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A Study on the Effect of Scaffolding through Joint Construction Tasks on the Writing Composition of EFL Learners

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Abstract: The present study is an attempt to investigate the effect of scaffolding writing proficiency through joint construction tasks on the writing composition of Iranian EFL learners and to investigate any significant difference in the writing proficiency of the girls and boys after receiving the instruction. To this end, sixty intermediate learners of English, majoring in Literature and Translation, studying at Shahid Chamran University of Ahvaz participated in the research and then were randomly divided into two groups, the experimental and the comparison. During the course of this study, i.e. 10 sessions, the participants were assigned to write compositions of about 150 words on eight writing topics. To find out whether there is any significant difference in the writing proficiency of the learners who receive joint construction instruction, two tests were used to compare the writing performances of the groups: a pretest prior and a posttest. Results of the Data analysis indicated that there is a significant difference in the writing proficiency of the learners who receive joint construction instruction. The results also showed that, as far as the instruction on joint construction was concerned, females outperformed the males.

Key words: Scaffolding; Joint Construction Task; Composition; Writing

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INTRODUCTION

In recent years, there has been a focus on the responsibility of learners for their learning. So, responsible learners are challenged for how to learn, apply what is learned, and connect their learning to the complex real-world problems in order to be successful. The ultimate goal is for students to become independent lifetime learners, so that they can continue to learn on their own or with limited support. Scaffolding optimizes student learning by providing a supportive environment and promoting student independence.

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Students, writing English composition, struggle with many issues including selecting proper words, using correct grammar, and generating ideas. Sometimes these problems are worsened because writing teachers tend to focus on grammar and see students as passive writers.

It seems that almost in most of the existing language teaching education programs in different universities of Iran English learners have many problems in writing a composition. The focus of instruction at the elementary and intermediate levels of language study of most Iranian universities is on the reading and listening. As a result, writing composition is reserved for the advanced level. So, the most crucial challenge appears to be learning how to organize and develop the ideas in an effective manner. Most of the students' papers lack clear purpose and unity, and content is not expressed logically.

To the researcher's best knowledge, in Iran, most of the writing practice in English writing classes is done individually not collaboratively. Although pair and group work is commonly used in language classrooms, very few studies have investigated the nature of such collaboration when students produce a jointly written text. As a result, joint construction task in writing is underused and does not seem to be consistently applied or understood instructionally in working with students because many students do not understand how to write in groups. Moreover, it seems that writing teachers rarely think of group work in teaching writing.

To this end, the aim of present research is to demonstrate a supportive learning environment by scaffolding in the classroom with the help of the teacher as a facilitator and to draw students' involvement in joint construction tasks as a scaffolding technique that could stimulate learners' motivation and develop their confidence in writing composition. This view to teaching writing composition would likely generate a good learning environment from which an individual could benefit and learn from others. It also builds up students' sense of teamwork when each member makes the highest quality contribution to the successful completion of the task. The impact of gender on using this technique is explored, too.

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

It is important to know that scaffolding is a method of supporting that is based on Vygotsky's (1978) theory of learning and his concept of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) identified as the difference between an individual's actual and potential levels of development. In other words, the skills that the individuals have mastered are the actual. Jaramillo (1996) believed that teachers activate this zone when they teach students concepts that are above their skills, and motivate them to go beyond their skills. At this point, Vygotsky (1978, p.3) emphasizes that full development of the ZPD depends upon full social interaction by stating that "the range of skill that can be developed with adult guidance or peer collaboration exceeds what can be attained alone". In this case, Vygotsky (1978) suggested that the only "good" learning is learning that is ahead of actual development. With respect to writing composition, Gardner (1985, cited in Daiute & Dalton, 1992) asserted that it is important to know that there are many domains in which one can be an expert. A learner may have a ZPD for mastery of facts, another for mechanical aspects of written language. Moreover, according to some researchers, two learners may have different strength or skills to share. And these diverse skills become useful at different points during joint construction. And as learners come up their individual limits, they can look to each other for support on performance in complementary domains. This may promote a sense of co-ownership and hence encourage students to contribute to the decision making on all aspects of writing: content, structure, and language. Thus, it is a singular text that has plural authors.

