

Application of Interactive Autonomous Learning Mode to Teach College English Writing

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Abstract

Writing is usually considered as an individual activity, emphasizing the result instead of the process in which students undergo to reach the final goal. However, writing process is of great importance to the students. In the writing process, they can develop writing competence and learner autonomy through interaction. Thus, this thesis intends to demonstrate the effectiveness of applying Interactive Autonomous Learning Mode to writing instruction in college classroom setting.

Key words: Interactive Autonomous Learning Mode; collaborative writing instruction; writing competence; learner autonomy; traditional writing teaching method; effectiveness

1 Introduction

College English, which was also called “public English”, is a required course for non-English majors in Chinese higher education. According to the 2004 *College English Curriculum Requirements* (cited in Jiang, 2006: 26), the objective of College English is to develop students’ ability to use English in an all-round way, so that in their future work and social interactions they will be able to exchange information effectively through both spoken and written channels, and at the same time they will be able to enhance their ability to study independently and improve their cultural quality so as to meet the needs of China’s social development and international exchanges. Thus, to develop the writing skills and the autonomous learning ability are both important to English learners. However, writing instruction is always considered as an individual activity, emphasizing the product instead of the writing process.

As for the researches of collaborative writing, some scholars (e.g., Daiute, 1986; Wells, Chang & Maher, 1990) focus on the issue of developing L1 writing skills. And other scholars (e.g., Donato, 1988; DiCamilla & Anton, 1997; Swain & Lapkin, 1998; Storch, 2002) begin to introduce this new method into L2 teaching and learning. There are only a few scholars (e.g., Storch, 1999 & 2005) compare compositions produced collaboratively with compositions produced individually. And there are also a few studies that investigate learners’ views on collaborative writing (e.g., Hyde, 1993; Kinsella, 1996; Mishra & Oliver, 1998; Roskams, 1999). Thus, there is no analysis on the development of writing competence through interactive autonomous learning mode.

This thesis tries to solve the disputes in the field of definition of learner autonomy by giving a working

definition of it and put forward the interactive autonomous learning mode and then test whether students in the experimental group who are taught with the interactive autonomous learning mode can perform better than the control group who are taught in the traditional way. The effectiveness of the IALM will shed light on its feasibility in teaching of listening, speaking and reading, etc.

2 Interactive autonomous learning mode

Accompanied by the emergence and development of cognitive and humanistic psychology, western educationists took initiative to take the fostering of learners' responsibility as one of the ultimate goals of education. It is until the 1970s that the concept of autonomy first entered the field of language teaching through the Council of Europe's Modern Language Project which aimed initially at providing adults with opportunities for lifelong learning. However, different scholars define autonomy in different ways, which cause misunderstandings and hinder its popularization. Thus, it is necessary to classify and clarify these different definitions.

2.1 The Definition of Autonomy

The early interest in the concept autonomy within the field of language education was "in part a response to ideals and expectations aroused by the political turmoil in Europe in the late 1960s" (Gremmo & Riley, 1995). The concept of "learner autonomy" first entered the field of language education through the Council of Europe's Modern Languages Project established in 1971. But different scholars vary greatly in their understanding of autonomy.

One of the pioneers of autonomy study Holec (1981, cited in Benson, 2005) defines autonomy as "the ability to take charge of one's own learning". His main concern is on the development of individual freedom and responsibility in response to the demand of social progress in which an improvement in the "quality of life" instead of the increase of material well-being through an increase in consumer goods and services is required. His explanation on this concept is that learner can determine the learning objectives, define the contents and progressions, select methods and techniques to be used, monitor the procedure of acquisition (rhythm, time, place, etc.) and evaluate what has been acquired. Dam et al. (1990) also contend that "autonomy is the learners' willingness and capacity to control or oversee his/her own learning".

