

CHAPTER FOUR : DATA ANALYSIS

4.1 Introduction

This chapter analyzes the data elicited through the research instruments – pre and post test essay scores, audio recordings of collaborative learning group discussions, researcher’s observation of subjects during the collaborative learning sessions, questionnaires and interviews. The pre and post test essay scores and the questionnaire yielded quantitative data while the audio recordings, observation and interviews elicited qualitative data. The research findings and subsequent discussion of these findings have been organized in sections under each of the tools/instruments that were used to collect the data. At the end of each section, both research questions will be addressed together.

As mentioned in Chapter 3, Section A of the questionnaire yielded the subjects’ background information; Section B, their perception on content related to collaborative learning; Section C, the subjects’ perception of language in collaborative learning, and finally Section D, their views on collaborative learning. The information obtained from Sections B, C and D will be discussed in Section 4.7. The background information on the subjects obtained from the questionnaire (see Appendix 3 Section A) was discussed in detail in Chapter 3 as it provided an overview of the sample population under study, and thus fitted more appropriately in the section on research methodology.

4.2 The Subjects

A total of ten subjects participated in this study. The subjects were selected based on their scores in the pre test (as discussed in Chapter 3, Section 3.4.1) which was administered by the researcher at the beginning of the study, and assessed using the MUET scoring guide. The scores also acted as the criterion for placing the students in two groups; the five subjects whose scores fell on the higher end of the scale were placed in Group A (the high proficiency group), while the five subjects who had lower scores (the average proficiency group) were placed in Group B.

4.3 The Research Questions

The questions that this study set out to explore are:

1. To what extent does collaborative learning help ESL students to improve their writing skills?
2. How do students of differing proficiency perceive the effect of collaborative learning on their writing performance?

As mentioned in 4.1, the research findings and the discussions will follow the order of data obtained from the research instruments used and both research questions will be addressed together at the end of the discussion of each research instrument.

4.4 The impact of collaborative learning on writing based on the pre and post test scores

This section presents and discusses the findings from the pre and the post test essay scores. As mentioned in 3.4.1, a pre test was carried out at the beginning of the study and a post test at the end of the study. The essay topic given for the pre test and post test was ‘How to keep the environment clean’. The reason for giving the same topic was to allow a comparison of the scores obtained before and after collaborative learning. The essay scripts were marked by two raters according to the MUET essay grading for the writing component (see Appendix 2).

The essays were marked based on two criteria, that is, content and language. Content refers to relevant ideas, adequate content, justified points of view and mature treatment of the essay topic. On the other hand, language refers to the use of appropriate markers and linking devices, and correct and varied vocabulary and sentence structures (see Appendix 2). The scores of the two raters were then averaged (see Appendix 6).

The table below shows the scores obtained by the subjects from Group A (high proficiency) and Group B (average proficiency) for the pre and post test essays.

Table 4.1
Scores obtained by subjects in the pre and post tests.

Group	Pre test	Total	Post test	Total	Difference
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A (High Proficiency)	Content	Language	Scores (60)	Content	Language	Scores (60)	Content	Language
A1	13	14	27	18	17	35	5	3
A2	17	15	32	18	17	35	1	2
A3	12	15	27	19	17	36	7	2
A4	24	24	48	20	21	41	-4	-3
A5	20	20	40	17	16	33	-3	-4
Group B (Average Proficiency)								
B1	10	12	22	15	13	28	5	1
B2	12	13	25	17	16	33	5	3
B3	11	11	22	15	15	30	4	4
B4	13	13	26	16	16	32	3	3
B5	13	12	25	14	14	28	1	2

As can be seen from Table 4.1, the post test scores revealed a marked improvement from the pre test scores for the subjects in both the groups except for two subjects from Group A - A4 and A5. The reasons for the decrease in the scores for these two will be explained in Section 4.8. The increase in scores of the eight subjects, both in content and language, shows a positive impact related to collaborative learning. Based on the scores obtained by the subjects, it can be noted that there is a bigger increase in the marks for content compared to language. The increase in scores for content could probably be due to collaborative learning whereby students were able to pool ideas related to content through group discussions. During the process of discussion, the subjects were able to listen to their group members' points of view and contribute their ideas pertaining to the topic of discussion in their essays.

As mentioned earlier, in the pre and the post tests, the subjects were required to write an essay entitled 'How to keep our environment clean'. The analyses of the essays of two

subjects - A1 and A2 - will be discussed here. A1 (Group A), in her pre test (see Appendix 10 Excerpt 1-A1), wrote about 'recycling' (paragraph 2) and 'gotong-royong' (paragraph 3). Her ideas, as can be seen clearly, were disorganized.

Paragraph 2

Firstly community is advised to use recycling bag when buying stuff at hypermarket...This is because plastic bag difficult...In addition, normally people throw it away...Consequently, the garbage...increase. As a result, ...government or private media company have... Advertise to educate the community...

Paragraph 3

On the other hand, every village head has to organize gotong-royong in a certain time to keep the village clean...This can be carry out by meeting...

In paragraph 4, there is a great deal of repetition about people being educated. Her thoughts appear to be jumbled and the paragraphs were not orderly as there was no coherence.

Paragraph 4

Nevertheless, people have to be educated about environment. They have to be educated to recycle the garbage. For example...not only adult should be educated, but also children. Parents and teachers in school have to educate the children...

On the other hand, in her post test essay (see Appendix 11 Excerpt 1-A1) her ideas were more organized and coherent. Extracts from paragraphs 2 to 5 are shown below. Each paragraph explained the action to be taken by different agents. For instance, in the second paragraph, the subject elaborated on recycling followed by steps to be taken by

the government in keeping the environment clean; in the third paragraph she explained about steps to be taken by individuals.

Her ideas were well elaborated and supported by examples. There was good use of linkers to show unity in the essay. This clearly shows a mature treatment of the essay topic. This is a clear indication that collaborative learning has helped the subject to improve her writing skills.

Paragraph 2

To overcome this problem...that is to keep our environment clean,... some effective way ...*First of all*, we should use 3R concept...that is recycle, refuse and reuse. Firstly, we have ... which are difficult to be biodegraded, such as plastic...*Besides*...we plastic bottle to make flower pot. *Furthermore*, we can cycle our recycleable items...paper...We can also recycle waste water from washing to wash the porch...Recycling is a good way to reduce the quality of things that we would normally throw out.

Paragraph 3

On the other hand, the authorities or government has to organize campaigns around the country to raise alertness...

Paragraph 4

In addition, everyone has a role to play in keeping the environment clean. We can change our lifestyles...

Paragraph 5

Moreover, people especially those who lives in cities should drive less ...Of course, it will cause a little bit of inconvenience but that is a small price to pay considering the amount of money we could save on petrol since the petrol price has increased.

The difference in the quality of writing between the pre and post tests is also noticeable in the case of subject A2 (see Appendix 10 Excerpt 2-A2). In the pre test, the ideas were not well expanded and there is no coherence between paragraphs. The vocabulary used is inaccurate at times. These can be seen in the excerpts below.

Paragraph 2

As a start, people must start reducing the transport on the road. Cars or motorcycles, they must be kept to a minimum. Public transports have been prepared by the government...

Paragraph 3

Secondly, factories must be given a strict notice to abide by the rules that we have. Many of the factories are more concerned about the money they are making than the waste they are producing to the environment...

Paragraph 4

Then the authorities have a role to place. As an example, the Municipal Council should place more rubbish bins around their areas...

