Teachers' Perceptions on Collaborative Activity in ESL Writing Class

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ABSTRACT

This study focused on teachers' perceptions of collaborative writing and how this activity was enacted in the classroom. Data were collected from a questionnaire and a semi-structured interview with 16 instructors who taught an academic writing course at Universiti Putra Malaysia. The findings revealed that collaborative activity is beneficial because it could enhance the development of cognitive and social skills and boost students' confidence in writing. On the contrary, the disadvantages of collaborative work are attributed by passive and uncooperative members as well as time factor. The findings also showed that the ways collaborative activities were enacted differed among the instructors. In addition, the choice of assigning groups and roles to students was also found to be varied. The insights from the teachers' perceptions are useful in improving the pedagogical applications of collaborative writing.

Keywords: Collaborative activity, academic writing, teachers' perceptions, ESL learners

INTRODUCTION

Pair work or group work has been commonly used in English language classrooms in Malaysia. This interactive pedagogy, which encourages social interactions among students, rests on the social constructivist theory of learning. Social constructivists (Bruffee, 1986; Vygotsky, 1978; Wertsch, 1991) emphasise social interactions as the pre-requisites to cognitive development. Vygotsky (1978) also maintained that knowledge is co-constructed and learning often involves the negotiation of meanings with more than one person.

Collaborative writing, which is another form of group work, fits the social constructivist tenet as it provides a collaborative nature of learning through social interactions. Collaborative culture in the classroom can foster diversity, trust and coherence. Purposeful shared work also raises students' tacit knowledge to explicit knowledge and changes social relations, which result in cognitive growth for the group members (Fullan, 1999).

The first way to look at collaborative writing is that it encompasses students supporting one another during the writing process. For instance, Bruffee (1984) uses the term 'collaborative writing' to refer to students getting together at various stages, while working on individual papers. In the research by Higgins, Flower and Petraglia (1992), freshmen collaborated and supported one another in the planning stage of writing a technical report.

The second way to look at collaborative writing is the dialogic relationship among group members. Dale (1992) stated that students were not collaborating if one member was not actively involved with the other group members throughout the writing process. Likewise, Ede and Lunsford (1990) used the term 'co-authored' *dialogically* when co-authors wrote a document together.

However, they called the collaboration *hierarchical* co-authoring when co-authors divided the work.

The third way of looking at collaborative writing is the production of a shared document. Shared document is produced by collaborators who engaged in substantive interaction, decision-making and responsibility in preparing the document (Allen *et al.*, 1987).

Having looked at the various perspectives about collaborative writing, one needs to understand the social and affective aspects which may also affect the collaboration process. Research findings on collaborative writing in the classroom showed more positive than negative results. For instance, research conducted in the L1 contexts (Allen *et al.*, 1987; Dale, 1994; Morgan *et al.*, 1987) revealed the facilitating effects of conflict. Conflicting views helped the collaborators to refine their ideas, produced solutions which were acceptable to others and worked out the logistics of a group process. The collaborators produced a better text through constant challenging of ideas and substantiating arguments (Dale, 1994). Nonetheless, if differing viewpoints were regarded as threats, the arguments would be counterproductive to group success and text production.

Research conducted on L2 learners (Donato, 1994; Sim, 1998; Storch, 2001, 2002, 2005; Tocalli-Beller, 2003; Yong, 2006) showed that students' co-construct new knowledge that went beyond any knowledge possessed by an individual when they collaborated (Donato, 1994). Sim (1998) and Storch (2002) suggested that the more active the students were during the collaboration, the more likely they would learn and be able to transfer knowledge into their individual writing.

In addition, disagreement is a common feature in any collaborative activity due to students' diverse backgrounds and perspectives. Similar to the earlier studies conducted in the L1 context, Tocalli-Beller (2003) found that when L2 learners resolved their disagreement properly through mutual negotiation and deliberations, consensus was reached and knowledge was then built. However, disagreements over personalised oriented matters were detrimental to group performance (*see also* DiNitto, 2000).

Thus far, research on collaboration in the L1 and L2 contexts have been focusing on the learners. On the contrary, research examining teachers' perceptions of collaborative writing is still lacking. Hence, more investigations and

research to gather insights into teachers' views are pertinent for a better understanding about the use of collaborative activities in the classroom.

