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Synchronous computer-supported collaborative writing of a proposal during the pandemic

Abstract

Modern technology has already changed the way we live, but the COVID-19 pandemic has provided us educators with an unprecedented situation in which we are faced with the enormous challenge of teaching online for a long period of time. It is therefore important to analyse various techniques for getting the most out of distance teaching, especially in a synchronous mode. The aim of the study discussed in this article was to analyse students' attitudes towards collaborative online work undertaken in synchronous mode during the pandemic. Thirty-three first-year BA students studying English Philology participated in this study. Respondents reflected on the process of online, synchronous collaboration via MS Teams by answering an online survey. The results of the study revealed that collaborative learning allows participants to actively participate in an online lesson, interact with others, co-construct a writing task, apply the new language introduced in lessons in a practical task and receive almost instant feedback. Consequently, any sense of isolation the students may feel is reduced and a sense of community is developed. In addition to this, a collaborative task enhances students' use of academic skills and the development of key competences that can lay the foundation for lifelong learning.

Keywords: computer-supported collaborative writing, e-learning, synchronous teaching, university teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic

Słowa kluczowe: wspólne pisanie wspomagane komputerowo, e-learning, nauczanie synchroniczne, nauczanie uniwersyteckie w czasie pandemii COVID-19

1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has not only led to an unprecedented global shut-down. Since spring 2020, most universities around the world and all Polish universities have been teaching online in an attempt to contain the spread of the virus. The COVID-19 pandemic has had a major impact on education globally. When the virus first hit the academic world, many of us educators thought that it would last just a few months, and that in October (at the latest) we would be returning to traditional teaching in a bricks-and-mortar classroom. However, when events took a different turn and the period of online teaching was prolonged, we started to think seriously about the methods for teaching online, and especially the teaching methodology, we were using. Most academic teachers have struggled with teaching online (Järvelä, Rosé, 2020; Topol, 2020). The first report on distant learning during the pandemic was conducted at the Pedagogical University (Długosz, Forys, 2020). These results showed the general eagerness of students and teachers alike to return to normality (Długosz, Forys, 2020). Students reported that they felt lonely when studying as they did not get many opportunities for collaborative work with their colleagues. Instead, the materials students received were supposed to be worked on individually in isolation. There was also often no opportunity for these students to receive any further task interpretation from instructors, which forced them into a position where they had to take control of their learning process alone (Długosz, Forys, 2020: 20). This social isolation, loneliness and social upheaval negatively impacted students' attitude and motivation towards learning, especially as they did not have many opportunities during online studying to acquire direct mutual feedback from their peers or academic staff. Collaborative online learning can be a good method for helping learners avoid such feelings of isolation, get to know the group better and observe others (Palloff, Pratt, 2005). Moreover, as other research results have shown, a collaborative learning method can help learners to be better prepared for the labour market (Brandon, Hollingshead, 1999). Therefore, the aim of this study was to analyse students' attitudes towards collaborative online work in a synchronous mode during the COVID-19 pandemic.

2. Computer-supported collaborative writing during a pandemic

The introduction of web-based learning in the early 90s heralded an unprecedented expansion in learning opportunities because it made it possible for learners to interact with the learning materials and cooperate with each other in a virtual environment (Krajka, 2012, Palloff, Pratt, 2013, Li, 2018). The development

of Web 2.0 tools has offered incredible opportunities for learners to actively participate and collaborate, while connectivism – the theory of the digital age – highlights the viewpoint that knowledge and cognition are distributed across networks of people and that technology and learning is the process of connecting, growing, and navigating those networks (Siemens, Tittenberg, 2009). Learning is no longer a personal, individual activity (Mason, Rennie, 2008). Although Web 2.0 tools have been strongly influencing educational processes, especially over the last decade, only COVID-19 and the changes this pandemic has brought to society have forced teachers around the globe to transform their methods and approaches to online teaching. As Järvelä and Rosé (2020: 143) state:

the need for effective virtual teamwork and computer-supported collaboration learning has never been as important as it is today, not only for the impact it has on learning, but also as it offers an amelioration for the isolation that has been felt by some more keenly in recent months than ever before.

