Improving ESL Learners' Academic Text Construction through a Collaborative Task

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ABSTRACT

Many ESL writing instructors incorporate some form of pair or group work at some stage of the writing process to provide their students the opportunity to brainstorm ideas, plan, and co-construct knowledge with their peers. Another reason is to encourage students to work independently from the teacher with the intention that they will be more autonomous. This paper reports on a qualitative study which examines how one group of tertiary ESL learners in an academic writing course jointly produce an academic essay during one collaborative task. This study highlights some critical incidents pertaining to the students' roles, their behaviours, and instances that contribute to knowledge and text construction during the group work. The findings showed that cumulative talk and use of questions moved the group discussion forward while negotiation helped the learners to test ideas at a deeper level. The learners also shared their expertise during text construction. The affective conflict which the group encountered during the collaboration also helped them to deal with differing viewpoints and maintaining coherence in the group.

Keywords: Academic writing, collaborative task, ESL learners, knowledge construction, text construction

INTRODUCTION

Vygotsky (1978), a social constructivist, maintained that knowledge is co-constructed and learning always involves more than one person. Learning takes place as a result of internalisation of ideas during social interactions in a sociocultural environment. One of the ways to encourage this form of interactive learning in the writing class is to create collaborative writing groups, where individuals can develop their zone of proximal development through interactions with more capable peers. Sociocultural theory forms the theoretical framework for this study (Lantolf, 2000). This theory places emphasis on what is significant in the social and cultural context which affects the learning process. Knowledge is not simply constructed within the individual, but is socially co-constructed and later internalised by the individual.

Research on collaborative writing has revealed many positive findings. In the L1 contexts, collaboration has fostered reflective thinking (Higgins, Flower & Petraglia, 1992), helped students to experience dialogic engagement (Dale, 1994), and engaged collaborators in cognitive conflict productively (Morgan *et al*., 1987). In the L2 contexts, research has shown that collaboration improves

grammatical accuracy (Storch, 1999), pooling of knowledge (Storch, 2002; 2005), scaffolding (Donato, 1994), sharing of expertise (Yong, 2010; Yong & Tan, 2008), and actualising zone of proximal development (Nyikos & Hashimoto, 1997).

Although research has reported encouraging findings on collaborative work, some setbacks have also been mentioned. Judgemental behaviour (Dale, 1994), affective conflict (Tocalli-Beller, 2003), individualistic stance (Storch, 2001), and male domineering behaviour (DiNitto, 2000) can be counterproductive to group interactions. Group members may encounter difficulty reaching agreement or completing the task on time.

I often incorporate group work in my writing class activities to encourage students to take more responsibility of their own learning process through collaborative tasks. Some students enjoyed working in groups while others were reluctant to do so as they preferred to work individually. As I assign collaborative tasks, there is information which I would like to seek. How do students co-construct knowledge during collaboration? How does collaboration affect text construction? What roles do the group members take? These are the questions that the present study aims to investigate.

METHODOLOGY

A case study approach was used in this qualitative study. The subjects were undergraduates who were enrolled in an academic writing course offered by the English Department at a public university in Malaysia. The writing course was a compulsory university course for them to improve their language proficiency. The enrolment for this academic writing course was approximately 900 students per semester. Students were divided into smaller groups of 30 per class. The students had three contact hours per week over 14 weeks.

One intact class was chosen for the study to investigate the collaborative sessions in a naturalistic context. The class was instructed to carry out all writing tasks in groups of three.

Students self-selected their group members as they felt more comfortable working with people they knew. Three groups volunteered to be the subjects of the case study.

This paper, however, will focus only on one of the groups to provide in-depth description of critical incidents that occurred during one of the collaborative writing task. The members in this group were Chinese. The connection between the members was loosely-knit. They were course mates who were pursuing a Bachelor degree in Economics and Management, but they did not know one another very well. The participants' background information is as follows:

TABLE 1
Participants' general background information

Participant	Age	Gender	Language proficiency
Joe	22	Male	Intermediate
Tim	22	Male	Low
Yin Wai	22	Female	Low intermediate

Writing Tasks

The students wrote three academic essays collaboratively: descriptive, logical division, and cause-effect. These writing tasks were part of the class activities to provide practice on writing. The writing activities were conducted outside class hours. The essay topics were assigned to the class to maintain standardisation. The writing tasks were not graded and the students were not under any pressure to perform. Nonetheless, the students tried to complete the tasks to the best of their abilities because they knew that they had to apply what they have learned when they write an individual essay during the final examination.

