CHAPTER 5

LIMITATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1   Overview

This chapter contains the review of the discussion of the three research questions. This is followed by a commentary of the limitations and recommendations for prospective studies and concluding remarks for this research.

5.2   Review of the Discussion of the Research Questions

This section is divided into three parts, with each part consisting of a review for each of the three research questions.

5.2.1   Review of Research Question 1: How can Collaborative Work in Writing be Implemented?

During the post-test, the assisting teacher and I observed the subjects and put down our observation in observation forms. In general, all subjects followed the steps involved in collaborative work. Subjects articulated and exchanged ideas for the essays, generated a rough draft, shared and edited essays among group members and finally redrafted the essays. Subjects carried out the steps according to the time frame allocated during the intervention period. However, two subjects were seen working as a pair during Step 3 of collaborative work – sharing and editing of essays – suggesting the need to gather subjects who are at ease working together.

5.2.2 Review of Question 2: To What Extent can Collaborative Work Benefit Students' Writing, in terms of Content, Vocabulary, Language and Mechanics?

This study attempts to reveal whether collaboration helps students to improve their writing. Firstly, subjects produced an essay individually in a pre-test. Then, it was followed by six intervention sessions in which subjects were trained in the steps involved in collaborative work. After that, subjects wrote their essays using the steps in collaborative work in a post-test. Essays from the pre- and post-tests were compared according to the marking criteria designed by the Malaysian Examinations Syndicate which cover content, vocabulary, language and mechanics.

The results demonstrated that collaborative work could improve students' writing, if collaborative work is put into practice thoughtfully. For instance, 21 out of 24 subjects made changes to their content after their collaboration. In addition, collaborative work appeared to have helped improve subjects who have poor or average command of the language. These subjects most likely benefitted because they were grouped with others who are at a level just above their zone of proximal development. However, not all subjects benefited from such grouping because most groups comprised of two or three subjects with the same level of competence. As such, they did not have peers who are at a level above them to benefit from. Despite the mixed result in language, collaborative work appeared to have assisted subjects in enriching their vocabulary. All subjects exhibited either minor or noticeable changes to vocabulary after collaborative work. In most groups, a subject would suggest words or phrases during discussion and the rest would then include them into their essays. In other groups, changes/addition to vocabulary is in tandem with the increase of /changes in ideas in the subjects' post-test essays. The connection between changes in vocabulary and increase in ideas is logical because subjects

employed new words or phrases to articulate their new ideas. However, there was no clear cut indication to suggest that collaborative work helped to improve subjects' mechanics.

5.2.3 Review of Research Question 3: To What Extent Do Students Find Collaborative Work Useful in Writing Their Essays?

I distributed questionnaires to the subjects after the completion of the post-test. On the whole, the majority of subjects liked working in a group, found group work to be useful and found it easier to work in a group. Most subjects also felt the training received to familiarise themselves with the steps involved in collaborative work was adequate. Most subjects too agreed that comments from their friends were useful and vice versa, suggesting that they valued the interaction during collaborative work. Moreover, subjects concurred that collaborative work had helped in producing ideas for their essays and in improving their language, vocabulary, and mechanics of writing. Most subjects gave positive justifications for favouring collaborative work in writing. Only one subject, however, did not agree with the rest because she explained that her contributions were not valued.

5.3 Limitations of the Study

There are several limitations which may have an effect on the results of the study. One significant limitation is time. The study was conducted over a period of eight weeks (one week for the pre-test, six weeks for the intervention phase and one week for the post-test). I could not afford to spend too much time on the study because there was an urgent need to complete the English language syllabus and prepare subjects for their PMR examination. The time constraint meant some subjects did not have adequate time to internalise the steps involved in collaborative work. This is substantiated by the analysis

of Question 4 in the questionnaire in which four subjects felt that the intervention phase was insufficient. Learning competence varies from subject to subject and therefore some subjects need more time to make the steps in collaborative work in writing a part of their learning behaviour.

Moreover, analyses of the results in language and mechanics also verify the need to conduct the study over a longer period of time. Analyses of language and spelling yielded mixed results. Of the 24 subjects, only 10 improved in language. Although subjects who had poor or/and average command of the language seemed to benefit from being grouped with other subjects who are at a level just above their level of competence, 13 subjects who had good command of the language did not demonstrate further improvement possibly because of constraints of time. In addition, one subject who had a poor command of the language did not improve even though she was grouped with others who had good command of the language. Improvement in language requires time and these 14 subjects may need it, considering that 13 of them do not have peers above their zone of proximal development to work with. This could also be applied to improvement in mechanics as analyses revealed mixed results.

Another limitation in this study is that only factual writing was under scrutiny. It is highly probable that some subjects may excel or feel comfortable in other forms of writing such as narrative, description of processes or procedure or argumentative writing. Therefore, the kind of writing may have affected the result of the study because they may not have been at ease with factual writing.