The results of different projects have already shown that in online settings it is not enough to prepare a lecture or a PowerPoint presentation and then expect learners to feel involved (Długosz, Forys, 2020). In these teaching modes, there is a tendency for learners to be assigned a relatively passive role, and there is almost no interaction between the instructor and the group. Moreover, as Komorowska and Krajka (2020: 15) state in their latest publication, the traditional training paradigm of the 20th century, namely “twenty years of education, forty years of work”, is a thing of the past. The higher education sector “needs to provide outcomes that are relevant for the labour market, by equipping students with appropriate competences and skills” (Sin et al., 2016: 93–94) and we cannot just forget about this during the COVID-19 pandemic, when we are feeling the effects of constraints imposed by social distancing.

The new list of Key Competences for Lifelong Learning proposed by the European Commission (2018) defines eight key competences that will reshape the landscape of future work in a dynamically changing world. Special attention has been given not only to multilingual, digital and entrepreneurial competences, but also to the development of the personal, social and “learning to learn” competences necessary to participate effectively in an active social life (European Commission, 2018). Societies of the future should not only be prepared for lifelong, autonomous learning but also be able to work and learn collaboratively in order to plan and manage successful projects (European Commission, 2018).

In the globally-connected professional world, collaboration skills are of critical importance. When teaching traditionally, we group students together or prepare team activities for them during which they can develop their teamwork. Yet

few teachers prepare activities involving collaboration or team working when they are managing remote learning experiences. Although peer response as a form of collaborative work has been researched since the 1990s, the collaboration of two or more people on a final product “has only been cautiously trialled to date” (Elola, Oskoz, 2010: 51), yet still appears to be “a promising research direction” (Li, 2018: 2). Mimi Li (2018) conducted an extremely valuable synthesis of twenty-one representative articles on computer-mediated collaborative writing published from 2008 to 2017. Interestingly, her analysis shows that although computer-mediated collaborative writing has been gaining in popularity, there is still not enough qualitative, and especially quantitative, data. In fact, as Blin and Appel (2013) state, two e-tools – wikis and Google Docs – have become increasingly popular in the language classroom. Unfortunately, some studies reveal that activities supporting collaborative work are more difficult to conduct online (Lowry, Nunamaker, 2003; Li, 2018; Reynolds, Cai, Choi, et al., 2020). According to Lowry and Nunamaker (2003: 277), teaching collaborative writing online can be complex for the following five reasons: (1) poor training or educational experiences; (2) more work with a team than with an individual; (3) more variety of opinions than in single-author writing; (4) more arguments within the team; (5) the difficulty of predicting the outcome. Palloff and Pratt (2005: 10) also add an additional element of concern, namely the “uneven participation of group members.” Nevertheless, academic staff should be seeking high-impact practice sessions involving student-to-student interaction during which students can feel a sense of teacher presence.

Nykopp, Marttunen and Erkens (2018: 537) provide the following definition of collaborative writing:

a learning task in which students in small groups construct and write a text together. They participate equally in the production of the text and are equally responsible for accomplishing the writing task by exchanging ideas, plans and suggestions for the composition of the joint text and together solving the problems that arise during writing.

Undoubtedly, collaborative work can be challenging and demanding for both teachers and learners (Nykopp, Marttunen, Erkens, 2018). Nonetheless, as the definition above shows, there are more benefits than disadvantages to collaborative writing. First of all, during teamwork, students construct their knowledge together, a process that is deeply rooted in social constructivist theory. The efficiency of such work is not enhanced when students are passively receiving information. Much better results are achieved when, even within a small group, knowledge and ideas are shared actively among all the

participants (Palloff, Pratt, 2005; Arnó-Macià, 2014). Moreover, according to the socio-constructivist model, learners should be introduced to authentic activities that are meaningful to them (Simina, 2012) and generate problem-based learning (Uribe, Klein, Sullivan, 2003), as well as “multiple viewpoints and patterns of reasoning that challenge the cognitive skills of each group member” (Brandon, Hollingshead, 1999: 123). Previous research has reported that non-conventional, real-life, up-to-date topics prepared by teachers have provoked positive emotions in students, such as feelings of interest, acknowledgement of the usefulness of tasks and satisfaction with the results, all of which influence the process of learning and motivation (Bernard, Rojo de Rubalcava, 2000; Asotska, Strzałka, 2011). Also, as Storch (2013) notes, collaborative writing involves communicative language teaching and task-based language teaching approaches. Both approaches are beneficial for students as they support learner interaction in the target language and the use of meaningful tasks.

