Creating effective goals in task-based language teaching for online collaborative English (as a foreign language) writing tasks

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This study investigates the characteristics perceived by English language teachers for setting effective online collaborative writing task goals using task-based language teaching (TBLT) and provides advice to English student-teachers to help them with designing their own online writing task goals in the future. Two rounds of online semi-structured focus-group interviews were conducted with eight interviewees, who were MSc TESOL students in UK universities. The acquired dataset was thematically analysed in order to answer the two research questions of this study. Based on the results from the first round of interviews, we extended the seven general characteristics included in the conventional SMARTER effective-goal-setting framework to adapt to both the online collaborative learning environment and using TBLT, by identifying extra characteristics, three of which were then determined as the key characteristics from the second round of interviews. Accordingly, the measures for implementing these three key characteristics are provided as advice to better realise the increasingly popular online collaborative learning methods using TBLT, hence enhancing the application of the findings to practice.

KEYWORDS: Goal Setting, Online Collaborative Writing, TBLT, Effective Task Goals, SMARTER Framework

1. Introduction

Task-based language teaching (TBLT) has received much attention from education communities, which has witnessed its development and implementation in the field of second language (L2) learning (Long, 2014; Robinson, 2001; Sun, 2015). TBLT, one of the well-established pedagogical approaches, focuses on purposeful communication and functional language use (Ellis, 2009). As a result, TBLT facilitates L2 Learning (Kim, 2012) and improves learning outcomes (Lou et al., 2016). Recently, technology-mediated TBLT has emerged for expanding the advantages and use of TBLT using up-to-date technology towards enhancing L2 linguistic

skills (Sauro, 2014) and stimulating the adaption of learners' technological literacy to the evolving world (González-Lloret & Ortega, 2014). This new form of the TBLT approach is applicable in the online learning environment and has been used to assist L2 learning (Nielson, 2014; Ziegler, 2016). One particular example in this direction is to collaboratively complete writing tasks on online platforms, which is called *online collaborative writing*.

There exist some studies on how to integrate TBLT into the online collaborative writing environment for improving the learning outcomes, with topics including (*i*) the essential task features for online collaborative writing, e.g., writing tasks are necessarily interactive, engaging, and collaborative (González-Lloret & Ortega, 2014); (*ii*) the effectiveness of different types of writing tasks such as jigsaw tasks and information-gap tasks (Smith, 2003); (*iii*) the characteristics of effective online joint writing environment of an open or pre-arranged type (Limbu & Markauskaite, 2015); (*iv*) the adoption of effective online tools for online collaborative writing, e.g., wikis and blogs (Lundin, 2008; Oskoz & Elola, 2014; Storch, 2013). Several other studies have also explored how to set effective goals for TBLT tasks by adopting various goal-setting frameworks such as the SMART framework (Wade, 2009).

As online learning has recently become increasingly popular with the substantial advance in technology and been used by a growing number of learners and teachers (Hockly, 2015; Hughes, 2018; Hromalik & Koszalka, 2018; Istifci, 2017), it is the right time to integrate it with TBLT approach for more efficient and specialised L2 teaching/learning. The explosion in the use of online learning generally as a result of the Coronavirus pandemic has made this not only apt, but urgent and necessary in order to facilitate learning. Despite this, relatively few studies, however, have investigated how to design effective goals by English student-teachers for TBLT writing tasks in the online collaborative learning environment. In fact, the majority of scholars in this research direction are devoted to helping English language teachers set effective task goals in L2 classrooms rather than in the online environment. This might be due to the fact that online teaching, until very recently due to the Coronavirus pandemic, has not been the mainstream teaching method, and most L2 learners have been accustomed to the face-to-face learning environment. The Coronavirus pandemic has meant a huge uptake in online learning since March 2020 globally, making the need for research into this area all the more vital and valuable.

In order to fill this research gap, the research questions were designed as follows:

(1) What are the characteristics of effective goals for online collaborative English writing tasks using TBLT?

(2) What advice do English language teachers find useful from this research into goal-setting for online English writing tasks in order to create their own online writing tasks for their learners?

2. Literature Review

2.1 Goals and Goal-setting Theory

Goals exist in diverse contexts, where people encounter them in many aspects of daily life (Brandstätter & Hennecke, 2018). For instance, companies set business goals for employees to increase profits; schools set curriculum goals for students to stimulate academic achievement; individuals set personal goals in different daily circumstances. There is one thing in common among all these situations: a goal directs individuals' behaviours to achieve an intended outcome.

