CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

The use of discussion as a mediational means in the process of teaching writing is based on the supposition that there is a positive relationship between peer interaction and the acquisition of writing skills. (Sim, 1998). Similarly, in this study, the researcher’s aim is to discover empirical evidence of the usefulness of discussion as a pre-writing tool in the teaching of writing at tertiary-level.

2.1 Theoretical Framework

This study is guided by the theoretical concepts of Vygotsky’s Social-Cognitive Theory, Piaget’s Cognitive Conflict Theory, Swain’s Output Hypothesis and Feuerstein’s Theory of Mediation. The general belief is learners need aid from more experienced individuals in order to achieve high levels of learning. It is known as the scaffolding process. The scaffolds will be removed once the learner has mastered the skill.
2.1.1 Social-Cognitive Theory

Vygotsky (1986) believes that cognitive development results from social interaction. There is a link between interaction and individual psychological development. This interaction takes place among individuals in the society. Learning will take place when internalization occurs (Vygotsky, 1978).

A child learns a great deal from the problem-solving process. Although from the earliest months of life, he is a "natural" problem-solver in his own right (Bruner, 1973), it is often the case that his efforts are assisted and fostered by others who are more skilful than he is (Kaye, 1970).

Bruffee (1984), a proponent for the social constructionist theory says that knowledge is socially derived. It means that interaction and negotiation constitutes learning. He adds that both of them will aid the internalization of cognitive and linguistic skills which in turn, result in improved writing abilities.

The central premise of Vygotsky's theory is that cognitive development or development of higher mental functioning takes place in a social context. (Cazden, 1988). Learning takes place through interaction with others. How a learner develops in the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) is determined by the nature of social interaction (Moll, 1989) in a specific problem-solving situation.
Vygotsky (1978) defines this zone as the distance between actual development (determined by independent problem-solving) and the level of potential development (determined through problem-solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers). Collaboration will result in development if the interaction is within the less capable learner’s ZPD.

Vygotsky (1978) explains that learners will need to move from the inter-psychological plane to the intra-psychological plane. This can be described as having adults “raise the ante” when the child has become more independent and does not need much help in a particular area. It can be described as capable learners aiding weak learners less when they have improved in a certain aspect.

Learners should also move from 3 stages which are from the Inner Speech level, Egocentric level and finally, to the Social Speech level. (Vygotsky, 1978) At the Inner Speech stage, the meaning of expressions is within the child and at the Egocentric Speech the meaning is still unclear to others. When the child reaches the Social Speech stage, the meaning is clear to the recipients.
2.1.2 Cognitive Conflict

Difference of opinions may occur during collaborative activities. Piaget (1959) mentions that the ability to accept and consider others’ points is essential to cognitive development. He says that social interaction will create cognitive conflict for there may arise a situation when one’s thoughts are not similar with the others.

Johnson and Johnson (1979) proposes a solution in resolving conflicts within a group. A model of conflict-resolution-learning is used. Feelings of insecurity and uncertainty will result during tense moments of argument. The learners will be forced to find out more information in order to reach an agreement.

In the writing process, one needs to perceive a topic from different angles. This will involve the ability to receive alternative points of view. Thus, in discussions, group members have to negotiate and reach consensus over conflicting matters. This will provide learners with the opportunity to think critically and to exercise good judgement.
2.1.3 Output Hypothesis

Swain (1995) and Swain and Lapkin (1995) listed out four functions of output in second language acquisition. Firstly, learners will improve on their language when they have practice in using it while producing output. This can be done by using the speaking or writing mode.

Secondly, there is a “noticing or triggering” function of output. Learners will begin to realise the difference between “what they want to say and what they can say”. In other words, they become aware of their limitations in using the target language. Hence, they are more conscious and pay ample attention to their learning. According to Schmidt (1990), he describes learners in this category as “those who notice most learn most and it may be that those who notice most are those who pay attention most”.

Thirdly, learners can test their knowledge of the language from their output. When they are corrected on their utterances, they will learn more effectively. Teachers need to be sensitive to their students' feelings, too, while attempting to do so. If they fail to do so, the students' affective filter may become high and they will not be able to learn well from their errors.
Lastly, output has a metalinguistic function. It simply means that students need to set aside some time to analyse their production. Consequently, they can continually improve their linguistic knowledge and internalising them to their own advantage.