Although Holec (1985b, cited in Benson, 2005) still contends that autonomy is a capability of learner, other scholars began to use it to refer to situations in which learners worked under their own directions outside the conventional language-teaching classroom. Riley and Zoppis (1985) employ the terms "semi-autonomy" or "complete autonomy" to describe the situation in which the learners working in a self-access center. While Dickinson (1987) even defines autonomy as "the situation in which the learner is totally responsible for all of the decisions concerned with his learning and the implementation of those decisions" and use "full autonomy" to describe "the situation in which the learner is completely independent of teachers, institutions or specially prepared materials". In fact, these definitions consider autonomy as a kind of learning situation or learning mode. They confused autonomy with autonomous learning.

Although researchers are aware of the fact that the theory of autonomy in language learning is essentially concerned with the organization of institutionalized learning instead of the learners' learning in isolation from teachers and other learners, they still tend to use the term independence as synonym for autonomy. However, there are also some scholars who view the concept autonomy in different ways. Little (1990) notices that "autonomy is essentially a matter of the learner's psychological relation to the process and content of learning". That is to say, autonomy refers to the learner's psychological independence in terms of the process and content rather than the learning mode in which learning takes place in an isolated situation. Nedelsky (1989) also contends that the capacity of autonomy is unlikely to exist without a feeling of being autonomous and this feeling is the best guide to understand the structure of those relationships which make autonomy possible. And Aoki (2000) defines learner autonomy as "a capacity to take control of one's own learning in the service of one's perceived needs and aspiration". In his opinion, the core of learner autonomy is a psychology construct, which can greatly influence the feeling of autonomy. It as a capacity refers to the domain-specific knowledge and skills necessary (1) to make choices concerning what, why and how to learn, (2) to implement the plan and (3) to evaluate the outcome of learning.

Autonomy (learner autonomy) in this thesis is defined as the learner's capability in certain context to take control of his own learning in the service of his perceived needs and aspiration. By "in certain context" is meant that the learning has to be occurring in a certain social context, whether or not the freedom of doing so is available. And "control his own learning" refers to that the learners make his learning plan (includes why, what, when, how to learn and whom to learn with), implement the plan, monitor and assess his implementation, and make adjustments so as to form a new plan when either external or internal factors urge for it. And what we should pay special attention to is that the control over learning may take a variety of forms in relation to different levels of the learning process.

Littlewood (1999) proposes a distinction between two levels of autonomy. The first of which regulates the direction of activity as well as the activity itself. The second of which regulates the activity once the direction has been set. He names the former one proactive autonomy and the latter one reactive autonomy. To be more precise, proactive autonomy usually means that "learners are able to take charge of their own learning, i.e. determine their own objectives, select methods and techniques, and evaluate what has been acquired" (Littlewood, 1999, cited from Holec, 1981). In this way learners can establish "a personal agenda for learning" (Littlewood, 1999) which affirms their individuality and sets up directions in a world which they themselves have partially created.

Littlewood (1999) furthers the explanation of this distinction in detail as follows. To his mind, although many scholars think that proactive autonomy is the only kind of autonomy that counts, in talking about institutional education, it is still necessary and useful to attach importance to the second kind—reactive autonomy, which may either be a preliminary step towards the first or a goal in its own right. Reactive autonomy is the kind of autonomy which does not create its own directions but, once a direction has been initiated, enables learners to organize their resources autonomously in order to reach their goal. He explains it in the following way.

It seems that learner autonomy in English language teaching and learning in China is mainly of a reactive

style due to its unique socio-cultural and educational contexts. Although it is very useful and important to facilitate learners to reach proactive autonomy, achieving the reactive autonomy per se is also a great success for language learners in the process of autonomy cultivation. Hence what we mainly concern in this thesis is reactive autonomy.

2.2 Definition of Interactive Autonomous Learning Mode

Autonomy in this thesis is defined as a psychological construct, i.e. learners' capability. And this capability is better to be developed in social contexts (social interaction). Besides, the review on developing autonomy in interaction also informs us that learner autonomy should be developed in social interactions. Based on this definition and the literature review, the IALM, which meets the needs to develop learner autonomy, learners' language skills and ability of cooperation, i.e. "whole person", comes into being.