This research was part of a larger study which investigated collaborative writing among the ESL learners in an academic writing class (Yong, 2006). This paper reported one aspect of the larger study by focusing on the teachers' perceptions of collaborative writing.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The objectives of the study are two-fold: a) to ascertain teachers' perceptions of the use of collaborative writing activities in the classroom, and b) to find out how collaborative writing activities were enacted by each individual teacher.

METHODOLOGY

The participants of the study were 16 English language instructors (5 full-time instructors and 11 part-time instructors) who taught an academic writing course to ESL learners at Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM). This writing course was an English language proficiency course, which was compulsory for all undergraduates who obtained a low score (Band 3 and below) in the Malaysian University English Test (MUET). Some faculties in the university made it a compulsory course for their students, regardless of the MUET band scores, except for those who obtained Band 6 (the highest band in MUET). In this course, students learned to write the different modes of academic essays, namely, descriptive, classification, comparison-contrast, and cause-effect. The writing activities provided students with the opportunities to learn the fundamentals of writing different types of essays and inevitably develop their fluency and accuracy in writing.

Prior to the selection of subjects, the researchers asked the full-time and part-timer instructors if they had used any group work or group writing activities during their writing class, for example, asking students to brainstorm, plan, draft or revise in pairs or in groups. Since all of them indicated that they had used group work in class, they were eligible to be included in the study. The participants were not given any training or specific instructions on how they should carry out collaborative activities in their classes because the researchers wanted to find out how each instructor interpreted collaborative writing and the style they employed to enact the collaborative writing.

The 16 instructors who volunteered to participate in the study were females with the exception of one male part-time instructor, who was a retired teacher. The full-time staff had 5 to 15 years of teaching experience. The majority of the part-time instructors had more than 12 years of teaching experience in either secondary schools or institutions of higher learning.

The course coordinator briefed all the instructors about the course syllabus and general information a week before the course commenced. The instructors had the flexibility to adopt any teaching methods which suited their class, as long as they followed the course schedule and syllabus closely. The instructors met their students three hours per week over a period of 14 weeks.

In this study, a qualitative approach was used to gather the teachers' perceptions of the use of collaborative writing activities in the classroom. Two research instruments were employed to collect data; a) a questionnaire consisting of nine open-ended questions, and b) a semi-structured interview.

The questionnaire primarily sought to find out the teachers' written views about the advantages and disadvantages of collaborative writing, how the collaboration was carried out in their individual classroom, whether the instructors assigned students into groups, whether they assigned roles to the students, and whether students wrote better quality essays by interacting in a group. The questionnaire was administered on the second last week of the semester (Week 13).

The semi-structured interview was used to verify the responses given by the instructors in the questionnaire, particularly on how they conducted the collaborative activity, what style they adopted, whether they assigned roles and group members to the students, and why they made those decisions. The interview was conducted informally with 10 selected instructors during the final week of the semester (Week 14). The duration of the interview was approximately 10 to 15 minutes per instructor. The researchers were not able to conduct an interview with the other six part-time instructors due to the clashes in the time schedule. All the interview responses were transcribed verbatim.

The short written responses in the questionnaire were collated to obtain a summary of the teachers' perceptions. Each item in the questionnaire was analysed and categorised thematically based on the two research objectives. Related data from the interview responses were used to substantiate and triangulate the questionnaire responses. The main focus of the study was to gather insights into the teachers' perceptions of the efficacy of collaborative writing activities. Hence, a qualitative approach to data analysis was more appropriate for this study.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The findings from the questionnaire and interview responses are presented and discussed thematically.

The advantages of collaborative writing

The most important advantage of collaborative writing, which was pointed out by the instructors, was the opportunity of gathering students of different abilities to work together on a task. A frequent response, which was highlighted in the questionnaire data by eight instructors, was that weaker students could learn from better students during the collaboration. Other comments mentioned in the responses to the open-ended questionnaire by individual instructor included better idea generation, better understanding of topic, more active participation from students, and learning of different writing styles when students put their efforts collectively.

