

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

In this chapter, I examine articles and studies which are related to the proposed study, beginning with a discussion of the social interactionist approach to language learning. Next, I discuss ESL writing and collaboration in general and how they can be conducted. Last but not least, the limitations and challenges of adopting collaborative work are discussed.

2.1 Social Interactionism

The teaching-learning process is a highly complex process. It is not as simplified as something carried out by a teacher standing in front of a class, transmitting knowledge to a group of willing learners, like blank slates waiting to be transcribed. However, such simplicity is prevalent in our students' learning experience. According to Asmah Haji Omar (2000:18), Malaysian students are "prescribed with English language textbooks, taught to write simple compositions, fill in the blanks, find synonyms and antonyms (mostly context free), straighten sentences which have been mutilated or dislocated on purpose, and such like exercises". Such situations need not necessarily arise if teachers adopt the social interactionist approach to learning. In a social interactionist approach, collaboration among peers is the key to efficacious learning (Williams & Burden, 1997). Teachers should thus view the learner as an individual actively involved in co-constructing meaning. As stated by Williams and Burden (1997), teachers should help and encourage learners in making sense of the language, rather than seeing them as passive receivers of the language.

Worthwhile learning therefore entails the learners in actively making sense of their world, but they do so within a social context, and through social interactions. As Salmon (1988:22) pointed out, “though each of us inhabits a unique experiential world, if it is to be a social world, we must find ways of reaching a common understanding together with others” (cited in Williams & Burden, 1997:28). In other words, the whole learning experience becomes a mutual endeavour. As such, the context in which learning takes place is essential to successful learning.

As mentioned in 1.1, social interactionism, which underpins my study, stems from the ideas of two of the most well-known psychologists, the Russian, Vygotsky, and the Israeli, Feuerstein. Social interactionists believe that “children are born into a social world, and learning occurs through interaction with other people” (Williams & Burden, 1997:39). They believe that mutual cooperation among peers with various capabilities is pivotal in generating positive learning outcomes. This school of thought considers the social nature of language itself, thus emphasising the importance of both the context of learning and the nature of the social and communicative interactions that take place within that context, usually a classroom (Williams & Burden, 1997). As stated by Littlewood (1981), many aspects of language learning can take place only through natural processes, which operate when a person is involved in using language for communication. Therefore, teachers need to be particularly aware of the impact of the interactions that occur in the classroom. The nature of the interaction in the target language may influence the way students learn that language.

Both Vygotsky and Feuerstein also emphasise the concept of *mediation* as a key element in the learning process, referring to the role of *mediator*: the one with most knowledge, usually a parent or teacher, but often a peer, in finding ways of helping the other to learn (Williams & Burden, 1997). Besides generating circumstances where

interaction between two or more learners will occur, as mediator in the language classroom, Williams and Burden (1997) elaborated that the teacher is also vital in fostering the right climate for learning to take place, for confidence to develop, for individuality to be respected, for a sense of belonging to be nurtured, for developing appropriate learning strategies, and for moving towards learner autonomy.

Another useful concept of social interactionism is put forward by Vygotsky. He coins the term *zone of proximal development* (ZPD) to point out the advantages of collaborative work set at a level just beyond the learner's current level of competence. The term 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). It simply means that working together with another person, either an adult or a more competent peer at a level that is just above a learner's present capabilities is the best way for the learner to move into the next layer (Williams & Burden, 1997). It is thus evident that social interaction is essential for learning to take place. My study, which involves collaborative work among peers with different levels of competency, takes advantage of the ZPD in an attempt to improve students' writing. The notion of ZPD is further corroborated by Krashen's *Input Hypothesis*, which argues that "second language learners acquire language by understanding language that is a bit beyond the learner's current level" (McDonell, 1992; in Kessler, 1992:54). For instance, the learner can exploit contextual clues in a sentence to determine the meaning of an unfamiliar word, or use his/her knowledge of the world to comprehend what he/she is currently learning. Therefore, it might be safe to assume that writing, too involves a similar process. Effective teachers should thus plan and carry out learning activities within students' zones of proximal development. Obviously, this can be accomplished in collaborative classrooms.