The interactive autonomous learning mode is put forward by Yuan in 2007. He suggests that the interaction between student and computer, student and teacher, student and student is quite important in computer and Internet based learning. But he does not give an exact definition of this learning mode. Thus, the author proposes a working definition of the IALM for this thesis. By the IALM is meant that the learner as a whole person receives and conveys authentic messages through actively taking part in the interaction between him/her and peer learners, teachers, and tasks in certain learning contexts. "Whole person" in the definition refers to that the learner needs to develop himself/herself in terms of thoughts, feelings and emotions, etc. rather than knowledge alone. And "receives and conveys" means that the learners not only need a large amount of "comprehensible input" but also need a large amount of "comprehensible output". "Authentic messages" refer to the messages that contain information of interest to speaker and listener in a situation of importance to both. The activity that asks the learners to read the dialogues with the assigned roles is by no means of this kind. "Actively" indicates that the learners are aware of: (a) the present competence of themselves and the other characteristics of themselves (e.g., learning styles, learning strategies, cognitive styles, anxiety and motivation, location preference and biorhythms, etc.), (b) the benefits of the learning tasks, especially the interaction in those tasks, and (c) when and how to participate in the learning tasks appropriately to make the benefit maximum. In a word, it means why, what, when, how to learn and whom to learn with. "Certain learning contexts" mean that the learning has to be occurring in a certain social context, whether or not the freedom of doing so is available. The "certain learning contexts" here emphasize two important aspects. One is that learning a language has to be taken place in interaction in social contexts rather in isolation. The other is that the social contexts must be suitable for language learning. If it is not suitable, the learner should have the capability to create the contexts actively.

As has been mentioned in the definition of learner autonomy part, many scholars claim that autonomy equals independence. The author contends that the fostering of learner autonomy can be and should be interaction oriented.

As has been mentioned above, autonomy, which is semantically opposite to dependence, implies independence per se. Therefore, learner autonomy is usually regarded as an antonym to learner

dependence, either on teachers or on peers. They even think that being independent from teachers, peer students and prepared learning materials is the defining characteristic of being autonomous.

However, learner autonomy in reality is impossible and should not be totally exclusive of dependence in that it is obvious that no students, anywhere, are learning in isolation without attending schools all their lives. The nature of language learning requires that the learners “actively participate in the social processes of classroom learning...actively interpret the new information in terms of what he/she already and uniquely knows...know how to learn and can use this knowledge in any learning situation he/she may encounter at any stage in his/her life” (Dam et al., 1990, cited in Gardner & Miller, 2002). Little (1996) also points out that collaboration, which suggests interdependence, “is essential to the development autonomy as a psychological capacity”. He states that “the development of a capacity for reflection and analysis is central to the development of learner autonomy and the development depends on the development of an internalization of a capacity to participate fully and critically in social interactions”. Thus, psychological independence is the ultimate goal of autonomy cultivation and interdependence is unavoidable in the process of autonomy development.

Interaction refers to the interplay between the learner and peer learners, teachers and learning tasks in the language learning contexts in which the learning takes place. The learner develops as a whole person and constructs his/her personal meaning through interaction with the teachers, peer learners, and environment through language learning tasks. Thus, interaction reflects the nature of language learning, including the autonomous learning in which learners actively take part in the interaction. It is through interaction that the ultimate goal of “independence” (being psychologically independent) can be finally realized. Interdependence is just one form of interactions (learner and peer learners and learner and teachers).

3. Application of I A LM to Teach College English Writing

3.1 Research Questions

This experiment intends to find out whether and what kind of advantages the collaborative writing instruction conducted within the framework of the IALM has when it is compared with the usual writing teaching method. Based on this general question, five specific research questions are raised.

Specific Question 1: Is the collaborative writing instruction conducted in the IALM more effective in improving the students’ writing proficiency in the experimental group than that of the students in the control group in which the students experience the usual English writing instruction?