Scaffolding writing composition is an effective technique to teaching writing composition that is supported by some researchers such as Larkin (2002), Lawson (2002), Van Der Stuyf (2002), and Hyland (2003), among others. According to Bodrova (1998), scaffolding can help learners reach the potential levels of writing performance. Oliver (2005), moreover, holds that teachers can scaffold writing skill by using some tasks. These tasks are explained in the following:

1) Outlining and writing frame tasks: Tasks that provide skeleton outlines, perhaps with sentence prompts, key vocabulary or prearranged paragraphs, to give writers a structure to write in.

2) Re-writing tasks: Exercises that require rewriting in some way, perhaps re-arranging in an appropriate order or changing the tone.

3) Genre scaffolding tasks: Models or samples to discover and then imitate language features which are commonly used in a particular genre, such as description or explanation.

4) Rhetorical model tasks: Models to compare how texts perform rhetorical moves such as making an argument by giving examples or presenting personal opinions.

5) Joint construction tasks: Tasks through which a group of learners construct a text together.

What is of paramount importance here, however, is the role of joint construction technique in scaffolding writing skill which seems to be useful, for its collaborative nature, to the teaching of writing composition of EFL learners that is the focus of this study.

Research findings in both first and second language learning have long been supportive of the use of small groups and pair works in the language classrooms (e.g. Kuiken & Vedder, 2002; Nassaji, 1999; Oxford, 1997; Savignon, 2001; Storch, 1998,1999, 2001a, 2001b; 2005; Swain & Lapkin, 1995, 1998, 2000; Williams, 1999). Researchers report that, regardless of the subject matter, learners working in small groups tend to learn more of what is taught and retain it longer than when the same content is presented in other instructional formats. In addition, learners who work in collaborative groups appear more satisfied with their classes. The use of small groups and pair work in L2 classrooms rests on the strong theoretical and pedagogical bases, and second language acquisition studies provide some theoretical rationales beyond this perspective that language is best learnt and taught through group work (e.g. Ellis, 2000; Skehan,1996,1998; Swain & Lapkin,1998; Storch, 1998). However, the use of small group in writing classes seems quite limited to the beginning stages such as brainstorming, or more commonly, to the final stages of writing such as the peer review stage. In this final stage, students review each other's written text and make suggestions on how it could be improved. Some researchers such as Mittan (1989, cited in Mangelsdorf, 1992) note that peer reviews provide the students with an authentic audience; increase students' motivation for writing; enable students to receive different views on their writing; and help them learn to read critically their own writing. One of the drawbacks of peer reviews, however, is that the focus is often on the product of writing rather than the process of writing. In this regard, when students are asked to peer review, they tend to focus on errors at the sentence and word level. Thus, the process of writing remains a private act, where writers are left to their own devices when making important decisions about their text (Storch, 2005).

One factor which most evidently demonstrates variation in language use is gender. Researchers have found that gender can have a significant impact on how students learn a language. In recognition of the role of gender in group work, Siann and Mcleod (1986, cited in Holzen, 1993) cited several works present in the interactions between males and females. One example given was that females were more willing to seek help from their partners. Additionally, as Jones (1999) argued, girls tend to be more community oriented by sharing things with each other and focusing on relationships. In other words, he found that girls were comfortable when discussions were collaborative. On the contrary, boys tend to be more individualistic by separating themselves from community and relations.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The present study seeks to find possible answers to the following questions:

1. Is there any significant difference between the participants who receive scaffolding instruction through joint construction tasks and those who do not in their writing composition?
2. Is there any significant difference between males and females who receive scaffolding instruction through joint construction tasks in their writing composition?

METHOD

Participants

Participants of this study are 2nd year students majoring in English Translation and English Literature at Shahid Chamran University of Ahvaz. They are all native speakers of Persian, ranging from twenty to twenty-six years of age.