Williams and Burden (1997) too believe that worthwhile learning:

- can take a number of different forms;
- is always influenced by the context in which it occurs;
- results mainly from social interaction;
- often needs to be mediated;
- is an emotional as well as a cognitive process;
- is closely related to how people feel about themselves.

(adapted from Williams & Burden, 1997:62)

Each of the above points reflects an important aspect of social interactionism with an additional emphasis upon the affective as well as the cognitive dimensions.

2.2 Theories of ESL Writing

In the previous section, I have touched on the concept of social interactionism which serves as the backbone of my study. In this section, I touch on writing in general because my study focuses on this particular skill which I feel is important as it is an integral part in our everyday lives, both as an instrument of communication and for self-expression. However, teachers often sideline writing in favour of developing students' speaking competence, which then results in the neglect of promoting students' writing capabilities (Ortega, 2004). In addition, writing is often treated as a tool to support learning, such as reinforcing new language components taught in the classroom (Hedge, 1988). Whatever the reason, writing has been a neglected area of English language teaching for some years.

However, although learning to write or even becoming a writer might be a complex and continuous process, writing should not be sidelined in the teaching and learning of language. Writing should not be treated solely as reinforcement to other language skills

learned in the language classroom. In fact, there are a variety of pedagogical purposes for the teaching of writing in a language classroom. As we know, different learners have different learning styles and needs. For example, some learners learn most easily using the aural channel while some feel more secure if they are allowed to read and write in the language. Thus, as Byrne (1988) notes, the teaching of writing skills enables us to provide for different learning styles and needs since writing could act as an aid to retention of learning for some learners.

Teachers should be able to see the purpose for teaching writing and in turn help students see the purpose of writing. In addition, teachers of English in Malaysia need to realise that learning to write in the second language is likely to be different from learning to write in the mother tongue. As Kroll (1990:2) suggests, “the complexity of mastering writing skills is compounded both by the difficulties inherent in learning a second language and by the way in which first language literacy skills may transfer to or detract from the acquisition of second language skills”. So, whatever approach is adopted, it should be capable of helping pupils to overcome their difficulty in all these areas. Perhaps that is why exploiting the use of collaborative work in the writing classroom could help develop students’ writing skills.

Since my study involves writing in a Malaysian context, which is ESL based, I am now going to look at the two foremost theories to the teaching of ESL writing; product and process (Chitravelu et al., 1995). The ‘product’ approach focuses on what students have written at the end of the writing activity while the ‘process’ approach focuses on how students write. Prior to the preference for the process approach in the 1980s, the teaching of ESL writing was essentially product-oriented (as discussed in 1.2). My experiences in writing had always reflected the ‘product’ approach. It involved the teacher giving a topic to the class, some brainstorming involving the whole class and finally the class writing on

the topic independently. Then, the pieces of writing were collected and assessed by the teacher. However, no feedback was given other than the correction of grammatical mistakes. The researcher's experiences echo the product approach to writing which has the following characteristics as outlined by McDonough and Shaw (1993:179):

1. priority is on precision or error-free writing
2. the centre of interest is the completed piece of writing
3. the teacher is responsible for assessing the piece of writing
4. writing serves to reinforce other language skills taught in class

As a result, the 'process' approach to writing has taken a back seat. Traditional teaching of writing, or the 'product' approach is deemed ineffective in helping ESL students become better writers because they are hardly given the occasions to understand the different strategies employed by effective essayists (Chitravelu et al., 1995). The role of writing in ESL classrooms never veered too far away from the 'product' approach, particularly the fourth characteristic as mentioned by McDonough and Shaw (1993), even though it underwent several manifestations echoing the ideologies of second language teaching that were prominent at various periods in the past century and to some degree reacting to the paradigm shift in L1 classrooms, particularly in writing (Lim, 2002). For example, the popularity of audiolingualism in the 1960s meant that writing was reduced to a humble role of cementing and supporting proper spoken structures (Lim, 2002). Similarly, in the 1970s, with audiolingualism giving way to communicative language teaching, the purpose for writing was "contextualized practice of grammar rules or forms previously presented in the lesson, and guided composition was a typical pedagogical technique" (Lim, 2002:2). Hence, even though language teaching ideology underwent changes, the shackle of the 'product' approach to writing remained.