Another benefit of collaborative writing was the sharing of resources. All the instructors, with the exception of one, perceived that students produced better written texts when they pooled their resources together. The instructor, who ticked *yes* and *no* for this item in the questionnaire, felt that less proficient students benefited more as compared to proficient students in terms of producing a better quality essay. Below are some excerpts from the interview.

As Sally put it:
> *The interaction among members often stimulates analytical and critical thinking and idea generation.*

Similar sentiment was also expressed by Lee:
> *Students see things from different perspectives and they are able to minimise grammatical mistakes and write in a more organised manner.*

Another benefit mentioned by Lim:
> *If students write alone, they might not be able to see their flaws. If done in a group, other members help by giving constructive criticism. With more interactions, the topic would be well discussed. Also editing can be fine tuned as there will not be a lack of proof-readers.*

The responses above suggested that the social interactions, which took place during collaboration, helped students to test and to generate more ideas. Students could review their work more critically as they exchanged their viewpoints. At the same time, the draft would be checked and revised more thoroughly by group members. These perceptions correspond with the findings of Dale (1994), Sim (1998), and Storch (2002), which revealed that collaborative effort resulted in more quality texts. The support of shared expertise apparently helps students to accomplish demanding academic writing tasks.

Besides producing better essays through collaborative effort, four instructors felt that collaborative writing created a sense of audience. Students learned to justify arguments and convince their group members. The process of justifying and deliberating created audience awareness in their writing. This finding concurs with Dale's (1992) study which suggests that collaboration enhances a sense of audience.

Another advantage of collaborative writing is that the writing task became less daunting and students' confidence improved through collaborative work. This perception was voiced by seven instructors during the interview. Lim, a part-time instructor, described:

Task does not seem so overwhelming and weaker students can learn from the better ones.

Ng shared a similar view:
Two heads are better than one.

Kathi said:
Students are more confident when working in a group.

In addition to boosting students' confidence, five instructors felt that collaborative activities provided a positive environment to develop students' social skills, such as cooperation and teamwork. As Ho put it:

Communication skills and cooperation are important to prepare students for the workplace.

In sum, the findings reveal that collaborative activity promotes collective effort from mixed ability group members. By sharing their expertise, students can generate more ideas and have a greater sense of audience which further enable them to produce better quality work. They were also found to develop confidence and sense of solidarity.

The disadvantages of collaborative writing

The most common disadvantage of collaborative writing, as perceived by ten instructors in the questionnaire responses, was the existence of passive group members. In specific, the passive members contributed very little to the discussion and were overly dependent on more proficient members. Good students might end up doing the task. As Lisa put it:

Some members may not be doing their fair share of the work and leave the task for others to do.

Although forming students into mixed ability groups could be a useful strategy, less proficient students might sometimes feel left out when good and average students dominated the discussion. This drawback could be prevented by reminding students to allow equal opportunities for every member to speak. Group leaders need to monitor and ensure that no one dominates the discussion and every group member is given a chance to voice his or her ideas.

Another disadvantage of collaborative writing is that the process itself was time-consuming. Analysis of the open-ended questions and interview responses revealed eight instructors' obvious explanations for this particular shortcoming. To begin with, students had to deliberate on whose ideas or which writing styles were better and more appropriate. As a result, they took a long time to reach consensus or to settle conflicting viewpoints and disagreements. Moreover, students also tended to be off-task and talked about unrelated topics sometimes. When this happened, it prolonged the discussion.

Findings from the interviews also revealed several other disadvantages of collaborative writing. One full-time instructor mentioned that teachers could not gauge students' proficiency level individually. Another part-time instructor mentioned that it was difficult to diagnose individual student's writing strengths through collaborative writing. Besides, the lack of cooperation and unwillingness to accept comments from group members were other drawbacks which made the collaborative activity daunting. As Lim said:

The inability to accept differing viewpoints can create tension and dissatisfaction among the group members.

An awareness of the possible perceived disadvantages, as mentioned in the findings, may

ensure that collaborative writing can be carried out more effectively to benefit students.

