

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Introduction

This chapter looks at the background of the study, statement of the problem, benefits of using collaborative work, conflict during collaborative work, collaboration in mixed-ability groups, importance of collaboration in mixed-ability groups, purpose of the study, research questions, significance of the study, and operational definitions.

Background of the Study

Many of the researcher's former teachers and instructors were advocates of collaborative writing. As a student, she was involved in many collaborative writing sessions. Therefore, when she became an instructor, she started using collaborative writing extensively. There are many reasons for using collaborative writing in the classroom.

First, collaborative writing prepares students for workplace writing for it parallels the way writing is carried out in the professional world (Woolever, 1991). Collaborative writing is common at the workplace because it generates quality ideas and enables the pooling of resources to produce a well-written document. However, collaborative writing leaves different impact on the collaborators. Leki, Cumming and Silva (2008) discovered that during collaboration, L1 writers benefited more than L2 writers due to

their dissimilarity in linguistic resources. Therefore, contacts with mentors at work guided L1 writers in their writing more than their L2 counterparts.

Second, collaborative writing fosters reflective thinking especially when learners are involved in presenting their opinions to their peers (Higgins, Flower & Petraglia, 1992). It occurs when students are engaged in the act of explaining and defending their ideas to their peers (DiCamilla & Anton, 1997; Storch, 2002; Swain & Lapkin, 1998). The students have to use their cognitive skills actively in order to follow an argument.

Third, collaboration is useful for all stages of writing. Collaboration promotes planning in writing (Dale, 1997). Collaborative writing results in good idea generation (Storch, 2005), pooling of knowledge (Donato, 1988; Storch, 2002), and better organisation which results in grammatically accurate texts that fulfil task requirement (Storch, 2005). Donato (1988, 1994) describes the knowledge-sharing process as collective-scaffolding in which learners aid each other in their learning. Collaborative writing also helps novice writers with revision (Dale, 1997). The composing process can be regarded as revision itself by experienced writers because the process is recursive (Flower & Hayes, 1981; Sommers, 1980).

Fourth, the process of collaborative writing instils self-awareness and self-confidence in the writer because one is affirmed of the ability to produce before the product is completed (Duin, 1991). This occurs especially when the writer has to

perform a difficult writing task. The writer is assured of the possibility to perform it successfully due to the guidance provided by the group members.

The theoretical rationale in the use of collaborative writing began with conceptualising composition as best produced when working with other writers. This is in line with the sociocultural theory (Vygotsky, 1978, 1986). There is a direct connection between interaction and individual psychological development. In a similar vein, the development of writing which is a psychological process can be considered as taking place during peer interaction. These changes cause substantial changes in the maturity of one's thinking.

According to Gerlach (1994), learning occurs through interaction with others. Franco (1996) states many linguists and psychologists agree that interaction is crucial as a means of exchanging knowledge that would stimulate both development and learning. Interaction also allows mediation process to take place. Ashman and Gillies (2003) define mediation as the “need for someone other than the learner to translate knowledge about the society and culture so that it can be internalised” (p. 199). Children's thinking process is affected by their association with adults and their cognitive development results from their social interaction with them (Vygotsky, 1986).

The domain where learning occurs is called the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). It is defined by Vygotsky (1978) as “the distance between the actual development which is determined by independent problem-solving and the level of

potential development as determined through problem-solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers” (p. 86). Another term similar to ZPD is “learning potential” which is used by Feuerstein and Rand (1997). ZPD consists of immature functions which are in the process of maturation in a learner. When the functions mature, the learner can function independently in areas they formerly were unable to perform (Feuerstein & Rand, 1997).

Despite the benefits of collaboration, there are drawbacks in the process, too. The researcher has discovered that there are adverse results when learners are involved in collaborative writing. Some groups are successful in working together, but some face unresolved conflicts which are detrimental to the solidarity of the groups. Some learners are apprehensive about collaboration due to the negative experiences they had (McWhaw, Schnacken, Sclater & Abrami, 2003). The problems may be in the form of resistance from students who prefer to work individually (Storch, 2005) or egotistical students who fight for control in groups (Dale, 1997). Since the researcher’s students also face challenges during their collaboration, it is relevant to investigate collaborative writing to discover factors which can foster or inhibit the process.