Nevertheless, that shackle gave way eventually when teachers and academics began examining the ‘process’ approach to writing (as discussed in 1.2). The ‘process’ approach involves students in skills such as:

1. thinking about what to write or brainstorming ideas
2. choosing and arranging ideas
3. drafting the essay
4. editing and revising the essay
5. writing out the essay

(adapted from Chitavelu et al., 1995:177)

The ‘process’ approach is thus ideal because students are given time to experiment with ideas and are provided with feedback on what they have written (Raimes, 1983:10). It is plausible that the ‘process’ approach to writing could be done alone without any feedback from others (except from oneself). Nevertheless, it is not particularly beneficial for them to write alone (as mentioned in 1.2). A majority of students complain about the problems of ‘getting started’ on a piece of written work. Teachers should be aware that it is inadequate to give students a topic and expect them to complete the task to the best of their abilities. Students may be prevented by a lack of vocabulary and ideas from producing a piece of acceptable written work. Therefore, the classroom can be organised in such a way to provide assistance for students as they write. One such classroom organisation that my study employs is collaborative work in writing (further discussions are in 2.3.2 and its subsequent sub-headings), one of the many manifestations of collaborative learning.

2.3 The Concept of Collaborative Learning

Collaborative learning is a generic term to cover a range of techniques from peer tutoring to small writing groups. However, all styles of collaborative learning, to a certain extent, attempt to actively involve the students in their own learning. According to Nunan (1992:3), collaborative learning or cooperative learning entails a group of learners working together among themselves or with the teacher to achieve common learning goals. Collaborative learning offers immense benefits compared to “traditional instruction because a group – whether it be the whole class or a learning group within the class – can accomplish meaningful learning and solve problems better than any individual can alone” (Tinzmann et al., 1990:1). In addition, collaborative learning allows students to cooperate and generate positive learning outcomes valuable for everyone involved (Johnson, Johnson & Smith, 1991). As my study looks into collaborative work in enhancing students’ writing, it is my contention that solitary writing is not especially useful for students because “to incorporate writing in the classroom without understanding its collaborative nature is to teach incorrectly, perhaps even incompetently” (Speck, 2002:7).

According to Noel and Robert (2004), serious inquiry into the process of collaborative writing emerged in the late 1980s with Mackler (1987) being among the earliest, whose subjects felt that teamwork would produce a finer piece of writing than individual effort. Carr and Allen (1987) in Topping (2001) discovered that children as young as five could voluntarily asked for assistance from their friends during the writing process and their friends reciprocated, regardless of urging from the teacher.

Bruffee (1993) argued that the misunderstanding of writing as a solitary affair stemmed from two assumptions. The first is the common belief that the act of writing itself is solitude. The other is the false impression that most people generate about professional writers; that they seemingly write out of thin air. Bruffee (1993) challenged

these assumptions by pointing out that writing is necessarily a collaborative event. For instance, the so-called professional writers such as doctors, lawyers and scientists do consult, interact and have conversations with each other. They “read and reread, check and recheck, revise and re-revise their own and each other’s written material” (Bruffee, 1993:53). Furthermore, because language is socially constructed, then the nature of writing is and should be collaborative and constructive. In fact, according to Speck (2002:6), “our own efforts to write confirm the truth that writing is collaborative, and our own efforts to write give us some insights into the truth that no writer writes alone. Clearly, writing is inherently collaborative – whether academic or ‘creative’ – and the interreliance of a text on other texts, the intertextuality of texts, is one major piece of evidence that supports the inherent collaborative nature of writing”. Therefore, Bruffee (1993:55) noted that all writings serve one purpose; “to affirm the social nature of writer and reader and their constructive collaboration”.