Another positive element of collaboration illustrated by studies is that while interacting with each other, students not only exchange their ideas but also observe each other's learning strategies and provide peer feedback in a spontaneous, timely way. As Storch (2013) notes, the same natural process of exchanging learning experience takes place in online collaborative settings. However, teacher feedback generally comes at the end and concentrates more on the product. Peer feedback triggers “a chain of suggestions and counter suggestions” (Storch, 2013: 49) that is immensely motivational for the whole group, as the way learners co-construct their ideas and share ownership builds up their level of commitment. Finally, the results of various studies examining collaborative forms of learning have shown that they promote such skills as creativity, the ability to take the initiative, and the development of the ability to think critically as well as trust, integrity, enhanced audience awareness and respect towards each other (Palloff, Pratt, 2005; Storch, 2013; Li 2018).

3. The study

3.1. Background to the study

The study reported in this article was conducted at the Pedagogical University of Cracow between December 2020 and January 2021. Thirty-seven first-year BA students from two groups studying English Philology took part in this study. The participants' command of English could be characterized as B2+ level according to the CEFR (Common European Framework of Reference).

The students who were involved in the study were enrolled in the obligatory 30-hour Writing component of the Practical English Language Skills

course. According to university policy, every conducted course should have a written syllabus that defines the structure of the course and aspects that should be covered during the semester. According to the Writing course syllabus, students of the first-year BA during the first semester should learn how to write a proposal¹ among other topics, such as writing formal and informal letters, or mastering the rules of punctuation.

The teacher had weekly meetings with two groups for 90 minutes each. Owing to COVID-19 restrictions, all the lessons were conducted synchronously online via Microsoft Teams. The students had been using the MS Teams software since March 2020 and felt sufficiently confident with this online tool. Although learners were studying online, time restrictions meant that the teacher did not have a chance to introduce a collaborative element earlier than the end of the semester, when writing a proposal topic was the only topic left. As a result, the research was conducted while covering that topic.

3.2. Research procedure

Firstly, the teacher introduced students to how to structure a proposal. After this theoretical part, learners were asked to reflect on some of the practical aspects of the collaborative task of writing a proposal. The teacher helped the students to do this by providing a suitable context. The learners were asked to imagine that they were in a team of experts commissioned by the Polish Prime Minister to write a proposal suggesting potential strategies for addressing the emergent crisis situation provoked by the rapid spread of COVID-19 (see Appendix 1 for task instructions). The task instructions for the collaborative exercise were created by the teacher herself. COVID-19 was purposefully chosen as a topic for the proposal, as the activity was being conducted during the festive period at the end of 2020, a time when the appearance of a second coronavirus variant was concerning everyone.

Taking into account that during the pandemic students only study in the online mode and do not have many opportunities to interact with one another, the teacher divided learners into breakout groups of threes and fours to collaborate synchronously. The teacher used a new feature of MS Teams that randomly divides students into groups. Below is a description of what happened during each stage of the study:

¹ According to Collins Dictionary (<https://www.collinsdictionary.com/us/dictionary/english/proposal>) a proposal is a plan or an idea, often a formal or written one, which is suggested for people to think about and decide upon.

- Stage I: the learners discussed the introduced topic (see Appendix 1 for the collaborative task instructions) with their teammates. It was also suggested that the learners draw a mind map of the ideas to be used during the writing of their proposal;
- Stage II: the learners continued working in the same group as during the previous meeting and were asked to brainstorm their previous ideas and write a plan for a proposal;
- Stage III: the learners worked on the final version of the proposal;
- Stage IV: the learners received overall feedback from their course instructor. During this stage, the learners discussed the mistakes in sentences that the instructor had taken from the proposals. At home, the learners were asked to use a dashboard created by the teacher on Padlet to analyse different examples of proposals and mistakes or good points marked by the teacher.

