Collaborative writing in small groups: Learners' perceptions

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Abstract

This study explored learners' perceptions toward the implementation of collaborative writing in small groups. Seventy-five learners of Diploma three who take a writing class were asked to write a paragraph using a collaborative strategy as one of their classroom activities. The learners were divided in three different classes that each class consisted of twenty-five learners. This small number of learners maintained the effectiveness of the classroom activity. The learners worked in group of three learners developed a paragraph using collaborative strategy. At the end of the class, the lecturer asked the learners to answer a questionnaire and an interview to get data about the students' perception of the implementation of collaborative writing in small groups. The learners' answered were analyzed and described. Learners' reactions to the collaborative writing experience mostly were positive. The learners said that in collaboration, the learners discussed and shared ideas among the member of the group that helped them to gathered more idea and knowledge for their writing. Besides, they mentioned that they increased the grammatical and lexical accuracy of their paragraph. On the other sides, there were five learners who have different perceptions for some reasons; felt shy to deliver their idea, lack of English competence, time consuming, and prefer to have individual work. Overall, the finding of this study was in line with other previous research finding about collaborative writing.

Keywords: collaborative writing, small groups, learners' perceptions

INTRODUCTION

Developing the writing competence for learners of English as a foreign language is not simple and easy to do. A proper teaching strategy is needed to engaged the learners with the course learned. This study described the results

of a research conducted to the learners of diploma three of English study program in implementing collaborative writing in small group. The teaching of writing course is presented in four semesters; they are writing 1, writing 2, writing 3 and writing 4. Writing 1 focuses on sentence constructions, writing 2 focuses on paragraph writing, writing 3 focuses on essay writing and writing 4 focuses on academic writing that learners are hopefully are able to write report and article. Writing 2 courses is a 2 credit course of which provided the learners to learn about the meaning of paragraph, structure and parts of paragraph, and write topic sentence for selected topic, *the process* of writing, coherence and cohesion, topic sentence and controlling ideas, method of development: process paragraph, cause and effect paragraph, comparison and contrast paragraph, and classification paragraph. Overall, the objectives of writing 2 course make the learners are able to develop paragraphs. To achieve this objective, the learners have to master the basic competencies required in writing a paragraph. This is not a simple objective to be achieved. The learner of writing 2 who were still fresh graduation from senior high school with different educational background have not been able to write a simple short paragraph, even they found difficulties to present ideas in writing. Grammatical error, lexical accuracy and organizing ideas coherently and cohesively are most problems found for the learners in writing paragraph.

Attempts to overcome this, collaborative writing in small groups were applied to achieve the teaching goals of writing 1 course. In relation to teaching writing, Kern (2000: 180-184) states that there are two things that become orientation in writing teaching, that is product approach and process approach. The product approach is more concerned with the textual form, with more grammatical teaching, error analysis, or combining single sentences into compound sentences. The process approach tends to focus more on the varied classroom activities which promote the development of language use: brainstorming, group discussion, re-writing. This approach has number of stages. The implementation of collaborative writing strategy seems support the process approach. The process approach encourages students to get more involved by actively participating in the learning process with the writing steps leading to produce texts (Miftah, 2015: 11).

A paragraph is a unit of writing in a larger body of work. It expresses a particular topic or theme. A paragraph is a component of fictional prose and non-fiction writings. When writing essays, research papers, books, etc., new paragraphs are indented to show their beginnings. Each new paragraph begins with a new indentation. The purpose of a paragraph is to express a speaker's

thoughts on a particular point in a clear way that is unique and specific to that paragraph. In other words, paragraphs should not be mixing thoughts or ideas. When a new idea is introduced, generally, a writer will introduce a new paragraph.

There are number of writing strategies can be used in order to write paragraph properly. Collaborative writing strategy supports the process approach in paragraph writing. Collaborative writing is a "highly essential writing and group act in which prominence is likely to increase", according to Lowry, Curtis, and Lowry (2004) and has been defined in many ways. Rice and Huguley (1994) offered a definition which emphasizes the primary activities of collaborative writing; it is performed collectively by more than one person to produce a single text and writing is any activity that leads to a completed document, including idea generating, researching, planning and organizing, drafting, revising, and editing.

Collaborative writing is an iterative and social process that involves a group focused on a common objective that negotiates, coordinates, and communicates during the creation of a common document (Lowry et al., 2004) through mutual interactions, shared expertise and joint decision-making throughout the whole process (Yong, 2006). Essentially, collaborative writing is a social process where writers seek mutual understanding. To gain that understanding, each member acts in accordance with a number of interaction rules and social rules. These members built the same goal; they have different knowledge; they interact in one unity; and they distance themselves from the text (Barnum, 1994). To high light, with the implementation of collaborative strategy, learners conduct communication among the members to share ideas that increase the students' knowledge. Collaborative strategy also makes learners more be active in expressing ideas and providing peer feedback in the writing process. In addition, the implementation of collaborative writing can increase the ability of students to produce writings (Supiani, 2012: 13). Therefore, this study explored learners' perceptions toward the implementation of collaborative writing in small groups.

