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Groupwork in Teaching Academic Writing

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ABSTRACT:

One strategy for instructing English Writing that numerous researchers have investigated to aid in the effective teaching of Academic Writing to university students is implementing group activities within writing skill instruction. This article provides a concise overview of the student-centered approach and the challenges students face when composing in English. It introduces the group-based method for teaching essay writing, highlighting its advantages. Additionally, the article discusses global research findings comparing the efficacy of groupwork versus individual essay writing, as well as potential challenges instructors may confront when employing this approach in their English Writing courses and proposed solutions to mitigate these obstacles. Lastly, the author proposes future research avenues aimed at conducting experimental studies to ascertain the efficacy of this method and furnish guidance for teaching Academic Writing.

Keywords: *Groupwork in writing, individual writing, collaborative output, writing methodology*

1. Introduction

Since the 1970s, following the advent of the Communicative Approach to language learning, the practice of learning in pairs or groups has gained widespread adoption among researchers globally and language instructors across various language classrooms due to its notably effective outcomes. This approach facilitates the transition from a teacher-centered to a student-centered approach in the learning and teaching process. Group work activities are rooted in the concepts of Vygotsky (1978, as cited in Foley & Thompson, 2003), who posited that human development unfolds through socially mediated circumstances. Vygotsky perceived language acquisition as both a cognitive process and a socially mediated developmental one, wherein human activities serve as crucial instruments for integrating language into life; a child's cognitive growth is nurtured through social interactions, and language development in children is influenced by activities within their social environment. As per Foley and Thompson (2003), group work stands as a pivotal activity in language classrooms for enhancing students' skills.

In the realm of teaching Academic Writing, instructors leverage student collaboration in the classroom from the initial stages such as topic selection, brainstorming, outlining, organizing information, to editing and revising, to collectively enhance the quality of their writing (Hồ, 2013). Hence, the question arises: Should students continue to collaborate with each other even during the writing phase, given that most steps in the Writing Process are conducted collaboratively by students?

Writing skills, particularly in English, place rigorous demands on students as writing necessitates not only language proficiency but also the capacity to express ideas coherently, logically, and in accordance with specific genre conventions (Norrish, 1983). According to Homstad, Torild, and Thorson (1996), writing in a foreign language remains a formidable and arduous endeavor for ESL (English as a Second Language) learners, as they face significant constraints not only in language proficiency but also in linguistic comprehension. Furthermore, Bacha and Bahous (2008) contend that even with fluent English proficiency, students may not necessarily produce high-quality writing. Silva (1993) and Olsen (1999) also acknowledge that students learning English as a foreign language often grapple with producing effective writing due to disparities in sentence structure and semantics between their native language and English. To delve deeper, Wang and Wen (2002) assert that students encounter challenges in writing English due to the influence of their native language; they frequently resort to translating from their native language to English in their compositions. Hồ (2013) discovered that owing to the influence of their mother tongue, students majoring in English face difficulties in producing proficient writing, evident in both expression and structure.

2. Benefits of Group Writing Activities

If students face numerous challenges in the writing process due to various factors mentioned above, then why not support them in collaborating with each other and writing collectively (group writing)? As the proverb says, "Many hands make light work." Drawing from the author's personal experience in teaching writing classes, students often commit errors such as disjointed sentences, unclear articulation of ideas, and linguistic inaccuracies. However, upon involving students in group work and jointly crafting a paragraph, the coherence of sentence structure improves, and ideas are expressed more clearly and effectively (Ho, 2013).

According to Lowry, Curtis, and Lowry (2004), group writing embodies a socially iterative process that encourages the entire group to focus on a shared objective, necessitating negotiation, cooperation, and discussion throughout the process of composing a collaborative document. Students will have ample opportunities to collaborate in groups (consisting of 3 to 4 individuals), engage in discussions, collectively draft an essay, and become co-authors of that essay. Research has consistently shown that group writing is effective and is recommended for implementation in writing classes as well as in final projects. Dobaq (2012), in studying group writing activities, pair writing, and individual writing, found that essays produced in groups are typically more accurate not only compared to individual essays but also compared to those written in pairs. Storch (2011) further asserts that group writing activities offer students valuable opportunities to deepen their understanding of language. Storch (2011) observed that while group writing outside the classroom is prevalent worldwide, the practice of conducting group writing activities within the classroom remains limited. Hence, the aim of this article is to advocate for the feasibility of organizing group writing activities directly within the classroom.