Beck (1993) wanted to find out how collaborative writing is carried out among scholars. Her research involved 23 respondents who held that collaboration in writing had been constructive. In addition, she discovered that groups inclined to be small, with most groups having two writers. Exchanging views on the content and the organisation of the piece of writing were mainly performed during writing. Delegation of work was conducted before and during writing.

Poulsen (1993) conducted a pilot project involving nine pairs of Danish adolescents whose English competency vary as each pair produced a piece of writing on a word processor. Three of the pairs were recorded using a split-screen method; half the screen displayed the piece of writing, while the other half displayed subjects’ behaviour as they collaborated. Although Poulsen conceded that the data collected were fundamentally qualitative in nature, the results were valuable to the understanding of collaboration in

writing. For example, Poulsen described in detail subjects' behaviour as they collaborated. In general, all three pairs were actively working together as they attempted their writing assignments. Although all the three pairs were active, there appeared to be one member (in each pair) dominating the process. In the end, Poulsen (1993:18) noted that "most difficulties were solved intuitively, and at least two-thirds of the problems were worked out successfully".

Klein et al. (1998) initiated a programme to increase student motivation by means of cooperative learning, writing in Mathematics and Multiple Intelligences. Their subjects consisted of Mathematics students who displayed low motivation level. The low motivation level was most likely caused by mediocre results of previous tests, students' and parents' outlooks and a classroom atmosphere which did not foster creativity. Klein and colleagues implemented a three-pronged strategy to elevate student motivation. The first intervention employed the use of student journals and surveys. The second intervention involved collaborative groups and utilising Multiple Intelligences activities. The third intervention involved writing through Mathematics and finding ways of dealing with real-life problems. The results showed an increase in students' motivation for learning Mathematics. The teachers' and the students' personal journals revealed improvement in writing in Mathematics and solving real-life problems.

Topping (2001) described three controlled studies of the effectiveness of a form of collaborative writing which he pioneered and refined over the years, called Paired Writing. In the Nixon Project, eleven-year-old peer tutors worked with five-year-old emergent writers. The results revealed "a statistically significant improvement" (Topping, 2001:166) in their writing. More importantly, however, the tutors and tutees (except one eleven-year-old tutor) cultivated a close bond, relished the exposure to Paired Writing and their eagerness shone during the project. The tutors, too, displayed better self-confidence.

The Sutherland Project comprised two classes of eight-year-olds. Each class is divided into two groups, an experimental group and a control group. In the first class, the experimental group consisted of students with mixed competency while in the second class, the experimental group is made up of students with similar competency. The control groups of both classes consisted of individual writers. They then underwent two training sessions so that they were familiar with the steps involved in Paired Writing. Comparisons were made between essays produced from individual writing (carried out before and after the project) and essays produced from Paired Writing (carried out during the project). The outcomes of the project showed that,

“both groups of paired writers showed significant improvement relative to their controls, but this was more evident for the cross-ability pairs than the same-ability pairs. On moving from individual to collaborative writing, the improvement in the cross-ability group largely represented improvement in the less able Writers. On returning to individual writing, the cross-ability group appeared to sustain the collaborative gains on average, but in fact this largely represented improvement in the more able Helpers.”

(Topping, 2001:167)

Similar to the tutors in the Nixon Project, most subjects in the Sutherland Project thought that they were more self-assured about writing than they had before the commencement of the study (Topping, 2001).

Finally, the Yarrow Project involved 28 ten-year-old children whose behaviour could be described as challenging. They were paired according to gender and grades from pre-test writing. Then, the pairs were put into two groups; one for Paired Writing and the other for individual writing. Both groups were subjected to training, similar to the Sutherland Project. The results showed that although all the subjects displayed

enhancement in their writing, paired writers did better than individual writers (Topping, 2001). As in the Nixon and Sutherland Projects, subjects who wrote collaboratively in the Yarrow Project demonstrated more confidence compared to individual writers.