Instrumentation

The instruments utilized in this study are as follows:

1. Two sample TOEFL tests extracted from Peterson' TOEFL (2005) one used both as a means of homogenizing the participants regarding their writing proficiency and as the pretest and the other one for the posttest;
2. Sample writing compositions (Bailey & Powell, 1987).

Scoring

The analytic approaches to marking are applied in this study. To assess the writers' compositions in the pretest and the post-test analytically, both teachers employ the analytic score rubrics by Hyland (2003) as the marking scheme. Also, it is for the most part due to the lack of consensus on one single marking method, reducing marker errors, increasing the reliability and validity of the test, and based on the claim that multiple marking improves the reliability of marking English essays (Weir, 1990, cited in Zare Ekbatani, 2004), each composition is subjected to more than one judgment by summing of multiple marks off two independent markers. The inter-rater reliability for the marking of the compositions is computed using the correlations among the two raters in the pretest and the posttest.

Design

This study incorporates the following features:

- Assigning students in groups
- Extensive modeling of composition process
- Selection of real-world topics for students to write in groups
- Regular feedback from peers and teacher

In summary, the three concerns contribute to the design of the writing composition of the present study. Firstly, an appreciation of the importance of group work in writing composition, as well as the need to write about "real-world" topics; secondly, the value of scaffolding or providing support during writing, as a way of controlling writing composition; and thirdly, the need for learners to engage with writing composition in such a way that they appropriate it to their own purposes. These ideas feature prominently in the design and delivery of the writing program reported on here.

Procedure

Beginning the research, a sample TEOFL test of writing proficiency of Peterson (2005) was given to 100 students of Chamran University of Ahvaz to ensure the homogeneity of the participants. Afterwards, 60 students (males and females) whose score was one standard deviation above and below the mean were selected as the main sample. Then, these sixty participants were randomly divided into two groups of thirty, the experimental and the comparison.

Before the instruction began, the participants in the experimental group were trained for about one hour in order to be able to use joint construction tasks effectively. They were taught how to write in groups. A common objection to the use of collaborative learning in writing classes is that students may know so little about writing group, or that they are not ready for this type of learning. Thus, teaching should take a positive attitude toward students who may not have developed what is considered group writing and help them develop the skills and habits for success in this respect. There are three steps that

may help students develop the joint construction strategy successfully in the basic writing classrooms. The first step is to develop an atmosphere of trust among the members of the class. Students, especially anxious, inexperienced beginning writers, need to feel comfortable and respected by the instructor and classmates. They need to know that they will not be put down or embarrassed as they interact with others. The second step is to carefully design a writing composition task with a clear goal and the third step is to explain the steps in the composition writing and the roles of each member of the joint construction group. Because of the students' fears and their desire to please, they become frustrated if they do not understand what is expected of them and how to achieve the desired results. Such anxiety will interfere with their writing.

The instruction session was held twice a week during five weeks, that is, 10 sessions in total. Beginning the instruction, the teacher formed the groups of students, each with three students. So, with thirty students, there were 10 groups. Each session, the teacher decided on the genre to be taught and the general topic of the text. Then, the participants of the experimental group were provided with one sample of writing composition they worked on under the supervision of the teacher. In this case, the teacher explained some features of the model text such as grammatical items like verbs, noun groups, clauses, pronouns, and organizational and cohesion features such as paragraph, topic sentence, and referring words. Then, a topic was introduced by the teacher and students were required to write a composition in groups. The selection of the topic was based on the students' familiarity and interest. In other words, the instructor selected the topics that spark students' interests, contributed to their knowledge, and finally was suitable for their future course without overwhelming them. Topics such as the advantages and disadvantages of cell phones, the effect of computer on your life, the effects of education on your future life were introduced by the teacher for the students to write about. Specifically, the teacher guided the students through reviewing what they knew about the text type and the topic. Then, the typical sequence of each session involved prewriting discussion, group outlining, group drafting of a text, and feedback. Initial discussion usually focused on what kinds of information might be expected in the current section of the essay. The class then collaborated in outlining and drafting text. During this process, the members of each group scribbled down whatever came to their mind for ten or fifteen minutes about the topic. At this stage, students paid no attention to organization, development, or mechanics while spilling onto paper whatever came to their mind. Afterwards, each group read the individual's scribbles for interesting ideas that had the potential for further development. This activity had two aspects: presentation and feedback. While presenting the outlines, members of the same group were provided a chance to give some comments. Basically, this activity was intended to encourage students to share and review ideas with one another before their outlines were developed into a composition. So, by asking questions, asking for clarifications, giving their opinions, and making suggestions for improvement, group members helped their peers to write collaboratively. During this process, teacher monitored the students' interaction. If students had difficulty in generating ideas, the teacher helped them. Once students had reworked their outlines, they were required to develop their own ideas into a complete composition consisting of an introductory paragraph, body paragraphs, and a concluding paragraph. Subsequently, they received feedback from peers and teacher. One of the advantages of the approach adopted in this study was that the learners were exposed to this cycle every session. At the end of each session, learners were asked to revise their draft and submit it to the teacher for feedback by the start of the following session. This sequence clearly placed responsibility for producing collaborative drafts on the learners.

