

CHAPTER FIVE : CONCLUSION

5.1 Summary of Study

This study examined the effectiveness of collaborative learning on individual writing performance among English as Second Language learners. This study was carried out to determine to what extent collaborative learning helped Form Six students improve their writing skills and how students of differing proficiency levels perceive the effect of collaborative learning on their writing performance. As such, the two research questions formulated for the study were:

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?

The researcher developed a research design which provided both quantitative and qualitative data. The quantitative data were collected through the pre and post test essay scores and questionnaires, while the data gathered from the audio recordings, observations and interviews were analyzed from a qualitative perspective. In this chapter, the researcher will summarize the key findings based on the data and discuss their implications for the teaching and learning of writing among ESL students. The findings will also be compared to other research findings before recommendations for future research are offered.

5.2 Summary of Findings

The data analysis revealed several interesting findings related to collaborative learning and ESL writing. In this section, these findings will be summarized according to the research questions posed at the beginning of the study.

5.2.1 RQ 1: To what extent does collaborative learning help ESL students to improve their writing skills?

The findings of the study indicate that students were engaged in productive interactions throughout the collaborative learning sessions. Students also had positive perceptions towards collaborative learning as evidenced by their discussions which led them to reconstruct their thoughts and to consider different points of view posed by the group members. They actively generated ideas, gave suggestions, and resolved conflicts; in general, they were able to improve their writing skills.

As shown by the post test scores, eight out of ten subjects in the study performed significantly better on both the main aspects of writing, that is, content and language. The findings show that students were able to present relevant ideas and adequate content in their essays after collaborative learning. They were also able to use a range of varied vocabulary, link ideas and expand ideas effectively and display short and effective sentence structures in their essays. This findings prove clearly that collaborative learning enabled students to improve their writing performance as they were able to refine their

ideas related to the essay topic and thus produce a more cohesive and coherent essay. This is consistent with Murray's (1992) view that language aspects usually improve after collaborative learning.

Although the essays were written by the subjects on an individual basis, the subjects were able to plan their writing well (as commented by the raters) as their discussions during collaborative learning were well sequenced and organized (as can be seen in the transcription of the recordings). Their writing performance after collaborative learning discussions show that they have indeed learnt to write effectively. This can be seen in their post test essays as there is better unity and sequencing of ideas with the effective use of linkers (as mentioned in Chapter 4 section 4.4).

Furthermore, the findings from the questionnaires and interviews reveal that collaborative learning has helped students to be more confident in writing essays. The students felt comfortable working in groups as they were able to gain ideas and content for their essays. According to Vygotsky (1978), students are capable of performing at a higher intellectual level when asked to work in collaborative situations than when asked to work individually. Piaget (1969), too, agrees that learning takes place in the social domain as interactivity plays a critical role in the process of learning. Flower & Hayes (1981:373) contend that "writers take materials previously gathered and organized and structure it into a linear piece of discourse in the process of putting ideas into visible language". Therefore, the group discussions during collaborative learning made it possible for

learners to activate their mental schemata and integrate the knowledge gained from discussions, thus producing better constructed essays.

As mentioned in Section 2.8 in Chapter 2, studies conducted by researchers such as Markanathan (2005) on group discussions among students and Foong (2005) on paired word show that group work enabled students to improve their writing skill. Both these researchers claim that the exchange of ideas during discussions enabled students to improve the quality of their essays. Similarly, in this study the majority of the subjects from both the groups (high and average proficiency) showed improvement in their writing performance which was done individually after collaborative learning. However, both the researchers emphasized on group writing where each group produces one essay, in contrast to the present study where each group member produces an essay which is written individually after collaborative learning discussions.

A student learns through both socialization and individual effort. Studies on group work in Bruffee's (1993) research on collaborative learning, in which he suggests that "conversation in its most literal sense...people actually talking to each other... is a major avenue for the transmission of societal knowledge". Therefore, it can be concluded that collaborative learning helped students improve their writing performance as can be seen in their essays which were written individually. The ideas gained from discussions were used as content in the written essays. This is in line with Lantolf's (2001) belief that interaction among peers is important as it involves constructing ideas during communication. In addition to that, the interaction during collaborative learning helped

students to hone their speaking skills, and thus improve their linguistic and language proficiency which can in turn be ploughed back into the writing process and product. Therefore, it can be concluded that collaborative learning did help students improve their writing performance, both in language and content.