Research Instruments

The collaborative writing session of the case study group was audio- and videotaped and transcribed verbatim for analysis. A semi-structured interview was also conducted to gather

information about the participants' personal views and perceptions of their collaborative writing experience. The interview was conducted after the collaborative writing sessions. The learners took turns to be interviewed.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The findings were taken from the last collaborative task where the students wrote a cause-effect essay on increased crime rates in the country. As this writing task was the most challenging among the three, it revealed many critical incidents which exemplified the manner in which the case study group collaborated and the ways in which they constructed knowledge and composed the text.

In this group, Joe was the leader, while Yin Wai was the scribe, and Tim was an active contributor. The scribe jotted down points that were raised during the group discussion. Most of the time the group members composed the text together where word choice and sentence structures were decided through group effort. The roles of the members remained the same throughout their collaborative sessions. The members' behaviours were quite consistent except for some instances when they encountered conflicting views.

The following excerpts are selected to illustrate the typical manner in which the group constructed knowledge and worked together.

Excerpt 1 is taken from the brainstorming stage. The group co-constructed knowledge by engaging in cumulative talk whereby they built on the ideas of the previous speaker (Mercer, 1995).

Excerpt 1: Cumulative talk

| 1 | J | : | Okay, today we're going to write an essay about "What are the causes and effects of increased crime rates in a country". So what is the point, do you think? |
| 2 | T | : | I think illegal immigrants is a point for the causes. Um… how about the deficit economy? |

3	J	:	Deficit economy? Oh, you mean… ah… recession.
4	T	:	Ah, recession and unemployment.
5	J	:	Unemployment, yeah.
6	YW	:	And I think that the peer pressure also one of the cause.
7	J	:	family problems
8	YW	:	and the mass media, western culture.

In Excerpt 1, Joe (J) initiated the discussion by taking on the role of the leader and getting the members to contribute their ideas. Tim (T) gave two suggestions for the causes, namely, illegal immigrants and deficit in the economy (Line 2). From Tim's initial suggestion, Joe provided a better alternative word recession to replace deficit economy (Line 3). Tim continued to expand Joe's idea as seen in Line 4. Yin Wai (YW) continued the brainstorming session by adding a new suggestion. As illustrated in Lines 7 and 8, the same pattern of cumulative talk occurred as the members built on the suggestions given by their group members.

Excerpt 2: Use of questions

Besides cumulative talk, the group also used questions to help them elaborate their points. This episode is taken at the juncture where the members had come up with a list of suggestions.

9	YW	:	Any other point? No other point, we pick three points from here. First, illegal immigrant. How?
10	J	:	Wait we don't, wait, wait, wait… we talk about all the point before…
11	T	:	Okay, yeah.
12	J	:	So illegal immigrant?
13	T	:	From the other country.
14	J	:	Illegal immigrant from other countries. Ah, okay. Then?
15	T	:	How about the causes?

16	YW	:	Ah, immigrant comes the…many has recession in their country, so they can't secure a permanent job, then they have to come here.
17	T	:	Um hmm.
18	J	:	What a better, better environment. What aa… income, good income?
19	T	:	Good income…
20	J	:	High salary? High income? I don't know.
21	YW	:	High…
22	J	:	Wealthy income? Well paid.

As the group continued their brainstorming session, they decided to elaborate each supporting point before they embarked on the composing stage (Lines 9 to 11). Joe and Tim asked short questions to help the group think about specific details for the point (Lines 14 and 15). Tim's question triggered an answer from Yin Wai who came up with a logical reason to explain the point about illegal immigrant (Line 16). The excerpt also shows Joe's deliberation on the choice of vocabulary through self-questioning in choosing the most appropriate word choice. It can be seen in Lines 18 to 22 when he tested out several alternatives: *good income, high salary, high income, wealthy income*, and *well paid*.