Collectively composing of the text produced a number of positive results. Firstly, the learners gained access to the process of their peers' writing through observing the way in which brainstorming different ideas results in the need to prioritize and select from those ideas, and the adoption of word choices and syntactic forms. Secondly, it focused attention on the way in which language is used to signal the relationship between ideas.

Data Analysis

After collecting the data and scoring the tests, to answer the research questions posed in this study, statistical analyses were performed using SPSS software. The descriptive statistics such as the mean, standard deviation, and range were calculated in order to examine the central tendencies and variability of the scores. For this purpose, an independent sample t-test was used to check if there was any significant difference between the experimental and the comparison groups. In this respect, it was used

in order to answer the first research question. Furthermore, another independent t-test was conducted to check the difference between the writing proficiency of males and females who received joint construction instruction in order to answer the second research question.

Results and Findings

To assess the writers' compositions in the pretest analytically, the researchers employed the analytic score rubrics by Hyland (2003) as the marking scheme.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics Showing the Mean of the Experimental and the Comparison Groups in the Pretest

Group	N	Mean	Std.Deviation	Std. Error. Mean
Experimental	30	53.52	10.72	2.144
Comparison	30	50.40	10.72	2.146

Table 1 indicates the descriptive statistics of the experimental and the comparison group in the pretest. As shown in the table, the mean and standard deviation of the experimental group are 53.52, 10.72, respectively, and the comparison group 50.40, 10.72. To check if this mean difference is significant, an independent samples t-test was conducted (see Table 2.).

Table 2: Independent Samples t-test Comparing the pre-test Mean of the Experimental and Comparison Groups

Equal variances assumed	Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means					
	F	Sig.	T	Df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean difference	Std. Error Difference	
Equal variances not assumed	.270	.606	1.029	48	.309	3.120	3.033	
			1.029	48.000	.309	3.120	3.033	

As table 2 shows, $F=.270$, $p>.05$, so, equal variances is confirmed. Considering the results of the independent sample t-test ($t(48)=1.029$; $p=.309$), one can conclude that there is not any significant difference between the experimental and the comparison group before the instruction. According to this, both the experimental and the comparison group were homogeneous before the instruction and the test distribution was normal.

The First Research Question

The first research question in the present study directed toward investigating the probable difference in the writing composition of students who received scaffolding writing composition through joint construction task and those who did not. In order to address the research question, the descriptive statistics of the two groups were examined. The pretest and posttest contained a writing proficiency test of the sample TOEFL writing composition (Peterson, 2005). The total score for the writing proficiency test was 100 that was based on the analytic score rubrics by Hyland (2003). It is worth noting that the writing proficiency test administered to 100 students for selecting intermediate participants was also used as the pretest. Table 3 displays the mean and standard deviation of the pre and posttest scores and also reflects the differences between means in the two groups. Moreover, the difference between the girls and boys before and after receiving the instruction are also provided.