Statement of the Problem

There are many reasons for carrying out this study. First, Cumming (2001) states that there are three principal areas of research in L2 writing which are studies on qualities of learners’ texts, learner’s composing processes and the sociocultural contexts of their writing. He further explains that writing is complex due to a myriad of textual,

psychological and sociocultural factors that have not been clearly explained by theories and research. Hence, the researcher is interested to examine the process, the product and underlying factors which influence collaborative writing in greater depth. It is to fill the gap in the area of research on collaborative writing in the Malaysian context.

Second, many studies on collaborative writing mainly focus on language and socio-cognitive processes. The nature of the writing process and written texts has not been investigated (Storch, 2005). Storch emphasises that the use of small group or pair work is quite limited to only the beginning stages which include brainstorming and the final stages which include peer review in writing classes. Daiute (1986) who is a L1 researcher further explains that group work should not only be used at the beginning and last stages of writing but for the entire process. After considering both Storch's and Dauite's view, the researcher decides to examine the process and product of the participants' collaborative writing. It is further supported by the participants' task which requires them to collaborate in the whole process of writing their long report.

Third, Storch (2005) has observed that pair and group work studies do not usually focus on students' jointly-written texts. Therefore, the researcher makes the decision to investigate the participants' collaboration in producing a jointly-written long report. It is to fill the gap in the area of research on collaborative writing in the Malaysian context.

In conclusion, this study investigates the process, product and student reflections on collaborative writing among students with mixed proficiency in a local context. The

stages in the process of writing are topic selection and brainstorming, drafting, editing and proofreading while the jointly-written long report is analysed thoroughly. Furthermore, the participants are encouraged to provide their views on the collaborative sessions.

Benefits of Using Collaborative Work

Students can gain many benefits from collaborative activities, namely, being trained in their social skills, familiarised with collaborative encounters, encouraged to practise the language, instilled with positive attitude in their learning and fostered with a sense of belonging. Meriam (2002) believes that students are equipped with social skills which help them produce good social interactions through their collaboration. This is made possible through working with learners possessing different personalities and values. Similarly, when students collaborate, they can hone their team-playing skills. Being a good team player also helps them to improve their employability (Jacobs, Holt, Olson & Goldstein, 1998).

Jacobs et al. (1998) realise that “in life, one seldom gets to choose whether to work alone or with others, or with whom we must collaborate” (p. 22). Therefore, it is important that students are provided with the opportunity to collaborate with others regularly. This is supported by Katzenbach and Smith’s (1999) research findings which concluded that workers were more productive when they worked together than when they were isolated from one another. Their colleagues could be a rich source of ideas and this could motivate them to produce high quality work. Classroom collaboration

can also offer practices in common forms of workplace documents (Howard, 2001). Hence, students learn how to work with others in order to produce documents.

Teachers also favour collaborative work because learners are provided with the opportunity to use the language in context. Richards (1994) believes that students can practise new features of the target language when they work together. In addition, Jacobs et al. (1998) indicate that collaboration involves using both key language functions such as disagreeing politely and making suggestions appropriately. Hence, students achieve two things through their collaboration which are improving their language ability and enhancing their speaking skills.

An added advantage of collaboration is creating a conducive environment for learning. Kulik and Kulik (1979) explain that utilising group discussion causes learners to become positive towards the subject materials they are learning. Students can learn effectively when they are interested in their lessons. Thus, a collaborative context can boost learning among students.

Furthermore, group work helps students to develop a sense of belonging. Jacobs et al. (1998) allege that schools can be lonely places. Teachers can help students to foster friendships by getting them involved in collaborative work. A strong bond is usually forged among peers when they meet and interact with each other regularly.

Conflict during Collaborative Work

The researcher has observed conflict among her students during their collaborative writing. Conflict could produce both positive and negative results. The former is having quality ideas and clear directions on how to perform the task while the latter is having some individual students opting to leave their groups to embark on the task alone and a number of them being voted out of their groups due to their insufficient contribution.

Shakun (1981) explains that conflict occurs when individuals have reached an impasse while Lippett (1982) defines conflict as a state of genuine difference. In addition, Hocker and Wilmot (1991) have given a clear definition of conflict by explaining it as “an expressed struggle between at least two interdependent parties who perceive incompatible goals, scarce resources and interference from the other party in achieving their goals” (p. 12).