3. Experimental Results

Shehadeh (2011) conducted an experiment involving 38 first-year students at a large university in the United Arab Emirates to evaluate the effectiveness and student attitudes towards group learning. Out of these students, 18 were assigned to the experimental group, where they collaborated on writing essays, while 20 were placed in the control group. The course spanned 16 weeks, during which both groups received instruction using similar teaching methods, led by the same instructor, with no discernible differences. Given that these were first-year students, their writing tasks primarily focused on composing paragraphs.

Data were gathered through pre-tests and post-tests, along with surveys administered to the experimental group. At the outset of the course, students from both groups were tasked with a pre-test, prompting them to "Describe your house" within a 30-minute time frame, aiming for approximately 100 words. The teaching process for both groups followed a similar trajectory, encompassing stages such as idea generation, outlining, drafting, editing, and submission. The key divergence between the groups lay in the final stage of writing. While the control group transitioned to individual writing after collaborating in the initial stages of the writing process, the experimental group continued to work collaboratively from inception to completion, including during the writing phase.

By the end of the course (week 16), both groups were instructed to compose a paragraph describing the university campus, again within a 30-minute window and aiming for approximately 100 words.

Comparing the pre-test and post-test scores revealed that essays written collaboratively in groups exhibited significantly higher quality in terms of content, paragraph organization, and vocabulary, as opposed to essays written individually. However, there was no discernible difference in terms of grammar and mechanics. Additionally, students in the experimental group reported feeling more confident and noted improvements in their writing skills when engaging in collaborative writing. Many students expressed that group writing facilitated idea generation, knowledge acquisition from peers, and enhanced collaboration skills to refine their writing. Nevertheless, it's important to note that this study solely compared the collective essays of the experimental group with the individual essays of the control group, without assessing the impact of group writing on the writing proficiency of individual students within the groups. Hence, it's challenging to conclusively assert that group writing enhances the writing abilities of individual students; rather, it can be inferred that the collaborative essays produced by the experimental group surpassed the individual essays of the control group. Ultimately, if collaborative writing fails to influence individual writing abilities, its significance may be questioned.

In a similar vein, Storch (2005) provided students in his class with the option to write either individually or in pairs. Out of the participants, 18 opted to write in pairs, while five chose to write individually. The study indicated that pair writing tended to yield shorter but more precise vocabulary and improved paragraph structure. Additionally, texts co-written by pairs exhibited better organization and clearer writing purposes. However, it's worth noting that this study analyzed data over a brief period and assessed students' writing only once, which may limit its effectiveness and reliability. Numerous underlying factors could only be adequately measured over an extended duration.

The limitations of both studies parallel each other, as they solely compared the quality of group-written essays with individually-written ones, neglecting to examine the proficiency of writing in groups and its impact on the individual writing skills of students within those groups.

Another study by Sutherland and Topping (1999) delved into comparing the efficacy of writing individually versus writing in groups, with groups consisting of either cross-ability or same-ability pairs. Sixteen students participated in this research, with an experimental class divided into two groups: one group writing individually and the other writing in pairs with differing abilities (cross-ability). Similarly, the control class was divided into two groups: one writing individually and the other in pairs with similar abilities (same-ability). Throughout the 8-week course, each class produced two essays weekly, each lasting 40 minutes. Data for analysis were gathered from pre-tests, post-tests, end-of-course surveys, and classroom observations.

