UNIVERSITI PUTRA MALAYSIA

EFFECTS OF COLLABORATION IN AN ONLINE ENVIRONMENT ON ESL TERTIARY STUDENTS' WRITING AND REFLECTIVE THINKING

IRENE LEONG YOKE CHU

FBMK 2006 18

For

Nicholas and LeAnn

"I desire distinction for you...."

"For you I desire spiritual distinction — that is, you must become eminent and distinguished in morals. In the love of God you must become distinguished from all else. You must become distinguished for loving humanity, for unity and accord, for love and justice..."

"In brief you must become distinguished for all the virtues of the human world — for faithfulness and sincerity, for justice and fidelity, for firmness and steadfastness, for philanthropic deeds and service to the human world, for love toward every human being, for unity and accord with all people, for removing prejudices and promoting international peace..."

"Finally you must become distinguished for heavenly illumination and for acquiring the bestowals of God. I desire this distinction for you.
This must be the point of distinction among you".

—From the Bahá'í Wriings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, The Promulgation of Universal Peace, p. 190—

Abstract of thesis presented to the Senate of University Putra Malaysia in fulfilment of the requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

EFFECTS OF COLLABORATION IN AN ONLINE ENVIRONMENT ON ESL TERTIARY STUDENTS' WRITING AND REFLECTIVE THINKING

By

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June 2006

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Based on a descriptive study, the main aim of this study was to observe and examine the effects of collaboration versus non-collaboration on students' writing and reflective thinking skills in an online learning environment. In order to achieve the purpose of this study, students engaged in both collaborative online writing tasks and non-collaborative online writing tasks were observed.

The findings of the study indicate possible pedagogical implications for the planning and teaching of an academic writing program for ESL students in an institution of higher learning. They support the relevance of creating a

collaborative learning environment in which the act of reflection is integrated to enhance and stimulate students' cognitive processes and enable them to improve in their writing skills.

The findings also show that how students behave in an online collaborative environment influences the way students think and regulate the various writing processes. The study provides evidence that the collaborative learning environment can be a channel to trigger students' reflective thinking to help them integrate and link ideas learnt at the surface level and to negotiate meaning using higher order thinking skills. The interactive and reflective discussions generated during online collaboration enhanced and provided opportunities for students to transform learning and as a result, improve their writing skills. The study shows that the combination of these two strategies empowered students to hone the behaviours that support successful collaboration and enhanced students' metacognitive awareness to adopt a deep approach to learning and writing.

In conclusion, the study shows that the implementation of telecollaboration and structured reflection during the teaching and learning of writing among ESL tertiary students can encourage students to share and discuss their thoughts and build ideas. The learning environment, which simulates a real life situation, allows students to get into a relationship with the writing tasks and motivate them to negotiate meaning at a deeper level.

Abstrak tesis yang dikemukakan kepada Senat Universiti Putra Malaysia sebagai mematuhi keperluan untuk Ijazah Kedoktoran.

KESAN PEMBELAJARAN BERKUMPULAN MELALUI INTERNET KE ATAS PROSES PENULISAN DAN AMALAN REFLEKSI PELAJAR BAHASA INGGERIS SEBAGAI BAHASA KEDUA DI INSTITUSI PENGAJIAN TINGGI

Oleh

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Pengerusi : Professor Madya Dr. Mardziah Hayati Abdullah

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Berdasarkan kepada pengajian diskriptif, kajiselidik ini bertujuan untuk mengkaji bagaimana tingkah-laku pelajar-pelajar yang mengikuti kursus penulisan secara berkumpulan melalui Internet mempengaruhi pemikiran refleksi dan proses penulisan mereka. Kajian ini juga mengkaji amalan refleksi dan proses penulisan pelajar-pelajar yang mengikuti kursus secara individu.

Keputusan kajian menunjukkan implikasi pedagogi untuk perancangan dan pengajaran kursus penulisan untuk pelajar-pelajar ESL. Keputusan kajian

menyokong penggunaan pembelajaran secara berkumpulan melalui Internet untuk memajukan amalan refleksi pelajar-pelajar dan meningkatkan prestasi penulisan mereka.