According to Locke and Latham (2002, p. 705), goals impact the performance of tasks and can be defined as "the object or aim of an action, e.g., to attain a specific standard of proficiency, usually within a specified time limit". This definition provides a theoretical base for setting goals in the education fields. In a broader sense, educational goals refer to statements that describe the general purpose of a course, which are similar to the so-called *aims* of a course (Macalister & Nation, 2010). A narrower definition of goals lies in learning objectives that are specified as 'what skills and abilities that learners should have to complete a course or a task' (ibid.). As an essential component of tasks, a task goal refers to "the vague and general intentions behind any learning task" (Nunan, 2004, p. 41). In other words, task goals indicate the general purpose and aim set by teachers to be achieved by learners in a learning task. Some complex tasks, including a series of sub-tasks, often have several goals; hence, the relationship between goals and tasks is unnecessarily one-to-one correspondence (Nunan, 2004, p. 42).

Goal-setting theory is initially used to stimulate individuals to work harder by setting work goals and has been broadly utilized in business and management fields to maximize employees' performance (Locke & Latham, 1990). Since then, an increasing number of researchers have been devoted to recognizing the value of goal-setting theory in the education community while employing it in the educational system.

Goal-setting theory (Locke & Latham, 2002) highlights the significance of *self-efficiency* and the achievement of individuals that is fundamentally determined by the interactions between personal beliefs and behaviours (Bandura, 1997). Self-efficiency herein refers to the confidence of L2 learners in believing that they are eventually able to achieve their learning goals, and influences 'the effort, persistence, choice of activities, and emotional reactions to success and failure of learners' (Schunk, 2003; Wolters, 2004; Zimmerman, 2000). By having high self-efficiency, L2 learners can remain profoundly and persistently motivated through finishing tasks and thus reaching the goals. A number of studies have presented that learners with higher self-efficiency usually respond positively to learning goals and negative feedback while adopting various learning strategies

to achieve their task goals (Locke & Latham, 2002; Schunk & Swartz, 1993; Zimmerman, 2008). It seems reasonable, therefore, that language teachers need to set effective task goals for learners to improve their efficiency and motivate them to better complete the subsequent tasks for achieving more learning goals, hence developing multifaceted language skills.

2.2 Setting Effective Goals for TBLT Writing Tasks

To set effective task goals, teachers should be aware of what factors affect the completion of learning goals. Achievement of goals is directly affected by the complexity and sequence of tasks (Locke & Latham, 2002). Finishing complex tasks demands that capable learners should use appropriate learning strategies. However, as task complexity increases, learners may be frustrated and demotivated in the process of achieving challenging task goals. Thus, task complexity should not go too much beyond the ability of learners (Locke, 2000). For the sequence of tasks, it is better if learners are assigned to finish relatively easy tasks initially, as the sense of achievement is usually high if they can successfully finish an easy task (Moeller et al., 2012). This helps learners maintain higher efficiency and actively attend to the extra tasks for achieving higher-level goals. Hence, learners are more likely to reach their learning goals if the tasks are ordered from simple to difficult.

In addition, the effect of goals is influenced by whether task goals set by teachers are consistent with learners' expectations. In this respect, task goals should meet the needs of learners and be aligned with their personal goals. *Needs analysis* of target learners is indispensable before teachers set task goals and create tasks, which requires teachers to analyse what a learner *wants*, *lacks*, and *needs* (Macalister & Nation, 2010).

When it comes to setting effective task goals, there are debates among researchers, and various goal-setting frameworks on the characteristic features of effective goals exist. Three main characteristics of goal setting, i.e., *specificity, proximity*, and *difficulty*, are proposed by Schunk (2003). He further states that specific, proximal, and moderately difficult writing task goals could promote learners' motivation and efficiency, as they are easy to be achieved. However, although used in many fields, these features of goal setting can be too general and broad, and not particularly applicable for setting task goals.

Effective writing task goals should fit the so-called SMART framework, in which goals are commonly regarded as "S *(specific)*, M *(measurable)*, A *(achievable)*, R *(realistic)*, and T *(time-based)*" (Wade, 2009). Application of this SMART framework into designing learning tasks has been recognized by many scholars to improve task performance, the sense of achievement, and self-efficiency (Fielding, 1999; O'Neill, 2000; Rubin, 2015). However, some researchers claim that general SMART goals may not be as effective as expected in terms of setting learning goals since

this SMART framework neglects two crucial aspects: evaluation and reflection on whether and how well learners can achieve writing task goals (Day & Tosey, 2011). Consequently, teachers might find it difficult to evaluate the effectiveness of task goals if they lack detailed feedback from target learners.

