# CHAPTER 1

# INTRODUCTION

## 1.1    Background

In this study, I examine the hypothesis that students' writing can be improved by means of collaborative work.  The study could substantiate the social interactionist view that learning is a social matter which involves interaction with other people if students' writing indicates a substantial improvement (Williams & Burden, 1997).

The social interactionist view of language learning argues that an individual acquires a language through purposeful communication with other people (Williams & Burden, 1997).  This view, which owes substantially to the works of Lev Vygotsky and Reuven Feuerstein, serves as the theoretical underpinning of my research.  They believe that the key to successful learning rests in the collaboration between two or more individuals with various competencies (Williams & Burden, 1997).  I strongly subscribe to the social interactionist view of language learning because I feel its application could be beneficial to teachers and students in a Malaysian context.

From my experience, a typical Malaysian ESL classroom has between 30 to 40 students of mixed abilities and temperament.  As such, teachers waste precious time maintaining order while trying to carry out a lesson effectively.  Moreover, teachers are unable to give ample attention to every individual during an ESL writing lesson.  Hence, it is my contention that teachers can use collaborative work to reduce disorder in class as students would be occupied with completing a task with their friends.

More importantly, collaborative work may also be beneficial in a mixed ability class.  Teachers can pair or group students of mixed ability to work on a task.  Students who are weak academically may therefore benefit from collaborating with students who

are academically competent.  As such, students who are weak academically can capitalise on their zone of proximal development with help from capable peers.  The term 'zone of proximal development' refers to "the layer of skill or knowledge which is just beyond that with which the learner is currently capable of coping" (Williams & Burden, 1997:40).

The use of collaborative work in the ESL classroom is also known by different classifications: cooperative learning (Johnson & Johnson, 1992), student team learning (Slavin, 1996), group investigation (Sharan & Sharan, 1992) and collaborative learning (Barnes et al., 1986).  According to Johnson et al. (1984), experiences from collaborative learning encourage constructive relationships and the value of tolerance among students. In addition, Smith and Elley (1997) noted that interactions are necessary for strengthening and cultivating one's language.  Hence, collaborative work affirms the views of Vygotsky and Feuerstein that learning occurs in a social context, which forms the main hypothesis of my study.

## 1.2    Statement of the Problem

While techniques on using collaborative work in the ESL classroom for teaching writing dates back to the late 60's and early 70's (Mukherjee, 1993), serious inquiry into the process of collaborative writing emerged in the late 1980s (Noel & Robert, 2004). Prior to that, the teaching of writing focussed essentially on the verity of the piece of writing produced by students and locating grammatical mistakes with a red pen (Lim, 2002).

There were two reasons the shift of emphasis from the product to the process involved in writing occurred; ESL teachers who were discontented with the attention to product in teaching writing and researchers of L1 writing such as Emig (1971), Graves (1975), Perl (1978) and Pianko (1979) started exploring the processes associated with

writing (Lim, 2002:1). In general, their findings revealed that teachers could strive to assist students to write competently by focussing on the processes involved in writing rather than the piece of writing itself (Lim, 2002:1). The resulting process-oriented approach to writing "was heavily influenced by a cognitive view of writing, where the writer engages in recursive and non-linear mental strategies organized into three broad stages of planning, formulating, and revising" (Ortega, 2004:2). The developments of L1 writing, which centred on the process approach to writing, began to rub off on the teaching of writing in ESL classrooms, as ESL teachers noticed the shift from product-oriented to process-oriented approach to writing in L1 writing classes (Lim, 2002).