Conflict has been regarded as either having positive or negative outcomes (Deutsch 1973; Johnson, 1970; Johnson & Johnson, 1995, 2005). The benefits of experiencing conflict are improving understanding of both the issues and values involved (Johnson & Johnson, 2006), increasing motivation level (Galanes, Adams & Brillhart, 2004; Johnson & Johnson, 2006), producing good and creative decisions (Galanes et al., 2004; Schulz-Hardt, Jochims & Frey, 2002), and creating strong cohesiveness among the individuals concerned (Galanes et al., 2004). All of these aspects contribute to a group’s success in collaboration.

In addition, Ede and Lunsford (1990) regard collaboration as accommodating not only “group cohesion” but also “creative conflict” and the protection of “minority views” (p. 123). This is supported by Flower (1996) who believes “conflict can open up live options that can construct a language of possibility and complicated ground for action” (p. 50-52). Their views are supported by Burnett (1991) who discovered that groups who expressed their disagreements performed better than groups which suppressed their views. Ideas can be evaluated when group members filter their peers’ contributions through in-depth discussions.

Flower (1996) also states that students should be prepared for dissent. Likewise, Howard (2001) is of the opinion that the teacher and student should be prepared for dissent while working in groups. Dissent should not be suppressed and consensus should not be forced (Clark & Ede, 1990; Flower, 1996; Janangelo, 1996; Spellmeyer, 1994; Trimbur, 1989). Dissent and consensus should be allowed to occur naturally during the course of discussion. They can help to clarify information and improve the quality of ideas.

On the contrary, conflict can spoil friendships (Janz & Tjosvold, 1985), destroy individual’s commitment towards a group’s project (Janz & Tjosvold, 1985), cause the group to spend too much time in thinking and fighting over trivial matters ((Johnson & Johnson, 2006), and reduce group cohesiveness (Galanes, Adams & Brilhart, 2004). Conflict could exist among students due to their different personalities and language proficiency.

Ting-Toomey (1985) explains that people manage conflict differently according to their culture. People from collectivist cultures emphasise on face saving while those from individualistic cultures focus on facts and principles to resolve differences (Ting-Toomey, 1988; Oetzel, Ting-Toomey, Yokochi, Masumoto & Takai, 2000). Those from collectivist culture use a linear approach which is indirect and non-confrontational while individuals from individualistic culture use a problem-solving approach which is direct and confrontational.

The researcher in this study is concerned over group conflict which can result in adverse situations because it has an impact on the students' academic work and morale. Therefore, she is compelled to investigate situations in which collaborative writing can be productive and non-productive.

Collaboration in Mixed-ability Groups

Language teachers are confronted with many challenges when teaching heterogeneous classes. Ur (1996) explains that it is due to:

“... learners' differences in the areas of language learning ability, language knowledge, cultural background, learning style, attitude towards the language, mother tongue, intelligence, world knowledge, learning experience, knowledge of other languages, age or maturity, gender, personality, confidence, motivation, interests, independence, self discipline and educational level.”

(p. 304)

One of the problems faced by language teachers is having students with mixed proficiency placed in a single class. The teacher has to be knowledgeable in using a fair balance of activities to cater to students with high, medium and low proficiency.

Collaborative work is an effective method to be used in a class of mixed-ability students. The use of collaboration in mixed-ability classrooms is supported by findings from many studies.

Lyle (1999) has rejected the action of streaming students in literacy learning but instead encouraged mixed-ability grouping in his study. His findings showed that ability grouping caused the performance of boys who were underachievers to suffer and to lag behind their female peers. However, collaboration and peer support promoted learning among the students. Discourse and writing in groups also helped to enhance the children's listening and reading skills.

In addition, a collaborative environment helps to reduce anxiety in a mixed-ability context. Clement, Dornyei and Noels (1994) and Dornyei (1994, 2001) advocate the use of a collaborative setting because anxiety can be reduced, self-esteem can be increased, learner involvement can be fostered and a positive attitude towards the learning environment can be instilled. The researcher has also noticed that most weak students do not have the courage to express their views when working alone in a task. On the other hand, when they are working in a group, they gain much confidence and enthusiasm when presenting their opinions. This is due to the help received from their peers which results in the progress of their learning.

The success of collaborative writing among mixed-ability learners is also evident from a study conducted by Salli-Copur (2005). Findings from the study showed that

good students could be a source of language assistance or knowledge to weak students when they worked together. Therefore, in this study, the researcher is interested to discover the impact of mixed-ability students working together in the Malaysian context.