The addition of conducting evaluation and reflection added into the SMART framework to set more effective writing task goals forms the so-called SMART-*ER* framework where specific writing task goals are used to better direct learners' attention on targeted tasks to develop particular writing skills (Moeller et al., 2012). Learners themselves are able to measure whether they achieve the goals or not by recognizing their observable achievement. Writing task goals should be achievable and realistic, which requires teachers to consider learners' characteristics, language proficiency, learning settings, and the appropriateness of goals from learners' perspectives, e. g., whether they have adequate time, knowledge, and ability to achieve the goals in a particular learning environment (Lam, 2019). Setting a deadline for learners to complete writing tasks is necessary as different learners could use different strategies to achieve a particular task goal. To improve the effectiveness of writing task goals, it is desirable for teachers to self-reflect and evaluate on the process of their learners working towards goals so that they can make adjustments based on task completion and feedback from learners.

To sum up, the SMARTER framework is expected to be feasible and practical to set learning goals for TBLT writing tasks, which requires writing task goals to be '*specific, measurable, achievable, realistic, time-based, evaluated, and reflected*'.

2.3 Online Collaborative Writing

Online collaborative writing mediated by available online tools, such as blogs and wikis, has been developed, as a unique affordance and a natural product of technology, and has brought about a new interactive environment for L2 learning (Lundin, 2008; Storch, 2005). Online collaborative writing is grounded on the social constructivism of Vygotsky (1978, p. 29) that emphasizes "the use of small groups or pairs" to achieve collaborative learning (Kemp et al., 2019; Liu et al., 2018; Lowry et al., 2004; Storch, 2005). Online collaborative writing is understood as a social process that team-members jointly create a written document according to a common task goal on an available networked platform. As a result, teachers need to encourage learners to actively participate in designed tasks so as to develop mutual scaffolding and active interaction while co-constructing their knowledge in collaborative learning groups.

The attributes of online collaborative writing for L2 learners have been highlighted as this learner-centred approach facilitates learning autonomy and success, which relies on "cognitive and metacognitive factors, motivational and affective factors, developmental and social factors, as well as individual differences"

(Wisher et al., 2004, p. 57). For instance, online collaborative writing can be regarded as an intended learning process of co-constructing meaning based on available online resources, creating and utilizing various strategies to jointly complete the writing tasks, which enhances the creativity and critical thinking of learners and facilitates achieving the learning goals.

Moreover, online collaborative writing provides L2 learners with a new platform with a rich range of information used to complete various writing tasks collectively, which closely relates to the personal interest, curiosity, and choice of learners towards lifting the level of their motivation and willingness to put more efforts into the completion of writing tasks. In this process, social skills can be honed and personal improvement promoted, e.g., enhancing interpersonal skills through active collaboration and communication with partners. Learners can remedy their writing mistakes by reflecting on feedback from peers and teachers, hence further internalizing their acquired knowledge by providing scaffolding to each other, developing multifaceted abilities using different learning strategies, and cultivating critical thinking about different ideas and knowledge. This learning-centred group approach promotes collaboration and interaction, in which learners are required to complete writing tasks in a group- or pair-work manner (Wisher et al., 2004), hence providing an opportunity for enhancing collaboration and communication.

In addition, online collaborative writing is an open-ended learning environment for self-regulated study, as L2 learners can self-select what and when to write in an asynchronous manner at their own pace and take account of their own commitments. This is particularly relevant today when lockdown restrictions caused by a pandemic can place extra work on learners, for example, caring for children due to school closures, thereby necessitating an efficient and planned use of learners' available study time. Even in non-pandemic times, being able to work at their own pace and in a way which suits their own commitments and lifestyles may alleviate pressure, giving more time for reflection and considered responses. This learning flexibility facilitates L2 learners to become more autonomous learners (Limbu & Markauskaite, 2015).

Despite these potential benefits, however, online collaborative writing faces some challenges. A primary challenge associated with online collaborative writing lies in a lack of more-orientated learning space that could be better arranged by experienced teachers or experts who are well-prepared in advance for setting appropriate goals and designing pedagogical tasks (Limbu & Markauskaite, 2015). There is also a lack of a more-guided interactive environment (Wisher et al., 2004), which requires online instructions and instructors who would provide timely hints, help, and feedback. This demands new roles of teachers shifting from working as a pure director and controller to a facilitator and moderator.