As can be seen, the essay lacks planning and the paragraphs are haphazard. The lack of vocabulary can be seen in the use of simple words and sentence structures. However, in the post test written by A2 (see Appendix 11 Excerpt 2-A2), the use of vocabulary has improved tremendously, as can be seen in the use of words such as *reusable*, *recycleable*, *littering*, and *serious offenders*. These can be seen in the excerpt below.

The excerpts below were written by A2 in the post test. Paragraph 2

One of the most common ways to help our environment clean is by 3R - reduce, reuse, recycle. We must reduce the usage of non-biodegradable items such as plastic bags as they are the biggest pollutants around. Some hypermarkets like TESCO discourage the use of plastic bags. The customers are encouraged to bring their own bags. The other alternative is to use paper bags as they are *recycleable*. The more practical way is to buy a *reusable* bag...

Paragraph 3

The attitude of the people is the key to a cleaner environment and there will be no changes at all if the attitude of the people do not change... everyone must work hand in hand...sharing transport...taking the public transport...

Paragraph 4

The last resort that the authorities can do is to punish the law breakers...or polluters. Open burning, *littering*... a jail term for *serious offenders*. Light punishment like counseling...

According to both the raters, A1 and A2 wrote in a more organized manner in the post test, and were able to give examples pertaining to their discussions. This was seen in the use of linkers such as *firstly*, *besides* and *furthermore*. In the pre test, the content was insufficient and there was no unity and coherence. In addition, there was lack of elaboration of the facts given. Therefore, the raters felt that the lack of vocabulary may have restricted the writers' expansion of ideas. It can be inferred that in the post test the subjects were able to expand and elaborate on recycling as they would have gained more ideas from their discussions during collaborative learning. The subjects' essays showed a mature understanding of the essay topic as they were able to relate the idea of car pooling with the increase in petrol price (see paragraph five written by A1). This clearly shows that collaborative learning has enabled these students to interact and relate ideas by giving examples related to current happenings in the country, such as the hike in the price of petrol.

As for Group B scores, all the five subjects from Group B showed an improvement in content and language (see Table 4.1). According to the raters, the subjects from Group B showed improvement in terms of coherence and idea development in their post test essays. The subjects also expressed ideas in a more logical manner. The post test essays

were more organized as the ideas explained in each paragraph were expanded further and substantiated with relevant examples.

The raters noticed, too, that the subjects were wiser as they formed shorter sentences to minimize their grammatical errors. The essays in the post test showed fewer grammatical errors; this could be due to the shorter and simpler sentences. For the purpose of further discussion pertaining to the pre and post test essays, the researcher will analyze the essays written by subject B3.

In the pre test, B3 from Group B showed an understanding of the essay topic but her ideas were not well developed and lacked elaboration and this can be seen from paragraphs 1 and 2 below. In paragraph 2, she explains about 3R (reduce, recycle and reuse) and gives overall examples. She fails to explain each and every item mentioned earlier; furthermore, the grammatical mistakes impede reading. The vocabulary used is inappropriate at times, and there is no unity and coherence in paragraphs. There are also a lot of grammatical errors as can be seen in paragraphs 2 (for example, *the means of 3R*, *the way to keep*, and *is stand for*) and 3.

The extracts below are from the essay written by B3 for the pre test. (see Appendix 10 Excerpt 8-B3).

Paragraph 1

The environment is the natural world in which people, animals and plant live. As the environment is the world for something that is alive, we have to take measures to protect the environment for our benefit.

Paragraph 2

The way to keep the environment clean is having the program 3R at everywhere in the country. The *means of 3R is stand for* reduce, recycle and reuse. The terms of 3R is reduce the using of plastic, recycle the old newspaper or book and ...

Paragraph 3

To achieve the environment clean, human are important to present the role. As a human, we can think better than other so we have to think.....In house, we can distribute our rubbish into many group. For example, we can grouping the rubbish depends.....

It is quite obvious that B3's language proficiency is of average level. This substantiates her self-claimed proficiency level in Section 3.3.1 (Table 3.1) where she claims her speaking and writing abilities are "average". Furthermore, coming from a vernacular school, her exposure to the language is limited. Her pre test essay clearly shows lack of planning and a less than satisfactory understanding of the essay topic.

In the post test essay, there is unity and coherence in paragraphs. This can be seen in the use of linkers at the beginning of each paragraph, and elaboration and expansion of ideas in the paragraphs. There are grammatical errors, but these are minimal. In paragraph 1, she writes about the environmental problems and the causes of these problems, and ends the paragraph by saying *there is several ways which can keep our environment clean*. This is an example of a good and precise introduction. Then in the next paragraph, she begins with *First of all, we should implement the 3R concept* In paragraph 3, the subject begins the paragraph with a general and impressive sentence.

The extracts below are from B3's post test essay. (see Appendix 11 Excerpt 8-B3).

Paragraph 1

Environment has been one of the major problem that human faced in this century. The rubbish produced through the daily activity of human is sufficient enough to be a nightmare.....*There is several ways which can keep our environment clean.*

Paragraph 2

First of all, we should implement 3R concept in our life, which represents recycle, reduce, and reuse respectively. As the first step, we should reduce the rubbish especially those

which are not biodegraded... Besides that, we can reuse the things which are...plastic bottles can actually be used again to make a flower pot...Furthermore, we can ...

Paragraph 3

In addition, we should change our lifestyle to overcome the environmental problem. Some of our daily routine can actually cause a lot of problems to our environment. ...the price of petrol fuel increased from day to day...

Although in her pre test, in paragraph 2, she mentioned the 3R concept, it was not further expanded as only a brief explanation was given. Whereas in her post test, her content and ideas are orderly as she writes *As the first step, we should...are not biodegraded...*(paragraph 2). She goes on to elaborate on the 3R's which are *reuse, recycle* and *reduce*. This was not done in her pre test essay. The post test essay is well elaborated and unity in paragraphs has been established by using linkers. As a result, B3's scores for content and language increased by four marks compared to the pre test.

A possible explanation for the increase in essay scores both in content and language could be due to exposure to the varied vocabulary and sentences used during the group discussion in collaborative learning. These improvements could also be due to the exposure to normal teaching and increased practice during collaborative learning in the duration of the research. It has to be noted that there was a gap of four and a half months between the pre and post tests as students were involved in school examinations, co-curricular activities and school break. The post test was not carried out earlier as planned

as on occasions students from either Group A or B were involved in school activities which could not be avoided.

Overall, there is improvement in development and organization of ideas, coherence, variety of sentences and a wide use of vocabulary in the post test. Having discussed the findings from the pre and the post test essay scores, the researcher will now address the two research questions.

With reference to the first research question *To what extent does collaborative learning help ESL students to improve their writing skills*, as can be seen from the scores in Table 4.1 (with the exception of A4 and A5), collaborative learning has helped the learners to improve their writing skills.

The comments from the two raters, too, show that collaborative learning has brought about improvement in students' essays which were written individually. The raters claimed that in the post test, the essays exhibited better forms of structure and paragraphs. As explained earlier, the ideas, too, were well elaborated and the organization of ideas were well sequenced. These findings are consistent with those obtained from a study conducted by Mohammed (1994) where all the three levels of teacher trainees from the lower intermediate, intermediate and advanced language proficiency groups showed significant improvement in their writing after peer conference in important aspects of writing such as content, organization, vocabulary, language use and mechanics of writing. Similarly, a study conducted by Vimala (2005) on the use of visual stimuli and

collaborative discussion in improving students writing skill showed improvement in terms of ideas and content after collaborative discussions and the use of visual stimuli.