The instructor was present during all four stages and monitored collaboration in groups. If students had any questions, they could always ask the teacher for assistance. However, in the third and fourth stages, the teacher did not “enter” the online rooms in which the students were working together. Although the instructor was constantly online, she wanted to give the groups “a free hand” in how they collaborated.

3.3. Research questions and the data collection instrument

The aim of this study was to analyse students’ attitudes towards collaborative online work in a synchronous mode during the pandemic. The aim was to answer the following research questions about the specific task:

1. How do students coordinate their collaborative online task in the synchronous mode?
2. How do students feel about the synchronous collaborative online task?

The data collection tool used for the purposes of the study was a questionnaire. The questionnaire, which consisted of twenty-three questions, was constructed in Microsoft Forms (<https://www.microsoft.com/en-us/microsoft-365/online-surveys-polls-quizzes>) and distributed among students from the two groups, as everyone enrolled in the course had access to this programme. All the questions were obligatory. The questionnaire was written in English as the whole course was conducted in English. The questionnaire (see Appendix 2) was divided into an introductory part, which covered some general information about the collaboration, plus four additional parts, as the collaborative work on writing a proposal consisted of four stages (see 3.2. above).

Research question no. 1 (“How do students coordinate their collaborative online task in a synchronous mode?”) was answered by collecting responses to questions 5, 12, 14–18 and 20–22. The responses to other questions from the survey provided data for the second research question (“How do students feel about the synchronous collaborative online task?”). Questions 1 to 22 in the questionnaire were analysed quantitatively, while the last question (23) was analysed qualitatively.

3.4. Data analysis

Despite the fact that thirty-seven students originally took part in four online lessons, only thirty-three students filled in the survey, and so the results are based on thirty-three respondents from two groups. Quantitative and qualitative data were gathered and analysed automatically by Microsoft Forms and Microsoft Excel was used to calculate percentages. The quantitative data gathered from the questionnaire for the fifth question is presented in section 3.5. When it comes to the qualitative data, Friedman (2012: 186) suggests that in order to analyse the qualitative data diligently, “the researcher must consider how much and what kind of data are needed to adequately address the research questions or purpose of the study and generate credible results.” Consequently, the qualitative data collected from the responses given to open-ended questions in the questionnaires was done manually by analysing the respondents’ answers, identifying similar themes, coding them and then interpreting the results.

3.5. Results

There was overall agreement between the participants on the first three dichotomous questions, which concerned the teacher’s good communication with the group, creation of an atmosphere of safety and trust, and provision of appropriate support. In the fourth question, 22 percent of respondents found the collaborative writing task easy, but for 18 percent of learners, it was a difficult task. In Question 5, students were asked to choose which of the elements listed they had observed in others while doing the collaborative task. The results are provided in Figure 1.

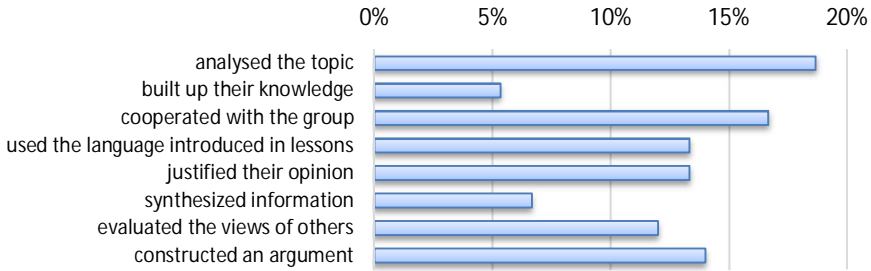


Figure 1: Answers to Question 5 – “During the collaborative writing, when I observed the others in the group, I noticed the way they:” (Students could choose more than one option here).