As the discussion progressed, more questions were asked and the questions served several purposes. The first purpose was to stimulate thinking through WH questions (Line 23). The second purpose was to seek help from others. Tim asked questions to seek help from his group members when he had difficulty expressing his thoughts in English (Line 25). The third purpose was to clarify thoughts as seen in the interaction between Tim and Joe in Lines 27, 28, and 31.

| 23 | T | : | And how… how do they come here? Why… |
| 24 | J | : | Use boat. |

25	T	:	I know. (J chuckles) They use boat. That shows that our, our what? How to say defense ah? So the country… "keselamatan" (security)
26	J	:	security
27	T	:	some problems because if the security is good enough, the illegal immigrant cannot come.
28	J	:	That means what? Easy to cross?
29	T	:	Ah huh.
30	J	:	Easy to cross? Easy to…
31	T	:	Lack security?
32	J	:	Yeah, I know your point, but…the word is like…
33	T	:	Ah, lack of…
34	J	:	Lack of rules or the rule.

In the exchanges above, the WH questions and questions seeking for help or clarification provided the means for the group members to stretch their idea generation. It is apparent that these questions, which were directed to others or oneself, improved the thinking process by triggering existing knowledge or creating new knowledge and refining the text production.

Thus far, the two excerpts show that the group collaborated in a supportive and cooperative manner. This cooperative pattern of collaboration changed as the group progressed in the discussion of the second supporting point.

The following transcripts (Excerpts 3 and 4) illustrate instances where the group engaged in negotiation and conflict resolution during the brainstorming session of the second supporting point on recession.

Excerpt 3: Negotiation

35	YW	:	Recession and unemployment rate.
36	J	:	No, unemployment rate increase because recession causes. Recession, what aa…
37	T	:	No job. Cannot find a new job.

38 J : What not, no job?

39 T : Cannot find a new job.

40 J : Um. Why cannot find new job? Then?

41 T : Then? No money, no salary.

In Line 35, Yin Wai informed the members about the topic of discussion at that instance, that is, recession and unemployment rate. Joe corrected her and said that the unemployment rate increased due to recession. As usual, the members explored ideas in a cumulative manner. Both Joe and Tim deliberated back and forth over the idea about people not being able to find a job during recession (Lines 38 to 41). Their talk resembled the Initiation-Response-Follow-up (IRF) mode between a teacher and a student. In this case, Joe acted as a surrogate teacher when he carried out all the questioning (DiNitto, 2000) in the hope of getting more justification from Tim. This created opportunity for deeper exploration of their ideas.

The following transcript shows how Joe utilised Malay and Chinese sentence particles to position himself above others during the negotiation process.

42 J : Wait *lah* ((emphasising)) that one is effect *wut* ((indicating obviousness))

43 T : The effect? The cause *ah*.

44 YW : The cause.

45 J : Yeah *lah,* ((emphasising)) we're talking about the cause.

46 T : Yeah.

47 YW : The cause.

The excerpt illustrates Joe having difficulties distinguishing the difference between cause and effect (Line 42). Tim and Yin Wai reaffirmed Joe that they were discussing the cause (Lines 43 and 44). Joe asserted his power as a leader by reminding the others that they were supposed to discuss the cause. When the confusion was cleared, the discussion continued.

48 J : What no money? The cause no money *ah*? ((seeking confirmation))

49 T : No job, no money *lah*. ((convincing)) No salary.

50 YW : because when they no salary… and they want to survive

51 T : Cannot eat

52 J : Don't eat *lah.* ((emphasising))

53 T : No food. ((laughter))

54 J : Wait, wait… what are high tech, high technology?

As seen in the interactions above, the members responded to each other's utterances in a cumulative fashion. To answer Joe's query (Line 48), Tim and Yin Wai provided the outcomes of people not having a job (Lines 49, 50, 51 and 53). The members also used Malay sentence particles in the utterances for different functions as seen in Lines 48, 49, and 52. The low level unstressed tone softens the meaning of the utterances, which created rapport among the members (Kwan-Terry, 1978; Platt, 1987).

