

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background

Traditional pedagogy has often viewed writing as a solitary endeavour. However, Barker and Kemp (1990) emphasise that most professional writing is a result of social collaboration. They say that it is the result of the writer's conscious association with members of a particular professional group. There is the need for writers to work with others while producing their writing pieces. Such positive experiences will enable them to obtain ideas and clarity in the process.

In this respect, the purely teacher-centred approach towards the teaching of writing is not an effective method for the students to master the writing skill. Due to the lack of learners' involvement in the writing lesson, it may be perceived as boring and unchallenging. Teachers of writing have to adopt a balanced mixture of teacher and learner-centred approaches in the classroom.

The teacher's role in the classroom has received a great deal of attention in recent research. Harmer (1991) describes the classroom roles of the teacher as part of a continuum ranging from "teachers as controllers" at one extreme and "teachers as facilitators" at the other end. Reid (1992) suggests that in order to promote classroom interaction, the teacher should abandon the role of the expert in front of the class and become the sage on the side.

On the other hand, Biao (1996) clarifies that a teacher should not give up control for she must perceive classroom events, diagnose their meanings and respond appropriately to all situations. To sum up, teachers cannot play the same role all the time in the classroom.

According to Nunan and Lamb (1996), roles in the classroom are dynamic, not static and are subject to change according to the psychological factors brought about by participants into the classroom and also the dynamics of group activity within the classroom itself. Therefore, teachers in the writing classroom need to recognise their role as facilitators in the classroom. This will result in students having the opportunity to contribute ideas in their lessons.

It follows that discussions are commonly used in the brainstorming technique. They can be used in a bid to make writing lessons more engaging and to create positive interdependence among learners. Kessler (1992) found that informal sharing can help students get acquainted and can establish important associations between what they already know and what they are learning. Thus, learners can pool their knowledge together and learn from each other. Consequently, they will have more ideas for their writing.

Discussions and studies acclaiming the benefits of small group work for ESL adult learners may be found in the literature from the 1980s through the 1990s. Generally, discussion is accepted as an important element in language learning as it could help to create interest in the learning atmosphere. Harmer says:

“Group work seems to be an extremely attractive idea
... increase in the amount of student talking time ...
students really [use] language to communicate with
each other ... and more importantly co-operating
among themselves.”

(1983: 206-207)

Group or collaborative work in the language classroom also provides non-threatening contexts for developing communication skills and fulfills the linguistic need for interaction (Long & Porter, 1985; Pica, Young & Doughty, 1987). Other additional benefits of group work include increasing the amount of student participation in the classroom, providing opportunities for students to practise and use new features of the target language and encouraging collaboration among learners (Richards, 1994). Students learn more effectively when they are not experiencing much stress. The classroom then becomes a conducive place for learning.

1.2 Purpose

This study aims to find out how students benefit from discussions before their writing task. Students' perceptions on collaborative writing experiences are also gathered.

This study is guided by the following research questions:

1. Does discussion help adult learners in their writing?
2. Are learners helped in focussing on the topic through discussions?
3. What are the aspects in which learners are helped from discussions? If no, why not?

1.3 Rationale

The researcher has often used discussions as a pre-writing tool in her writing classes. She would like to find empirical evidence for their effectiveness in the production of their essays. This move is supported by Stenhouse (1975) who mentions that it is not enough for teachers' work to be researched but they will have to research it themselves. Such involvement is similar with the opinion of Barnes, who says:

“... to frame the questions and answer them, we must grope towards our invisible knowledge and bring it into sight. Only ... can we see the classroom with an outsider’s eye but an insider’s knowledge, by seeing it as ... the behaviour of people from an alien culture. Then, by ... imagination, we can both understand better what happens and conceive of alternative possibilities.”

(Barnes, 1975:13)

In other words, teachers would have to conduct research on their own to discover effective teaching methods in their classrooms.

In this Information Age, many teachers have discovered that their students are being exposed to a lot of information via the Internet. Some students may possess more up-to-date knowledge in this area of specialization compared to their teachers.

Thus, it is appropriate that ESP teachers, especially, should act as facilitators in the classroom and allow their students to contribute ideas through discussions. Such a practice will help learners to be more independent in their learning instead of relying totally on the teacher. In addition, the learners become more responsible for their own learning, too.

In many writing classrooms, weak students may not receive much attention from their teachers due to the lack of time and class size. They actually need instructional support or scaffolding which is described as an aid to cognitive and social development, as explained below:

“... students collaborate, they can function as scaffolding for each other by assuming complementary roles and supplementing each other's knowledge and skills. ... students who have progressed the furthest in one area ... function as models or helpers for slower students. Reciprocity ... exists in ... situations, for example, when a student who is more capable in one field takes on a new role, the teacher's role.”

(Hoel, 1997: 7)

The peer-tutoring and peer-correction that takes place through discussions benefit weak students. Although learners tend to favour teacher feedback over peer feedback, it is not necessarily any less valuable (Chaudron, 1983). Some students prefer the latter because they do not feel self-conscious when they are being corrected by their friends instead of their teachers.

A psycholinguistic rationale for group work has also been proposed in the research on writing. According to Long (1990), the more individualized negotiation for meaning which is possible in small groups should increase the

quantity and quality of comprehensible input available to students. In this study, the reading materials provided to the participants can prove to be a rich source of input. This is beneficial to most learners since they usually write on matters they have read beforehand. (O'Dell, 1996). When they have read materials directly linked to the topic they are supposed to write on, they can relate to the writing task given to them. In a way, their writing is monitored indirectly.

1.4 Significance

This study is significant in a few ways. Firstly, the findings would provide a deeper understanding on the advantages and disadvantages of using discussions as a pre-writing tool. Through this, teachers can improve the quality of their classroom discussions when they are aware of the strengths and pitfalls of the method.

Secondly, the study will reveal how to overcome difficulties in the use of discussion as a pre-writing tool. For example, if the study shows that discussions can help learners use transitions effectively in writing rather than merely having the teacher teach them, a brainstorming session can be held in the writing classroom.

Thirdly, the study will demonstrate how reading materials can be used widely in the writing classroom. If it proves beneficial to the subjects of the study, teachers may be better informed about ways to obtain input for writing through reading.