While the three projects described by Topping all involved pre-adolescents, Neomy (2005) focused on collaborative writing with adult ESL students as her participants. Subjects were allowed to write either in pairs or alone. Most subjects wrote in pairs, while some wrote alone. Texts composed by pairs were analysed and set against texts composed by individuals. Subjects' opinions on the exposure to collaborative writing were noted. The study discovered that texts composed by pairs were concise but better in areas such as task achievement, grammatical precision and intricacy. Neomy also found that collaborative writing allowed her subjects to consolidate ideas and share with one another their points of view. Most subjects found exposure to collaborative writing beneficial, but some conveyed doubts about it.

Ferguson-Patrick (2007) attempted to boost writing quantity and quality with a group of 12 six-year-old pupils through collaboration. The study indicated that the subjects benefited from the cooperation and the texts produced showed improvement in terms of quantity and quality. Ferguson-Patrick also revealed that her subjects shared knowledge and provided motivation and help to each other.

King (2007) recounted the use of collaborative storymaking with students in diverse school contexts. She affirmed that collaborative storymaking enhances students' verbal communication and composition. King welcomed other teachers to utilise collaborative storymaking in their classrooms to inspire their own and the students' reading, writing and speaking skills.

Graham and Perin (2007) gathered and evaluated studies on writing approaches to find out which approaches are capable in enhancing writing skills among adolescents.

Graham and Perin listed, in order from most effective to least effective, eleven approaches to writing. Collaborative writing came in third, behind summarisation (in which students are taught how to condense texts) and writing strategies (in which students are taught how to organise, revise and amend essays). Graham and Perin were quick to point out that these eleven approaches ought to be taken advantage of collectively. By doing so, teachers would know which approaches would work best for their students.

Therefore, the studies mentioned above brought to light the effectiveness of collaborative work in improving students' writing. These studies covered diverse subjects, from five-year-olds to children with behavioural difficulties to academicians, suggesting that collaborative work can be beneficial in various circumstances. The Nixon, Sutherland and Yarrow Projects as described by Topping (2001) clearly demonstrated that students benefited from Paired Writing, which is one of many manifestations of collaborative work in writing. In particular, the tutors and tutees in the Nixon Project which developed a close relationship as Paired Writing was carried out echoed Strong, Silver and Robinson's (1995:12) stand that "students want and need work that will enhance their relationships with people they care about" in order to maintain motivation in learning. Similarly, the results from Klein et al.'s (1998) programme showed improvement in students' motivation for learning mathematics. Klein and colleagues' programme is unique because they chose to focus on collaboration in writing in mathematics, suggesting that collaborative work in writing could be used across the curriculum to benefit students. King (2007), for instance, focused on collaborative storymaking to increase students' speaking and writing skills.

As such, the teacher's aim in teaching writing then is to create a collaborative classroom environment that promotes interaction among students. In other words, "the classroom is pedagogically constructed so that students make choices about their learning and are seen as coworkers who bring talents to the classroom that need to be used for

everyone to learn” (Speck, 2002:8). Hence, “collaborative writing fits nicely with the premises that support cooperative learning and logically shares the pedagogical presuppositions of active learning” (Speck, 2002:8).

Collaborative learning classes are usually more relaxed and enjoyable compared to traditional classes. This creates a positive learning environment. Unlike the traditional classrooms which centre on the dominant role of the teacher, students are encouraged to participate in their learning by sharing their erudition with their peers in the collaborative classrooms, thus making them feel more motivated (Tinzmann et al., 1990:2). This in turn promotes an affective climate that enriches the learning atmosphere. The implication is significant because Strong, Silver and Robinson (1995) identified the need for involvement with others as one of several consequential characteristics for maintaining motivation in learning. Motivation, too, is often improved if students feel less inhibited and more able to explore possibilities for self-expression. Students assume a more active role in their learning by acting as resources for each other. They learn to organise their learning besides having a voice in the decision-making process (Tinzmann et al., 1990). For instance, every step in writing, from choosing an issue to assessing what has been written, is most likely to crop up during interaction. Over a period of time, students may internalise this interaction about writing and use it to monitor and regulate their own writing.