Keputusan kajian juga menunjukkan bahawa tingkah–laku pelajar-pelajar secara berkumpulan mempengaruhi pemikiran mereka dan membantu dalam penyemakan penulisan mereka dengan lebih efektif.

Kajian ini membuktikan bahawa persekitaran memainkan peranan yang penting untuk mengalakkan pelajar-pelajar menggunakan pemikiran refleksi secara mendalam supaya mereka dapat mengaitkan ide-ide, pengalaman atau isi yang dipelajari dengan lebih efektif. Persekitaran yang memberi peluang kepada pelajar untuk membincang dan membuat diskusi secara berkumpulan lebih memanfaatkan pembelajaran pelajar terutamanya dalam penulisan mereka.

Kajian ini juga menunjukkan bahawa pembelajaran secara berkumpulan dan amalan refleksi merupakan dua strategi yang saling melengkapi. Kedua-dua strategi ini boleh mengalakkan pelajar-pelajar mengamalkan tingkah-laku yang positif supaya ia dapat membantu mereka menggunakan kesedaran metacognitif untuk membaiki cara penulisan mereka.

Pada kesimpulannya, kajian ini menunjukkan bahawa pembelajaran secara kumpulan melalui Internet dan amalan refleksi boleh mengalakkan pelajar-pelajar berkongsi maklumat dan meningkatkan pembelajaran dan prestasi penulisan mereka.

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UPM

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I certify that an Examination Committee met on 7th December 2006 to conduct the final examination of Irene Leong Yoke Chu on her Doctor of Philosophy thesis entitled “Effects Of Collaboration In An Online Environment On ESL Tertiary Students’ Writing And Reflective Thinking” in accordance with Universiti Pertanian Malaysia (Higher Degree) Act 1980 and Universiti Pertanian Malaysia (Higher Degree) Regulations 1981. The Committee recommends that the candidate be awarded the relevant degree. Members of the Examination Committee are as follows:

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DECLARATION

I hereby declare that the thesis is based on my original work except for quotations and citations which have been duly acknowledged. I also declare that it has not been previously or concurrently submitted for any other degree at UPM or other institutions.

_____

IRENE LEONG YOKE CHU

Date: 7th December 2006

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Based on a descriptive study, the main aim of this study was to observe and examine the extent to which online interactions and behaviour affect students' reflective thinking and their writing processes. In order to achieve the purpose of this study, students engaged in both collaborative online writing tasks and non-collaborative online writing tasks were observed. The data obtained from the non-collaborative environment were deemed necessary and invaluable as they lent support to the findings obtained from this study.

This chapter presents the background to the study, the problem statement, the purpose and significance of the study, as well as the research questions that guided this study.

1.1 Background to the Study

1.1.1 The Importance of Writing

Writing is a challenging and stimulating activity that should be viewed as an essential lifetime skill and according to Hughey et al. (1983) student-writers need to understand that mastering the complexities of the writing process not only helps them achieve their immediate goals but also serves them beyond

the confines of the classroom. Learners express their ideas, feelings, hopes, dreams and joys as well as anger, fear and frustrations through writing. Therefore, it is a medium through which students demonstrate their understanding and interpretation of the concepts and theories they have studied over a period of time. Thus, in every writing activity, a writer's success depends greatly on how well information, ideas, thoughts and feelings are successfully expressed and conveyed to the target reader. The person reading the information should not only be able to understand the points the writer is trying to make but also place as much importance on the message being conveyed.

Therefore, it is undeniable that writing plays a key role in every student's life within a community and the need to find new and improved ways to enhance students' writing skills has constantly been a great challenge for educators at all levels of the educational system. For years, various theories and approaches have contributed to the change in writing instruction. One approach that created a major impact on the way writing instruction was viewed was the process approach which emerged since the 1970's with Emig's (1971) groundbreaking research on the composing process of twelfth graders (cited in Haneda and Wells, 2000).