Furthermore, analyses of the results from the questionnaire would have been more insightful if some probing via interviews were conducted. The interviews could not be carried out because I was transferred to another school in another state after completing the research. In addition, it is impossible to go back to that school as the subjects have moved

on to a different form and class, while some may have probably transferred to other schools.

5.4   Recommendations for Future Studies

There are several recommendations for prospective studies. Ideally, collaboration would work at its best in small classes. In a small class, the teacher would be able to monitor the students closely as they carry out collaboration and act as a facilitator to provide assistance to the students if and when it is necessary. In addition, the teacher would also be able to divide students into groups that are not too large to avoid having what Chitravelu et al. (1995) refer to as passengers; students who just tag along but do not provide input during collaborative work. In fact, according to Chen (2004), groups of three or four students would be most ideal. Large classes, on the other hand, are difficult to monitor and can be noisy, which hamper collaboration from being carried out effectively. In such a case, it is prudent for the teacher to seek assistance from another teacher to help monitor and facilitate collaborative work.

The next recommendation is to put collaborative work into practice in a more natural setting on a daily basis in school. The experimental setting of this research demonstrates that to a certain extent, collaborative work could promote students' writing. Most subjects in this research made changes to the content and demonstrated either minor or noticeable changes to their vocabulary after collaboration. Collaborative work too appeared to help improve subjects who have poor or average command of the language. If collaborative work is carried out in a natural setting on a regular basis in school, students would be able to integrate the steps in collaborative work in writing into their writing behaviour and improve significantly over a long period of time. After all, students'

learning competencies differ among each other and therefore some students need time to internalise the steps and to display improvement in their writing.

Besides training the students, another recommendation would be to provide in-service training for teachers. Such training is useful for teachers to familiarise themselves with collaborative methods. Teachers who are trained could apply collaborative methods more effectively in their teaching-learning process. Effective implementation of collaborative work in the classroom could lead to better writing on the part of the students.

Ultimately, collaboration teaches lifelong learning strategies. The more collaborative work is done in schools, it will entrench lifelong learning strategies in the minds of students. Students will learn to monitor their thinking while writing even in the absence of other students or a teacher.

5.5   Concluding Comments

The purpose of this study was to determine whether the quality of students' writing could be increased through collaborative work. Based on the results, analyses and discussion, it can be deduced that, to some extent, collaborative work in writing achieved its purpose. The study also shed light on how collaborative work can assist in the learning and teaching of writing in an ordinary Malaysian ESL classroom.

In order to ensure the effectiveness of collaborative work in writing, it has to be carefully executed with adequate time. One has to look into how subjects are grouped. This study shows that grouping subjects who have poor or average command of the language with subjects who are just beyond their level of competence could yield favourable outcomes. Weaker subjects benefit from collaborating with more capable ones and the evidence show up in their essays. They improve in terms of content, vocabulary, and to a certain extent, language and mechanics.

Other aspects that one has to look into are modelling and training. Modelling the steps involved in collaborative work in writing is essential so that subjects know what they are supposed to do. Additionally, subjects must have ample training sessions so that they can carry out the steps effectively. In the questionnaire, most subjects felt the training sessions received were enough, a couple said the sessions were too many while a handful said they were not enough. It is understandable that some found the training insufficient or too many because students have different levels of learning competency. Some may internalise the steps quicker than others. One has to find that equilibrium of allotting adequate training without causing the 'practice' and 'fatigue' effect (Wray, Trott & Bloomer, 1998:164).

Observation of subjects during the post-test revealed that they carried out the steps in collaborative work. This indicates that the modelling and training received by subjects during the intervention phase were useful. Although two subjects were seen working as a pair, this incident merely accentuate the need to look into grouping subjects who are comfortable collaborating with one another.

Analyses of subjects' pre- and post-test essays revealed that when collaborative work was carried out carefully, it could promote students' writing. Subjects made changes in content and vocabulary. Although language and mechanics registered mixed results, it is highly probable that positive results would be achieved if subjects had been given more time and opportunities to write collaboratively.

Analyses of subjects' responses to the questionnaire showed that the majority of subjects liked working in a group and valued the comments from their friends. Most of them gave positive remarks for preferring collaborative work in writing.

In conclusion, collaborative work in writing may help improve the quality of students' writing when it is thoughtfully planned and implemented. Nevertheless, it does

not assure swift improvement for all students or ensure error-free essays for all students. Collaborative work allows students to procure different skills or knowledge and consequently make fewer mistakes in their writing and widen their scope of critical thinking. Students could also internalise the steps in collaborative work in writing and use the steps to monitor and regulate their own writing when they are required to write individually such as in an examination. More importantly, however, students are given opportunities to participate in collaborative work in writing as they prepare for their life beyond the classroom in which "collaborative writing is a common occurrence in the community or workplace" (Murray, 1992:100).