In the collaborative classroom, the teacher plays the role of a mediator (Tinzmann et al., 1990). As mentioned in 1.1, the secret to efficacious learning rests in the nature of the social interaction among peers with various capabilities. To maximise students’ ability to take responsibility for learning in a collaborative classroom, teachers as mediators can take on the role of facilitating, modelling and coaching.

According to Tinzmann et al. (1990), the teachers' role as facilitators requires them to establish contexts for connecting new information to previous knowledge, create chances for collaborative work and problem solving, and provide students a variety of authentic learning activities. Besides establishing a conducive physical environment, teachers need to organise their students. To encourage student-centredness, students can be organised to work in groups with the teacher acting as facilitator and resource person to start off the activity, intervening only when necessary to keep it going (Chitravelu et al., 1995). Group work offers enormous potential. In such learning situation, students cooperate to accomplish their objectives and "capitalise on their own abilities, knowledge, and strategies within the parameters set by the teacher" (Tinzmann et al., 1990:6). In fact, according to Davis (1993), students who are actively engaged in the learning process and who cooperate in small teams are inclined to absorb easily the lessons taught in the classroom and remember them longer than when the same lessons are made known in other modes of instructions. Students engaging in such collaborative work will certainly find learning more purposeful and meaningful than in traditional classrooms and this is corroborated by studies such as Klein et al. (1998) and the Yarrow Project as described by Topping (2001). Klein et al.'s (1998) programme involved subjects who had low motivation level in mathematics. Classroom atmosphere which impeded creativity was one among many reasons given for the low motivation level. After going through the interventions which included collaborative group activities, writing through mathematics and solving real-life problems, subjects demonstrated increased motivation for learning mathematics. The Yarrow Project (Topping, 2001) had subjects whose behaviour were demanding and at the end of the project, subjects who wrote collaboratively showed progress in their writing and exhibited more confidence in writing compared to individual writers.

Harmer (1991) indicates that a lot of teachers form heterogeneous groups in which weak and strong students are mixed together. This is often a good thing for the weak students (although there is a danger that they will be overpowered by the stronger members of the group and thus will not participate) and probably does not hinder the stronger students from getting the maximum benefit from the activity. The results from the Nixon, Sutherland and Yarrow Projects (in which weak and strong students are paired together) clearly indicated that students benefitted from cross-ability groups as they performed well in writing and felt more confident towards writing (Topping, 2001). As stated by Tinzmann et al. (1990), teachers can facilitate collaborative learning by establishing contexts which nurture classroom behaviour that fosters interaction and collaboration.

On the other hand, homogeneous groupings allow students to work at their own pace besides fostering their confidence. Better students can be given harder tasks while less able students can work on tasks that suit their level of ability and cater for their needs. In turn, students are likely to write better because they are not daunted by the whole writing process. However, Chitravelu et al. (1995) pointed out that homogeneous grouping, if carried out too often, would 'label' the students and widen the gap between the different ability groups further. Therefore, the adoption of collaborative work should be planned and organised well to achieve optimum result in a mixed-ability class.

In addition, collaborative learning is helpful in reducing the teacher's workload and more importantly students receive instant comments and assistance, both affective and cognitive (Mukherjee, 1993). Collaborative learning methods can also generate more robust and lively prose as writers or rather students are continuously creatively stimulated by their audience (Mukherjee, 1993).

Therefore, it is the hope of the researcher that this proposed study would add to the understanding of collaboration in writing. This study is unique in that it would be carried

out in a typical Malaysian school setting with 24 fifteen-year-old female students as participants who share similar education and cultural backgrounds. The students' competency in the English language, however, varies. This study is also unique in that the subjects would be divided into groups of four and hence the dynamics may be different from, say Topping's (2001) Paired Writing. In addition, subjects would undergo some training sessions so that they are familiar with the steps involved in collaborative writing. The training sessions are important so that students have clear guidelines on how to collaborate during writing. This is to avoid one member dominating the group, similar to Poulsen's (1993) observation of his subjects. Such incident occurred probably because Poulsen did not provide concrete instructions to his students on how to work together and each pair was required to produce a piece of writing together. In this proposed study, each student is required to produce a piece of writing instead of a group producing just one. The essays produced during this study are analysed based on the marking criteria designed by the Malaysian Examinations Syndicate (Appendix I) which cover content, language, vocabulary and mechanics. Apart from the essays, data collection would include post-test observation and questionnaire to find out what subjects think about collaborative work in writing.