Specific Question 2: Which of the five aspects (theme, diction, structure, cohesion and grammar) of writing proficiency of the students in the experimental group is significantly higher than that of the students in the control group after the different treatments in writing instruction?

Specific Question 3: Do the students in the experimental group develop stronger interest in English writing and English learning than the students in the control group?

Specific Question 4: Do the students in the experimental group develop clearer self-awareness than the students in the control group?

Specific Question 5: Do the students in the experimental group develop better interpersonal relationships with classmates than the students in the control group?

3.2 Overall Research Design

This thesis consists of both quantitative and qualitative study. The first step is to execute the collaborative writing instruction in college English writing instruction within the IALM in the experimental group. Then the instructor collects the data for qualitative analysis through classroom observation and students' diaries to demonstrate the hypotheses 3, 4 and 5. Finally, the data for quantitative analysis will be collected through pretest and posttest which assess the students' writing proficiency. The quantitative analysis is to demonstrate hypotheses 1 and 2. The scores of the students in the experimental group and the control group will be compared to show that the execution of collaborative writing instruction within the IALM in the experimental group can produce better results than the usual writing instruction in the control group.

3.3 Subjects

The subjects who are first-year college students come from two classes in China West Normal University. These two classes are both classified as Level B Classes according the graded language teaching model in China West Normal University. Level B Classes are those classes that consist of students whose marks of National Entrance Examination are between 90 points and 125 points. The students in one class are majoring in Chinese. The class consists of 45 students with 6 boys and 39 girls. This class was considered as the experimental group. The students in the other class are majoring in Mathematics. The class consists of 48 students with 18 boys and 40 girls. This class was arranged as the control group.

3.4 Instruments

As has been mentioned above, the present study is both a qualitative and a quantitative research. Data are collected from three main sources. One is from classroom observation. The instructor takes note when each collaborative writing activity is carried out in the classroom. The purpose of the observation is mainly to get to know the reaction of the participants of the activities. The second main source is from students' diaries. The students of the experimental group are required to write a diary according to the requirements (see Appendix B) after each activity to reflect upon their feelings, achievements and suggestions for improvement of the activity in the future. The third main source of the data is from the students' performance in the pretest and posttest which are designed to test the students' writing proficiency. The two writing proficiency tests are chosen from CET 4 exams. Pretest is chosen from CET 4 in June, 2006. And posttest is chosen from CET 4 in a simulated test on the Internet. The data for quantitative analysis is analyzed with the statistical software SPSS 13.0.

3.6 Data Collecting Procedure

The experiment started from October 6th, 2016 until December 28th, 2016. The whole experiment lasted three months. The time is short because of the one-month military training for the freshman in September.

The data needed for the research are collected through the following procedure.

The experiment started with the pretest of the writing proficiency among the experimental and the control group on October 6th in the second period after their self introduction in the first period. The second step was to conduct the first writing activity on October 15th. The students in the experimental group were asked to write an essay on the topic *On Living on Campus*. They discussed among group members on how to introduce the thesis statement, how to diction, how to structure the essay and how to make it coherent, etc. And they were required to complete a draft in class. After class, the discussion and negotiation would go on until they complete the essay and write down on a piece of paper which was handed out by the instructor. The essay they wrote was required to hand in the next week. Then the essays they handed in were exchanged among different groups and they read it in turn and gave suggestions on how to improve or how to correct if any mistake exists. After that, each group was asked to grade the essay and explain the reasons why they gave such marks. They were also asked to exchange their ideas after class. Finally, they were asked to write a dairy on how they acted in the process of collaborative writing and mutual evaluation in class, what they had learned and any suggestions to improve it in the future. When the activity was over, the instructor summarized the problems that he noticed in the essays which they had in common and the activity per se. However, the writing activity in the control group was quite different. The instructor first explained how to compose an exposition with the problems he had found in the essays which they composed in the pretest. Then, the students were asked to compose the essay individually after class with the problems mentioned in class in mind. The essays were also required to hand in the next week. But the instructor just pointed out their problems in the essays through different marks and several sentences of comments in their exercise books. The instructor also gave detailed comments on the problems they had in common in class.