2.1.4 Theory of Mediation

Feuerstein’s Theory of Mediation emphasises that a child’s learning is shaped by significant adults who are called mediators. Experiences provide mediated learning experiences to a child. They shape the child’s early attempts at responding to stimuli, directing and encouraging more appropriate responses while explaining why one response is more appropriate than another. (Feuerstein, Rand, Hoffman and Miller, 1980).

According to Williams and Burden (1997), mediation must be concerned with empowering, with helping learners to acquire the knowledge, skills and strategies they will need in order to progress, to learn more, to tackle problems and to meet new, emerging and unpredictable demands. These skills can be categorised as of a high cognitive level.

Learners are also trained to be autonomous and to be independent in their learning. In the process, they become independent thinkers and
problem-solvers. (Williams and Burden, 1997). This will not take place without having the learners being provided with suitable self-access materials and the helpful guidance of the teacher in ensuring the learners interact with their materials until they become self-directed.

Interaction between the mediator and learner must take place. The learner has to be actively involved in the process. Only then can he digest and absorb the input which may later become intake for him.

According to Feuerstein, Rand, Hoffman and Miller (1980), reciprocation has to take place, too. The learner has to reciprocate the intentions of the mediator. In other words, he has to submit to the instructions of the teacher. This is of importance in carrying out the task planned and reaching an agreement as to what should be done and why. Reciprocation may also occur at the level of acceptance and willingness to comply. This can be a direct result of a process of negotiation in which consensus has been reached from other mediational activities.

Social interactionists believe that children learn from their interactions in the social world. This will result in meaningful learning and helping them to make sense of the world. It can be concluded that interactions are crucial to all children in their internalisations of the input provided in their environment.
Williams and Burden (1997) believe that such experiences may occur, too, among adult learners when they have meaningful discussions with their peers. Their more capable peers will play the role of mediators to their weaker counterparts. Effective learning and sharing of ideas will hopefully take place.

2.2 Group Work

Group work is a generic term covering a multiplicity of techniques in which two or more students are assigned a task that involves collaboration and self-initiated language (Brown, 1994). It usually involves small groups of six or fewer members. Large groups do not provide them with sufficient opportunities to speak.

Group work offers more opportunities to learners to interact. By one estimate (Long and Porter, 1985), if half of the class time were spent in group work, it could increase individual practice five-fold over whole-class traditional methodology.

The contemporary view on writing was to concentrate on the product rather than the process. The teachers of writing discover that writing is a long and painful process whereby the final draft will only emerge after many drafts (Nunan, 1995).
Stemming from this, a number of classroom techniques have been used. One of them is conferencing. Its aim is to allow learners the opportunity to discuss their initial drafts with their teacher and peers.

Group work is perceived as important by many researchers. Cummings (1989) says:

"Current approaches to writing instruction in a second language advocate the negotiation of their audiences, sequential processes of drafting and revising compositions and the development of learners' abilities to diversify their capacities for written expression."

Learners tend to benefit from the collaborative efforts for they can undergo each stage of the writing process such as idea generation, cooperative work on gathering and organising points, seeking peer feedback and the existence of an authentic audience. Collaborative learning and teaching strategies have been studied in order to determine how best to harness diverse strengths, energies and personalities in the shared responsibility for education (Clark, 1987).
2.2.1 Benefits and Shortcomings of Group Work

Collaborative learning or group work is essential in learning. Five major pedagogical benefits are listed by Long (1990).

Firstly, group work increases the quantity of language practice opportunities. In the traditional classroom, language is restricted to initiation by the teacher in an artificial setting resulting in the whole class becoming a “group of interlocutors”. Learners in small groups are allowed to initiate talk, give and take in a face-to-face situation, negotiate for meaning, extending conversational exchanges and adopting roles which may not seem possible in a teacher-centred environment.

Secondly, group work improves the quality of student talk. Barnes (1976) mentions that students can be involved in “exploratory” talk and use wider speech repertoire. It means that students are concerned with meaning and not so much on language, resulting in a functionally wider range of talk.

Thirdly, according to Long (1990), group work helps learners to study at their own pace whereby instructions become individualized. This is an advantage to slow learners for they do not have to feel intimidated in the midst of other learners.
Fourthly, group work helps to create an affective climate in the classroom (Long, 1990). The intimate group setting is essential to shy and linguistically insecure students. Lastly, group work can be a source of motivation to learners.

Jones (1994) explains that learners become responsible for their own learning when they indulge in group work. The reason is the focus on the teacher is reduced and they can concentrate on the task given to them which requires them to be directly responsible.