Results from the study indicated that when comparing pre-test and post-test writing outcomes, the writing proficiency of individuals in the cross-ability experimental group significantly improved, whereas there was no notable difference in the writing abilities of individuals in the same-ability control group. In terms of individual writing skills, comparing pre-test and post-test essays, both pairs writing groups exhibited significant progress, with the cross-ability group seemingly outperforming the same-ability group. Moreover, when comparing collaborative essays with individual essays within the groups, the study found that the quality of pair-written essays significantly enhanced compared to the individual writing abilities over the duration of the course. Though conducted on primary school students, this study contributes valuable insights into the efficacy of group writing skills.

In another investigation by Zabihi and Rezazadeh (2013), the ability to write complex sentences, accuracy, and fluency between an individual writing class and a group writing class were compared among 92 university students in Iran. Students were assigned narrative topics, with essays approximately

250 words long and written within 45 minutes. Thirty-two students were randomly assigned to the individual writing class, while sixty students were allocated to the group writing class. In the group setting, each member was encouraged to contribute ideas, which were collectively refined through discussion and mutual agreement, often aided by visual prompts. The findings revealed that only accuracy was notably higher in the group writing classes, indicating that the group writing method facilitated the production of more accurate essays. However, in terms of fluency (measured by the number of words in the essay), group writing did not excel, likely due to time constraints. Additionally, contrary to previous findings, group writing did not notably enhance students' ability to produce complex sentence structures. Furthermore, the study identified a positive correlation between creative writing and fluency in individual essays rather than in group essays. This study was limited by its design of group writing methods in collaborative writing.

Two researchers in Iran also investigated the influence of group writing on the fluency level and quality of writing. Biria and Jafari (2013) conducted a study with foreign language students at an academy in Isfahan, Iran. Ninety students participated in the study and underwent an English proficiency test, where 30 students were selected for the control group and wrote individually, and 60 students were chosen for the experimental group, writing in pairs. Students in both groups were trained to write essays of about 250 words each. A total of 7 essays were written by students throughout the course. The first and last essays were analyzed to measure differences in students' writing abilities throughout the course. Similar to the work of Zabihi and Rezazadeh (2013), the results showed that paired writing did not show much progress in terms of fluency compared to students writing individually. However, in terms of the quality of writing, paired essays were of higher quality than individual ones. The study did not thoroughly investigate the writing abilities of individuals within the group writing class, instead only comparing the quality of group essays. In terms of methodology, the study did not involve individuals in the group writing process before writing essays, to take advantage of collaborative learning opportunities, so that students could learn from each other's strengths.

Unlike the studies mentioned above, Kim (2008) compared the effectiveness of individual writing versus group writing in terms of vocabulary development among Korean language learners studying foreign languages. The study found that regardless of whether the writing was done individually or in groups, there was no significant difference. However, paired writing resulted in a higher number of vocabulary words in the final exam compared to individual writing. Additionally, similar to Dobao and Blum (2013) and Watanabe and Swain (2007), it was observed that when students discussed with each other while writing collaboratively, they learned from each other significantly, and the results of their writing in the final exam were higher, regardless of whether the English proficiency of their group members was high or not. Storch (2011) noted that collaborative writing activities or group writing (with 2-4 people), if carefully designed and monitored, can create an optimal environment for learning foreign language writing.

4. Survey Results on Learner Attitudes

Absolutely, regardless of the method employed for instructing learners, a crucial aspect in education is comprehending the learners' attitudes toward that method. When learners' preferences are not taken into account, it can be challenging to secure their engagement in the learning process. Consequently, achieving optimal effectiveness may prove difficult. Conversely, when learners are in agreement with the chosen educational approach, the outcomes are more likely to align with expectations. Moreover, understanding learners' attitudes enables educators to identify any challenges or constraints associated with the methods they employ, thereby empowering them to seek enhancements and improvements as needed.

To gauge the attitudes of learners and instructors towards the implementation of group writing methods at a public university in Oman, Ajmi and Ali (2014) conducted a survey among 64 English as a Foreign Language students and interviewed 5 instructors regarding their perspectives on incorporating group writing into the curriculum. The objective was to ascertain how students and instructors perceive group writing and identify any challenges encountered during these activities, as well as explore methods for improvement. Survey findings indicated that the majority of students and instructors held favorable views towards group writing activities. Students expressed a positive sentiment towards group writing, citing it as an engaging activity that facilitated time-saving when completing assignments. Additionally, students acknowledged that group writing provided them with opportunities to exchange skills and experiences, fostering mutual learning. One challenge identified in the study was the lack of active participation from some group members or disagreement with assigned tasks. Furthermore, certain individuals tended to dominate group discussions, potentially due to variations in English proficiency, personality, culture, and differing interpretations of the task.