Although the cognitive view of writing provided an understanding of how the human mind functions during the writing process, "it has ignored the way in which context and writing interact" (Murray, 1992:100). In other words, in real-life contexts, writing is done collaboratively. For example, proficient writers such as doctors, lawyers and scientists deliberate, hold discussions, and communicate with one another over their written work (Bruffee, 1993). It is possible that the process-oriented approach to writing can be done alone without any feedback from others, but it is not particularly useful for students to write on their own (McDonough & Shaw, 1993). As such, researchers such as Doheny-Farina (1986) and Odell (1985) in Murray (1992), Murray (1992), Beck (1993), Poulsen (1993), Jones and Pellegrini (1996), Franken and Haslett (1999), Topping (2001), Lim (2002), Noel and Robert (2004), Neomy (2005), Ferguson-Patrick (2007) and King (2007) approached the process-oriented approach to writing from a social interactionist perspective. The social interactionist view of writing (as mentioned in 1.1) involves putting students into groups. Within each group, students collaborate in fulfilling the writing assignment (Jones & Pellegrini, 1996). Therefore, educators should provide ESL students the circumstances to apply collaborative writing strategies during writing

activities so that they are primed for life after graduating from secondary school (Murray, 1992). In the Malaysian context, it appears that the ESL writing classes do not prepare students for the future as there is "a decline in the fluency and competency in the language" (Alias Mohammad Yatim, 1997:57). Hence, a study that examines collaborative work in writing in a typical Malaysian ESL classroom is needed in order to determine whether collaborative writing can be used effectively with Malaysian ESL students. It is hoped that this study contributes to the understanding of learning and teaching of writing in a Malaysian context in order to halt the perceived decline in the proficiency in the English language.

## 1.3    Purpose of the Study

This study seeks to gain an understanding into how collaborative work can aid the learning and teaching of writing in a typical Malaysian ESL classroom. Thus, the study's main aim is to find out whether students' writing improves substantially when it is done collaboratively.

According to Jones and Pellegrini (1996), many classroom circumstances adopt the social interactionist approach to writing (as mentioned in 1.2). The conclusion in Jones and Pellegrini's (1996) research, that additional inquiries are necessary to explore the ways in which various social relationships (such as peers) have a bearing on various kinds of writing, has urged my interest in carrying out the proposed study. Moreover, Bruffee (1993:57) argued that "because writing is itself a displaced form of conversation, teachers have to find ways for students to learn to engage in constructive conversation with one another (such as collaborative work) about writing". Therefore, writing, one of the two major mediums in which language is expressed (the other is speaking), should be thought of as social, collaborative and interactional.

4

This investigation into the effectiveness of collaboration in improving students' writing is timely because collaborative writing activity resembles "the actual conditions of writing in business, government, and those academic disciplines where collaboration is the norm, rather than the exception" (Trimbur, 1985 in Mukherjee, 1993:120). In addition, by taking into account the outrageous amount of data and knowledge that wage-earners have to deal with in their working environment, "collaboration is likely to be a highly necessary skill in all countries and students need to be exposed to it before they join a job" (Mukherjee, 1993:120). Therefore, students must be given the occasion to use collaborative writing in anticipation of life beyond the classroom (Murray, 1992).

There are three reasons why writing is chosen for this research. The first is because writing has been perceived as difficult by students. For instance, Chitravelu et al. (1995) noted that a lot of Malaysian ESL students find writing challenging because they do not find a reason for it. That perception needs to be altered because as noted by Raimes (1983), writing is a means for communicating with an audience. Using collaborative work in writing may bring a change in the aforementioned perception among Malaysian ESL students and thus make writing enjoyable because "students want and need work that will enhance their relationships with people they care about" (Strong, Silver & Robinson, 1995:12).

The second reason is due to the lack of research on the relationship between peer communication and classroom learning (Johnson, 1995), even though it is a common belief among language teachers that students' language competency increases as a result of constant interaction with their classmates (Franken & Haslett, 1999). The lack of research on the impact of interaction on learning is further compounded by research focussing particularly on language output such as grammatical faultlessness and speaking articulately (Franken & Haslett, 1999). This is because when ESL teachers contemplate the dilemmas

that they face when teaching the English language, they favour the improvement of the speaking skill over writing proficiency (Ortega, 2004). Therefore, this research is significant because it aims to look at the effectiveness of interaction through collaborative work in the context of writing.