Another challenge relates to the issues with the online collaborative writing communities: the virtual identity of online learners, low collaboration and low

trust among learners, and insufficient critical feedback. In most cases, group learning requires team-spirit, sense of identity, goals, member participation and contribution, which remains an issue in the virtual learning environment (Wisher et al., 2004). Also, relatively low collaboration might occur in learning groups due to "social loafing" (i.e., low participation of group members) (Storch, 2005), "free-rider effect" for unequal participation of learners (Lipponen et al., 2003), unequal contribution (Handayani, 2012), and writing texts cooperatively but collaboratively (that is, only divide work and put them together without sufficient interaction and negotiation) (Storch, 2005). Moreover, most learners tend to act kindly to each other and are unwilling to give negative feedback to others, thereby sometimes lacking effective interaction and trust (Wisher et al., 2004).

2.4 Integration of TBLT and Online Collaborative Writing

The communicative language teaching movement since the 1970s has changed teachers' perceptions of language teaching, whose focus has gradually moved from merely on language accuracy to language fluency, aiming to develop the communicative ability of learners (Ellis, 2018). TBLT, a teaching approach emphasizing the design and practice of tasks, has emerged from this movement and is currently used in English as a foreign language teaching. "TBLT is a process-based approach in which the task is the unit of focus, and where the emphasis is placed on interaction, meaning, and what learners can do with language" (Ziegler, 2016, p. 138). As TBLT emphasizes the active interactions and intensified language use among learners, this would require L2 learners to positively negotiate meaning and process knowledge with the target language for completing the given tasks.

To make full use of the TBLT approach, researchers have proposed to introduce it into the online collaborative learning environment, in light of its favourable pedagogical effect - "the use of small group and pair work is further supported by the communicative approach to L2 instruction and its emphasis on providing learners with opportunities to use the L2" (Storch, 2005, p. 154). The features of TBLT are in good agreement with many core features of online collaborative writing such as being learner-centred and task-based (Willis, 1996), hence enhancing the practice of online collaborative writing. The relatively low level of collaboration and trust in the online collaborative writing can also be alleviated when TBLT is effectively integrated into online collaborative writing through increasing the motivation and participation of learners, improving team-spirit, and encouraging communication via setting effective online collaborative writing goals to augment the level of mutual trust (Willis & Willis, 2007). In addition, the whole process of active and collaborative writing practice in completing TBLT tasks within the online learning atmosphere is able to foster the multifaceted abilities of learners, for example, in knowledge, writing skills, emotional and personal development (Wisher et al., 2004). Therefore,

applying TBLT to online collaborative writing has the potential of further exploiting the advantages of the online collaborative writing method and mitigating some issues with the current application of online collaborative writing.

3. Methodology

In order to investigate the typical features of high-quality writing task goals and offer English student-teachers useful guides on goal-setting to improve their ability in setting own effective task goals for online collaborative writing in the future TBLT classes, a qualitative study with two rounds of focus-group interviews was conducted as a basis for data collection and data analysis.

3.1 Interviewees

Eight interviewees (all full-time MSc TESOL students), purposefully sampled, were invited to contribute to this research. All interviewees had attended a full-time TESOL programme for one year at UK universities with a dual identity as a student and an English teacher. The interviewees, as experienced English teachers, had sufficient knowledge and good perception of TBLT, setting goals for tasks, and online learning/teaching. Although these interviewees varied in experience and knowledge in TBLT and online learning/teaching practice (see **Table 1**), their interview responses were useful and inspiring to support and enrich our study.

TAB. 1. *Background information of the eight interviewees regarding the duration of their TBLT teaching experience as well as online learning and teaching experience.*

Interviewee	Duration (year)	
	TBLT Teaching Experience	**Online Learning and (Teaching) Experience**
T1	4	3 (<1)
T2	3.5	2.5 (1)
T3	2	3 (1.5)
T4	3	1.5 (<1)
T5	1.5	3.5 (<1)
T6	2	2 (1)
T7	3.5	3.5 (2)
T8	4.5	2 (1)

3.2 Research Instruments and Procedures

The online focus-group interview was adopted as the research instrument since it is a common and useful method in qualitative studies and can acquire detailed

information through real-time responses of the interviewees who could be more easily organized beyond the limit of physical locations (Dilshad & Latif, 2013; Gray, 2013; Ho, 2006; Robson & McCartan, 2016), which therefore fits the study environment. Online semi-structured interviews allowed us to collect diverse interviewees' perceptions in a flexible and comfortable manner within focus groups (Balushi, 2018; Breen, 2006; Potter & Hepburn, 2005). Core questions relevant to research themes were pre-designed and answered by the interviewees, as well as any follow-up questions could be added in time according to audience responses. Two rounds of semi-structured focus-group interviews were conducted in English; each group interview lasted around two hours.

