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AUTONOMOUS ENGLISH AS A SECOND LANGUAGE WRITING THROUGH GROUP-WRITING TRANSFORMATIONS

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ABSTRACT

The study investigated the effects of group-writing on learners at an institution of higher learning who worked in cooperative based writing groups (group-writing henceforth) and individually. 117 undergraduates participated in this quasi-experimental study for 14 weeks. The learners were grouped in groups of three or four. A mixed-design approach was employed in data collection. Questionnaires were administered and semi-structured interviews were carried out to elicit information. The results indicated a favourable view of group-writing as an instructional approach in English as a second language (hereafter ESL) writing classrooms. The learners in the group-writing cooperated with each other on assigned tasks. The results revealed that there was a significant difference between the experiment and control groups, whereby the m 39.3772 value for the experimental group while m 28.1149 for the control group at (0<,05). This obviously shows that the learners in the experimental group have outperformed the learners who worked individually. As they had more opportunities to work together, they built a strong perception of group cohesion and responsibility for other's learning which gradually helped them become autonomous writers. This study adds insights into pedagogical approaches used in ESL centres of higher learning and recommendations are suggested for further research.

Keywords: *Group-writing, instructional approach, autonomous writers*

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INTRODUCTION

Group-writing is acknowledged as a set of pedagogical practices in which students are grouped and encouraged to work together to participate in discussing the different perspectives on a common topic (Chapman, Meuter, Toy & Wright, 2006; Hirst & Slavik, 2005). It is a fundamental principle of group-writing that learners achieve success by providing help, sharing resources and encouraging each other's efforts. Such groups provide more opportunities for students to have hands-on activities (Kreie, Headrick & Steiner, 2007; Lee, 2003; Greenfield, 2003). It is claimed that group-writing when adopted in small group activities provide students with opportunities to practise the target language naturally. Hirst and Slavik (2005) and Lim (2002) stress that the most powerful language curricula are those which maximise opportunities for multiple channelling in language learning. Mason (2006) and Chen (2004) argue for group-writing as a powerful tool to uplift learners' writing competence in the English language. Hence, it is believed that group-writing is an effective instructional approach in ESL writing classroom which allows learners to have good grasp of skills and to internalise the processes involved.

Group-writing approach to language learning emanates from Vygotskian Sociocultural Theory (1978) based on the views that knowledge is social, and is co-constructed from group efforts to learn, understand and solve problems. Recognising that the social nature of learning is through the assistance one receives from others, Vygotsky postulates that the true direction of the development of thinking and learning is not from an individual to the social but vice versa. He therefore theorises that learning, first begins in the social or interpsychological plane, from where it then gradually moves to the individual or intrapsychological plane. As such it is believed that once learners master the skills taught by the more capable people in the environment, they internalise this process and in future, these learners do not need such support.

Vygotsky (1978) further posits three areas of learner ability: tasks that they can perform by themselves, tasks that they can accomplish with the assistance of others, and tasks that are impossible to execute themselves. Thus, he argues that there is a gap between the actual developmental level determined by individual problem solving and the level of potential development determined through problem solving with guidance or with the cooperation of others. He claims that "the child deliberately copies and

assimilates what he sees in adults" (p. 89). Therefore, there are always more and less capable learners within groups of similar ages, so it is likely that they imitate others and receive assistance from peers who are ahead in their respective levels of development (Vygotsky, 1978). Vygotsky's conception of learning as a social enterprise that leads to cognitive development as depicted above suggests that ESL learners may write more effectively in group-writing and leads them to become autonomous writers.

THE ESL WRITING CLASSROOM

Group-writing is perceived as an empowering approach which provides students with autonomy and control to organise and regulate their learning of writing skills (Chen, 2004; Lancaster & Strand, 2001). Mason (2006) and Kaur (2006) have shown that collaborative work in ESL classrooms increases learner involvement in groups, leading to a better grasp of the writing skills as it creates opportunities for learners to actively communicate in real, meaningful contexts, and extended language acquisition beyond what is provided by the teacher.