Research shows that children working collaboratively obtain a combined higher performance output than children working individually (Samahan & De Lisi 2000). This is in line with Vygotsky's (1978) notion that social interaction is a prerequisite to learning and cognitive development: knowledge is co-constructed as learning always involves more than one person. In collaborative learning students are able to gain ideas through social interaction. Raimes (1985) and Zamel (1983) claim that one of the difficulties faced by ESL learners in writing is generating content. As mentioned in Chapter 1, Section 1.1, it has always been the lack of ideas and limited language proficiency that has been the main hurdle in writing. As such, collaborative learning can help to alleviate the problem of lack of ideas. This is possible as students work in small groups and exchange ideas in the process of discussion.

The second research question framed was *How do students of differing proficiency perceive the effect of collaborative learning on their writing performance?* Findings show that collaborative learning had a positive impact on three subjects (A1, A2 and A3) from Group A. All three essay scores showed an improvement in scores for content and language. As can be seen in Table 4.1, the two subjects (A1 and A3) received higher scores for content compared to language. On the other hand, A2's score for language was higher than the score obtained for content. This shows that collaborative learning has enabled these three subjects to gain more content during discussions, elaborate on

these ideas and present their views logically. Therefore, it can be said that students from Group A, that is, the higher proficiency group, (with the exception of A4 and A5) benefited from collaborative learning as their writing performance clearly shows that there is an increase in the scores obtained.

On the other hand, collaborative learning has had a negative impact on two subjects (A4 and A5) from Group A. The scores obtained in the post test for content and language were lesser compared to the scores obtained in their pre test (Table 4.1). This shows that collaborative learning has not had a positive effect on two subjects from the high proficiency group. This will be further discussed in Section 4.8.

As for Group B, the average proficiency group of learners, all the five subjects showed remarkable improvement in their scores, both for content and language. Their post test essays show the use of a broader vocabulary, well developed ideas and more effective presentation of views. Therefore, the students of average proficiency found that collaborative learning assisted them in their writing performance.

Based on the findings from this section, it appears that the results gathered from the pre and post tests are consistent with a study conducted by Jayaletchumy (2006). Her study on the effects of peer tutoring on the language performance of low achievers in an ESL class indicated that it (peer tutoring) helped low achievers in an ESL classroom improve the quality of content, vocabulary and mechanics in the composition. The improvement in these three components helped the students to acquire good writing skills. It can,

therefore, be assumed that based on the pre and post test scores, collaborative learning has brought about improvement in the students' writing performance as this can be seen in the essays written by the subjects individually from Group B, that is, the average proficiency group, as well as by three of the students from Group A (the high proficiency group).

4.5 Patterns of communicative functions utilized by subjects during collaborative learning

This section discusses the data collected from the audio recordings during collaborative learning discussions. The researcher carried out a total of ten recordings throughout the study. All ten recordings were transcribed, but the researcher decided to analyze only three recordings due to constraints of time. These three recordings (3, 7 and 9) were taken at random. Recording 3 was based on a discussion on the essay topic *Caring for Senior Citizens*, recording 7 on *National Unity* and recording 9 on *Importance of English Language*. The transcripts of the recordings are attached and labeled as excerpt 1A for Group A (see Appendix 7-1A) and 1B for Group B (see Appendix 7-1B) for recording 3 (Caring for Senior Citizens), excerpt 2A for Group A (see Appendix 8-2A) and 2B (see Appendix 8-2B) for recording 7 (National Unity) and finally excerpt 3A (see Appendix 9-3A) and excerpt 3B (see Appendix 9-3B) for recording 9 (Importance of English Language). Table 4.2 below shows the frequency of interaction of each subject from Group A and B during collaborative learning discussions prior to the writing of the essay. The interactions have been categorized into ten language functions which are:

providing information, asking for clarification, elaborating, arguing, organizing, interrogating, responding, repeating, agreeing and disagreeing (see Chapter 2 for a justification of these categories).

Table 4.2

Distribution of language functions used in the essay *Caring for Senior Citizens*

	Group A					Group B				
Subjects	A1	A2	A3	A4	A5	B1	B2	B3	B4	B5
Providing Information	18	20	20	10	17	3	3	3	-	1
Asking for Clarification	2	6	2	1	2	1	-	-	-	1
Elaborating	5	5	7	2	2	2	2	4	-	2
Arguing	-	5	3	2	5	2	-	-	2	-
Organizing	9	3	1	2	2	-	-	1	-	1
Interrogating	6	3	3	3	1	4	-	1	1	1
Responding	1	5	4	4	4	-	2	2	-	-
Repeating	3	5	2	2	3	1	-	-	-	-
Agreeing	5	4	3	2	4	-	-	1	3	1
Disagreeing	1	-	2	-	-	1	-	3	-	-

In the discussion on *Caring for Senior Citizens*, it can be noted that all five subjects were actively engaged during collaborative learning sessions. As can be seen in Table 4.2, all of them provided information throughout the discussion, providing clear indication that collaborative learning encourages students to communicate as there was a lot of argumentation. This can be seen in the negotiation of the age of senior citizens. The discussion clearly indicates that students are very meticulous about figures and statistics.

Below is an extract from Recording 3 Group A (see Appendix 7-1A - Excerpt 1A)

Excerpt 1A

Line	12:	A4:	Yeah, 50 and above right...
	13:	A2:	Senior citizens are persons who are 55 years.....
	14:	A1:	55 too young...
	15:	A2:	55 like senior..
	16:	A1:	Then 48....
	17:	A3:	No lah 48 young ok
	18:	A1:	Let's come to a consensus
	19:	A2:	Ok 55 and above
	20:	A3:	The essence.....that.....(student meant chicken essence)
	22:	A1:	That one is out of topic...
	23:	A2:	That's not out of topic
	24:	A3:	Yeah, yeah

The students argued about the exact age one can be considered to be a senior citizen before going further into the discussion. During the process of debating about the age, they were able to convince one another, and finally agreed on student A2's opinion. Student A1 had taken the lead by getting her members to come to an agreement so as not to waste time discussing trivial matters. This is an indication of being well- organized, and is in line with Piaget's social cognitive theory where the ability to consider and to argue is a key factor in cognitive development. The discussion in excerpt 1A shows that all five subjects were involved in the discussion. This can be seen from Table 4.2 where all the five subjects fully utilized all the language functions during collaborative learning discussions.

On the other hand, the discussions in Group B were limited and there was less interaction. This could be due to the fact that being average proficiency learners, they were more restricted in terms of language, and thus confined their conversation only to the essay topic. The fear of going to greater length of discussion may have their ideas distorted or stressing the age was of no importance could be another reason.

A comparison (see Table 4.2) of the subjects from Groups A and B would show that the subjects in Group B were less active participants. They (Group B) had less conversation as reflected in the use of fewer functions, and their discussions being mainly limited to the essay topic. This could be due to lack of knowledge regarding the essay topic, and poor linguistic skills which restricted them from interacting. This is possible as these subjects are not avid readers and they do not use the language very often.