The study consisted of three steps. To fit the study context, the 2 groups of 4 interviewees separately finished three online writing tasks in *Step 1* before two rounds of interviews. When doing these pre-designed writing tasks, interviewees were provided with task goals. All interviewees succeeded in finishing these online tasks within a specific time limit, but at a flexible timeslot chosen based on their selection. This activity led to further discussion about the overall perceptions of the interviewees from the viewpoint of both teacher and learner for the three designed mini-tasks and how effective they thought the task goals were. This step aims to identify the characteristics of effective task goals in online collaborative writing. In *Step 2*, based on the thematic analysis and evaluation of task goals (details are given in Section 3.3), the semi-structured online interviews of the two focus-groups were arranged to answer the first research question. The second round of the online semi-structured focus group interviews was carried out as *Step 3* for the same grouped interviewees using core questions designed from our summary of the dataset obtained in the first round of interviews, e. g., how the effectiveness of the three designed task goals might be improved within the context of online collaborative writing practice. They were further required to critically evaluate the main findings of the first-round focus-group interviews and, subsequently, provide useful advice that could be followed to enable effective goals in their future teaching. We were also able to survey the possible measures that each interviewee plans to use in their future online teaching activities.

3.3 Data Analysis

Within this critical stage of the study, thematic analysis was used for a systematic and in-depth data analysis of the collected semi-structured focus-group interview data, aiming at gaining insights for our qualitative research, due to the flexibility of thematic analysis (Belotto, 2018) and the relatively new subject of integrating TBLT with online collaborative writing (i.e., certain lack of appropriate theory to describe and understand this integration). The relevant criteria for good thematic analysis (Vaismoradi et al., 2015) were used as a guide for identifying, refining, and

discussing the key themes in the perceptions of interviewees. The so-called *six-step* thematic analysing method (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was adopted at this stage to enable rich descriptions and in-depth discussions of the whole dataset acquired from all the interviewees. The obtained thematic analysis results could also be related to clarifying the two overall research questions and compared with the literature, to produce a high-quality report, hence good completion of this research.

4. Results and Discussion

Based on research literature, the conventional SMARTER characteristics were initially adopted as basic themes to investigate the effectiveness of setting online collaborative writing task goals using TBLT, however, we found that these characteristics insufficiently or imperfectly fit into this study. This motivated us to make a considerable extension to the conventional SMARTER framework by establishing and extracting extra new characteristics based on the results of the first-round focus group interviews. The effectiveness of writing task goals herein is reflected in terms of language production (e.g., the quality and quantity of the written texts) of online learners.

On the basis of a detailed thematic analysis within the data items and the seven generic features of the conventional SMARTER framework (Moeller et al., 2012), nine new characteristics (*straight-forward:* short and lucid task goals that can be easily understood by learners; *motivated:* the degree of difficulty of completing a goal is gradually increased; *multifaceted:* task goals have active effects on developing multiple abilities of learners; *aligned:* task outcomes are highly aligned with task goals; *appropriate:* task goals should meet learners' needs; *reasonable:* promoting target learners to be aware of the necessity and importance of task goals; *trackable:* task outcomes need to be recorded, and clearly reflected learners' progress; *engaged:* task goals should be interesting and engaging, and thus, learners are willing to pay more time and effort completing them; *revised:* goals are supposed to revise and update based on the feedback from the learners to make them effective.) were extracted to establish an extended SMARTER framework for designing and achieving effective online collaborative English writing task goals.

Among these sixteen characteristics (see **Table 2**), seven characteristics (S: specific; M: motivated, multifaceted; A: aligned; R: realistic; T: time-limited; E: engaged) were found to have a close relationship with TBLT; in other words, the application of TBLT could be expected to bring about a significant improvement in the design and implementation of effective online collaborative English writing task goals in these seven crucial aspects.