Group work produces greater quantity of output and negotiation of meaning than the traditional teacher fronted classes. (Long and Porter, 1985) In addition, the negotiation of meaning, accomplished through such interactional moves as clarification requests and confirmation checks have been shown to result in modified output. (Pica, Holliday, Lewis and Morganthales, 1989)

Olsen and Kagan (1992) describe four components that are important in successful collaborative learning. They are thoughtful planning tasks; a rational approach to the construction of groups; accountability by each participant for the successful completion of the assigned task and the development of social skills necessary for the group to work effectively.
Swain (1993) adds the fifth point which is the task given should result in positive interdependence among the students. Through the activity, learners need to feel that they depend on their friends to learn and complete the task. They should also feel that all of them have benefited from the interaction.

Nunan (1993) supports the use of collaborative learning. He says that L2 learners lack the motivation to use the target language. By promoting a learner-centred curriculum, the students feel more involved in their lessons. Simultaneously, the students, too, get to use the L2 in their course of discussion.

Learner-centred activities and group work are not similar but they complement each other. They require the learners to be responsible for their learning in a way. Therefore, they become independent and realise that they cannot rely solely on the teacher.

Nunan has observed that even elementary-school children have taken responsibility for planning, organising, managing and evaluating their own language when classroom topics are nominated by the learners instead of the teacher. Learner participation in class relates significantly to improvements in language proficiency and that in group work among high-school students, opportunities to speak are significantly correlated with the acquisition of vocabulary. (Nunan, 1988).
Jones (1994) carried out a project at Universiti Brunei Darussalam that moves attention away from the individual learner but focuses on both reading and writing as group activities. This study involved some university undergraduates. It assumes that the students face problems in writing which is an important skill to them.

The group work requires the students to use input obtained from their reading to have an influence on their output in writing. The writing tasks present problems and open knowledge gaps that can only be addressed with recourse to reading. The students read with a purpose that is the knowledge gained from a particular section will contribute to the group's overall objective of producing a specific written task.

On the whole, the students have to share a reading passage, negotiate its meaning and then attempt to answer the written assignment. The students will have to be responsible for any extra input they might acquire for comprehension as well as for the quality of the finished product. In other words, the learners have to be responsible for their own learning.
Jones (1994) discovered that when the learners were released from the constraints of working solely with their own limited resources and not having a teacher to lead or intimidate them, they became less inhibited than before. The group they were in also provided a non-threatening and supportive environment to them.

They gained confidence in experimenting and contributing to the task assigned to them. When they realised that they would not be mocked for their mistakes, the students began to treat their task seriously. Gradually, the apparently shy and retiring student started to initiate and seek clarification from the teacher. The consequence was the students no longer passively accepted input but questioned it and tried to produce written work that contained mastery of both semantics and syntax.

When learners are expected to produce language, they are expected to make use of what language they have while admitting their own limitations. This is in line with the experiential view of learning. In a teacher-centred classroom, students are provided with opportunities to express themselves. Therefore, much of the students' ability is assumed.
Long, Adams, McLean and Castanos (1976) carried out a study on the effectiveness of group work on ESL adult learners. From the classroom transcripts collected, it is found that group work prompts students to adopt more roles and use a greater range of language functions than teacher-fronted activities.

Two disadvantageous corollaries of collaborative work are blindness and randomness. (Reid, 1993) Group work functions well when it is part of an overall sequence that has some individual writing, reading, or thinking, some small group collaboration and some synthesis with the class as a whole.

As Corder (1991) points out, no one model of teaching guarantees that students will learn; different occasions, audiences, subject matter and opportunities demand different methods of teaching. Collaborative learning may allow students to discover knowledge and while it does place the responsibility of learning on the students, it may descend into pretentious “multivoiced monologues” or randomness (Reid, 1993).

On the other hand, the traditional lecture allows the teacher to share the burden of learning with the students. Students, too, are allowed to have direct conduit to knowledge. Group work will definitely be useful to motivated learners who are genuine in wanting to learn.
Some learners may not act positively towards discussions. This may be due to their personalities and learning styles. They may not know how to negotiate or may not choose to negotiate, in fact, an entire group may remain quiet during the discussion.

These students may give misleading, wrong and even counterproductive feedback. These unprepared or uncooperative students can derail small group activities (blindness, randomness) and the teacher will experience as many feelings of failure as the students (Reid, 1993). Therefore, teachers need to provide guidelines to their students before carrying out collaborative work.