Joe, in his enthusiasm, shifted the discussion to another topic about *high technology* before the members could explore the idea about *job* further (Line 54).

55 T : What about high technology?

56 J : They can't find any… they can't find job because they're now more modern they use…

57 T : No… [because now is…

58 J : [electronic more than human. They use capital more than=

59 T : =wait, now is recession period, so most of the company that…

60 J : No, now, we're talking about unemployment.

61 T : Yeah. Recession, causes by the recession.

62 J : Yeah, any more causes.

63   T   :   Deficit economy *ma*. ((persuasion)) So employer… ((Joe chuckles)) uh huh?

64   J   :   Okay *lah* ((persuading)), you write *lor* ((resignation to a course of action)). Anything, anything, okay. Effect, effect. ((Tim pauses to jot down his ideas))

This time it was Tim's turn to query Joe on his new suggestion (Line 55). Joe provided the reason about the use of high technology to replace human (Line 56). The overlapped and latched talk in Lines 57 to 59 indicates a slight power struggle between Joe and Tim. Both of them seemed to have their own explanation why people cannot find a job. Joe felt that it was because modern technology is now replacing human workers, while Tim felt otherwise. In Line 62, Joe diverted the disagreement by asking for new ideas. Tim explored another possibility about *economy deficit* (Line 63). During the interaction, both Tim and Joe inserted colloquial L1 particles to soften the slightly tense atmosphere (Lines 63 and 64). In Line 64, before Tim could finish his explanation, Joe decided to relinquish control and let Tim take over the writing because Joe wanted to complete the task quickly. The findings revealed that the group resolved their differing viewpoints by negotiating and sometimes by complying with others to avoid conflict (Tocalli-Beller, 2002). As far as possible, Tim always tried to provide explanation for his views. It appears that Joe and Tim adopted male domineering behavior while Yin Wai took a more subservient role by listening (*see* DiNitto, 2000).

Excerpt 4: Affective conflict

Another negative affective factor created by power relations is illustrated in the following excerpt. Affective conflict (Tocalli-Beller, 2003) and power struggles (Thornborrow, 2002) are evident as the members struggled to compose their first supporting point about illegal immigrants. The underlined words are the actual written text.

65   J   :   First of all, illegal immigrant is the main problem, in these days. Illegal immigrant has create serious problem.

66   YW   :   For our country?

67   T   :   To some countries? Not our country.

68   J   :   Then in a country *wut*?

69   T   :   It's not only our country.

70   J   :   Yeah.

71   T   :   Oh.

72   J   :   Don't want to write our country.

73   YW   :   It's our country.

74   J   :   In the country, what our country.

75   T   :   Has created serious problem.

76   J   :   Later, later. Serious problem in the country. Follow this one, in the country.

Joe constructed the first sentence for the introductory paragraph- *First of all, illegal immigrant has create serious problem* (Line 65). The group members, however, had disagreement over the word choice of *our country, some countries* or *in the country*. After a few rounds of deliberations, Joe asserted his power by asking the others to follow the wordings which were given in title (Line 76). Joe exhibited impatient behaviour of wanting to move on quickly with their text production.

The discussion continued as follows.

77   YW   :   This problem happen in our country because due to the poor economy in their… country.

78   J   :   Not poor economy, what you call that? Bad economy? Weak economy. Unemployment rate… Um?

79   T   :   Unemployment rate is very high in their country.

80 J : During recession. That's why they can't find a job. They hardly find jobs in their countries. I don't know… you construct the sentence (chuckles).

81 YW : Some of them come to our country not because of the unemployment.

82 J : Yeah, no…

83 YW : Because they want to secure a better job in our country.

In the transcript above, the members joined effort to construct the text. Yin Wai provided the second sentence (Line 77). Since Joe was unsatisfied with the phrase *poor economy*, he explored other alternatives (Line 78). Meanwhile, Tim tried to come up with another alternative sentence structure (Line 79). Joe also attempted to formulate a sentence based on the ideas which they had brainstormed earlier. However, midway, he jokingly shoved the responsibility to Yin Wai to construct the sentence, since she was the scribe (Line 80). Yin Wai gave an alternative idea to explain why immigrants came to the country (Lines 81 and 82). The transcript shows that through constant testing and deliberation in idea generation and text construction, the group wanted to produce a more quality piece of work.