The student responses to Question 6 provide an outline of students’ attitudes towards isolation during the pandemic. Seventy-six percent of respondents agreed that collaborating online with their colleagues helped to reduce their feelings of isolation. The students’ responses to Question 7 indicate that all of them showed each other mutual respect as team members. The results of Question 8 show that the learners generally agreed with each other as a team (94%). Furthermore, the responses to Question 9 show that all the respondents felt comfortable with the group in which they had been working. In Question 10, 88% of the respondents agreed that the up-to-date topic of the proposal was interesting. The majority of students agreed, in their responses to Question 11, that working with the support of a team made it easier for them to grasp what was required by the task than if they had been working alone. In Question 12, 76% of respondents stated that their group had not assigned a leader. A minority (24%) assigned a leader for their group. In Question 13, students were asked about their preferences with regard to being involved in more collaborative writing assignments. The same percentage of respondents (45%) marked the options “often” and “rarely”, whereas 9% did not want to take part in collaborative writing assignments. In Question 14, almost everyone (97%) agreed that discussing the topic together helped them to come up with useful expressions connected with the topic. In Question 15, 67% of students marked the option, “creating a mind map was useful and we did it”, while 33% considered creating a mind map a difficult task and decided not to do it.

Questions 16 and 17 relate to the second stage of the research. In Question 16, all participants agreed that at the beginning of the second stage of the study they had quickly revised the ideas developed during the first stage. Also, in the second stage, 88% of participants agreed with Question 17, which means that students wrote a plan for their proposal.

Questions 18 to 20 relate to the third stage of the study. As for Question 18 (“When writing the proposal”), 83% of students chose the option “we worked individually on a chosen part of the proposal before developing the final content together by juxtaposing our ideas”. 42% of respondents chose the option “one person wrote everything and then as a team we suggested modifications”. No one chose option “one person wrote everything and we as a group did not contribute any further changes”. In Questions 19 and 20, everyone agreed that they had had enough time to write the first draft of the proposal, reread the proposal and do the final editing.

The last three questions in the survey (21–23) relate to the fourth stage of the research. In Question 21, all participants agreed that finding and analysing the mistakes in anonymous sentences taken from the proposals was beneficial for them. In Question 22, 64% of students used the dashboard on Padlet to analyse the way other groups’ proposals had been written. However, 36% of students did not make use of this opportunity. Question 23 was open-ended and designed to collect feedback from the participants. The author analysed the respondents’ answers, which sometimes contained more than one relevant data unit, and were unstructured and heterogeneous. Similar themes were identified, which are presented in Table 1 below. It is also important to note that students’ responses are presented in the original version.

Response Category	Students’ responses
1. Be in contact with others in the group/ Communicating with others	<i>“It was a nice way to exchange our views and learn things by listening to others’ opinions”; “I enjoyed working with my group since everyone was active and everyone took equal part. I also loved the communication between us, it was important especially now when we can’t meet at university”; “It was great to do something in collaboration with others”; “I liked the way we worked together as we could get to know each other better”; “I found it interesting writing a proposal as a group.”</i>
2. Collaborative work helps with observing how others work/Learning from others	<i>“The task helped me to understand how other people approach writing paragraphs, coming up with ideas”; “I found the process of brainstorming with a group beneficial because we came up with many ideas I would not come up with on my own”; “It was nice to brainstorm and consider others’ views on the subject”; “Being able to compare my ideas with others, without having to compete but rather work together, made the process of writing the proposal much easier and more enjoyable”; “I could learn something that I didn’t know as well as compare my knowledge to colleagues.”</i>
3. Overall satisfaction with the collaborative task	<i>“I really liked that way of writing the proposal”; “I find collaborative writing interesting and helpful”; “It was fun and I could look at the topic from different perspectives”; “I liked the task”; “Definitely something I would like to do more often during classes. It was creative, fun to do and “stress-free” task”; “I would say that it was a great experience and I really enjoyed it”; “I feel like it was a very useful exercise”; “I feel like I learned a lot on this lesson”; “I</i>