The third reason writing is chosen for this research is because the writing skill has become a necessity in the face of increasing globalisation and the constant evolution of communications technology. Increasing globalisation means English writing "plays fundamental intercultural and transnational roles in businesses, work places, and governmental activities across the world's geography" (Parks, 2000 & Thatcher, 2002 in Ortega, 2004:1). The ever changing face of communications technology, particularly in the realm of cyberspace which offer free blogging platforms, has amplified the necessity to write competently in English. English writing competence is also a must for students who choose to further their studies in English-medium institutes of higher learning. Being competent in English language writing could help increase the competitiveness of the students, thus opening more "doors to individual, national, and international progress and advancement" (Ortega, 2004:1).

## 1.4    Research Questions

The objective of the study is to determine the effectiveness of collaborative work in students' writing. As mentioned in 1.3, Malaysian ESL students often find writing difficult. When they perceive writing to be a chore, it may affect their self-esteem and vice versa. Collaborative work could be the answer to break this vicious cycle. According to Johnson and Johnson (1983), "cooperative learning experiences, compared with competitive and individualistic ones, promote higher levels of self-esteem" (cited in Johnson et al., 1984:21).

Therefore, the research questions have been formulated to explore whether students' writing can be enhanced through collaborative work. It is anticipated that the data collected would be informative regarding the effectiveness of using collaborative work in the learning and teaching of writing. The fundamental research questions are as follows:

(i)    How can collaborative work in writing be implemented?

(ii)   To what extent can collaborative work benefit students' writing, in terms of content[1], vocabulary[2], language[3] and mechanics[4]?

(iii)  To what extent do students find collaborative work useful in writing their essays?

## 1.5    Significance of the Study

The proposed study intends to provide a more comprehensive and realistic insight regarding the use of collaborative work in learning and teaching writing. The study is based on a hypothesis that writing, as well as other types of learning, is socially based. This hypothesis is, of course derived from the social interactionist theory that learning involves interaction (as discussed in 1.1 and 1.2).

A recent article in the *New York Times* (Lewin, 2003) reported that "writing in schools is found to be both dismal and neglected" (cited in Wong-Kam & Vasquez, 2003). White and Arndt (1991) also stated that writing has tended to be a much more neglected part of the language programme, both in first and second language teaching. Being part of

---

[1] The essays are examined based on changes in numbers of ideas. An increase in ideas does not necessarily mean an improvement in the quality of the ideas themselves. Further details are in 3.3.3.1

[2] The essays are examined based on changes and/or addition of words and/or phrases. Further details are in 3.3.3.1

[3] A holistic assessment is used to evaluate this component. Further details are in 3.3.3.1

[4] Accurate use of spelling, punctuation and paragraphing would merit an "excellent" band while high density of errors in these three aspects would merit a "very weak" band. Further details are in 3.3.3.1

the four language skills that need to be mastered by language learners, the importance of the writing skill should not be sidelined. Through writing, one is able to share ideas, arouse feelings, persuade and convince other people. Sometimes too, one is able to discover and articulate ideas in ways that only writing makes possible (White & Arndt, 1991) Furthermore, writing is becoming an increasingly important and used skill because of the cheapness, availability, accessibility and convenience of e-mail, blogging, the Internet and even text messaging. Thus, the study is significant because it highlights the importance of writing and the means to get students to be actively involved in writing through collaboration.

My early experience in learning writing consists of the teacher setting aside time to write on a topic. Writing should be done in solitary and the teacher would then evaluate the finished products. Occasions for interaction and discussion were restricted. With the exception of a few exceptional students, others often produced unsatisfactory pieces of writing. Consequently, students lacked interest in writing. According to Bruffee (1993:57-58), peer interaction is a necessary component for successful writing because "students can write effectively only to people they have been and continue to be, directly or indirectly, in conversation with". Hence, teachers should provide an environment for students to interact with their peers during the writing process and collaborative work offers such opportunities. Moreover, the need to engage with others is one of the several important elements for maintaining motivation in learning. Strong, Silver and Robinson (1995:12) for instance argued that "students want and need work that will enhance their relationships with people they care about". Therefore, this study is significant in that collaborative work in writing provides occasions for peer interaction which in turn could lead to an improvement in writing and maintaining motivation in learning.