2.3.1 Limitations and Challenges of Collaborative Work

Despite the many advantages that can be derived from collaborative work, there nevertheless exist certain drawbacks when there is a paradigm shift from the traditional instructional mode to collaborative work.

Noise generated during collaborative work tends to be a concern for most teachers, administrators and parents (Tinzmann et al., 1990). Some people assume that "noisy classrooms indicate lack of discipline or teacher control" (Tinzmann et al., 1990:7) and

that students cannot learn in such situations. However, Tinzmann et al. (1990) emphasised that noise generated during collaboration implies that active learning is taking place. Teachers, however, need to set some regulations before implementing collaboration in the classroom. Teachers, too have to take the extra time to plan and prepare for the adoption of collaborative learning in their classroom, especially during the introductory or initial implementation stage. As pointed out by Bleich (1988:281),

“...one of the fundamental problems for those of us seeking to encourage regular, habitual collaboration among students is our lack of knowledge about how groups work...Except in the most general sense, we do not understand how individuals interact with one another in groups, and we generally do not know how to textualise group interactions in order to study it in depth.”

(cited in Mukherjee, 1993:116)

On the other hand, students have to work within the parameters set by the teachers. This way, the problem of classroom control or the lack of structure in a collaborative classroom can be minimised.

Individual differences among students may also be a concern in the implementation of collaborative learning. It has been mentioned earlier that a collaborative learning situation allows for heterogeneous groupings. However, “many people still doubt that individual differences can be better addressed in a collaborative classroom with homogeneous groupings” (Tinzmann et al., 1990:8). As pointed out by Tinzmann et al. (1990), many teachers still believe that collaboration affords gifted or high-achieving students and that low-achieving students have nothing much to contribute. Besides, teachers are also concerned that more competent students will be held back (Tinzmann et al., 1990). Nevertheless, Tinzmann et al. (1990) also provided answers to the above concern. According to them, students’ level of ability should not be a major concern as

seemingly less-able students have surprised teachers for being able to contribute ideas and provide insights in a collaborative learning situation. Furthermore, Tinzmann et al. (1990:8) “suggest that high-flying students earn much from their exposure to diverse experiences and also from peer tutoring (e.g. Johnson & Johnson, 1989)”.

Another drawback of collaborative work is largely due to the linguistic insecurity of ESL students. One such linguistic insecurity is the tendency to overdo correction in writing as part of their constant effort to be faultless in the English language (Mukherjee, 1993). This linguistic insecurity defeats the purpose of collaboration in the ESL classroom in two ways. First, it impedes the student from communicating genuinely with the group as the student is worried about making errors and secondly, it inhibits the students from taking other ESL students seriously because of their poor proficiency (Mukherjee, 1993). Yet, this limitation can be rectified. While setting the rules for collaborative work, the teacher should place emphasis on the fluency rather than accuracy of the language. That means students are encouraged to contribute without worrying too much on the accuracy of the language or their linguistic insecurity.

2.3.2 Collaboration in Writing

In the end, however, I feel that the benefits that can be derived from collaborative work in writing far outweigh those aforementioned limitations. The numerous studies and researches as discussed in 2.3 argue persuasively that collaboration could help improve ESL students’ writing. As mentioned in 1.2 and 2.2, it is not helpful for ESL students to write alone because, after all, they are language learners. As learners, they need to be actively involved in the learning process. In fact, McDonough and Shaw (1993:227) contended that the classroom itself is clearly an environment for students to cooperate in which “structuring activities in different ways (quite apart from the primary language

learning function) can allow for the establishment of a cohesive and collaborative working atmosphere”.