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	<i>think it was interesting and beneficial"; "It was definitely a fun experience and I would love to have more writing tasks in this form."</i>
4. Improving group-working skills	<i>"This task taught me how to work in a team better"; "In my opinion, collaborating on the writing task was very helpful when tackling a complex topic such as the one we were assigned"; "This activity strengthens my group-working skills."</i>
5. Students' preferences towards individual and group work	<i>"I usually don't like working in groups, but this time it helped a lot and it was also quite enjoyable"; "I prefer working alone, however, it was not that bad"; "I found it interesting writing a proposal as a group but I still find it more comfortable if I do it alone"; "Although I typically dislike working in a group, it was quite nice this time"; "Usually, I prefer working alone but not this time. This activity was very beneficial to work together"; "It was okay, but I myself feel better when working individually because that's what I was doing during all my previous years of education."</i>
6. Difficulties that students encountered	<i>"Interesting but difficult, as you have to come to an agreement with others, that may have other ideas"; "Everything depends on people you're working with so it's never 100% accurate, for example we had a lot of arguments with what to type because one person wanted their version, me and my friend wanted our version and one girl wasn't talking at all or wasn't contributing at all. I bet that if I got into a group with 3 open minded people it would be much easier than writing 2 vs 1 in 4 people group"; "I feel like at some point there was too much time but maybe that's because we didn't use the mind map method, just wrote a simple plan"; "Concerning the writing I found there were some issues on the way and sometimes we had to compromise. There was also one person who was not as interested in the task and we had to keep reminding her about it – I believe choosing our own team would create a space with people we know well and trust would put in the work to achieve the goal of writing something good."</i>
7. Attitude towards the teacher's feedback	<i>"I really enjoyed the feedback stage. I appreciated the opportunity to look for the mistakes in the samples and the attention to details it helped us develop"; "The teacher was supportive and helped us with correcting mistakes and discussed them with us."</i>

Table 1: A selection of student responses to Question 23 – “How do you feel generally about the collaborative writing task you took part in? Have you got any further comments you would like to share?”.

3.6. Discussion

The purpose of this subchapter is to present answers to both research questions in relation to the data obtained from the questionnaire.

1. How do students coordinate their collaborative online task?

Ten of the questions (5, 12, 14–18, 20–22) and some parts of the students' answers from the open-ended Question 23 provided the data for the first research question. The results indicate that during the collaborative writ-

ing task students observed each other and the way other team members analysed the topic; cooperated with the group; constructed an argument; used the new language that had been introduced in the lessons; justified their opinion, or evaluated the views of others. Some of the students' responses to the open-ended question (see Table 1, Points 2, 4) provided further justification for these opinions. Additionally, the results of the study show that during the collaborative task learners saw the usefulness of: brainstorming a complex topic in order to come up with useful expressions; structuring a mind map; writing a plan for a proposal; using draft revision techniques; or even rereading strategies. Clearly, they really took advantage of the opportunity they had been offered and were also practising metacognitive strategies. As a result, it should be acknowledged that their proposals were correctly structured, used complex sentences and were coherent. Similar results gained from complex texts produced in pairs are discussed by Storch (2005) and Strobl (2014). Moreover, it was interesting to analyse the way students were collaborating and the way they divided their work. Every group decided during the research to choose one person who would record in writing the oral contributions of the others. Almost everyone wanted to contribute and there was no tendency among all the teams to assign a leader for the group. The results indicate that two strategies for writing the proposal were popular with the teams. Either they worked individually on a chosen part of the proposal before developing the final content together by juxtaposing their ideas, or one person wrote everything and then they collaborated as a team on making some modifications. Similar results can be seen in Janssen et al. (2012), in which various authors show that collaborative planning and the division of labour are both important for successful collaborative performance. However, two replies to the open-ended question in the current study suggest that one student was not interested in the task and did not want to take part in the activity, or that there were different views on a topic. Point 6 in Table 1 (see 3.5.) provides additional student comments. The way in which students tried to argue their points or resolve disputes by compromising signals the appearance of an element of conflict or disagreement, which is a natural process in a successful collaboration task and leads to student satisfaction, as it stimulates the exchange of ideas (Palloff and Pratt, 2005; Storch, 2013). Finally, the results show that the students saw the benefits of analysing the mistakes in anonymous sentences taken from the proposals by the teacher. In response to the open-ended question (Table 1, point 7), one student wrote "I really enjoyed the feedback stage. I appreciated the opportunity to look for the mistakes in the samples and the attention to details it helped us develop." However, the group results are di-

vided when it comes to their replies concerning the analysis of others' proposals completed on Padlet in their own time. Half of the group did this and the other half did not. However, this tendency to procrastinate is not surprising when it comes to tasks that should be completed with minimal teacher support. As Holec (1981, in Little 2012:12) admits, knowledge about how to be autonomous is not innate. The results of some studies reveal that when learners should be displaying self-discipline or applying themselves to autonomous learning, their motivation tends to drop (Humphreys, Wyatt, 2014; Kálmán, Gutierrez Eugenio, 2015; Dembo, Seli, 2016).