Having positive results from peer response groups is challenging in an ESL classroom. Learning to write honestly and frequently in a second language, to share work and to respond to another’s work, to accept criticism and to work on revisions are often new behaviours for ESL students that may be difficult to achieve (Ballard and Clancy, 1992; Basham and Kwachka, 1992).

However, students must be taught to give productive response; unplanned or informal collaboration and response are usually neither efficient nor effective (Dassin, 1991; Haernik, 1984; Hansson, 1992; Krest, 1988). Teachers should nurture new attitudes and behaviours among students.
Group work can cause the teacher to feel "on the outside" (Reid, 1993). Students may perceive that the teacher is not doing one's job that is teaching. As a conclusion, teachers need to establish a pattern of facilitation, mediation and mini-conferencing.

The learners have to view the teacher as a knowledge or experience resource. During the discussion, the teacher has to circulate, answer questions, encourage discussion, intervene if necessary, briefly join each group and have mini-conferencing with the students (Reid, 1993).

2.3 Oral Techniques in Language Learning

Many psychologists and linguists agree that interaction is a crucial means of exchanging knowledge that would both engender development and learning. Graves (1996) has the opinion that interaction is seen as extremely significant in any learning process.

Theories of communicative competence emphasise the use of interaction for humans. They use it in sending messages, receiving messages, interpreting them in a context, negotiating meanings and collaborating to accomplish certain purposes.
Allwright (1984) believes that exchange is the basic unit of discourse. Linguistic interaction is a collaborative activity involving the establishment of a triangular relationship among the sender, the receiver and the context of the situation.

Brown (1994) defines interaction as the collaborative exchange of thoughts, feelings or ideas between two or more people resulting in a reciprocal effect on each other. Vygotsky (1988) points out that there is no development of learning without interaction among people and that the human being first experiences active problem-solving activities in the presence of others.

Rivers (1987) says that communication derives essentially from interaction in which someone has something to share with someone else who is interested and active while the interest lasts. Davis (1989) summarizes the importance of interaction within the classroom: Interaction is the process in which each student is in charge of building knowledge so that the solution is reached through a common effort of cooperation and mutual help.
There are many advocates for interactions in the language classroom. Nunan (1989) defines communicative tasks as a piece of classroom work which involves learners in comprehending, manipulating, producing or interacting in the target language while their attention is principally focussed on meaning rather than form. The task should also have a sense of completeness, being able to stand alone as a communicative act in its own right.

The need for the existence of interactive classrooms is explained by (Rivers, 1987: p 4-5). Through interaction, students can increase their language store as they listen to or read authentic linguistic material or even the output of their fellow students in discussions, skits, joint problem-solving tasks or dialogue journals.

In interaction, students can use all they possess of the language --- all they have learned or casually absorbed -- in real life exchanges. Even at an elementary stage, they learn in this way to exploit the elasticity of language.

Discussions are useful in the teaching of English. The relevance of classroom discussions is described as:
“...The assumption is that this internal process of learning will come about as a consequence of the external interaction which takes place between the two kinds of participants: the teacher ... and the learners on the other. The classroom interaction serves an enabling function: its only purpose is to provide conditions for learning.”

(Malamah-Thomas, 1991)

Classroom interaction, in short creates a conducive situation for language learning.

2.3.1 Benefits and Shortcomings of Oral Techniques and Interaction

Gough (1987) cited love, belonging, power and fun as important elements in learning. Discussions can combine all of these elements in a lesson. He said that teachers cannot force students to learn but they can set things up so that they want to learn. When learners' needs are closely met, they will perceive school as a place they want to learn in.
Classroom studies have proven that group interaction does not result in a decline in grammatical accuracy compared to the same learners' performance in lockstep work as measured by the percentage of grammatical T-units. Through the latter, more errors may take place due to interlanguage. The amount of negotiation work achieved in interlanguage talk is also greater than that in either lockstep work native or non-native speaker conversation in pairs.