Furthermore, collaboration among mixed-ability learners is strongly encouraged at the revision stage. Russell (1985) who conducted a case study on four children with low, average and high abilities in writing discovered the importance of collaboration to weak students during their revision of work. The purpose of the study was to investigate the relationship between peer-conferencing and writing. The conclusion made was poor writers needed questions from their peers at the revision stage. On the contrary, average and high ability students were independent in carrying out their revision because they could become their own audience in performing it.

It has also been discovered that positive attitude towards learning can be fostered through collaboration among students of different proficiency. A study carried out by McAllister (2005) showed evidence of a marked improvement in the students' attitude. The study focussed on texts produced by heterogeneous collaborative writing groups of four to five students. The students were efficacious and had an increase in retention rates, enjoyment in their writing and overall improvement in their writing in comparison with individual classes. In addition, Dornyei and Murphey (2003) state that learners can become a "cohesive and mature group" when working together (p. 59-60). Therefore,

collaboration among students of different proficiency is strongly recommended to create a situation conducive for learning.

Importance of Collaboration in Mixed-ability Groups

Collaboration in mixed-ability groups have been studied by some researchers. They are Bean (1996), Bruffee (1993), Cohen (1994), Daiute (1989), Gere and Stevens (1985), Gillies and Ashman (1995), Graves (1983), McCarthey and McMahon (1992), Saunders (1989), Storch (2002), Swing and Peterson (1982), Vygotsky (1978) and Webb (1985). Three significant advantages of collaborative work are encouraging scaffolding, creating positive interdependence and fostering critical thinking skills.

Scaffolding

Gredler (1997) defines scaffolding as “the process of controlling task elements that are initially beyond the learner’s capacity” (p. 365). The concept of scaffolding is explained by Donato (1994) as:

In social interaction, a knowledgeable participant can create, by means of speech, supportive conditions in which the novice can participate in, and extend, current skills and knowledge to higher levels of competence.
(p. 40)

The researcher’s rationale for using group work is for learners to be involved in peer learning. This is synonymous with the opinion of Vygotsky (1978), Webb (1985) and Swing and Peterson (1982). Webb (1985) discovered that in mixed-ability groups, high ability students gave more help to their peers than in same ability groups. Similarly, Swing and Peterson (1982) found out that students with low achievement

benefited more in heterogeneous groups than being in homogenous groups. The assistance provided by peers was needed at the brainstorming, composing, and editing stages.

In addition, scaffolding can take place in the form of equipping students with skills they did not possess initially. Vygotsky (1978) found out that students were able to solve problems on their own after being provided with help from their peers. He hypothesised that the student's ZPD, which was the difference between the student's understanding and potential to understand more difficult concepts was extended by the student's social interactions. By being in a mixed-ability group, students could learn effectively from the guidance provided by their more knowledgeable peers.

Positive Interdependence

An advantage of collaborative work is establishing positive interdependence among students. Gillies and Ashman (1995) who studied the effects of mixed ability and gender composition of Grade 6 students' behaviour and interactions discovered that students who were trained to facilitate interactions performed well in their group work. The students also became responsive towards the needs of others by providing help to them.

Students can also adjust easily to their working environment when they have been involved with collaborative work in mixed-ability groups. The experience trains them to

be tolerant and develop their team-playing and interpersonal skills. These skills are crucial at the workplace in helping them to get along with their colleagues.

Critical Thinking Skills

Critical thinking skills can be stimulated through collaborative work. Ideas can be debated and clarified through discussions with group members. The value of debate in enhancing critical thinking skills in students is highlighted by Nelson-LeGall (1992). She explains that when there are diverse views in the collaborative groups, the students need to learn to argue, justify, explain and counter-argue in their discussions. These actions resulted in cognitive growth among the students.

Webb, Nemer, Chizhik and Sugrue (1998) also found out that the group ability of students has an effect on the quality of group discussion and student achievement. Students in mixed-ability groups could provide higher quality explanations to increase their understanding than students in similar-ability groups. Furthermore, students with low and medium abilities contributed more to their achievement test scores than to their ability scores.

Purpose of the Study

The main objective of this study was to observe the use of collaborative writing among ESL students with different levels of English proficiency in a tertiary institution. In this study, the use of collaboration was perceived as a mediational tool in writing with special emphasis on the writing process, written text and factors which influenced

collaboration. In addition, students' perceptions of their collaborative writing experiences were also gathered.