Group B started their discussion on the essay title *Caring for Senior Citizens* right away without contemplating the age category of the senior citizens as did Group A. As can be seen in the extract below, the participants began their discussions by talking about the introduction of the essay in the very first line, whereas in Group A, the introduction only came in line 31. This indicates that the average proficiency students preferred to limit their conversation and discuss content pertaining to the essay topic only, perhaps due to insufficient knowledge and limited vocabulary; or they might have been reluctant to argue, and just accepted suggestions forwarded by their group members. Being of average proficiency, these students might have shied away from talking too much as they could have been afraid of making grammatical mistakes during their conversation.

Below is an extract from Recording 3 Group B (see Appendix 7-1B -Excerpt 1B).

Line 1: B1: For introduction, nowadays the senior citizens are more longer life span.....so what do you all think?

Line 5: B2: I think one of the method is we should.....better facilities

Line 6: B5: Like what?

Line 7: B2: For example provide better transportation, medical for senior citizens.

The second recording was on the discussion on *National Unity*. Table 4.3 below shows the frequency of interaction of each subject from Groups A and B during collaborative learning discussions prior to the writing of the essay.

Table 4.3
Distribution of language functions used in the essay *National Unity*

	Group A					Group B				
Subjects	A1	A2	A3	A4	A5	B1	B2	B3	B4	B5
Providing Information	11	6	7	6	7	1	5	1	1	2
Asking for Clarification	-	1	4	1	1	-	-	-	-	-
Elaborating	4	4	5	3	3	1	4	1	1	2
Arguing	3	1	2	-	1	2	1	-	-	-
Organizing	-	4	2	1	1	-	-	1	1	1

Interrogating	-	-	1	2	-	2	-	-	-	3
Responding	-	2	-	-	1	-	-	-	-	1
Repeating	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Agreeing	-	1	1	2	2	-	1	2	1	1
Disagreeing	1	-	1	1	1	-	1	-	-	-

The transcript of discussion on the topic *National Unity* among Group A subjects, shows the emergence of disagreements between the participants, and how these are resolved. The participants' differing ideas and suggestions often gave rise to cognitive conflicts, the resolution of which easily turned into social talk, including personal remarks and affective expressions. Although the conflicts and disagreements that emerged between the students seemed not to lead to domination or withdrawal, the students' collaboration was generally harmonious in nature; arguments and disagreements were solved without personal accusations or remarks. Students concentrated on joint problem solving, as can be seen in Excerpt 2A (Appendix 8-2A).

Below is an extract from Recording 7 Group A (see Appendix 8-2A - Excerpt 2A)

- Line 42: A1: Maybe they are just onlookers or who knows thieves who.....
- 43: A4: The problem with you is you are always negative you know....how.....can your *pemikiran* (thoughts) be so *cetek* (shallow) ah..
- 45: A1: Not *ceteklah*, (shallow) but it's a fact, you don't read papers ah?
- 46: A3: Ok never mind, why don't you tell us how to promote unity? Can or not?
- 47: A1: Why not? I think.....

As can be seen from Table 4.3, it is clear that the subjects from Group A were actively involved in collaborative learning discussion and the mode *providing information* has the most counts. This shows that students are familiar with the topic of *National Unity*, and they had knowledge which enabled them to interact with their group members. As for Group B, the subjects' interaction was less compared to Group A. Here again, being average proficiency learners, these subjects limited their discussions to the essay topic. As can be seen from Table 4.3, subject B2 contributed and elaborated most of the information during collaborative learning discussion. Perhaps the essay topic given was not favourable and students did not have much to contribute as the topic requires information a lot of general knowledge which had to be obtained from the mass media.

Below is an extract from Recording 7 Group B (see Appendix 8-2B - Excerpt 2B)

- B1 :Eh first of all ah how to define national unity....maybe we.....
- B4 :I think national unity is mixing with people of different races and talking eh taking part in community activities where.....
like rakanmuda or gotong-royonglah where people work together
and clean up the kawasan and then....
- B2 :Yeah, but gotong-royong also not everyone will take part, like our friend here
will go missing when there's gotong-royong then he....
- B5 :Eh I didn't go missinglah I just went outmah.....the gotong-royong is full of
aedes mosquitoeslah..... you want to visit me in hospital ah?
- B1 :Why the aedes only come after you ah? Maybe your blood is tastier...
- B2 :Ok ok.....the national unity can be promoted by the media also like advertising
some good points where there is multi racial and show movies or dramas where
all the races take part and then there will be unity...

The discussion above clearly shows that students lack content and ideas pertaining to the essay topic. As these subjects are average proficiency learners, they have limited knowledge on national unity, and therefore the discussion is choppy. Facts not related to the essay topic are discussed as students get restless when they are unable to relate to the discussion. As subject B2 was able to take control of the discussion, the other members were able to contribute only minimal ideas.

According to Slavin (1989), for effective collaborative learning, there must be “group goals” and “individual accountability”. The groups’ task is to ensure that every group member has learned something, and it is in the interest of every group member to spend time explaining concepts to group mates. In exchanging views among members, participants would be able to gather ideas for writing their essays later. This proved to be the case in this study, especially in Group A.

The third recording was on the discussion for the essay *Importance of the English Language*. Table 4.4 below shows the frequency of interaction of each subject from Groups A and B during collaborative learning discussions prior to the writing of the essay.

Table 4.4

**Distribution of language functions used in the
essay *Importance of the English Language***

	Group A					Group B				
Subjects	A1	A2	A3	A4	A5	B1	B2	B3	B4	B5
Language Functions										
Providing Information	8	6	7	8	5	2	2	3	3	4
Asking for Clarification	-	-	1	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Elaborating	2	3	6	4	5	1	1	3	2	-
Arguing	4	3	4	3	1	2	2	1	2	2
Organizing	1	1	2	1	-	1	1	-	-	-
Interrogating	1	1	2	-	-	3	3	2	1	2
Responding	-	1	-	-	-	1	1	-	2	-
Repeating	-	3	1	-	1	-	-	-	-	-
Agreeing	1	3	-	1	1	1	1	-	1	-
Disagreeing	1	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-

Below is an extract from Recording 9 Group A (see Appendix 9-3A - Excerpt 3A)

A2 :I think both. In our country it's a second language. At the same time English is an international language. Any country you go to, if you can't speak English then you will be lost, that is why now our government keep emphasizing on the importance of English and...

A5 :Yeah, that's why they introduce Maths and Science in English....

A1 :Yeah but I thought they are going to go back to BM...

A4 :It doesn't matter, I think the main reason Maths and Science were introduced in English is to improve the standard of English especially among students from the rural...

A1 :But actually I don't quite agree with the implementation you know, because the students in the rural are still at a disadvantage.....because they are not given enough exposure to the language.....

As can be seen from the extract above, the subjects from Group A seriously discussed and argued about Maths and Science being taught in English. This clearly shows that these students were well aware of the happenings around them, and therefore able to relate their points of view during collaborative learning discussions. As can be seen from Table 4.4, the language functions were used by all the subjects as they actively participated during discussions.

As for Group B, as can be seen from Table 4.4, the function of *providing information*, which was used the most, was still far less frequent than that used by Group A. Below is an excerpt from Recording 9 Group A (see Appendix 9-3A - Excerpt 3A)

Line 4: B3:I think is very important to master the English language.....

Line 8: B3: because you can speak English other than.....

Line 10: B2: ...if your mother tongue is English?...

Line 12 : B1:many people cannot speak their mother tongue

Line 14: B2:very shylah if don't know mother tongue.....