Studies have shown that the frequency of other-correction and completions by group members is higher in group work than in lockstep teaching and not very different from that observed in native or non-native speaker conversations (Bruton and Samuda, 1980). Learners are able to correct each other successfully. Group members almost never miscorrect and there is minimal incorporation of other students’ errors. (Long and Porter, 1985)

Porter (1983) carried out a research on adult ESL learners from three proficiency levels. From their conversation transcripts, she found out that the participants produced more talk with other learners than with native speaker partners. They did not produce more errors when speaking with other learners nor "learned" each other's mistakes.
A seminar presentation on teaching methods (Centre of Development of Teaching and Learning) and a university handbook on teaching (Centre for Educational Technology: Pan, 1995) has shown some interesting results. The experienced teachers involved have cautioned against using tutorials as opportunities for still staff input. They have encouraged and illustrated activities that lead students to take on more active roles in learning. This will provide students with the opportunities to explore ideas for themselves and for tutorial interactions to take place.

Significantly, tutors who attempt to encourage student talk often report varying levels of success in the quantity and quality of student interaction among different groups of students. Student perceptions can themselves constrain practices, though Rubdy (1996) shows how conscious attention to the dynamics of tutorial participation can help to modify and extend both tutor and student views of what is possible and appropriate.

Some researchers argue that when students work in a group, they will learn and be influenced by each other's mistakes. Porter (1983, 1986) refutes this notion for there is not much findings to support it.
Some group settings may be used to increase the quantity of work done on a useless task (Long, 1990, p 39). Aston (1986) has pointed out how poorly designed problem-solving activities can lead to a lot of negotiation work or trouble-shooting. This may result in frustration especially when too difficult a task is given and unshared participant backgrounds exist.

It is normal for students to get discouraged when they cannot perform a task allotted to them. When students of opposite personalities are grouped together, they may face a difficult time of reaching agreement on their discussion. Teachers have to prepare well before discussions are used. They need to ensure that maximum results are attainable through group work.

2.4 Implementation of Interactive Tasks

Interactive principles are automacity, intrinsic motivation, strategic investment, risk-taking, the language-culture connection, interlanguage and communicative competence (Brown, 1994). Learners need to be able to proceed to automatic modes of processing. The focus is more on meaning than form. According to Brown (1994), from the speech acts of fulfillment and self-actualization produced during the interactions, students should develop a system of self-reward.
Strategic language competence helps in the production and interpretation of language. According to Brown, students have to understand that there is risk-taking involved in the production of intended meaning and the interpretation of intended meaning. Their attempts will cause them to be either happy when they are successful or shunned when they fail. The cultural loading of interactive speech as well as writing requires that interlocutors be thoroughly versed in the cultural nuances of language.

Brown (1994) adds that students have to be aware of the long process that entails language acquisition. Along the way, they may make numerous errors that can be corrected by the teacher. The elements of communication such as grammar, discourse, sociolinguistics, pragmatics and strategies are important. They work together in order for successful interaction to take place.

It will be useful for teachers to be informed on the type of tasks needed for maximum results during discussions. Long (1981) carried out a study on the effectiveness of one-way and two-way tasks on native adult ESL speakers. Two-way tasks are those in which each student has unique information which must be shared for the task to be completed successfully. Meanwhile, for one-way tasks, only one student has all the information needed for the activity.
The results from the conversation transcripts show that these tasks prompt significantly more conversational adjustments by native speakers than one-way tasks. The former involved learners in more negotiation of meaning than the latter. (Long, 1981)

In a follow-up study on Long’s work on one- and two-way tasks, Doughty and Pica (1986) found that, again, two-way tasks generated significantly more modified interaction than one-way tasks in her study on adult ESL learners. More modified interaction was produced in small group work than in teacher-fronted tasks.

Duff (1986) compared convergent tasks which required problem-solving with divergent tasks which were in the form of debates. From the classroom transcripts of the adult ESL students, it was found predictably that convergent tasks produced more negotiation of meaning.

The group formation is equally essential to encourage interaction. Varonis and Gass (1985) conducted a study on ESL learners. It was found that most negotiation of meaning occurred when the learners were placed in small groups. They should consist of students with different language background and proficiency levels.
Allison (1998) carried out a case study on first-year undergraduates on how much discussions will help students in making summaries. He found out that members of the discussion group wrote summaries which contained less points about genetic influences on intelligence which were found in the original text than others.

The reason for it was from the transcripts, Allison (1998) found that the students focussed on environmental factors such as parental influences on how children occupied their time and sometimes on a narrow subset of the genetic issues raised in the text which was whether boys were more mathematically gifted than girls.

On the other hand, the participants stated that they were encouraged to mull over the text. Observations by the class teacher showed that the students did some in-depth discussion on the subject-matter and they also discussed their apparent task inhibitions throughout the session.