The study also suggested that to effectively utilize group writing, instructors should clearly state the purpose of the task, provide specific instructions, and guide students on how to work in groups effectively. They should also require students to actively participate and contribute to the group work, while groups should establish working rules, fairly assign tasks, and provide mutual support. Although the results of the study showed positive attitudes of learners toward group writing, the study did not specifically measure the effectiveness of this method.

Dobao and Blum (2013) also carried out a survey to find out how students felt about paired and group writing rather than the difference between individual and group writing. There were 147 willing student volunteers in the study. 55 students consented to fill out the survey after three randomly selected classes were included in the study. The assignment for each student was to write on the same subject. Two courses were set aside for solitary writing, and one class had half the pupils write in groups of four and the other half in pairs. Throughout the course, these groups worked together to generate collaborative essays. According to the study results, most students preferred group writing, with very few preferring solitary writing. Due to the collaborative element of writing with a partner, students who participated in paired writing acknowledged greater enjoyment and mentioned enhanced potential for meaningful input to the essay. However, students who wrote in groups of four felt that this method made it easier to share ideas and information, which improved their English language skills. The majority of students said that practicing in groups or couples helped them choose words and grammar more carefully. Notably, in contrast to the paired and group settings, the study did not ask for comments from the two courses that were assigned to individual writing. The key findings of this study will be summarized in the conclusion below.

5. Challenges and Solutions in Organizing Group Writing

While managing and organizing group writing presents numerous advantages and can be highly effective, variances in English proficiency and teamwork skills also significantly impact the group's productivity. Collaborative learning and writing necessitate students within the same group to share mutual interests in problem-solving. It's imperative for students to acquire the ability to support one another in information gathering and be willing to cooperate in attaining shared objectives (Erkens et al., 2005). Uneven participation from group members poses a significant challenge (Handayani, 2012). Therefore, to enhance control, group writing activities should be conducted within the classroom setting. Instructors can foster collaboration among students in all group tasks, particularly in collaborative writing. Achieving common objectives requires group members to engage in joint activities and thinking. They must brainstorm and utilize their abilities to develop a unified framework for negotiating and conveying individual viewpoints to the entire group (Erkens et al., 2005). Differing opinions within the group are inevitable; thus, instructors should closely monitor group discussions and strive to find the most suitable resolution to reconcile individual perspectives within the group.

In writing classes, another significant challenge in group writing is the tendency for students to divide tasks among themselves, resulting in each student being knowledgeable only about their assigned portion. However, if instructors adeptly organize and facilitate collaborative efforts in tasks such as topic selection, idea generation, outlining, and structuring ideas collectively, then the assignment of responsibilities to each group member can be viewed as a collective endeavor. Particularly after students have completed individual tasks, instructors can create conducive environments for peer feedback, collaborative editing, joint revision, and mutual reading aloud. At this juncture, collaborative writing becomes considerably more effective.

6. Conclusion

The author comes to a number of conclusions that will direct further study in this area. First of all, while research indicates that writing in pairs or groups produces better outcomes than writing alone, very little of it offers a managerial framework for group writing projects. Instructors are constantly concerned about whether Asian students, and Vietnamese students in particular, have strong teamwork abilities and actively collaborate to produce high-quality work. Measuring this in the current setting is challenging, though. Secondly, there hasn't been any research done in this area to assist teachers in coming up with better ways to teach writing in our setting. Additionally, overcrowded classes prevent instructors from evaluating writing for each student individually. Therefore, researchers should further conduct experimental research in two areas: (1) scientifically verify whether group writing helps students improve their English writing skills individually, and if so, to what extent this activity is effective; and (2) identify an effective model for managing student teamwork.

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