Line 19: B1:let's talk about Englishlah not mother tongue

In the extract above, the subjects from Group B were discussing the same point, and not expanding their thoughts and views pertaining to the discussion. The subjects' interaction lacked clarification and elaboration, and thus the discussion was aimed at the

mother tongue instead of the importance of the English language. One reason for this situation could be the lack of vocabulary. As can be seen in the excerpt, their conversations were short and brief. Perhaps the limited language proficiency may have inhibited these participants from voicing their thoughts further.

Therefore, it can be assumed that engaging students in conversations can help them improve their communication skills. The more they are involved in conversations, the more they gather ideas; at the same time, they learn to share their thoughts by exchanging ideas. It is through conversations that students formulate better ideas and become analytical because of the differences in their points of view.

The findings (Tables 4.2, 4.3 & 4.4) reveal that when compared to the high proficiency group, the average proficiency group members devoted a substantially lower portion of their time during collaborative learning to content. Perhaps they felt satisfied after gaining a few content points for their essays. This could presumably be because they have insufficient command of the language and knowledge of the subject matter to offer effective explanations. The scores obtained in the essays and the comments by the raters as to why students lack content points indicate that this could possibly be due to the relative lack of proficiency in the language. This finding confirms Bennets' (1995) argument that high ability children appear to perform well as they tend to talk more, and more of their talk is academic in content.

To address the first research question based on the discussions that took place during the collaborative learning sessions, it can be said that the subjects were able to share ideas and expand on them and later transfer all the information gathered during discussions into their written essays. This can be seen in the scores obtained in their post tests, where eight out of ten subjects improved in content and language. During collaborative learning discussions, these subjects listened attentively to the ideas contributed and discussed by their friends, and adopted these in their essays. Therefore, it can be said that collaborative learning helped the subjects widen their knowledge on issues related to the essay topics, and enabled them to incorporate these in their essays.

The second research question touched upon how students of differing language proficiency perceive the effect of collaborative learning on their writing performance. The findings show that the subjects in Group A have the linguistic resources to engage in collaborative learning sessions as these subjects were very comfortable during discussions. As they were high proficiency learners, these subjects were able to interact during discussions and, as such, able to exchange ideas. However, collaborative learning did not appeal to two subjects from Group A, namely, A4 and A5. As can be seen in Tables 4.2, 4.3 and 4.4, they began enthusiastically, but this enthusiasm fizzled out in the next two collaborative learning discussions. Therefore, it cannot be assumed that collaborative learning is effective for all high proficiency learners. Even though all the students in Group A had higher proficiency than those in Group B, these two students were not keen in collaborative learning as they preferred to work individually.

The students in Group B (average proficiency) participated in all the discussions but their conversations were minimal, perhaps due to lack of knowledge and not having sufficient ideas to contribute. These subjects kept the discussion going by contributing ideas which they felt were appropriate. Therefore, it can be said that collaborative learning is effective to some extent for the students of average proficiency as they are able to discuss at least some of the ideas during collaborative learning.

4.6 Subjects' participation during collaborative learning sessions

The subjects from Group A that comprised learners of high proficiency were able to interact throughout the collaborative learning sessions as observed by the researcher throughout the study. They felt comfortable expressing their thoughts and substantiated their views by giving their own examples pertaining to the discussions. This can be seen in Excerpt 1A (see Appendix 7-1A) where A1 highlights an example of someone who was left in the old folks home despite having children (line 155). Furthermore, the use of words and phrases indicate the subjects in Group A were of higher proficiency compared to the subjects in Group B. The use of words such as *twilight years* (line 10) in Excerpt 1A (see Appendix 7-1A), *prejudice* (line 32) in Excerpt 2A (see Appendix 8-2A) and phrases such as *longer life span* (line 47) in Excerpt 1A (see Appendix 7-1A), and *what comes around goes around* (line 281) in Excerpt 1A (see Appendix 7-1A), *brain wash* (line 49) and *nasty experience* (line 51) in Excerpt 2A (see Appendix 8-2A) shows that during collaborative learning students were able to utter such words and phrases: this is a clear indication that learning takes place during social interaction as other students learn

these new words and phrases. This also clearly shows that the subjects from Group A, the high proficiency group, are well exposed to the language as they were able to use words and phrases which are linguistically correct and appropriate, and relate various examples to the topic of discussion. Furthermore, the subjects participated throughout the discussions, with the exception of A4 and A5. Therefore, it can be concluded that most of the subjects in Group A were comfortable throughout the collaborative learning discussions.

What emerged from the observations of the collaborative learning discussion sessions was the fact that though the subjects from Group B comprised average proficiency learners, they were generally willing to participate and contribute during discussions as they felt secure being in a group of similar ability learners. The comfort zone enabled them to interact, and they were not worried of being ridiculed by their group members.

However, not all members of the average proficiency group were forthcoming in their participation. In the process of collaborative learning discussion on the topic *Caring for Senior Citizens* (as can be seen in Excerpt 1B Appendix 7), the researcher noted that participant B4 from Group B did not interact much. This participant had been quite passive since the beginning and did not contribute to the discussion. Instead, he posed a question to another friend by asking him to contribute. This can be seen in line 3 Excerpt 1 where B1 talks about the introduction to the essay and later asks for the opinion of the other group members by saying, “So, what do you think?” Participant B4 immediately responded by diverting the question to a specific member by saying “Bee Hoi, what do

you think?" (line 4). He was unable to contribute and was afraid of being picked on by the group members; therefore, he immediately participated by getting another member to contribute. In the same extract, participant B4 (in line 18), merely says "I think they shouldlah" by agreeing to the argument stated by B1. Here again, he was reluctant to give his point of view, and this confirms the findings from the interview where he admits to having an inferior complex while interacting with the other members of his group. Hence, even though members from this group were generally of average proficiency, it cannot be denied that some members were bolder and could speak up, while some of them just shied away from participating in the discussions.

Another example is B2 who only provided ideas during collaborative learning sessions after much persuasion from his group members. His brief contributions were interjected with short and long pauses. His ideas and language remained limited during these sessions. It can be concluded that in the first collaborative learning session, B2 was not actually involved because he did not have the linguistic resources, being less proficient. Therefore, it can be concluded that B2 was not actively engaged. This seems to reaffirm the findings in the interview session (Section 4.8) where he confessed that his exposure to the English language was limited, and therefore he was quite reluctant to speak up as he was afraid of making mistakes.

From the researcher's observations, it was clear the subjects from Group B, the average proficiency group, did not possess adequate vocabulary in the English language to

express themselves adequately during the collaborative learning discussions. This inadvertently forced them to use Malay words and phrases as can be seen in Excerpt 2 where words like *kawasan* (line 6), *katak bawah tempurung* (line 39), *ketua kampong* (line 46), *kampong* and *bandar* (line 47) were used. This use of Malay further supports the idea that the participants from Group B were only of average proficiency as they were not able to come up with the appropriate English words.

Apart from the switch to Malay words, it was also noted that the students' poor command of the English language and lack of ideas hampered their performance. This can be seen in Excerpt 1, *so they will boring in the house* (line 24), *provide cheaper for their health* (line 36) *because although at there, there got people to take care* (line43), Excerpt 2, *but gotong-royong also not everyone will take part* (line7), *not necessary, sometimes even rojak also* (line22), Excerpt 3, *then getting jobs also very easy because* (line 8), and *that one because they are old, so they cannotlah* (line54). These are a few examples of spoken language that emerged during Group B's discussions which indicate that they are of average proficiency. These findings seem to reaffirm the findings of the study conducted by Lim (2004) who claimed that her participants' poor command of the language hampered their writing ability. In the case of this study, the poor command of the language can be seen as students form grammatically incorrect sentences during discussions and use very limited and simple vocabulary. Nevertheless, they were able to generate sufficient ideas for the essay topics as can be seen in their written essays.