METHOD

As an effort to improve learning, the collaborative writing strategy was applied through some steps such as planning, improvement, carrying out actions, observing, and doing reflection. Before planning steps was applied, the initial reflection in the form of problem identification, problem analysis, and problem formulation were conducted. The problem of the learners' in writing

paragraph mostly were on gathering the idea of their writing, grammatical problem and also paragraph organization. Once the problem was identified, the problems need to be analyzed by reflecting and reviewing the materials and teaching strategy. The problems were then described operatively in order to guide the improvement efforts. The problems were what the teaching strategy that could be applied effectively in the teaching of writing and how the learners perception of the teaching strategy applied.

Once the problem was elaborated, the next step was to seek out or develop an improvement strategy, which was done by reviewing the theory, reviewing relevant research results, discussing with team-teaching and exploring the lecture's experiences. The selected strategy to solve the problem of lack ability in writing paragraph faced by the learners were collaborative writing in small group. This strategy was in accordance with the capabilities of lecturers, students' abilities, facilities available, as well as the learning objectives of writing 2 course.

Carry out the action was the next steps. This step was the implementation of collaborative writing for writing 2 course. It was started by preparing lesson plan, including learning materials, tasks to be performed, learning tools, evaluation methods includes the method of record and analyze data. The study was carried out in the fourth week of a 14-week semester. In the first three weeks, teaching input was provided according to the scheme of work for the course. The input included the meaning of paragraph, structure and parts of paragraph, topic sentence which was also integrated selected topic. The purpose was to familiarize them to a more interactive, participative classroom environment. In week four, the process of writing, coherence and cohesion, topic sentence and controlling ideas, method of development: process paragraph, cause and effect paragraph, comparison and contrast paragraph, classification paragraph were taught, and an in-class paragraph writing task was assigned to be completed by the learners in self-selected groups of three. The learners completed the entire process in their group – reading the passage, identifying main ideas, deleting irrelevant points, combining ideas, and writing the paragraph in their own words.

In the classroom implementation, the learners who are 75 learners were divided in thee classes. Each class consisted of 25 students. The small number of the students in class made the class activities conducted more effective and easy to manage and control. Then, the students were assigned to work in small group of three students to discuss and share the ideas of a certain topic. Then, they were assigned to develop a paragraph. In the two hours of classroom

activities, the time were divided for some activities; the lecturers did introduction, learners shared and discussed the topic with their group, developed a draft of paragraph writing, did peer feedback, revised the draft and produced the final paragraph writing.

Observation and reflection were the last two steps in implementing the collaborative writing strategy. Observation was conducted throughout process of discussion and the writing process. This was done to observe the involvement of the group members in discussing the topic and in developing paragraph.

In doing reflection, the lecturer collected the data and determined the data collection method used. Data collection procedures and tools are determined based on the data needed. The data collected were more likely to qualitative data. The procedures and data collection method used was interview with informal and semi-structured questions to elicit students' perceptions of using collaborative writing in small groups to write paragraph. All learners or 75 learners became the respondents of the study and were given a questionner to be answered. Besides, the learners were also assigned an interviewed. Informal and semi-structured interviews were conducted individually to ensure privacy and confidentiality. The questions were design to get the data toward the learners' perception of the implementation of the strategy that cover the questions about the learners' motivation to learn English, the most difficult language skills to be mastered. and the learners' perception of collaborative strategy.

DISCUSSION

The implementation of collaborative writing strategy overs numbers of benefits for learners. Alwasilah (2000) stated that collaborative writing strategy has a number of advantages as inculcate cooperation and tolerance of others' opinions and enhance the ability to formulate and express ideas; inculcate an attitude of writing as a process because group work emphasizes revision, allowing rather weak students to know the writings of more powerful peer works; encourage students to learn from each other in group work, and present the working atmosphere they will experience in the professional world in the future; and familiarize self-correction and repeated draft writing, where the student as the author becomes his most loyal reader.

In addition to the above advantages, the collaborative writing strategy has several shortcomings, and the main ones are (1) the difficulty of getting collaborative peers, (2) in group work often too many alternatives or

suggestions for confusing improvements and (3) seizing many time lecturers and students (Alwasilah, 2000).

The results of questionnaire were described in the following discussion. The first question related to the learners' motivation to learn English. There were 35 respondents out of 75 respondents or 47% answered that their motivation to study English was in order to get a good job. While 40 respondents out of 75 respondents or 53% stated that they learn English in order to be able to communicate in English in the written form and spoken.

The second question related to the language skills that were difficult to be mastered. There were 30 respondents or 40 % stated that writing is the most difficult english skill to be mastered. Then , 25 respondents or 33 % stated that speaking is the most difficul followed by Reading (15 respondents or 20%) and the last was listening (5 respondents or 6,7 %).