The way the students coordinated the collaboration process in a team suggests they possessed the intellectual maturity to consciously use many academic strategies and techniques, a skill that is crucially important at a time when students do not have many opportunities for peer interaction, the observation of others or collaboration per se. Although at university we teach adults who are already familiar with a wide range of academic strategies, educators should still remember how important it is, even in an online environment, to maintain a natural process of interaction and promote peer observation and the development of key competences in order to prepare learners for their future professional careers.

2. How do students feel about the collaborative online task?

The results suggest that the students felt comfortable while doing the collaborative task. Most of them would like to continue doing similar activities. Furthermore, the teacher's role influenced the students' attitudes, as the results indicate that the students highly rated her communication skills and thought she timed the activity appropriately, provided adequate support and created an atmosphere of safety and trust. In fact, as Palloff and Pratt (2005) show, if an instructor is aware of the stages involved in managing a collaborative course and creates clear explanations, then students feel confident while cooperating on a task and the instructor's assistance is not needed. A study undertaken by Nykopp, Marttunen and Erkens (2018) describes similar results with regard to the teacher's role in guiding students while doing a collaborative task. Additionally, it should be admitted that in online settings when the group is divided into small teams, it is not possible for the instructor to monitor every minute of the collaboration process. Even though students were left to work alone in teams of threes and fours, the results reveal that they managed to conduct the task together within their teams, create their own friendly learning settings and build up mutual respect and understanding towards each other. A positive group climate is important for effective collaboration (Wilson, Straus, McEvily, 2006). When working in a team, it was easier

for them to understand the topic as they could “exchange their views” or “look at the topic from different perspectives” (Table 1, Points 1, 2). Consequently, they did not feel isolated despite the physical distance between them. This is especially visible when analysing students’ responses to the open-ended question in Table 1, Point 5. The results suggest that not every student was keen on taking part in a collaborative process of learning as they had not encountered this teaching method “during all previous years of education.” Nevertheless, those students who prefer individual work considered the online collaborative work to be beneficial and enjoyable. This supports Elola and Oskoz’s (2010) suggestion that although collaboration can be useful and valid, the possibility of working individually provides more control over the writing process.

4. Conclusion

The main idea behind 19th-century inventions such as the electric light bulb, the telephone or the locomotive was to connect people. The same is happening now, at a time when new technology and the Internet are influencing the way society functions. The COVID-19 pandemic has led to a situation in which the influence of modern technology has never been stronger. The way students are educated at universities depends on us, as educators. There are tools available for collaborative learning, so we should not limit ourselves to online lecturing, but instead seize the chance modern technology offers and incorporate various teaching methods into online settings as if we were teaching in an on-site classroom.

This study appears to confirm that computer-supported collaborative writing is beneficial (Palloff, Pratt, 2005; Elola, Oskoz, 2010; Järvelä, Rosé, 2020). It not only promoted positive emotions in students but also allowed them to actively participate in an online lesson by being less teacher-dependent, interacting with others, co-constructing a writing task, applying language newly introduced in lessons and receiving almost instant feedback. Consequently, it helped to reduce the sense of isolation and developed a sense of community, thus participants got appropriate support from the teacher, which is particularly important in today’s pandemic-dominated world. In addition to this, it showed that a synchronous computer-mediated collaborative task can greatly enhance students’ use of academic skills and the development of the key competences. This can lay the foundation for openness to lifelong learning that it is so crucial to have in the dynamic modern-day world of work.

Finally, it is important to note that these conclusions are only tentative, as only a small number of participants took part in the study.

