web-based collaborative writing, consisting of the three phases *preparation*, *collaboration*, and *reflection*. Like Li and Zhu (2017, p. 51), Bikowski and Vithanage (2016, p. 94) recommend starting off with a *preparation stage* where students are familiarized with the Web tool, form groups according to their specific skills, and practice rapport-building activities and communication techniques. In the *collaboration stage*, the teacher assists groups in the areas of effective communication and team management, dealing with issues such as how to cope with different learning and working styles and contrasting input within a group. The *reflection stage* can take place during and/or after the project and may consist of written (collaborative) e-journals and blogs or oral discussions and presentations of the collaborative process. These techniques are intended to help students become more aware of their own writing skills and needs but can also serve as an information source for the teacher in case any conflict or issue arises (Bikowski & Vithanage, 2016, p. 95).

On a more practical level, Pölzleitner (2010) designed a 6-step model for magazine writing to let lower intermediate to intermediate EFL students explore article writing creatively. As a first step, the learners form a team of around four members, choose specific working roles (editor-in-chief, assistant editor, timekeeper, or layout editor) and find a name for their group magazine. The teacher sets three to four dates for in-class peer conferences (20–30 minutes) where the

students discuss and give feedback on each other’s written work. In sum, the students individually produce three to four texts for the magazine as homework. Finally, the learners revise and layout their texts for the finished group magazine. All magazines are printed out and displayed in a workshop for students to read and talk about.

Both of the aforementioned project models by Bikowski and Vithanage (2016) and Pölzleitner (2010) informed this AR project intervention. However, several adaptations were made to fit the concrete teaching context.

4. Project description

4.1 Participants and teaching context

The AR project was conducted during my Master teaching practicum in 2021/22 at an academic secondary school in Lower Austria. The participants were 17 students in an upper secondary 10th grade class with twelve female and five male students. Their overall language level was at approximately B1+ according to the CEFR (Council of Europe, 2017). As a laptop class, the learners were already used to using digital media, including a digital class platform for sharing teaching contents and student work. However, the students had not been introduced to the text type “article” yet and they were also not accustomed to the CW working format or the digital writing tool that was used.

4.2 Intervention

Inspired by the project plans of Bikowski and Vithanage (2016) and Pölzleitner (2012), the AR writing project was carried out in the form of a 6-step collaborative writing sequence over four weeks, which is outlined in Figure 1. It consisted of three phases: an *introduction phase*, where the students were introduced to the text type “article” and the working format; a *production phase*, where the students wrote, discussed, and revised their texts; and a *reflection phase*, where the students presented their finished products and their experiences during the process.

Figure 1

6-step Collaborative Writing Sequence

Phase	Lesson	Topic	Content
Preparation	1 st lesson	Introduction	Students (S) deduce the structure and language of an article.
	Homework	Planning	S learn about how to plan an article structure before writing.
	2 nd lesson	Start 1	S form teams, choose roles, learn about the task, choose their topic, and start writing article 1.
Production	Homework	Draft 1	S submit first draft of article 1.
	3 rd lesson	Peer feedback 1	S give each other guided written and oral feedback, receive minimal teacher feedback, and start revising article 1.
	Homework	Revision 1	S submit peer-revised draft of article 1.
	4 th lesson	Start 2	S learn about the task, choose their topic, and start writing article 2.
	Homework	Draft 2	S submit first draft of article 2.

	5 th lesson	Peer feedback 2	S give each other guided written and oral feedback, receive minimal teacher feedback, and start revising article 2.
	Homework	Revision 2	S submit peer-revised draft of article 2.
			Christmas break
	Homework	Final draft 1, 2	S receive detailed process-oriented teacher feedback and revise articles 1 and 2 for the final draft.
Reflection	6 th lesson	Presentation	S receive the finished magazine. S orally present their text products to the class and reflect on their writing process.

In the first session, the students were introduced to the structure and language of an article through an inductive approach (cf. Pölzleitner, 2012). After showing the students ideal text examples and letting them analyze the structure and useful vocabulary, we extracted a “text recipe”¹ they would use for their own writing. This was intended to help students remember the structure as they had to actively decipher it from the texts themselves (Pölzleitner, 2012). The text recipe also served as a model for the article self-checklist. As homework, they practiced how to plan their texts and create a coherent text scaffold ahead of writing. This step is especially helpful when multiple writers are involved with different ideas.