TAB. 2. *The conventional SMARTER characteristics for effective goal-setting, nine newly-extracted characteristics for effective online collaborative English writing task goals, and seven effective characteristics for designing online collaborative writing task goals using TBLT.*

Theme	Characteristic					
	Conventional SMARTER framework[a]		New characteristics extracted in this study[b]			
S	specific	√[c]	straight-forward			×[d]
M	measurable	×	motivated	√	multifaceted	√
A	attainable	×	aligned	√	appropriate	×
R	realistic	√	reasonable			×
T	time-limited	√	trackable			×
E	evaluated	×	engaged			√
R	reflected	×	revised			×

[a] *The seven generic characteristics of the conventional SMARTER framework.*
[b] *The nine newly-extracted thematic characteristics in the study based on the first round of online focus group interviews.*
[c,d] *The characteristic that can be enhanced by (√) or is not closely related with (×) TBLT.*

On the basis of **Table 2**, the data were further analysed in the second-round interviews to work out the essential characteristics of effective online collaborative writing task goals using TBLT. Each interviewee was asked to choose the three most important thematic items out of seven characteristics in the results of the first-round interviews, which were reflected by the first two rows in **Table 3**. The selected results of the top-three characteristics from all interviewees are summarized in the following table:

TAB. 3. *The top three characteristics selected by the interviewees*

Characteristic / Interviewee	specific	motivated	multifaceted	aligned	Realistic	time-limited	engaged
T1	√	√					√
T2	√				√		√
T3		√	√		√		
T4			√	√			√
T5	√				√	√	
T6	√			√			√
T7	√		√	√			
T8				√		√	√
Count	5	2	3	4	3	2	5

The counts in **Table 3** highlight the characteristics of being specific, engaged, and aligned as the top three key characteristics of effective online collaborative writing task goals using TBLT, based on the emic perspective of eight English student-teachers.

The research findings in response to the overall research question have been briefly summarized in the *two-stage* schematic diagram below (see **Figure 1**). The second-round focus group interviews were carried out to provide a means for all interviewees to select the essential characteristics of effective online collaborative writing task goals as Stage 1. Three key characteristics were determined in this stage from the characteristic selecting results of the interviewees and listed in **Figure 1** according to a descending order of their vote numbers coming from all the interviewees. Subsequently, the key measures as *useful advice* corresponding to the selected key characteristics by the interviewees to design effective online collaborative writing task goals constitute Stage 2 of the guiding results. Also, detailed needs analysis of learners is considered as a prerequisite of this two-stage procedure as it can facilitate to get a rich range of information of learners, which serves as a starting point to set online writing task goals. The second-round focus group interviews were conducted with the same interviewees of the first-round interviews, whose core questions are:

(1)   As an English student-teacher, what are the three most essential characteristics which make online collaborative writing task goals effective?

(2)   What advice and measures from this research, do you think, are vital for helping you create your own online writing task goals in the future?
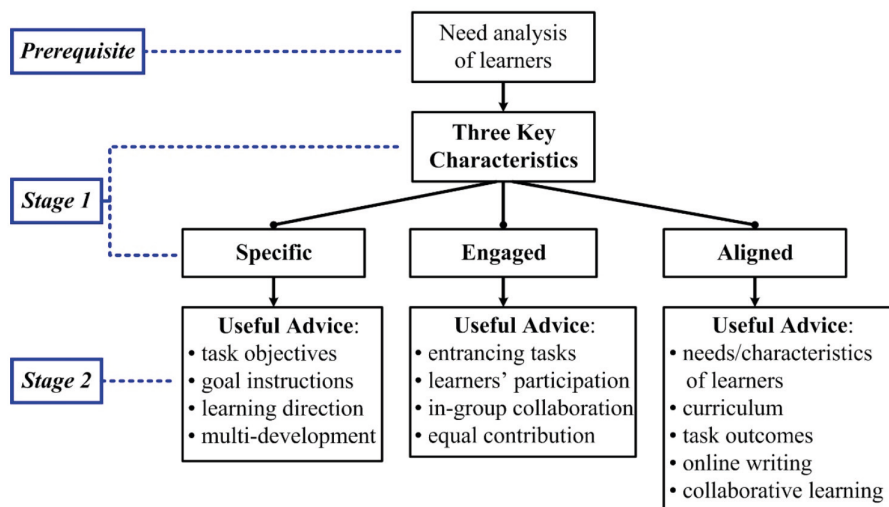
FIG. 1. *The two-stage schematic diagram used to answer two Research Questions.*

The consideration of learners is judged to be crucial (e.g., via carrying out detailed *needs analysis* of learners) prior to designing the task goals. As mentioned by all interviewees in the second round of interviews, a needs analysis of learners facilitates to obtain a rich range of information of learners about their so-called *gaps*, *necessities*, and *wants*: the *gaps* fits into the current knowledge of learners, while the *necessities* and the *wants* fit into the required knowledge and individual needs of learners, respectively (Macalister & Nation, 2010). All these three fundamental aspects of learners' needs should be taken into particular consideration by teachers, or even regarded as a prerequisite for setting effective online collaborative writing task goals.