The second writing activity was conducted on November 5th. The activity was a story extension. The topic, the beginning and ending of the story were given to the students. The topic was *Unforgettable Valentine's Day*. The students could also use their own topics that they prefer. But they had to discuss how to complete the story according to the background information and the ending of the story and make it reasonable and coherent. The classroom discussion in the experimental group ended up with a draft as usual. The final work was handed in the next week. Their stories were also exchanged, read and corrected among groups. The most interesting ones were read out in the class. After the activity, the diary was written by each one as usual. However, the students in the control group were to write individually after class and handed them in the next week. The comments were given in their own exercise books.

The third writing activity was conducted on November 30th. The activity was a dictogloss. The students in the experimental group listened to a passage for four times and took note. At the first time, they just listened and tried to get the main idea of the passage. At the second time and third time, they tried to write down the key points of the passage. And at the fourth time, they checked and tried to complete the sentences they had written down. But because the students complained that they had not grasped the main idea of the passage, the passage was played another two times for the students in both the experimental group and the control group. Then they worked in groups to discuss and reconstruct it into a coherent passage. The draft was completed in the class. Then they continued the discussion and negotiation within

each group after class. The essays they composed were handed in the next week and exchanged among groups. They read the essays written by another group and corrected the mistakes if it was necessary. The diary was also asked to write after the activity. The students in the control group were required to write a coherent passage according to what they had written down in class individually. The fourth activity has not been conducted because of the lack of time. And the last step was to launch the posttest of writing proficiency on December 10th. The data needed for the research were collected through the procedure mentioned above. And the next chapter will delve into the analysis method and report the results.

4 Results and Discussion

4.1 Quantitative Analysis

Because the scores of experimental1 and experimental 2 come from the same group of subjects, to demonstrate whether the students have improved significantly after one semester’s learning, we should choose Paired Samples T Test to analyze the scores of these two tests. The following is the output from the SPSS.

Table 4.1. Paired Samples Descriptive Statistics of Experimental 1 and Experimental 2

		Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pair 1	experimental 1	5.8067	45	1.14026	.16998
	experimental 2	7.0933	45	1.75582	.26174

From the above descriptive statistics, we can notice that the mean score of posttest of the experimental group is obviously higher. But the standard deviation of posttest is higher than that of pretest too. It reflects that the gap of students’ proficiency is widened after the experiment to some extent. This phenomenon may be caused by the students’ different attitudes towards the collaborative writing activities and their different motivation towards it.

Table 4.2. Results of Paired Samples T Test on Experimental 1 and Experimental 2

		Paired Differences					t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
		Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
					Lower	Upper			
Pair 1	experimental 1- experimental 2	-1.28667	1.72411	.25701	-1.80465	-.76869	-5.006	44	.000

As shown in Table 4.2, we can find that there is a significant difference between the two tests of the experimental group. The numbers $t = -5.006$ and $P = .000 < .001$ show that difference between the two tests is significant at .001 level. Thus, the students have improved a lot through the collaborative writing instruction.

The same analysis is also conducted between pretest and posttest of the control group. The output of the analysis in SPSS is listed below.

Table 4.3. Paired Samples Descriptive Statistics of Control 1 and Control 2

		Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pair 1	control1	4.8646	48	1.52127	.21958
	control2	6.3375	48	1.36641	.19722

Table 4.3 shows that the mean score of posttest of the control group is obviously higher than that of pretest. But the standard deviation of posttest is lower than that of pretest. It reflects that the gap of the students' proficiency is narrowed after one semester's learning. The reason why this happens may be the identical passive learning with the same teacher's instruction.