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APPENDIX 1

Task instructions on writing the proposal:

Imagine that you are in a team of experts responsible for the country's emergent situations. You have found out that people in the UK are currently experiencing the rapid spread of a new variant of coronavirus, which is supposedly even more contagious. If this is true, then more people than ever will need hospital treatment.

European countries would like to minimize the mixing of people during Christmas. As a result, more and more countries are suspending flights from the UK and would like to close all possible routes from Britain.

In Poland, we do not know much yet about this more infectious coronavirus variant. Unfortunately, there are many uncertainties and unanswered questions.

Your team has been asked to write a proposal in 220–260 words to the Polish Prime Minister. You are expected to suggest different ways of coping with this extraordinary situation. Think about borders, flights, deliveries, people who would like to visit their relatives for Christmas time and future British-Polish relations.

APPENDIX 2

Dear Students,

The purpose of this survey is to check the way you collaborated with your team during our last writing assignment – when you were asked to write a proposal.

Your collaborative work on writing a proposal consisted of four stages (four online meetings):

STAGE I: you were randomly divided into groups on MS Teams and then your instructor introduced the topic and asked you to discuss it with your colleagues in a team. It was also suggested that you draw a mind map of your ideas.

STAGE II: you continued working in the same group and you were asked to brainstorm your previous ideas and write a plan for your proposal.

STAGE III: during this stage you were working on the final version of your proposal.

STAGE IV: during this stage you received the overall feedback from your course instructor. Together with your teacher you discussed mistakes in the sentences taken from your proposals. At home you were asked to use the dashboard on Padlet, which your teacher had created for you, and to analyse your and your colleagues' different examples of proposals and their mistakes or good points.

The survey below is divided into four stages discussed above, plus there is an introduction part.

Thank you for your help!

Introduction:

1. There was good communication between the course instructor and the group.
Agree / Disagree
2. Our teacher created an atmosphere of safety and trust.
Agree / Disagree
3. Our teacher gave us appropriate support.
Agree / Disagree
4. I found collaborative writing:
 - a. easy
 - b. difficult
5. During the collaborative writing, when I observed the others in the group, I noticed the way they: (*you can choose more than one option*)
 - a. analysed the topic
 - b. built up their knowledge
 - c. cooperated with the group
 - d. used the language introduced in lessons
 - e. justified their opinion
 - f. synthesized information
 - g. evaluated the views of others
 - h. constructed an argument
6. Due to the fact that at the moment you cannot attend bricks-and-mortar lessons, online collaboration with my colleagues helped me to reduce feelings of isolation.
Agree / Disagree
7. As a team we showed each other mutual respect.
Agree / Disagree
8. As a team we generally agreed with each other.
Agree / Disagree
9. I felt comfortable with the group I worked with.
Agree / Disagree
10. It was interesting for me to write a proposal on an up-to-date topic.
Agree / Disagree
11. Working with the support of the team made it easier for me to grasp what was required by the task than if I was working alone.
Agree / Disagree
12. We assigned a leader for the group.
Agree / Disagree
13. I would like to be involved in more collaborative writing assignments:
 - a. often
 - b. rarely
 - c. never

Stage I:

14. Discussing the topic together helped us to come up with useful expressions connected to the topic.

Agree / Disagree

15. Creating a mind map was:
- Difficult for us and we did not do it
 - Useful and we did it

Stage II:

16. We quickly revised the ideas we developed during the first meeting.
Agree / Disagree
17. We wrote a plan for our proposal.
Agree / Disagree

Stage III:

18. When writing the proposal:
- we worked individually on a chosen part of the proposal before developing the final content together by juxtaposing our ideas
 - one person wrote everything and we as a group did not contribute any further changes
 - one person wrote everything and then as a team we suggested modifications
19. We had enough time to write the first draft of the proposal.
Agree / Disagree
20. We had enough time to reread the proposal and do the final editing.
Agree / Disagree

Stage IV:

21. In the last lesson, finding and analysing the mistakes in anonymous sentences taken from our proposals was beneficial for me.
Agree / Disagree
22. After the lesson I used the dashboard on Padlet to analyse the way others' proposals were written.
Agree / Disagree
23. How do you feel generally about the collaborative writing task you took part in?
Have you got any further comments you would like to share?
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