In attempting to produce a piece of continuous text, most writers often go through similar stages. Some of these stages include putting ideas on paper, formulating a plan, rephrasing sentences, looking for suitable vocabulary, cancelling what is deemed unnecessary, suffering from writer’s block, changing pens, and so on, some of which are quite quirky (McDonough & Shaw, 1993). To expect students to go through what writers do must be quite a daunting experience. No wonder then that students find writing challenging. Some organisation is required and Hedge (1988:21) offered the following steps that most writers go through when producing a piece of writing:

1. getting ideas together
2. planning and outlining
3. making notes
4. making a first draft
5. revising, redrafting
6. editing
7. final version

The classroom can offer an atmosphere for writing at each step. This can be accomplished by providing a collaborative framework where students collaborate on their writing. Therefore, for the purpose of this research, I have decided to adapt the writing steps as offered by Hedge with a collaborative framework. The following are steps involved in collaborative work for writing:

1. discussing ideas for the essay
2. producing a rough draft
3. sharing and editing essays among group members

4. redrafting the essay

These four steps are essentially Hedge's. I condensed the seven steps offered by Hedge into four for practical reasons. One such reason is time constraint. The researcher had to use a significant amount of class time, which would otherwise be used to cover the English language syllabus, to carry out the study. Following Hedge's steps to a T would be time consuming and may result in me not being able to complete the syllabus on time. Another reason concerns students' English competency. Some were more proficient, while others were either average or low. Therefore, I modified Hedge's steps to ensure all students could internalise the steps facilely. In the following sub-headings, the four steps involved in collaborative work for writing are explained in detail.

2.3.2.1 Step 1: Discussing Ideas for the Essay

One of the most common problems that students face when attempting to write is what is known as writer's block. This problem refers to the difficulty of starting or continuing a piece of writing because students have no ideas. To address the problem of writers block, students are put into groups to generate ideas. If indeed two heads are better than one, as the saying goes, then having more heads would surely be the best.

In groups, students then can talk among themselves to generate ideas. To ensure that their discussion is on the writing task at hand, students need to be clear on what they should do during the discussion. During discussion, students should take turns to ask and answer questions. The nature of the questions depends on the writing task, but generally students should be made aware of the 'Wh' questions: who, what, when, where, why and how.

While ideas are being generated from discussion, students should take down notes. Once the group has enough ideas, students should review their notes and make any changes if necessary. Students can then proceed to the second step.

2.3.2.2 Step 2: Producing a Rough Draft

During this step, students should look at the notes that they have agreed upon and start a rough draft. If a member struggles on vocabulary or sentences, other members should provide assistance to him/her. For instance, if a member struggles on a word, other members should provide possible words which he/she may find useful.

Students must be made aware that if a problem arises while attempting a rough draft, they should share it with members of the group. Students are also reminded that they should not belittle their friends' problems. This is to ensure that members offer one another a sense of audience and constructive feedback.

2.3.2.3 Step 3: Sharing and Editing Essays among Group Members

Once the students have completed their rough drafts, they then share their drafts among group members. Members read their friends' drafts and indicate where to improve. Students must be reminded to provide constructive suggestions during this stage. Students are also reminded that during this stage, suggestions offered should be on the following categories:

meaning (refining ambiguous ideas)

spelling

punctuation

paragraphing

These categories are spelled out so as to ensure students know what kind of suggestions that they should offer and what they would expect in return with regards to their own essays.

2.3.2.4 Step 4: Redrafting the Essay

The final step is to rewrite from the edited draft. During this stage, students take note of the suggestions offered by their group members. Students may choose to accept or reject those suggestions. Then, they make the necessary changes before the essays are handed in to an external evaluator.

2.4 Conclusion

The review highlighted the importance of engaging students to be actively involved in the learning process. In order to get students to be active participants in learning, teachers could make the learning experience a shared enterprise through social interactions. These interactions, or collaborative learning, may assist students in capitalising their zone of proximal development. And because language is socially constructed, the nature of writing should be collaborative. The four steps involved in collaborative work for writing are adapted from Hedge's (1988) outlining of what most writers experience when constructing a piece of text. In the next chapter, the methodology employed to examine the effectiveness of collaboration in teaching and learning writing is discussed.