The third question related to the learners' perception about the implementation of the collaborative writing stategy in small group to write paragrah. There were 70 respondents or 93 % stated that the strategy is good while 5 respondents or 6,7 % stated that the strategy was not good. In order to get more specific information that the lecturer conducted an interview.

The responses gathered from interview were the majority of respondents had a positive perception towards the use of collaborative writing in the classroom in terms of a variety of aspects. In terms of motivation, respondents felt that collaborative writing had improved their confidence to write in English. For example Goesty said:

> When I'm working in pairs, looks like that I have different ideas with my partners. So it was necessary for me to compare mine with hers...

The learners noted that such a pooling of resources provided opportunities to observe and to learn from each other. As Zahra said:

> He teach me much from his idea, important for me to learn from me and may be he did either...

Rani described how this collaborative process of pooling ideas took place:

> I think, if I have a better idea, I will tell her. And I think I understand what she says but then ... If she can give another better idea, I'll accept her idea.

While Kartika said that:

> I think ...when I'm working in pairs I can get more ideas ...because different people have different ideas. So, I compile the important ideas together that make a paragraph. It is a real fun to work with

A number of respondents noted that it was helpful for both improving their grammatical and lexical accuracy. In terms of improving grammatical accuracy, learners commented that it is easier to correct other people's errors than their own. For example Anggi said:

> I know that I am weak in grammar, when I'm working in group discussion, I get more feedback about my sentence construction and grammar used. It really helps me.

However, some respondents had reservations about collaborative writing. One such reservation stemmed from a lack of confidence in one's own language skills as well as concerns about criticizing others. This was expressed clearly by Ummu:

> Yeah it's very hard because you can't say ...I mean if I say something I ...I think...maybe she's no ... I can't explain you ... Maybe I think she'll ... she'll think that I will ... I want to be better than her .... You know, you can't just say stop you are wrong ... or maybe, maybe I am wrong. So it's hard to work in a group but it's very helpful.

Some others respondents stated that it was time consuming to work together. As Yudi stated:

> ………… It takes time to have discussions…. I spend my time to listen to people who actually speak not necessary information that I should here. I have my own internet that give me all information that I need. I prefer to write individually. It gives me more privacy.

This finding echoed the results of past research such as Shehadeh (2012) whose subjects found collaborative writing to enhance their selfconfidence, and Yong (2006) who proposes that collaboration fosters camaraderie and self-confidence. Two sociocultural constructs commonly identified in collaborative writing, the co-construction of knowledge and languaging, were also cited by

learners as major benefits. Most of the respondents agreed that they discussed about the best way to use the target language to express their ideas, in terms of grammar, vocabulary, sentence structure, and spelling, among others. This corresponds to instances of languaging or language-related episodes identified in Swain (2000) and utilized as a variable in a number of studies on collaborative writing. It was shown, for instance, that frequencies of language-related episodes corresponded to quality of written text produced (Watanabe & Swain, 2007). Furthermore, the interview responses suggested that the respondents perceived collaborative writing to have had a positive impact on their grammar. This is in line ewith numerous past studies (Storch, 1999; Storch, 2005; Wigglesworth & Storch, 2009) which found that collaboration had a positive effect on overall grammatical accuracy. Storch's 2005 and Chao and Lo's 2011 studies also revealed that students perceived greater grammatical accuracy to be one of the benefits of collaboration.

The learners' perceptions of the problems they faced when using collaborative writing in the classroom, the highest number of respondents found lack of English proficiency to be a problem when they collaborated with their group members. In interviews conducted with students, Yong (2006) also found that lack of proficiency was a factor that might hinder smooth collaboration and writing progress as it prevents group members from expressing themselves clearly. Some of the respondents that Storch (2005) surveyed also noted lack of confidence in their language skills as a reservation they had about engaging in collaboration. Other problems that learners faced during collaboration was an unwillingness to offer their opinion for fear of offending others, also noted in Storch (2005) and the inability to finish the writing task in the allocated time. It has been found that students who worked in pairs or groups took a longer time to complete the tasks than those who worked individually (Storch, 2005; Watanabe & Swain, 2007). The benefits of collaborative writing noted by the participants may stem from the fundamental tenets of sociocultural theory that underpins collaborative writing, in that external, social activities are the main basis for cognitive development. Several other benefits identified by the students in their interview responses corresponded with sociocultural features of collaborative writing, specifically the co-construction of knowledge and languaging, where students discuss about the best way to articulate their meanings in the target language.

CONCLUSION

In terms of the process of writing that learners engaged to write a paragraph, collaborative writing afforded the learners the opportunity to interact on different aspects of writing. In particular, it encouraged learners to collaborate when generating ideas. As reported from questionnaire and interview, it enabled learners to discover ideas together and exposed them to different views. Collaborative writing also afforded learners the opportunity to give and receive immediate feedback on language, an opportunity missing when learners write individually. This may explains why group tended to produce texts with greater grammatical and lexical accuracy. In short, the finding of this study support the previous studies on the benefits of implementing collaborative writing strategy writing course.

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