As to the first research question, *To what extent does collaborative learning help ESL students to improve their writing skills?*, the observation by the researcher throughout collaborative learning discussions revealed that collaborative learning had trained students to be outspoken as they were quite comfortable being in the same level of proficiency; the tendency among most subjects to speak up was not restricted. Collaborative learning helped students improve their writing performance as the students were able to transfer the ideas discussed during collaborative learning sessions in the written essays. This is evident in the scores obtained in the post test where the percentage increase for content is higher than that for language. Therefore, it can be said that collaborative learning helped students gain ideas for the written essays.

To address the second research question, *How do students of differing proficiency perceive the effect of collaborative learning on their writing performance?*, the researcher noted that collaborative learning would not work with students like A4 and A5 from Group A who had a different mind set. These two students preferred individual tasks as they did not like the concept of sharing. Participants A4 and A5 appeared to be uncomfortable in the group as they looked like reluctant participants who were being forced to contribute during discussions. As they mentioned in their interviews (see Section 4.8), they felt that essays had to be written individually during examinations, so they should be trained to think individually and not in groups. Therefore, it can be assumed that collaborative learning may not necessarily work for all high proficiency learners.

On the other hand, collaborative learning benefits the average learners as these students made an attempt to interact in English despite having only average proficiency in the English language. During the observations the researcher felt that collaborative learning would give them an opportunity to speak up. Furthermore, they gained more ideas for their essays by exchanging opinions. Therefore, it can be said that collaborative learning may be beneficial and effective for average learners as the students had shown improvement in their written essays.

4.7 Subjects' perception of collaborative learning

This section discusses the subjects' perceptions of collaborative learning with regard to content and language in writing. The questionnaire required students to rate how they felt about collaborative learning using the scale from *strongly agree* to *strongly disagree*. The questionnaire was divided into four sections. As already discussed in Section 3.4.4, Section A required students to provide information pertaining to their background (this has already been discussed in Section 3.3.1), Section B focused on subjects' perception of how or to what extent collaborative learning helped them in improving their content in writing, while Section C touched on the language aspect. Section D consisted of open ended questions and students' general perception of collaborative learning. A total of ten questionnaires were administered to the participants from Groups A and B.

4.7.1 The subjects perception of the role of collaborative learning with regard to content in writing

The subjects were required to complete the questionnaire based on their perceptions of the role of collaborative learning pertaining to content in essay writing. The data analysis below is obtained from Section B of the questionnaire.

Table 4.5

Subjects' Perceptions of the role of Collaborative Learning with regard to content in writing

	Item	Strongly Disagree		Disagree		Undecided		Agree		Strongly Agree	
		F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%
1.	Collaborative learning helped me gain more content for the essay.					2	20	3	30	5	60
2.	I am able to develop and elaborate on ideas gained during discussions					2	20	4	40	4	40
3.	I was able to analyze and evaluate ideas in writing the essay.					2	20	6	60	2	20
4.	Collaborative learning is a good way to pool ideas for essay writing					2	20	5	50	3	30

5.	Collaborative learning enabled me to present my points clearly					2	20	6	60	2	20
6.	We spent more time discussing about the content for the essay					2	20	-	-	8	80
7.	During discussions I was unable to expand my ideas	5	50	3	30	2	20				

The data clearly shows that the participants were all in favour of collaborative learning as they indicated that it had helped them to gain content and ideas and thus improve their writing skills. However, it must be noted that two subjects (A4 and A5 from Group A) had opted for *undecided* for all the constructs. Further elaboration pertaining to their responses can be found in Section 4.8.

With regard to the first construct, five subjects *strongly agreed* and three subjects *agreed* that collaborative learning had helped them gain more content for the essay. Their perception was validated by the fact that the post test scores of their essays showed that all eight subjects had indeed shown an increase in scores for content. This could be due to the fact that collaborative learning enabled the subjects to brainstorm on the essay topic and thus generate ideas for writing the essay.

Where the second construct was concerned, four of the subjects *agreed* and another four *strongly agreed* that collaborative learning helped them to develop and elaborate on their ideas. During the process of discussion during collaborative learning, the subjects were

able to pool their ideas together. The ideas gained from the discussions were further elaborated upon in their written essays.

For the third construct, six subjects *agreed* and another two subjects *strongly agreed* that after collaborative learning they were able to analyze and evaluate their ideas while they were writing their essays individually. The same participants also felt that after collaborative learning, they were able to present their points more clearly. The positive impact on collaborative learning can be seen in the increased scores obtained in the post tests as well as scores obtained in the three essays.

In the case of the fourth construct, five subjects *agreed* and another three *strongly agreed* that collaborative learning was a good way to pool ideas for essay writing. The ideas related to the essay topic were contributed by the subjects during collaborative learning. This is in line with Hedge's (2005:13) contention that as students work in groups, they are able to brainstorm, organize and sequence ideas; this would eventually lead to a better mastery of the writing process.

With regard to construct five, six subjects *agreed* and another two *strongly agreed* that collaborative learning enabled them to present more clearly their points related to content. This is in line with the comments given by the raters (see Section 4.6) that the subjects were able to contribute and discuss ideas pertaining to the essay topic.

As for construct six, all eight subjects except for A4 and A5 *strongly agreed* that during collaborative learning, they spent more time discussing the content for the essay than

other irrelevant ideas not related to the essay topic (as evidenced in the excerpts). This construct was devised to find out if the students were focused during discussions or if they were easily carried away discussing topics not related to the essay topic.

For the final construct, five participants *strongly disagreed* and another three *disagreed* that during collaborative learning discussions they were unable to expand their ideas. The final construct was negatively worded to offset the positive response and the tendency to agree with everything (see Section 3.4.5).

Therefore, it can be concluded that collaborative learning has helped students improve their writing skills. Section B of the questionnaire clearly shows that eight out of ten subjects were in favour of collaborative learning in the teaching of writing as they felt that they were able to improve the content of their essays. This can be seen in the marked improvement in the subjects' post test scores (Section 4.4, Table 4.1) where all eight subjects' scores for content showed improvement. As a matter of fact, the subjects scored higher marks for content compared to language. Therefore, collaborative learning is effective in teaching writing in an ESL class, especially for enhancing the content of the written product.

4.7.2 The subjects' perception of the role of collaborative learning with regard to the language aspect of writing

The data below is obtained from Section C of the questionnaire.

Table 4.6

Subjects' Perceptions of the role of Collaborative Learning with regard to language in writing

	Item	Strongly Agree		Disagree		Undecided		Agree		Strongly Agree	
		F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%
8.	I am able to link ideas effectively					2	20	4	40	4	40
9.	My style of writing improved as I am able to write more coherently after group discussions.					2	20	5	50	3	30
10.	Through discussions I am able to gain appropriate vocabulary related to content.					2	20	3	30	5	50
11.	I am able to use different forms of sentence structures.					2	20	3	30	5	50

The analysis of data pertaining to how collaborative learning helped participants improve their language in essay writing shows that the same two participants, A4 and A5, were very neutral and *undecided* (see Table 4.6) This was probably because they were not in favour of collaborative learning (This will be discussed, as mentioned earlier, in Section 4.8). However, the other eight participants did agree that collaborative learning helped them improve the language of their written essays.