Writing has often been regarded by teachers and learners alike as the most difficult and tedious skill to teach, learn or acquire for non-native as well as native learners (Rohayah & Naginder, 2004; Kim & Kim, 2005; Abu Rass, 2001). Furthermore, ESL classrooms comprise learners from diverse backgrounds they tend to differ in their learning preferences and abilities (Mariam, 2004; Azizah Kadir, 2002; Asmah, 1982). Many Non Native learners (NNS henceforth) cannot write well even after eleven years of learning English (Mariam, 2004) as they are unable to develop ideas, present them clearly and coherently and plan cohesive paragraphs. This situation highlights the need for educators to pay attention to learners having problems acquiring writing skill to elevate their writing ability. Some researchers (Mason, 2006; Chen, 2004; Atkinson, 2003) claim that writing in small groups have yielded positive effects in ESL writing classrooms but little is known about how effective such an approach is in higher learning institutions and the learners' views of the approach. This gap leads to a pertinent need to investigate the effectiveness of group-writing approach within the higher education setting. As such we set out to answer the following questions:

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. To what extent does group-writing approach enhance ESL learners' writing performance?
2. How do tertiary-level ESL learners perceive group-writing?

SCOPE OF THE STUDY

The group-writing skills observed in this study included positive interdependence, face-to-face promotive interaction and group processing (Johnson & Johnson, 1999). Positive interdependence denotes "either we swim or sink together". If the group members face such a situation then they will have two responsibilities to deal with simultaneously. The responsibilities include making the most of their own productivity as well as that of the other members in the group. In such a situation, the group members have two responsibilities simultaneously: to make the most of their own productivity as well as that of the other members of the group.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

The study was conducted with a sample size of 63 in treatment and 54 in control ESL learners at one public institution of higher learning. It is recognized that the perception of learners at one particular institution may vary from another, hence does not represent ESL learners' perceptions, in general. The small sample size (n=63) too does not make allowance for any generalisations to the general population of ESL learners.

METHODOLOGY

A case study approach was employed in this study. Pre- and post-tests grades and group interviews adapted from Johnson and Johnson (1994) were applied to elicit information from 117 learners at a public institution of higher learning. The interview consisted of eight questions, eliciting learners' perceptions on group-writing to create autonomous writers. The experimental groups comprised of 63 learners while the control group 54. In the experimental group, group-writing continued for a duration of 14

weeks. Both groups were taught by the researchers for 2 contact hours per week. The learners were exposed to 7 different topics. The study consisted of three phases.

In phase 1 (week 1), the learners were given a pre-test and grouped into small groups of 4 or 5. In phase 2 (week 2 – 12), the treatment groups worked in small groups while the control group worked individually. During this process, the researchers assumed the role of facilitators in both groups and they were given a test in week 6 and week eleven. In phase 3 (week 13), the researchers conducted the post-test. The test scripts were assessed by three independent raters. Then the researchers performed interrater reliability checks on the scores from both groups using Spearman's rho correlation to check for consistency among the three raters and if their scores correlated highly or weakly with one another. The treatment and control groups showed that the three raters were significantly correlated at the 0.01 level (2- tailed).

The researcher also conducted structured interviews with the learners to elicit their perceptions of what happened in their groups as they worked together. The respondents were also video-recorded in their groups as they participated in group-writing.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The present study investigated whether there was a significant difference in the learners' writing achievement before and after the implementation of the group-writing approach in the teaching of writing skills.

Research Question 1: The Effectiveness of Group-Writing

Table 1: Results of Paired t-test between Pre and Post-test Scores: Experimental Group

	Pre-test	Test 1 (week 6)	Test 2 (week 11)	Post-test
Mean	27.1579	29.3759	33.1149	39.3772

Table 1 shows the mean value of the on-going assessment of the respondents in the treatment group. The results indicate that there was gradual improvement among the respondents in their writing performance throughout the treatment. Furthermore, the respondents' pre- and post-test

writing performance were analysed according to their overall test scores using paired-samples t tests (Table 2).