The continuation of the discussion shows the members' struggle in composing the text due to their lack of proficiency.

84 J : Yeah. I mean our first cause is this, then our second cause is, they want to secure a better job. Calm down one by one, *wut*? Write one point by one point, *wut*. Isn't it right? Like the unemployment that's why come over here. Then you can write what? Your what? The environment?

[pause for 40 seconds]

Due to the what? <u>High unemployment</u> rate during recession <u>in their own country</u>.

85 T : Ah, like that-*lah*, the illegal immigrant is no passport (J: Um.), and then shop employer don't want to employ them (J: Um.). And then when they come, they can't find a job, and then they will go to… ah… involve in some illegal activity (J: Um.)

Joe laid down the rules to discuss the causes one at a time (Line 84). The group paused for quite a while because they lacked language proficiency and had to struggle to come out with the sentence structure. Tim employed a strategy by jotting down his thoughts. After Tim had gathered his thoughts, he could explain his points in a more logical link (Line 85). Joe paid close attention to Tim as he provided the explanation. Tim took responsibility to contribute his ideas to the text construction.

The members continued to explore and to come to a decision on how they wanted to construct their sentence.

86 J : That one is effect *wut*?

87 T : From the causes to effect. It's consist all.

88 YW : Um.

89 J : No, we want to write… can you? Can you write all the causes first then write your effect? That one is consider effect, I think?

90 T : I think they're connected from the causes to effect.

91 J : Yeah, that's right. We should put… yeah, that's why we're talking the causes first.

92 T : Okay, okay.

93 J : Can you think about the causes first? No, this happen due to <u>they can't find any job</u>, you mean recession <u>in their own country.</u>

Even though Tim's earlier explanation seemed sensible, Joe pointing out that Tim's idea was related to effect (Line 86). Tim explained that there should be a connection between cause and effect (Line 87). Joe continued to assert his decision of writing the causes first before the effects (Line 89). Although Tim had his own views (Line 90), he was willing to accommodate Joe's authoritative behaviour because he wanted to maintain the group's harmony (Line 92).

Excerpt 5: Sharing of expertise

The following critical incident shows the transfer of knowledge and sharing of expertise (Storch, 2002). This excerpt was taken during the end of the text construction of the first supporting paragraph on illegal immigrants.

94	T	: There are lack security of our immigration authorities. So that the illegal immigrant can easy cross to… cross to our country?
95	J	: Um hmm. You write ah.
96	YW	: Huh?
97	T	: Write like that cannot connect?
98	YW	: Can't connect
99	J	: You write the whole thing again.
100	T	: And then suddenly jump, the essay is not beautiful.
101	J	: What talking you?
102	YW	: Can't continue with this point.
103	T	: How to jump, suddenly jump to the another point. Like that.
104	J	: What you mean jump to another point, same…
105	T	: From the better environment and then jump to the security.

The excerpt illustrates how Tim put into practice what he had learned about coherence in class. He felt that the ideas which the group wanted to put in the essay were incoherent as there was no direct link between wanting a better environment, an idea which was suggested by Yin Wai earlier (Excerpt 4, Line 83), and the idea

about lack of security. He was transferring his knowledge into the text construction to make the ideas flow smoothly. There were disagreements between Joe and Tim (Lines 97, 101, 103 and 104).

The continuation of the discussion demonstrates another aspect of collaboration, namely, sharing of expertise.

106	T	: Lack security… of our… of the country immigration…
107	YW	: of…
108	T	: of the country immigration or the custom? The custom effect is immigration. Maybe we write custom. And, so that the immigrate… the illegal…
109	J	: Therefore the illegal immigrants can come to…
110	T	: can easily come to our… across our…
111	J	: So, therefore what? Illegal immigrants can come to our country without legal documents?
112	YW	: Finished this sentence?
113	T	: No, no, no. Therefore, comma, therefore.
114	J	: <u>Therefore, immigrants, illegal immigrants can come to our country without legal documents.</u>

Despite disagreement of viewpoints, everyone contributed ideas collectively. Tim suggested ideas while Yin Wai monitored the discussion. Joe, who was more proficient, provided the vocabulary and grammatical structure. The members learned to pool their resources together. Although Tim was not good in writing, he transferred what he had learned in the classroom about transition markers and punctuating sentences to the collaboration. He corrected the structure by asking Yin Wai to add a comma after the conjunctive adverb *therefore* (Line 113).