The way collaborative activity was enacted in class

a)   Collaboration style

Data gathered from the questionnaire revealed three different styles, in which individual instructors enacted collaborative writing in the classroom. The most common style was to ask the students to select a leader and then work on the task as a team by contributing ideas, composing, giving feedback and revising without any intervention from the teacher throughout the writing process. Students could choose to carry out the collaborative activity outside class hours. This approach is akin to the style adopted by Dale (1994). In the current study, it was found that the majority of the instructors (12 out of 16) used this style.

The second style was to ask students to form groups, discuss the topic, write drafts and conduct peer review sessions during class time. Teachers acted as facilitators and helped out whenever needed. Only two out of 16 instructors adopted this style.

The third approach was to put a good student in charge as the leader who would then delegate the task. The group members worked on their parts and compiled the document later. The instructor walked around to monitor the class. This hierarchical co-authoring is similar to the style adopted by professional writers in Ede and Lunsford's (1990) study. Out of the 16 instructors, only two indicated that they utilised this style.

Interviews with 10 instructors revealed that those who adopted the first style preferred their students to take more responsibility for their own learning process. The two instructors who adopted the second style felt that their students still needed help and assistance from the teacher. The other two instructors who incorporated the hierarchical co-authoring mentioned that by dividing the task, students would know their roles and do their parts before coming together for the next collaborative writing session.

b)   Groupings and roles

Based on the data gathered from the interviews, seven instructors mentioned that the ideal group size should range from three to five members. All the instructors felt that large group size was not encouraged as some members would remain passive and depend too much on others to do the work.

Three instructors felt that pair work was not ideal because it might be difficult to reach a consensus when the partners disagreed with each other. As for decision-making, it was found to be easier to vote if there were odd numbers in a group.

The findings from the questionnaire revealed that nine out of 16 instructors assigned students into collaborative groups because they wanted to ensure that there were mixed abilities in the collaboration. The interview sessions shed more insights into their choice. If a group consisted of only novice and weak students, it might affect the quality of the writing, if the members were unable to monitor or detect any mistakes made. With mixed ability groups, students could share their expertise and writing strengths.

The other seven instructors preferred their students to choose their own group members because they felt that students would be more comfortable working with their close friends. Furthermore, they also felt that students worked better with those whom they like or those they have worked with before. They would not feel intimidated. The findings about familiarity showed that self-selection of group members could foster camaraderie which strengthened team efforts.

Findings from the questionnaire and interview data also revealed that the majority of the instructors (10 out of 16) did not assign roles to the students because they preferred their students to choose roles which suit their own ability. These instructors believed that when students felt comfortable and were at ease with their roles, they would be more responsive. The other six instructors who assigned roles to students wanted to give each group member a chance to lead. This was also a strategy used to prevent good students from dominating the discussion or ending up drafting the whole essay without considering the voices from other members.

CONCLUSIONS

The current study showed that collaborative activities in the writing class could help develop cognitive and social aptitudes. During the group interactions, students were dialogically engaged in knowledge construction as they were exploring and deliberating ideas, sharing expertise, constructing text, resolving disagreements, making decision, and revising the document. This recursive pattern of discovering and reinventing meaning during collaboration enhances cognitive development

for both weak and more proficient students. The data reinforced earlier findings that purposeful shared work enhanced the co-construction of new knowledge, which then expanded the knowledge possessed by an individual (Donato, 1994). Similar to the findings by Dale (1990) and Tocalli-Beller (2003), it was found that students also had to learn to cooperate and resolve disagreements during the interactions to maintain group cohesion.

As observed from the findings and earlier studies, collaborative writing can be conducted in different styles. Teachers can adopt the collaborative style which works best for their students, based on their learners' needs, level of proficiency and writing abilities. There should also be flexibility whether to assign roles and group members for students or to allow students to self-select group members and their own roles. Teachers also need to ensure that students feel comfortable and are uninhibited during the collaboration to maximize learning and productivity.

As a suggestion, teachers should allow students to have the choice of working independently if they prefer to do so. Therefore, it is important to be sensitive to students' individual preference and learning style to avoid curbing their creativity. Nonetheless, teachers can encourage solitary student writers to give themselves a chance to experience collaborative work with their peers as a preparation for future workplace writing and interactions.

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