Table 2: Results of Paired t-test between Pre and Post-test Scores: Experimental Group

	Mean	SD	T	P
Pre-test	27.1579	5.44576	16.976	.000
Post-test	39.3772	4.82139		

The scores in table 2 show statistically significant improvement in scores from pre-test (M=27.1579, SD = 5.44576) to Post-test (M = 39.3772, SD = 4.82139), t (16.976) = 8.488, p= 0005. The low significance value for the t test p= 0.000 indicate that there was a significant difference between the two variables, meaning that the learners taught in the group-writing approach during ESL writing class performed better. In general, the results in the experimental group showed that there was significant improvement among the learners between pre- and post-test scores. Therefore, it can be concluded that group-writing increased respondents' writing performance.

Table 3: Results of Paired t-test between Pre and Post-test Scores: Control Group

	Pre-test	Test 1 (week 6)	Test 2 (week 11)	Post-test
Mean	28.2759	28. 3358	28.2339	28.1149

Table 3 shows the mean value of the on-going assessment from the control group. The results indicate a slight improvement from pre-test to test 1, (from 28.2759 to 28. 3358). There was a marginal improvement from the pre-test and test 1 mean value (0.0599), however, it dropped gradually (0.1019) in test 2 and in the post-test (0.1190). This showed that there was no consistent improvement in the control group's writing performance. To explain their performance further, the pre- and the post-test scores were analysed using paired-samples t tests (Table 4).

Table 4: Results of Paired t-test between Pre and Post test Scores: Control Group

	Mean	SD	T	P
Pre test	28.2759	3.30851	.509	.612
Post test	28.1149	3.02480		

The result (Table 4) demonstrates that there was no significant improvement among the learners in the control group. The scores showed statistically no significant improvement in scores from pre test (M=28.2759, SD = 3.30851) to post test (M = 28.1149, SD = 3.02480), t(.509) = .254, p = .0005. Therefore, it can be concluded that there was no significant improvement between the pre- and post test scores among the learners in the control group.

The paired-samples t-tests for both the groups also demonstrated an extensive improvement in writing among the learners in the experimental group compared to the pre- to post-test scores. The result indicates that the learners in the experimental group had improved in their writing proficiency as there was significant difference in their pre- and post-tests scores. Besides, the results of the on-going assessments (week 6 and week 11) also support that there was gradual improvement in the treatment group while the control group did not show significant improvement. Thus, we could conclude that the learners in the treatment groups have improved their writing. Almost all the learners who were assisted had become more independent in writing and had obtained better grades in their post-test.

The findings of this study revealed that group-writing empowers learners and provides them with autonomy to control and regulate their own learning, which concur with Brown (2008); Depaz and Moni, (2008), Mason (2006), Mariam (2004), Azizah Ibrahim (2001) and, Gleason and Isaacson (2001) on the relationship between group-writing and writing performance. By bringing together diverse interests and perspectives in the form of group-writing to knowledge construction process, students can achieve the aspired goals compared to individual attempts (Johnson & Johnson, 2004). Brown (1008), Mason (2006), Lancaster and Strand (2001) and Mariam (2004) also revealed that studies on the relationship between group-writing and academic achievement had been consistently positive in their outcomes.

Hence, the current study supports the postulation that ESL instructors employ group-writing to improve ESL learners' writing skills. While it may be time-consuming in training them to adapt to group-writing, the positive outcomes imply that it is an important and effective way in helping students to engage in writing in the second language.

Research question 2: ESL Learners' perception of group-writing

Generally, the learners in the experimental group gave positive feedback on the group-writing sessions. They perceived that it was a conducive, stress-free environment which encouraged them to engage in learning. The learners commented that they participated actively and felt that their oral performance was better as they did not feel threatened speaking in the target language. One learner, Amy, commented,

> *"Group-writing lessened my workload because all of us discuss and we take turns to write. If individual work, every essay I have to write. Besides, my group members were very helpful and guided me even outside classroom time".*

In contrast, the learners expressed anxiety when they had to speak in front of the class. They did not want to reveal their 'bad' pronunciation or lack of grammatical knowledge which could be construed as 'weaknesses' by their peers. They were more willing to reveal their weaknesses as they felt less anxious among their peers in the writing groups, as highlighted by some researchers (Brown, 2008; Smialek & Boburka, 2006; Panetta et al., 2002).