Research Questions

This study was guided by the following research questions:

- a. What are the critical incidents that occur during the collaboration of mixed-ability students in the writing process?
- b. In what way does collaboration impact the students' composing process and text production?
- c. What factors enhance and what factors inhibit collaboration in a mixed proficiency group?

Significance of the Study

Findings from the literature base in collaborative writing have repeatedly shown the improvement on students' compositions. Collaborative writing has many potential benefits such as enhancing learning (Trimbur, 1985); being trained to write for a purpose and receiving useful forms of feedback from multiple perspectives in writing (Al-Jamhour, 2005); having joint knowledge through varying viewpoints (Ede & Lunsford, 1990); achieving high quality in writing (Beck, 1993); socialising with group members (LeFevre, 1987); improving interpersonal skills (Rice & Huguley, 1994); developing critical thinking, reducing anxiety, providing helpful feedback, and providing new perspectives (Gokhale, 1995).

Two areas which have been heavily researched in collaborative writing are the use of non computer-support and computer-support in discussions. These studies concentrate on role and task sharing (Colbeck, Campbell & Bjorklund, 2000; Oliver and Omari, 2001), peer evaluation (Falchikov, 1993; Freeman, 1995; McWhaw et al., 2003; Sullivan and Hall, 1997 and Van Lier, 1996), sense of ownership (Brooke, Mirtz & Evans, 1994; Spigelman, 2000), peer tutoring (Brinson, 2005; Robertson, 2005; Villareal, 2005) and procedures in collaboration (McWhaw et al., 2003; Sutherland & Topping, 1999), changes of attitude towards writing (Daiute, 1985); gaining useful input in writing (Daiute, 1986), and the use of collaborative tools such as Microsoft Word and Collaboratus (Lowry & Nunamaker, 2003).

This study on collaborative writing was conducted to discover the use of non computer-support discussions. The researcher decided to concentrate on this area because not all group writing conducted in the classroom use computers as a means for interaction. In addition, the use of technology can be less effective for it can cause writers to waste time, experience less satisfaction than their peers who interact face-to-face (Galegher & Kraut, 1994), and to be involved in little thinking due to concentration on writing and conflicting styles and opinions (Grow, 1988).

While the literature base of collaborative writing has developed significantly over the past ten or fifteen years, there remains a need to explore collaborative writing in relation to Malaysian students. This study aims to investigate collaborative writing

pertaining to participants' proficiency with emphasis on their culture. Hence, the findings from the study would be relevant to the localised context.

The findings from this study can provide insights on how to carry out collaborative writing effectively among students with different levels of proficiency. Teachers can guide students on appropriate behaviour to reduce conflict and foster cohesion during their discussions. Students can be encouraged to reflect on their contributions so that they can learn good team-playing and interpersonal skills. Thus, they can improve their ability in collaborating with others.

Operational Definitions

The terms employed in this study may carry different connotations to individuals. Therefore, in this section, several terms are defined as they are used in the study to avoid different interpretations.

Collaborative Learning

Collaborative Learning is an umbrella term for a variety of approaches involving joint intellectual efforts by students and teachers (Smith & MacGregor, 1992). Tocalli-Beller (2003) refers to it as “instructional methods in which students of all performance levels are organised into small groups to work together towards a common goal which in general is the discovery and mastery of the academic content at hand” (p. 144-145). Kaye (1970) explains that the end result of collaborative learning is creating something new or different through a deliberate and structured collaboration process. In

conclusion, the researcher uses a combination of the definitions and explanations provided in this section for the study.

Collaborative Writing

Allen, Atkinson, Morgan, Moore and Snow (1987) define collaborative writing as “collaborators producing a shared document, engaging in substantive interaction, and shared decision-making power and responsibility for it” (p. 70). This definition is used by the researcher in this study.

Low Proficiency

Students with low proficiency obtained grades C and F in their English I (XYZ1111) test. Grades D and E were not used in the awarding of scores because students in this category were either upgraded to grade C or not upgraded at all resulting in them obtaining grade F.

Medium Proficiency

Students with medium proficiency in this study obtained grade B in their English I (XYZ1111) test.

High Proficiency

Students with high proficiency in this study obtained grade A in their English I (XYZ1111) test.

Mixed Ability and Mixed Proficiency

Students with mixed ability and mixed proficiency in this study were students with different levels of command in English. They were classified into three categories which were low (grades C and F), medium (grade B) and high (grade A) based on their results obtained for their English I (XYZ1111) test.