In the second session, the learners formed teams² of two to four students (respecting current COVID guidelines)³ and chose their specific roles within the team (expert for “task achievement”, “organization and layout”, “lexical range” or “lexical accuracy”; cf. BMBWF 2019a) that would become their focus for the upcoming project regarding both writing and giving feedback. There were six teams in all, each named after a color of the students’ choice: black, white, blue, red, yellow, and purple.⁴ Then the learners were introduced to their first task (see appendix task: article 1), which was constructed in a semi-open manner to provide them with the autonomy⁵ of choosing a sub-topic of their own or selecting one from a pre-assembled list. After receiving a specific link for their team on the *Etherpad* collaborative writing platform, the students could try out some of the features and then start writing their first article. They finished the text as homework (collaborating online/in school after class) until the third session, supported through the material on articles discussed beforehand (see appendix: checklist).

During the subsequent peer feedback workshop⁶ (see appendix: steps of the peer feedback workshop) in the third session, the teams were paired with a partner team and then led through the peer feedback process in five steps: (1) reading the article individually, (2) checking the

¹ The term “recipe” was deliberately used as the use of metaphors (cooking recipe > text scaffold) can support students’ memorization (McGlynn & Kelly, 2018, p. 28).

² The term “team” was chosen intentionally instead of “group” to stress the idea of collaboration and connectedness.

³ Students should not leave their seats during class and should not be in contact with students who are not sitting next to or opposite them to minimize the risk of spreading COVID-19.

⁴ This idea was adopted from a former collaborative web-based data collection project at university. It made referring to individual groups easier and also emphasized the idea of unity.

⁵ See Pinter (2016, p. 377) for the relevance of supporting learner autonomy in project work among teenagers.

⁶ In contrast to Pölzleitner (2010) I chose not to call it “peer conference” but rather “peer feedback workshop” in order to stress the impression of the feedback given to an ungraded work-in-progress text rather than a serious conference that assesses final texts.

article checklist together, (3) checking the text regarding one's individual role, (4) discussing the findings in the group, and finally, (5) presenting the feedback to the partner team. On top of this, each team received some brief written teacher feedback and the entire class was given general tips on what to take into account regarding the revision and the second article.

This process of becoming acquainted with the task (see appendix for task: article 2), choosing a topic, starting to write, giving and receiving peer feedback as well as general teacher feedback was repeated in lessons four and five.

Over the course of the Christmas break, all teams received detailed process-oriented formative feedback that highlighted both errors as well as strikingly positive expressions and phrases. Each of the four text assessment criteria was marked in a different color and commented on separately. Finally, a written motivating comment addressed to the team concluded the feedback.

After the students finalized both of their texts with the help of the teacher feedback, all the texts were combined and the layout was adapted to fit the format of the final class magazine "6C exclusive".⁷ In the last session of the project, the teams were each handed a printout version of the magazine so they were able to flip through it while each team reflected on their collaborative writing experience (cf. Bikowski & Vithanage, 2016, p. 91) and presented one of their texts.

4.3 Methodology

In the first step of this research project, I observed the class and talked to their regular EFL teacher in order to select an appropriate focus and decide on an intervention that is both profitable for me as a student teacher and for the students. In the next step, I designed the program by adapting and implementing the aforementioned 6-step collaborative writing sequence while continuously re-adjusting it as the project progressed.

The AR project was accompanied by both qualitative and quantitative research methods according to the principle of triangulation in an effort to gain a balanced impression of the intervention (Burns 2010, p. 97): a pre- and a post-intervention questionnaire, a continuous teacher journal, and the different versions of the student texts throughout the writing process. Due to the limited length of this article, this article will focus on the data derived from the teacher journal.

The teacher journal was selected as a method because the regular documentation of the CW process enabled me to later reflect on the classroom events and my decision making, which triggered new conclusions from my experiences (cf. Richards & Lockhart, 1994, p. 7). The reflections of the teacher journal were guided by the following eight questions selected from Richards and Lockhart (1994, pp. 16–17):

1. What did you set out to teach?
2. Were you able to accomplish these goals?
3. What teaching materials did you use? How effective were they?
4. What kind of decision making did you employ?
5. What were some of the challenges and difficulties in this lesson?
6. Would you teach the lesson differently if you taught it again? If so, how?

⁷ The magazine name is the result of several individual student suggestions and a final class vote.

7. Did students contribute actively to the lesson?
8. What changes do you think you should make in your teaching?

After gathering and reviewing the teacher journal entries that were produced after each session of the sequence, they were categorized and analyzed according to the qualitative content analysis approach via MAXQDA (cf. Mayring 2015). Subsequently, the results were visualized in a summary chart in Figure 2.

5. Findings

Regarding the teaching materials used, the project plan proved to be the most important part of this intervention, as it was vital in order to move the project forward and have a structure to rely on. Secondly, the text recipe and the article self-checklist seemed to help students get an idea of the requirements of the new text type.