The group-writing approach was also found to be beneficial when learners started to focus on the quality of the ideas presented, and re-read and edited the paragraphs. During the pre-writing stages, they generated ideas during discussions, clarified and organised their thoughts. A learner, Syed, remarked,

> *"I don't know much English but group members helped me to write better. Now I am more confident to write my own essay".*

Another learner, Sarah, admitted,

> *"I cannot speak English well. I was very worried of my oral speaking test but after having group-work for one semester; my spoken English has improved. I am happy because I can speak and write in English now".*

In the interviews, some of the learners expressed guilt about using L1 resources. One learner, Marina, explained,

> *"Group writing has encouraged me to use English. Usually I discuss in Bahasa Malaysia but this time I was forced to speak English. This really helped me to improve my English and I can write better".*

The excerpts above reflect that the learners perceived the researchers' facilitation as useful; the learners enquired about the essay writing question and to understand the reading materials provided. It could be implied here that they perceived the researchers' assistance to be more crucial than their peers as they sought the former's compared to the latter's. However, throughout the planning, organising and sharing of the essays, the learners sought their peers' assistance and not the researchers. They were able to plan and organise whole essays into appropriate rhetorical structure, which attests Mason (2006), Kos (2001) and Johnson et al. (2000) findings. This implied that they needed the researchers' assistance at the initial stages of their writing but eventually became autonomous writers as they engaged deeper in the group writing.

The research also found that as they engaged in the writing activity, the learners began to use the linguistic resources of their peers. For instance, some students were only able to enunciate some words in L1 and relied on their peers to translate in L2. They also shared their ideas which were expanded by others. Thus, group-writing allowed learners to examine information and add onto new knowledge for the writing tasks.

The group-writing approach not only helped to improve learners' writing but also speaking skills. They had become more confident in using the English language to communicate with their peers in the class. The learners developed better listening and oral skills as a result of responding to their peers. More importantly, the group-writing sessions motivated them to become autonomous writers.

CONCLUSIONS

It was evident that group-writing approach played a role in the composing process where the learners planned together. The stress-free learning environment encouraged the learners to be more actively engaged in group discussions and writing. Learners learned to think together and to share ideas in order to develop their writing proficiency. They remarked that the group-writing helped them to gain more confidence in using the target language, speaking as well writing. In ESL classes, it is an important approach as NNS learners preferred to work in groups as they felt inhibited if called upon individually to present their views (Kaur, 2006; Asmah, 1982 Reid, 1987). Thus, the group-writing approach encourages learners to be more engaged in the writing activities.

PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

The premise of the study is that group-writing benefits ESL learners in their written output. The results also show that it especially encourages the limited proficient learners to partake and utilise their more-proficient peers' linguistic and rhetorical knowledge in the construction process. It also creates a stress-free learning environment for them as they have peer support. As such, they have less anxiety in learning and writing. Hence, the group writing approach helps ESL learners to become autonomous writers even though this is initiated in the group, which could be further developed by the teachers to help them venture into individual writing.

Course designers who are keen in adopting the group-writing approach may need to consider in-house training, courses, seminars or workshops to develop appropriate materials and resource packs that support group discussion and writing. This could take the toll off individual teachers, who otherwise, have to source for materials on their own and deal with more constraints.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE INSTITUTIONAL RESEARCH

In this study, the number of respondents was small (only 63 in the treatment class while 54 were in the control group) and was conducted in a specific context. Hence the results of this study may not be generalized to other contexts. The researchers propose that a larger sample size be used and also that the advanced diploma and degree students be involved in future studies to provide supplementary insights into ESL writing instructions. In-depth students' opinions regarding the group-writing could help in gaining a better overview of this writing instruction to promote autonomous ESL learners.

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