4.1 Key Characteristic 1: Being *Specific*

In order to ensure the specificity of online writing task goals, task objectives and learning directions cannot be ambiguously described for online learners, these two elements being emphasized by all interviewees in the first round of focus-group interviews, and accordingly, specific learning objectives should be attached to effective writing task goals by teachers, while each learning objective needs the intended outcomes clearly-stated with related instructions to help learners complete a writing task.

When it comes to specific task objectives and goal instruction, *Teacher 1* (T1) stated that online learners often misunderstand the task goals if they are missing or non-specifically presented in goal-setting. T1 further emphasized what the intended outcomes of language production should provide to learners.

> I agree … The task designer should provide … not only general goals but also specific objectives … and, intended outcomes, this … is crucial.

This point aligns with the concept – *performance outcomes* proposed by Locke & Latham (2002) which herein refers to learners performing better and making more effort when they are clear about the expected outcomes of an online writing task goal set by teachers. Also, providing learners with specific task objectives and goal instructions have a similar function as the so-called *performance objective* that learners know what they should do to achieve the learning objective (Macalister & Nation, 2010), which contributes to the goal achievement since learners' performance is indirectly under the guidance of professional teachers.

Five out of the eight interviewees pointed out that clear learning directions with relevant guidance of specific task goals can also improve the effectiveness of goal achievement as the learners could concentrate on finishing a particular aspect of the learning goals (T2, T3, T5, T7 & T8). This argument aligns with Rubin's statement that a clear direction should be included in the goal-setting stage for

guiding the learners to make learning efforts (Rubin, 2015), which can enhance the effectiveness of set goals.

For the characteristic of being specific, five interviewees agreed that teachers should provide detailed task objectives and goal instructions with clear learning directions; meanwhile, goals set by teachers need to stimulate multiple ability development of learners, e.g., at the level of knowledge, skills, and emotion (T3, T4, & T7).

4.2 Key Characteristic 2: Being *Engaged*

Better learning outcomes always require proactive engagements of learners during the process of completing, individually or collaboratively, writing tasks. As T1 stated in the interview, learners' in-depth engagement with keen interest is essential for spontaneously attempting and self-regulating different learning strategies, learning styles, and making more efforts to better achieve the writing task goals, which requires teachers to design engaging online writing tasks. Different learning strategies and learning styles can make completing the process of writing tasks more engaging, hence potentially enhancing the willingness of learners to make efforts and be engaged, which is similar to the statements in Zimmerman (2008) and Wisher et al. (2004).

With particular reference to the online collaborative writing environment, interaction and cooperation between group members are crucial for effective writing task goals. In order to stimulate more effective collaboration at a group level to achieve an online writing task, teachers should assess the participation and personal contribution of learners in their group work at a real-time and multifaceted level (T1), and monitor the in-group collaboration among learners, such as whether they actively interact and negotiate with their partners to effectively complete the writing tasks (T2 & T6). This can help respond to emerging challenges such as low participation (Storch, 2005) and unequal contribution (Handayani, 2012) of learners.

4.3 Key Characteristic 3: Being *Aligned*

The alignment characteristic of effective online collaborative writing task goals with three main aspects is highlighted in **Figure 2**:
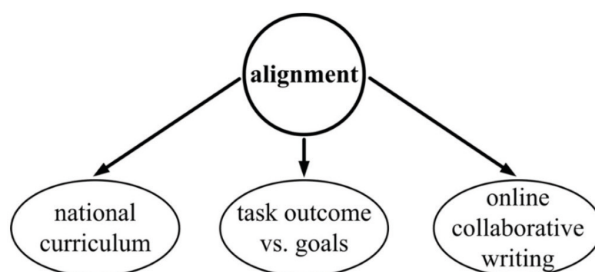
FIG. 2. *The three main aspects of aligned online collaborative writing task goals.*

The first consideration of alignment is related to remaining consistent with the instructions of the national curriculum and the resulting writing tasks do not go beyond the scope of the curriculum (T2). Also, the outcomes of designed writing tasks demand to be aligned with the set goals, which should be particularly noted when working out the goal-task pairs. T8 stated this during the first-round focus-group interview:

> To make the writing task goals align with … task outcomes is also important, e.g., if teachers setting a task goal … aims to teach learners to … write an email, but the task outcome is to write a letter … So, making task goals relevant to … task content is essential.