Table 3: Pretest and Posttest Descriptive Statistics for the Experimental and Comparison Groups

Groups		Participants	Mean	SD	Number
Pretest	Experimental	Boys	62.56	3.000	10
		Girls	48.44	10.12	20
		Total	53.52	10.72	30
	Comparison	Boys	46.33	17.38	11
		Girls	50.95	10.00	19
		Total	50.40	10.72	30
Posttest	Experimental	Boys	69.00	5.19	9
		Girls	65.56	9.13	17
		Total	66.80	8.000	26
	Comparison	Boys	40.00	4.35	10
		Girls	50.23	9.08	17
		Total	49.00	9.23	27
Pretest-Posttest Differences	Experimental	Boys	6.44	4.47	9
		Girls	17.12	6.85	17
		Total	13.28	7.96	26
	Comparison	Boys	-6.33	14.43	10
		Gils	-.73	3.65	17
		Total	-1.40	5.70	27

As is shown in Table 3, the results reveal that the experimental group had an increase in scores after the instruction was completed. The experimental group of boys' mean increased by 6.44, while the girls' mean increased by 17.12. On the contrary, there was no increase in the mean scores of the comparison group in the posttest. It is worth noting that the number of participants in the two groups was less in the posttest, since 4 of the participants of the experimental group left the experiment after a few sessions and 3 of the participants of the comparison group were absent for the posttest. As a result, instead of 30 participants, there were 26 participants in the experimental group and 27 participants in the comparison group.

Table 4: Descriptive Statistics of Gain Scores of the Experimental and Comparison Groups

Group	N	Mean	Std.Deviation	Std. Error. Mean
Experimental	30	13.28	7.961	1.592
Comparison	30	-1.40	5.701	1.140

According to Table 4, the mean of the experimental and comparison groups is different. To investigate if this difference is significant, an independent samples t-test was conducted.

Table 5: Independent Sample t-test for Gain Scores of the Comparison and the Experimental Group

	Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means				
	F	Sig.	t	Df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean difference	Std. Error Difference
Equal variances assumed	5.417	.024	7.496	48	.000	14.680	1.958
Equal variances not assumed			7.496	43.490	.000	14.680	1.958

Based on the results of Table 5, equal variances is not confirmed ($F=5.417$, $p=.024$), so the results of the t-test with the assumption of unequal variances is supported. As the results revealed, ($t(43.490) = 7.496$; $p < .05$), there is a significant difference between the posttest scores of the comparison and the experimental group.

The Second Research Question

The second research question in the present study was directed toward investigating the probable difference in the writing proficiency of girls and boys after receiving scaffolding writing composition through joint construction task.

Table 6: Descriptive Statistics for Boys and Girls' Scores after the Instruction

Sex	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error. Mean
Boys	10	6.44	4.475	1.492
Girls	20	17.12	6.850	1.712

According to the descriptive statistics of Table 6, the mean of the girls increased by 17.12 while the mean of the boys increased by 6.44. According to this descriptive statistics, girls outperformed the boys after the instruction.

Table 7: Independent Samples t-test for Boys and Girls' Scores in the Experimental Group

Levene's Test for Equality of Variances				t-test for Equality of Means				
Equal variances assumed	F	Sig.	t	Df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean difference	Std. Error Difference	
Equal variances assumed	1.320	.262	-4.182	23	.000	-10.681	2.554	
Equal variances not assumed			-4.703	22.312	.000	-10.681	2.271	

As Table 7 shows, ($F=1.320$, $p=.262$), so the assumption of equal variances is confirmed. Based on the results, ($t(23)=-4.182$; $p<.05$). As a result, there is a significant difference between boys and girls after the instruction. Thus in addressing the second research question, it appears that scaffolding writing composition through joint construction task did make a difference in the writing composition of girls.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study suggest that scaffolding writing composition through joint construction task can enhance Iranian intermediate learners' writing composition. In this respect, the results show that the experimental group outperformed the comparison group in the posttest. Moreover, it shows that there is a significant difference in the writing proficiency of the girls and boys after receiving joint construction. In other words, the results show that girls outperformed boys after receiving the instruction. Thus, it seems that girls benefit more from joint construction task than boys.