5.2.2 RQ 2: How do students of differing proficiency perceive the effect of collaborative learning on their writing performance?

This study confirms that collaborative learning was favoured among students from both the high and average proficiency learners with the exception of two students from the high proficiency group. The majority of students were able to relate the facts and information gathered during discussions and use them in their essays.

However, as stated earlier, not all students in the higher proficiency group were in favour of collaborative learning; two students (A4 and A5) seemed to have a negative attitude towards collaborative learning. This can also be seen in the scores obtained in the post test which were lower than their pre test scores. These two students felt that collaborative learning was a waste of time, and preferred a teacher-centred teaching and learning method as they claim to be fluent and proficient in the language. As they mentioned during the interview sessions, writing, being an individual task, is best taught to a whole class and not in groups since during examinations the students have to think on their own. Therefore, it can be concluded that the benefits of collaborative learning may not be

applicable for all higher proficiency learners as some may feel that they are already adequately prepared for the writing task.

Where the subjects of average proficiency are concerned, they were all in favour of collaborative learning as they felt secure and contented with their group members. The findings from the questionnaires, interviews and observations clearly show that all five participants from the average proficient group felt that collaborative learning helped them improve their writing skills. As can be seen in their post test essay scores, the increase in content and language clearly indicates that collaborative learning had been beneficial to this group of learners. Similarly, a study conducted by Sim (1998) on low proficiency students showed that peer interaction enabled students to generate ideas and construct sentences in the process of assisting one another in the writing task.

The findings from the interview reveal that being of average proficiency, these students' level of confidence was low compared to the high proficiency group. This could be due to the former's limited exposure and usage of the English language (Chapter 4, Section 4.8). Furthermore, being of the same level of proficiency was an added advantage where collaborative learning was concerned. They claimed they were comfortable and not at all conscious about making mistakes and using their mother tongue whenever they could not get the right word during discussions. This can be seen from the recordings where the use of Malay words was prevalent in some of the discussions. Therefore, it can be concluded that collaborative learning could have been beneficial for the average proficiency learners as their writing performance showed significant improvement.

5.3 Recommendations

There is a dearth of research on how to improve writing skills among students in secondary schools. Studies into the methods and styles of teaching writing need to be looked into. Different methods can be employed to suit the needs of the students depending on the students' capability. Writing lessons can be planned and taught in various ways but the teaching has to take into account the students' abilities and their proficiency levels. Therefore, studies should be conducted to examine the writing processes of students of different proficiency levels.

Further, studies on collaborative learning in the teaching and learning of the writing skill among heterogenous versus homogeneous groups of students should be carried out. The patterns of discussion among these two groups also require further study.

5.4 Suggestions for future research

The findings support the idea that group interaction during collaborative learning fosters the development of learning, and thus improves the process and quality of writing. Further studies in the area of writing need to be carried out to provide more insights. Research can be carried out on verbal interactions and students' behavior during collaborative learning in secondary classroom, an issue that has not been widely investigated. The patterns of interaction, too, can be analyzed together with the content in the written essays. Further research can also be carried out on the effect of collaborative learning on speaking and listening skills where communicative functions are used to analyze the frequency of interaction among group members. Here again, the

different variables such as grouping of students into heterogeneous and homogeneous groups can also be looked into.

5.5 Conclusion

The present study was carried out in an attempt to improve students' writing skills through collaborative learning. The study has shown that the benefits of collaborative learning are applicable to ESL learners, regardless of proficiency levels. The study has also shown the construction of a shared understanding in peer interaction among group members during the writing lessons.

Since the benefits of collaborative learning have been clearly indicated, it is to be hoped that ESL teachers, especially those who teach writing, will incorporate this method in their classrooms.