As shown in Table 4.6, where the eighth construct was concerned, four subjects *agreed* and the other four *strongly agreed* that they were able to link ideas effectively in their

essays after collaborative learning. This was evident in their essays, especially with the use of linkers (as mentioned in Section 4.4).

As for construct nine, five subjects *agreed* and another three *strongly agreed* that their style of writing had improved as they were able to write coherently after discussions. The subjects' positive perceptions were supported by their post test scores where there was a marked improvement in the scores for language (see Table 4.1 in Section 4.4).

For the tenth construct, three subjects *agreed* and another five *strongly agreed* that through discussions among peers in collaborative learning, they were able to gain appropriate vocabulary related to content in the essay topic. The same subjects also felt that they were able to use different forms of sentence structures in their essays (construct eleven). Nevertheless, they limited themselves to shorter sentences as was seen in the post test essays.

The findings above indicate that from the subjects' perspective, collaborative learning had positive benefits in teaching writing as the participants viewed collaborative learning as a tool to gain content and improve the language of their essays. Linguistic competence is essential in producing essays of good quality.

Section D of the questionnaire required subjects to state their opinions about collaborative learning, the problems they faced, the advantages and disadvantages of collaborative learning, and whether writing lessons should be taught by incorporating collaborative learning. All eight students mentioned that there were advantages like

being able to work cooperatively, exchange ideas, widen knowledge and improve their listening and speaking skills. They also agreed that writing should be taught by incorporating collaborative learning as they were able to sharpen their listening skill and got to improve their speaking skill as well. They did not mention any disadvantages. However, the two other subjects, A4 and A5, wrote that they felt bored at times and that collaborative learning was a waste of time.

To answer the first research question *To what extent does collaborative learning help ESL students to improve their writing skills?*, based on the subjects' perceptions, it can be concluded that generally their beliefs were positive. The subjects were able to use the ideas gained from collaborative learning discussions in their essays. Considering the brainstorming sessions of mind mapping during collaborative learning, the students were able to arrange, sequence and link their ideas well and faced less difficulty in writing. This can be seen in their written essays and the comments by the raters after marking their essays. They were also able to retain the information gathered during discussions and use this in their essays. Therefore, it can be said that collaborative learning helped students improve their style of writing as they were able to use different forms of sentence structures and varied vocabulary gained during collaborative learning discussions.

The second research question was *How do students of differing proficiency perceive the effect of collaborative learning on their writing performance?* Here again, collaborative learning was not very appealing to the two subjects from the high proficiency group – A4

and A5. Nevertheless, the other three subjects from Group A were very positive and preferred collaborative learning as group discussions had brought about expansion of ideas and they were able to analyze, contribute and exchange ideas pertaining to the essay topic. Similarly, all the subjects from the average proficiency group (Group B) were in favour of collaborative learning as they felt that they had gained ideas, improved their vocabulary and linked their ideas effectively. As such, it can be said that collaborative learning was also found to be effective for the average learners.

4.8 Interview data on Subjects' perception of Collaborative Learning in the teaching of writing

Whenever time permitted, the researcher conducted interviews with the subjects after the collaborative learning discussions; this was done in groups due to time constraints. As both Groups A and B were being recorded simultaneously, the researcher was only able to interview one group after each collaborative learning session. As such, the researcher selected the group which was either the most active or passive during collaborative learning. Occasionally, the researcher carried out individual interviews whenever there was a need and this was done immediately after the recordings of collaborative learning sessions. The individual interview was to ascertain as to why a particular participant was passive and did not participate actively during the collaborative learning discussions. These individual interviews were mostly conducted with two participants, namely A4 and A5 from Group A.

In response to the first interview question (see Appendix 4) on *Do you like working in small groups or would you rather work alone?*, three participants from Group A (A1, A2

and A3) claimed that they preferred to work in groups as far as discussions were concerned. According to participant A3, “We prefer just to discuss the essay topic with friends, but when it comes to writing the essay, I would prefer to do it on my own because I get to practice my writing skills”. Similarly, all five participants from Group B were in favour of working in groups. Hence, eight participants preferred group work as they felt comfortable interacting with their group members. They reiterated that it was much easier and accommodating to work with members who were of the same level of proficiency.

This is in line with Johnson (1998) who contends that group work fosters the exchange of ideas, and generates knowledge and active participation in the decision-making process. Similarly, Long and Porter (1985) are in favour of small group interaction as “it increases language practice opportunities, it improves the quality of student talk and it motivates learners to learn” (cited in Ellis 1994:598).

In response to the second interview question, *Did collaborative learning help you in any way?*, participants A1, A2 and A3 were in favour of collaborative learning as they felt they were able to generate more and interesting ideas for content in their essays. In fact, they claimed that they had too much to write as they included the examples obtained during collaborative discussions. As one participant (A2) put it, “Ideas keep pouring in but we cannot write everything that we discussed as some of the ideas need good examples to elaborate”. This is similar to the response from the questionnaire (see Table

4.5 Section 4.7.1) where five participants *strongly agreed* and three participants *agreed* that collaborative learning helped them gain more content for the essay.

A2 further elaborated that “Before when I wanted to write, I used to be lost for content for the essay. It was difficult to develop ideas due to insufficient knowledge about the essay topic. But in collaborative learning discussions, even though at times we go out of topic, I still managed to get ideas from my group members. I also wrote down the vocabulary, phrases and sentence structures uttered by my friends, especially the good ones”. A1 and A3 also agreed with this view point.

A1 mentioned that “Sometimes when I want to write down the points discussed, I tend to forget the point which I had in mind because the members discuss and go on expanding some more. Collaborative learning discussion was very organized because we help one another to follow the order of discussions”.

The eight participants (the exception being A4 and A5) stated that they liked the idea of collaborative learning in the English language classroom. They felt more relaxed and happy learning English in groups as there was a lot of interaction.

Similarly, participant B1 who came from a Mandarin speaking home, admitted that after collaborative learning, he was better able to organize his points for the essay and he was more systematic in writing. This view was echoed by the other participants in Group B as they felt that collaborative learning enabled them to be more organized in writing

essays. Participant B5 agreed that collaborative learning was a good way of gaining ideas for the essay topic as they were able to pool their ideas; this gives them a chance to get some content for essay writing. Coming from a Mandarin-speaking home and a National Type primary school (see Table 3.1), he finds collaborative learning has helped him in improving his writing performance.

In response to question three, *Did you feel comfortable voicing your opinions or were you very conscious about it?*, participant B2 who also came from a Mandarin-speaking home, felt that he had the opportunity to speak in English with his peers and he was not at all conscious of making mistakes. At the same time, he claimed that if he was given a chance to speak in front of the class in English, he would still be very reluctant.

Participants B1, B3 and B5 claimed that at times they were reluctant to voice their opinions as they may pronounce or utter the wrong word. They claimed that the reason they were less proficient was the lack of exposure to the language and limited usage of English outside the classroom. They seldom spoke in English outside the class as they were very conscious of their proficiency, although eventually they regretted not doing so. They felt that one way to improve their proficiency was by using the language often; this was something which they had failed to do. Participants B2 and B4 who were from the vernacular school also faced the same problem. They claimed that the exposure to the usage of the English language in school was limited as they only used the language during their English lessons. As they were in the 'average' class, they were unable to

interact in English with their peers from the good classes as they were worried about making mistakes.