After being prepared to write, they were ready for their tasks, which were each designed to be entertaining and motivating as well as semi-open in order to leave space for individual choice and engage students' interests. For example, I chose the topic "Viral Internet sensations" because I knew that platforms such as TikTok had been a huge success among teenagers in the last year and this was something that students could relate to and also bring some of their unique interests to class. For instance, Team Yellow wrote about a viral unusual haircut resembling that of the main character of "Avatar" because one of the members actually re-created it, and Team Blue wrote about the "#FreeBritney" trend as this was a topic that resonated with them throughout the past year. These personal interest topics led to entertaining articles and stimulating in-class discussions.

During the peer feedback workshop I used a Powerpoint presentation, which helped give the students an overview of the upcoming steps. However, there were some initial uncertainties regarding the peer feedback sheet. During the peer feedback workshop, I noticed that some teams had problems posing questions about the text, because they were not used to taking the perspective of a reviewer but after giving them some suggestions and ideas, they eventually all managed to come up with useful questions. For example, one student asked who that person in the text called "Draco" was and the other team answered that he is a character from the "Harry Potter" universe. I explained that not all readers would know the person mentioned and therefore it would be a good idea to clarify that in the article as well. This shows that the peer feedback workshop made the students reflect on their text content and their audiences.

Another useful handout I created was the final reflection sheet that asked students to individually reflect on the process. This could have also been useful during the process itself, in order to be able to intervene and do some spontaneous trouble-shooting if needed. Also, some additional input on time management and peer writing strategies would have been advantageous for the students.

The following chart displays a selection of the most relevant key points of the aforementioned results of the teacher journal.

Figure 2

Overview of the Teacher Journal Results

Topic	Reflections
Benefits of web-based CW	<p>This project enabled students to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ learn about a new text type. ▪ experience autonomous collaborative working along a guided plan. ▪ establish bonds with their classmates and have positive teamwork experiences. ▪ practice working with a web-based writing tool (<i>Etherpad</i>). ▪ raise their awareness of their own writing skills and of writing as a process. ▪ get ideas of different writing styles from their colleagues. ▪ negotiate text structures and different ideas with their team members. ▪ give and receive detailed peer feedback, receive process-oriented teacher feedback. ▪ create a collaborative magazine (co-ownership, feeling of success).
Observations on task design/selection	<p>The teaching materials that likely contributed to success:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ project plan (steps and goals) ▪ article text recipe (overview of text characteristics) ▪ article self-check list (self-checking text characteristics) ▪ semi-open, motivating tasks that cater to students' interests and leave room for choice (individualized, room for choice) ▪ peer feedback PowerPoint (workshop overview with time indications) ▪ article peer feedback list (peer-checking text characteristics) ▪ reflection questions on the writing process (final presentation)
Recommendations for future projects	<p>The following tips are recommended future projects:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Prepare to be flexible as long as you stick to your overall plan. ▪ Group students according to their skills and/or preferences (not possible due to COVID-19 guidelines). ▪ Equip students with collaborative writing strategies to use and leave them the freedom to choose what works best for their group. ▪ Have students get to know the writing platform ahead of writing (e.g. <i>Etherpad</i>: color-coding for name, downloading as a Word file). ▪ Pre-teach vocabulary (e.g. mind mapping). ▪ Use a timer (with alarm) for different stages of teamwork and announce it ahead of time (e.g. display an overview of the steps over PPP). ▪ Give students enough in-class writing time and give clear instructions on how to manage online team meetings. ▪ Have students reflect on their collaborative writing process during the project (e.g. learner diary) in order to be able to do some trouble shooting if necessary.

6. Conclusions and recommendations for future practice

In general, my research focus on material design and selection helped me shed light on how to equip students with the right tools to successfully complete a collaborative class magazine. The project plan with its steps and goals proved to be the most essential part of my project as it laid down the overall structure. Also, the self-checklist and the peer feedback checklist with the Powerpoint overview of the session proved themselves to be highly useful. In addition, the semi-open tasks for the article that allowed the students to choose within a certain set of guidelines not only granted them more learner autonomy, but also enabled me to assemble a final magazine of ten unique and personal texts while only designing two writing tasks.