In addition, the purposes of writing are often influenced by its audience. Small groups can help apprehensive or blocked writers become more fluent and can provide an audience that assists the writer in revising (Legge, 1980; cited in Herrmann, 1989). Indeed a comparative study of amateur writers and professional journalist (Wootten, 1981; cited in Herrmann, 1989) disclosed that the students thought of their audience and readers less than the journalist did. Accordingly, it can be deduced that students require audiences apart from the teacher. Collaborative writing groups would certainly provide immediate audience for students. Besides creating "a greater sense that writing is a social activity closely linked to the human life" (Ishihara, 1996; cited in Matsubara, 2001), the presence of audience gives students a sense of pride and success which in turn may encourage them to improve their writing. The findings of the proposed study could be significant because it would be viewed as a pragmatic contribution towards the learning and teaching of writing.

Moreover, this study is significant in terms of changing the mindset of Malaysian teachers of English who are "generally disheartened by the deteriorating standard of competence in the language among learners" (Jamali Ismail, 1992:7). The depreciation in the standard of English proficiency is due to factors connected to the education system, which is beyond the teachers' control. These factors include the structure of the education system which curtails students' chances for contact with English, the need to complete the syllabus without taking into account students' competency (in other words, it is sink or swim), the nature of public examinations in which students can still pass even if they do not make the grade in the English subject, the scarcity of English teachers and students who are unenthusiastic in learning the language (Jamali Ismail, 1992). With such overwhelming factors, it would appear that the odds are against Malaysian teachers of English in raising the standard of the language.

This study is significant in that it demonstrates to teachers that they can work within the system to make a difference. This study is conducted during the students' English Language periods and uses a writing topic which is related to the syllabus. Ultimately, however, this study is significant in providing the tool for English teachers to use in improving students' writing skill, which is collaborative work.

**1.6     Scope of the Study**

This study aims to investigate the effectiveness of collaborative work in writing. Therefore, the scope of this study is very precise in many aspects. For example, this study examines students' written work and not other learning skills. Written work produced by students during a pre-test, in which students were required to write individually, and a post-test, in which students were required to write using the steps involved in collaborative work, were compared and analysed based on content[5], language[6], vocabulary[7] and mechanics[8]. This study also explores one particular form of essay, which is opinion essay and not other forms of essay, such as formal and informal letter writing, speeches, dialogues, processes and procedures and pictorial compositions. In addition, this study looks into students' responses to collaborative work in writing through questionnaire and not looking at what the researcher thinks. Finally, this study focuses on a homogeneous group of subjects as opposed to a heterogeneous group. The subjects were of the same age, gender and ethnic group. The reason for this is to minimise differences in learner variables such as age, gender, educational and cultural background.

---

[5] An increase in ideas does not necessarily equate to an improvement in the quality of the ideas. Further details are in 3.3.3.1

[6] Assessment is based on the marking criteria designed by the Malaysian Examinations Syndicate. Further details are in 3.3.3.1

[7] The essays are analysed based on changes and/or addition of words and/or phrases. Further details are in 3.3.3.1

[8] Assessment is based on the marking criteria designed by the Malaysian Examinations Syndicate. Further details are in 3.3.3.1

## 1.7    Summary

This study aims to test the hypothesis that students' writing can be enhanced through interaction in the form of collaborative work. This hypothesis is based on social interactionism which stresses on learning in a social context. In the next chapter, the following areas would be discussed:

- Social interactionism

- ESL writing

- The concept of collaborative learning

- Limitations and challenges of collaborative work