Participant B4 from Group B claimed that if he had been put in Group A (the high proficiency group) during collaborative learning, he would definitely have been a silent and passive participant as he felt he needed time to think and answer. This seems to prove that if participants were grouped according to their proficiency level, chances of interaction would be high compared to heterogeneous grouping where students are grouped according to mixed ability.

In response to the fourth question in the interview, *What are the techniques that you learnt in collaborative learning for writing your essays?*, all eight participants (with the exception of A4 and A5) claimed that the brainstorming strategy was effective in improving their writing performance. This is in line with the findings from Rao's study (2007:104) where he claimed that "students feel positive about the brainstorming strategy..... and they perceived that the strategy helped them improve their English writing performance". Apart from brainstorming, the participants also admitted that they were able to organize, sequence and elaborate on ideas and content from collaborative learning discussions. Collaborative learning has helped students improve their writing skill as students benefitted from the discussions. They were able to improve at least to some certain extent in many aspects of writing (as discussed above).

In response to the last interview question, *Do you think collaborative learning should be practised in teaching and learning the other skills such as listening and speaking?*”, A1, A2 and A3 said that collaborative learning enabled them to improve their communicative skills. These participants agreed that they enjoyed speaking and using English during discussions.

It can be concluded that eight out of ten subjects claimed that they liked the idea of collaborative learning during the English language lessons. They felt more relaxed and happy learning English in groups as there was a lot of interaction. These participants claimed that they enjoyed speaking and using English during discussions as they were able to form sentences which helped them in writing their essays. The interview findings also revealed that the subjects had a positive perception towards collaborative learning. All eight agreed that it was easier to write essays after collaborative learning as they already had the content and ideas from discussions among group members.

The interview data showed that eight out of ten subjects (80%) felt that collaborative learning should be practiced not only in the teaching of writing as they were able to gather content, expand on ideas discussed and organize view points appropriately. The subjects felt that collaborative learning was one way of prompting them to speak up, and they were forced to be attentive listeners.

As mentioned earlier, individual interviews were carried out with two subjects, namely, A4 and A5. The reason for doing so was because the researcher noticed that these two subjects were exceptionally reserved and did not contribute much during the

collaborative learning discussions. When interviewed, A4 and A5 claimed that they did have a positive attitude towards learning English as they believed that people generally could improve their language if they read extensively and spoke the language as often as possible.

When asked why they were not actively participating in the collaborating learning discussions, these two subjects stated that they preferred working alone as they felt that working in groups was a waste of time. These two subjects thought that they could write better if they did not participate in group interactions as they claimed that their ideas had got mixed up after discussions, and that this had led to lower marks in content and language. According to A4, “Normally when I want to write essays, I will do a mind map and arrange my thoughts in sequence and expand on the content briefly in the mind map itself. But when we discuss in groups, I feel like my thoughts are all over and I am not able to link ideas and relate to the content. So if you ask me I definitely would prefer to work alone. Furthermore, I was always drilled to be independent and not dependent. Maybe it is because of my background as I am the only child; I don’t like sharing”.

This point of view was agreed upon by A5, who felt that writing was an individual task in examinations; therefore, they should be trained to think and write individually. As he put it “What’s the great idea of having discussions when at the end of the day you still have to write the essay individually, so why waste time?.” The views of these two subjects clearly show that they were not in favour of collaborative learning as sharing was not in their culture, as mentioned by A4 earlier. Therefore, collaborative learning

may not be preferred by some participants as their aim is to ace the exams for which group discussions are not seen as crucial or productive.

These findings are consistent with those of Forman (1989 cited in Kumpulainen & Kaartinen 2003:334) who warns that, “Not all kind of peer interactions will create productive learning opportunities”. This is further supported by King (1992), who argues that the nature of collaboration and the process of negotiating during discussion affect the quality of learning in peer groups. However, what can be inferred from this study is that collaborative learning, while favoured by the majority, might not appeal to all.

As to the first research question, *To what extent does collaborative learning help ESL students to improve their writing skill?*, all eight subjects agreed that through collaborative learning they were able to improve their English language proficiency. Language proficiency refers to the knowledge and ability to speak, write and understand the target language of the language learners. Collaborative learning was very useful to the students as the discussions among group members helped them to generate ideas and helped them improve their communicative skills. These eight students felt that they were able to write more confidently as they were able to get more content and incorporate the vocabulary produced by their group members during discussions. Therefore, they were able to write using appropriate and varied vocabulary in their essays. The students were able to elaborate and link their ideas effectively and show coherence in their essays. As discussed in Section 4.6, the improvement in content and language can be seen in the students' post test scores.

As to the second research question, *How do students of differing proficiency perceive the effect of collaborative learning on their writing performance?*, collaborative learning may not be applicable to all high proficiency students. Two of the high proficiency students (A4 and A5) felt that by reading extensively they were able to improve their proficiency level. As they were both avid readers, they had the confidence, the language and wide knowledge pertaining to essay topics. Therefore, they preferred individual and not collaborative learning. According to them, during examinations, writing was an individual task. As such, they believed they should be trained to think and write individually.

On the other hand, collaborative learning was to a great extent very effective for the average learners as they were comfortable with their group members, and the comfort zone enabled them to interact confidently. After a few collaborative learning sessions, they got used to the idea of interaction. Even if they had to switch to Malay words at times, the group members were very cooperative and they did not feel shunned. In brief, the average proficiency learners felt that collaborative learning discussions helped them to improve their writing skill.

4.9 Conclusion

This chapter presented and discussed the findings of the present study aligned according to the two research questions. To briefly summarize, the findings for the first research question, *To what extent does collaborative learning help ESL students to improve their*

writing skills?, revealed that collaborative learning helped ESL students improve both the content and language in their essays. The data analysis revealed that collaborative learning enabled students to enhance their linguistic repertoire as they were able to include the vocabulary and phrases used by the group members during discussions in their essays. The use of appropriate vocabulary, syntax and cohesive devices in the written essays reveal that students benefitted from collaborative learning as verbal interaction during discussions promotes usage of linguistic devices in the process of communicating one's thoughts related to the essay topic. During collaborative learning, the input which is content pertaining to the essay topic, is discussed by group members who then include this input in their written essays. As such, the students were able to gain adequate content and expand their ideas using information gained during collaborative learning discussions.

The students responded positively towards collaborative learning as can be seen from the findings in the questionnaire whereby they claimed that they were able to link ideas, use different form of sentence structures and write coherently in their essays. This is a clear indication that collaborative learning has brought about positive improvement in the students' writing skills, and this can be seen in the increase in the content and language component of the post test essay scores.

Several pertinent findings emerged from the second research question, *How do students of differing proficiency perceive the effect of collaborative learning on their writing performance?* A significant finding was that not all students were in favour of

collaborative learning. Two students from the high proficiency group claimed that they preferred to write their essays without any form of discussions with their classmates as they felt collaborative learning was a waste of time. It was revealed in the interview findings that these two students were very confident of their language proficiency, and therefore they felt that there was no necessity for collaborative learning.

On the other hand, all the students in the average proficiency group and three students from the high proficiency group strongly claimed that collaborative learning was indeed very useful to them. The latter were able to improve their writing performance after collaborative learning as they were able to write confidently and in a mature style. All five students from the average group preferred collaborative learning in the teaching of writing as they felt that group discussions enabled them to brainstorm and gain ideas which helped improve their writing performance.

The findings of this study reveal the benefits gained by students from collaborative learning during their writing lessons and how they improved their writing skills. The summary of the research findings, implications and recommendation for further research will be discussed further in the next chapter.