After carrying out this collaborative writing project, I would first and foremost recommend to plan the project carefully while considering the teaching context and the students. Furthermore, I would suggest exploring different CW platforms first and checking which one fits the students' needs and the purposes of the project the best. Ideally, students should have ample time to

practice and become accustomed to the tool first. I also suggest preparing the students ahead of the project by pre-teaching time management and group working strategies. If it were not for the COVID-19 restrictions, I would have also advocated for intentional group formation according to students' skills, strengths, and personal preferences and perhaps even leaving the choice for solitary writing. If possible, more in-class writing time would reduce students' at-home workload and would make teacher support more accessible. Keeping a learner diary or having learners hold process presentations might also help to understand and support the learners' collaborative processes. Finally, the peer feedback workshop and the minimal teacher feedback seem to be very useful for the first revision cycle and I would imagine this to become even more effective once it became an established routine.

The project was overall positively received concerning both group work and digital work and led to the production of good quality student articles that are collected in the final magazine. Hence, it can be concluded that this web-based collaborative writing project was successful regarding both the collaborative writing skills of the students as well as my personal professional developments.

Application Box

Technology-enhanced collaborative writing projects can have many benefits for students. To ensure a smooth and effective CW process, I would recommend the following:

- Pre-assess students' prior experiences with web-based CW and prepare them accordingly.
- Carefully select the writing platform, the text type, the topics, and the teams.
- Take time for students to get accustomed to the text type, working format, and digital platform beforehand.
- Map out a clear writing plan first and always be flexible towards adaptations.
- Design teaching material that is easily comprehensible and transferable to future projects.
- Equip teams with different (digital) collaborative writing and communication strategies.
- Be clear in your instructions and time-scheduling.
- Make time for in-class writing sessions and peer feedback workshops.
- Provide process-oriented teacher feedback.
- Let students reflect on the writing process during (learner diary) or after (presentations) the project.
- Be aware that it might take some time to establish a routine.

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Appendix

TASK: Article 1 “Advertisements”

The school magazine of your English partner school has started a series of articles on successful advertisements. You decided to send them an article about an ad you like.

In your article you should:

- describe the advertisement
- explain what makes it special
- specify the target group

Write around 250 words. Give your article a title.

TASK: Article 2 “Viral Internet Sensations”

Your class is asked to create a school lifestyle magazine where you write about current media trends in the English-speaking world. You are asked to write an article about a viral Internet sensation (on TikTok, Instagram, Twitter etc.) that has been popular this year. Choose a video/picture/meme/post to write about.

In your article you should:

- present the chosen Internet sensation
- speculate why this particular Internet sensation went viral this year
- specify the target group

Write around 250 words. Give your article a title.

Checklist – How to write a good article		✓
Context	Think about who will read the article and where it will be published and adapt your text style accordingly (formal/informal).	
Title	Use a catchy title to pull the reader in and make clear what the article is about.	
Introduction	Write a powerful introduction that grabs the reader’s attention right from the beginning.	
Main part	Include all the bullet points of the task. Give details and examples/ stories to support them.	
	Structure your text into paragraphs for every new idea .	
	Link the paragraphs (with linking phrases) and lead the reader through your article.	
	Express your opinion (e.g. with a personal anecdote)	
Language	Address the readers directly to make the reader feel involved.	

	Use colorful and descriptive language , including strong adjectives.	
	Make use of rhetorical questions and/or exclamations .	
Ending	End your article in a powerful way (summary, final opinion, recommendation, comment)	

Steps of the peer feedback workshop			
<i>Read</i>	Read the text of the other team	individual work	2 min
<i>Check 1</i>	Check the points in the check-list together on the sheet	group work	3 min
<i>Check 2</i>	Check the text again regarding your individual role(s) and make notes	individual work	2 min
<i>Discuss</i>	Discuss your findings in the group and fill out sheet	group work	3 min
<i>Present</i>	Nominate 1 person who presents your feedback to the other team, then switch	group work	5 min/ group

Peer Feedback

team giving feedback:

team receiving feedback:

Checklist – How to write a good article		✓
Context	Think about who will read the article and where it will be published and adapt your text style accordingly (formal/informal).	
Title	Use a catchy title to pull the reader in and make clear what the article is about.	
Introduction	Write a powerful introduction that grabs the reader's attention right from the beginning.	
Main part	Include all the bullet points of the task. Give details and examples/ stories to support them.	
	Structure your text into paragraphs for every new idea .	
	Link the paragraphs (with linking phrases) and lead the reader through your article.	
	Express your opinion (e.g. with a personal anecdote)	
Language	Address the readers directly to make the reader feel involved.	
	Use colorful and descriptive language , including strong adjectives.	
	Make use of rhetorical questions and/or exclamations .	
Ending	End your article in a powerful way (summary, final opinion, recommendation, comment)	

2 things we liked about the text

2 questions we have about the text

Our suggestions for improvement