Another alignment aspect lies between effective writing task goals and specific features of the online collaborative writing environment. Three interviewees further stated that the online collaborative writing task goals should be worked out as collaboratively and as interactively as possible (T2, T7 & T8), which is aligned with the requirements of the online collaborative learning environment and demonstrates its advantages (Liu et al., 2018; Lowry et al., 2004).

The characteristic of being aligned requires teachers to align the goals with the course curriculum, needs, characteristics, and current language proficiency of learners, as well as the features of the online collaborative writing environment and TBLT (T4, T6, & T7). In this way, the writing task goals set by teachers are more appropriate for learners.

5. Conclusion

This study investigates the characteristics of setting effective online writing task goals using TBLT and providing useful advice to English student-teachers in designing their own online writing task goals. The findings have shown that the

measures of the identified three key characteristics (i.e., specific, engaged, and aligned) are used as advice to enrich the knowledge and skillset of English student-teachers in setting online learning task goals. Teachers are advised to analyse in detail the needs of learners; to prepare specific goal instructions and provide clear intended goal outcomes, which are desirable to enable progress in learning and develop multifaceted abilities of learners; to design engaging writing tasks and check the attendance, personal contribution, and in-group collaboration of learners; and to align online writing task goals with the needs of learners, online learning platforms, and course curriculum.

In this study, the overall research questions of setting effective online collaborative writing task goals are of importance to provide timely insights on the utilization of increasingly popular online learning/teaching methods and broaden the use of TBLT, in particular, under the current circumstances of the unexpected outbreak of the Covid-19 virus worldwide. At present, educational entities such as universities and schools across the globe are relying on online teaching, which has already shown the effectiveness of online learning and could lead in the future to significant changes in teaching/learning methods. This can be a good beginning for promoting a combination of online collaborative learning and TBLT. In this crucial period, collective efforts of the educational system, teachers, learners, and closely related support from specialist IT colleagues are required to keep the learning/teaching life at a normal level.

As the results of our study reveal, more research is needed in the field of online collaborative writing. This could be done as action research in schools with teachers working with teacher educators from universities trying out collaborative practices, but also technology, and analysing results to see what the most effective ways forward are and disseminating this advice. Furthermore, the relevant advice could be promoted by national education bodies using guidance documents, but also via workshops and online dialogue. We believe that these measures will lead to an enrichment of the experience of students undertaking online collaborative writing, helping them to succeed in using TBLT in designing their own online writing task goals in the future and incorporating best practice in terms of the use of technology and online pedagogy.

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Appendix A. Focus Group Interview Questions (the first-round)

Section one: critical evaluation of three mini-tasks based on interviewees' experience
1.   As task participants, how do you feel about the three mini-tasks?
2.   As English student-teachers, what do you think about the three mini-tasks?

Section two: critical evaluation of the designed task goals for three mini-tasks
3.   As task participants, what are your feelings about the designed writing task goals? Do you think they are effective for academic writing development? (If you do think they are effective, please list your reasons. If they are not effective enough, how they might be improved to become effective?)
4.   As English student-teachers, what do you think about the writing task goals? Do you think they are effective enough for your students' language development in writing? (If you think they are effective, please give your reasons. If they are not effective enough, please point out possible improvement that could be made to improve the effectiveness)

Section three: discussion about characteristics of effective writing goals for online collaborative writing using TBLT
5.   As English student-teachers, what in your experience makes up an effective task goal for online collaborative writing using TBLT?
6.   Are there some typical features of these effective task goals?

Appendix B. Focus Group Interview Questions (the second-round)

Section one: perceptions of the interviewees on the useful advice from this study through selecting the most essential three effective characteristics out of the identified seven ones according to the first-round interviews
1.   As an English student-teacher, what are the three most essential characteristics maintaining online collaborative writing task goals effective?

Section two: advice of making online collaborative writing goals effective
2.   What advice do you find useful from this research into goal-setting for online English writing tasks in order to create your own online writing tasks? (Please offer some related and useful measures or advice based on the three options in the first question)