The results of this study are in line with the general conclusion drawn from other studies in this regard which claimed that joint construction can enhance writing composition (Oliver, 2005; Storch, 2002; Swain & Lapkin, 1998). Yet, these studies do not take into account the importance of gender. The present study indicates that girls get a better result from joint construction.

According to Harris (2006), joint construction is a student-centered approach that relies on collaboration as a powerful learning tool. It promotes students' interaction. In addition, it moves the student from the traditional passive stance of receiving knowledge from an authority to an active involvement. The interaction among students that is required for this does increase awareness and offer differing perspectives for one to write a composition. In this regard, when writing collaboratively, each student may take responsibility for different parts of the text, and as a result, there may be group consensus or collective responsibility for the final product.

In the present study, given an environment which offered the cooperative writing techniques, and to synthesize the product and the process approach to teaching writing, joint construction task encouraged the learners to explore and develop the knowledge of the writing process explicitly. This was beneficial

because learners gained awareness of inappropriate writing habits and realized that different people approach writing in different ways.

During the sessions, it became clear that the groups worked more productively and with less stress than during writing individually. Additionally, students had made at least some progress in learning how to pool their ideas and how to cooperate and help each other rather than be destructive and competitive.

The reason that females writing composition outperformed males was possibly due to the fact that females tend to share their ideas with the group while writing composition and, by using joint construction, they could function as scaffold for each other. This happens through complementary role and supplementing each other's knowledge because they may be good in different areas such as grammar, vocabulary, organization, content, and mechanics. On the contrary, boys tend to be more individualistic and like to submit individual writing assignment instead of group writing assignment probably because they think they are more self-confident.

Hence, due to importance of joint construction on the writing composition of EFL learners and the fact that it can take the place of traditional individual writing composition, EFL learners should be trained to use joint construction effectively. In this regard, students need to be aware that their interaction in this process is evaluated as part of their grade. So, for joint construction to be effective, learners must view writing as a process of cooperation and collaboration.

How teachers respond to student writing is also crucial. Over the past decades, considerable attention has been given to the treatment of errors in the written work of second/foreign language learners (Bitcher, Young & Cameron, 2005; Ferris, 1995a, 1995b; Robb, Ross, & Shortreed, 1986). Feedback in this study comes in the form of error correction by the teacher. Tsang (1996, cited in Porto, 2001) found that frequent writing practice with little or no teacher feedback only led to a limited improvement in L2 writing. The importance of feedback has also been pointed out by Swain and Lapkin (1995, cited in Porto, 2001), who stated that relevant feedback could play a crucial role in advancing the learners' second language learning. With regard to the feedback in the joint construction task, the fact that students write in groups, is reflected in the way feedback is both perceived and received by the students. According to Harris (1995, cited in Boughy, 2007), students often perceive feedback as criticism rather than as the constructive and well-meaning suggestion it is intended to be.

On reflection, it is believed that the present study had two major strengths. Firstly, by providing appropriate scaffolding through joint construction task throughout the composition cycle, students were able to focus attention on the language, structure and content needed to produce a composition. Secondly, by using joint construction, students were able to establish links between their beliefs, attitudes, and prior knowledge on the one hand, and the topic they were writing in groups, on the other. This successfully reduced the language burden for class members as they write in groups.

CONCLUSION

As mentioned earlier, the results suggest that there was a significant difference between the experimental group that received the joint construction treatment and comparison group that did not receive this treatment. In other words, considering that the comparison and experimental groups consisted of students with similar English proficiency, it can be supported that joint construction had helped experimental group in achieving much better pieces of writing as a whole and in respect of writing components such as content, organization, vocabulary, grammar, and mechanics. In addition, the findings were consistent with the notion that the gender can play a critical role in writing composition. In other words, the results confirmed the fact that the female group outperformed the male group after joint construction instruction.

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