All the critical incidents demonstrate the manner in which the group collaborated, co-constructed knowledge and composed the text. Sometimes they functioned harmoniously as a group, but at other times they experienced conflicting views and had to resolve the conflicts in order to keep group solidarity.

Findings from the Interview

The interview responses from the participants revealed how they felt about their collaboration experiences during the collaboration process. Below are some of their comments regarding the positive reactions towards collaborative task.

Yin Wai

I can exchange my idea with my group member, so I can get more idea in this essay writing. I also can learn to how to work in a group. So I can learn how to cooperate with others.

We tolerate each other and accept opinions. All of us dare to voice what we think and we know that our members do not mind if we correct their mistakes. When I'm wrong, they'll correct me.

Tim

They accept my idea and try to correct my mistake about the grammar and the ideas. When I can't express myself, they give me the words, so it makes me more confident.

I learn about cooperation and teamwork. When we go out to work, it's all teamwork.

Joe

Both of them understand what I am talking about and they quite support my ideas. They give a lot of examples.

Yin Wai felt that she could exchange ideas with her group members because they were tolerant and willing to accept corrections. She also shared the same sentiment with Tim about learning to cooperate and work as a team. Tim saw the value of teamwork in preparation for workplace collaboration in future. He did not feel intimidated although his language proficiency was not as good as the others. The group members' scaffolding helped him to build his confidence. Joe, on the other hand, was happy that the other members supported his points and provided examples to substantiate his ideas.

The members also commented on the conflicts which they encountered.

Joe

At first I feel a bit stressed and disappointed because they don't accept my point of view when they mentioned out why the point is not suitable for this essay. They give the rational reason and I started to accept it.

Tim

Although they disagree with what I have mentioned I did mentioned it out compared to the last discussion where maybe I did not express what I was thinking.

Yin Wai

Maybe not conflict just different ideas. Maybe we can't understand what the members are trying to say. We are trying to understand the ideas more and we explain the ideas until we understand. When we understand the point more then we can elaborate.

Being the group leader and a better student, Joe found it hard when his ideas were rejected. Through the collaboration, he had to learn to listen to others and to accept multiple perspectives to resolve disagreements (Dale, 1994). On the other hand, Tim learned to voice his opinions more openly as compared to earlier collaboration sessions. He recognised his position as a team member to contribute actively

to group effort and to maintain harmony. Yin Wai, a more timid member, felt that conflict occurred because ideas were not communicated effectively among the members.

CONCLUSIONS

The study shows that it is not always easy for learners to collaborate. Sometimes the collaboration process is smooth and productive, but at times the collaborative process becomes difficult because group members have to contend with resolving conflicting viewpoints, member's authoritative behaviour, and lack of language proficiency. Affective conflict can also influence the climate of the group's collaboration. If a member adopts a domineering and aggressive attitude, it can intimidate other members and prevent the group from having a positive working relationship.

On the other hand, when group members play mutually supportive roles, they can co-construct knowledge through sharing of knowledge and expertise. As demonstrated in the excerpts, the weaker students learned about sentence construction and increased their command of vocabulary from more proficient peers, while the better students are exposed to ideas and perspectives which they have never thought of before. The study reveals that the collaboration pushed the learners to go beyond what they could achieve on their own in terms of idea generation, sentence structure or language accuracy. The group has learned not to simply meet the task requirements, but to actively construct it (Platt & Brooks, 2002). The collaborative task also taught the learners about team work through negotiation, joint decision making and conflict resolution which are important aspects of working in a group.

Adopting group conformity instead of individual stance also contributes to the success of collaboration. When group members find meaning, recognise the value of collective work and accountability derived from working together, their language performance and productivity could be improved to a greater level.

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