1.1.2 The Process Writing Approach

The process approach proposes that writing comprises three major stages: ‘pre-writing’, ‘composing and ‘revising'. The approach evolved over the years and opened up new avenues towards the learning and teaching of this skill. Since then, researchers have become more interested in what actually takes place inside an individual’s mind during the writing process (Murray, 1980).

This cognitive view to writing as illustrated in the writing models championed by Flower and Hayes (1981) and Murray (1980) explain that students are actually thinking and brainstorming as they write. According to these theorists, writing as a process suggests that the writers are the ones in control of their own texts and that they have a meaning they wish to communicate. In an effort to find the best way to express this meaning, the writers go through a constant cycle of thinking, rethinking and brainstorming.

They also maintain that the writing process is an activity that is recursive in nature and writers use problem-solving strategies to construct meaning as they write. Therefore, in order for students to become good writers, the process approach goes beyond just requiring students to revise, revise and revise again. In fact, in many instances during the writing process, writers as individuals or in a group actually pause and reflect on their inner thoughts and make the necessary connections with their own knowledge or

experiences before churning out these thoughts into the written form. Hence, the act of writing empowers as well as manifests the students' understanding of the subject matter which involves reflective thinking.

According to Wells (1999), writing is a technology that empowers writers' minds because of their need to express what they think. In their effort to make the meaning of their text clear and explicit for their audience, writers adopt a reflective approach to writing. They create a world of meaning that captures how they feel and what they believe about the subject matter. They begin to interrogate their thoughts and find suitable words and phrases to convey their ideas into the written form. As a result, they begin linking thought with language. The act of reflective thinking coupled with various stages of writing becomes an effective process for meaningful learning to occur.

In fact, with the various capabilities of computers, rewriting and revising are now allowed to be the cognitive processes that they should be rather than be dominated by mechanical aspects of actually putting words down on paper (Simic, 1994). The integration of computers into writing classrooms have given students the advantage to approach their writing from a cognitive perspective as they try to find the best ways to express their thoughts into words. Not having to deal with the burden of rewriting their drafts by hand, student writers have the opportunity to exercise their cognitive abilities during

their writing process by focusing more on the meaning of the texts they want to produce. Therefore, today the computer is viewed as the cutting edge technology that has enabled students to focus their attention on the actual act of writing, thus providing opportunities for the stimulation of metacognitive abilities to take place.

1.1.3 Computer-Assisted Writing

The combination of the process writing approach and the use of computer technology has revolutionised the way writing is learnt and taught. With the advent of computers in the late 70's, the writing world underwent a tremendous change. Writing instructors have viewed this change as the long-awaited opportunity to help students become better writers.

Computers have given writers the freedom and the ability to make various changes to their written product and this has allowed them to become better revisionists. Students no longer dread the thought of revising and more importantly revising is no longer seen as a correction method for spelling or punctuation errors. With the assistance of the computer and its various tools and applications, students now have the opportunity to engage in the writing process while trying to experiment with language forms and structure.

The various functions and capabilities of computers have also enabled writers to take their time to stand back, ponder and reflect on what they have written and to make suitable changes on their texts. The use of computers has empowered writers with the ability to make desirable changes to their text and to view their writing from different perspectives. As a result, students are now beginning to enjoy the writing activity and are now more ready and willing than before to revise.

Proponents of the writing process would agree that the more one revises the better the finished product will be. Unlike the traditional method where revisions were a means to a grammatically error-free end product, the use of computers has made it possible for students to use revisions to convey their message more effectively and accurately to the reader.

Computers are designed to help writers to edit and manipulate the language with ease and as a result, they are free to execute more complex changes to their texts, as rewriting is no longer as mechanical or painful as it used to be. In the process, the relationship between the writer and the text changes. The computer screen allows writers to distance themselves from the texts and scrutinise the way they write. By doing so, they get into a relationship with the text as they think and experiment with as many possible ways they can to put their thoughts and ideas into writing. Computer technology has evolved so extensively over the years that word processors offer spelling and