Table 4.4. Results of Paired Samples T Test on Control 1 and Control 2

		Paired Differences					t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
		Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
					Lower	Upper			
Pair 1	control1 - control2	-1.47292	1.77461	.25614	-1.98821	-.95762	-5.750	47	.000

According to Table 4.4, we can learn that there is also a significant difference between the two tests of the control group. The numbers $t = -5.750$ and $P = .000 < .001$ show that the difference between the two tests is significant at .001 level. The students have also improved a lot through one semester's learning.

From this step, we can see that both the experimental group and the control group have improved a lot. But we cannot know whether the collaborative writing instruction conducted in the IALM is more effective in developing learners' writing proficiency. The second step is to analyze whether the scores of the posttest of the experimental group are significantly higher than those of the control group after one semester' different treatments. Because the students in the two classes may be of different writing proficiency at the very beginning, we need to analyze the pretest scores of those two classes to see if they are at the similar level. These are two different classes with different number of students. So we should employ Independent Samples T Test to test whether there is any significant difference between these two classes regarding to their initial writing proficiency. The output is listed below after the analysis in SPSS.

Table 4.5. Independent Samples Descriptive Statistics of Experimental 1 and Control 1

subjects		N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
scores	experimental group	45	5.8067	1.14026	.16998
	control group	48	4.8646	1.52127	.21958

Table 4.6. Results of Independent Samples T Test on Experimental 1 and Control 1

		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	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
									Lower	Upper
scores	Equal variances assumed	8.494	.004	3.362	91	.001	.94208	.28023	.38544	1.49873
	Equal variances not assumed			3.393	86.882	.001	.94208	.27768	.39015	1.49401

The statistics in Table 4.5 show that the mean score of control1 is lower than that of experimental1. And table 4.6 shows that *P* value of Levene's Test for Equality of Variances is $.004 < .01$, which means that the variances of the pretest scores of the experimental group and those of the control group are not equal. So we should check the result in the row of “Equal variances not assumed”. The *P* value of t-test for Equality of Means is $.001 < .01$, which is significant at the level of $.01$ (2 tailed). Thus, it suggests that the writing proficiency of the students in the experimental group and the control group is significantly different. The writing proficiency of the students in the control group is much lower. Therefore, we can not choose all of the students in both classes to be the subjects for the statistical analysis. The better way is to choose some of them of the similar writing proficiency for analysis. The researcher chooses the students whose scores are between 4 and 6 from the two classes. The number of the selected subjects that meet this condition from the experimental group is 27 and from the control group is 17. The researcher applies Independent Samples T Test to test whether they are of the similar writing proficiency. The results of the analysis from SPSS are listed below.

Table 4.7. Independent Samples Descriptive Statistics of Pretest of the Selected Subjects of the Experimental Group and the Control Group

subjects		N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
pretest	1.00	27	5.2222	.58266	.11213
	2.00	17	4.9882	.62238	.15095

Table 4.8. Results of Independent Samples T Test on Pretest of the Selected Subjects of the Experimental Group and the Control 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	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
									Lower	Upper
pretest	Equal variances assumed	.227	.636	1.264	42	.213	.23399	.18518	-.13972	.60769
	Equal variances not assumed			1.244	32.450	.222	.23399	.18804	-.14883	.61680

From the data in table 4.7, we can notice that the mean scores and the standard deviations of both selected groups are very close to each other. And the significant difference of Levene's Test for Equality of Variances in Table 4.8 is $.636 > .05$, which means that the variances of the pretest scores of the selected group of subjects from the experimental group and those of the selected group of subjects from the control group are equal. So we should look at the data in the row of "Equal variances assumed". As is shown in this table, the selected subjects from the experimental group and the control group do not differ in their mean scores (the mean difference is .2339). The *P* value of t-test for Equality of Means is $.213 > .05$, which means that there is no significant difference in writing proficiency between these two selected groups. Thus, the selected subjects from the experimental group and the control group can be regarded as two groups of the equal writing proficiency at the beginning of the experiment.

Based on this, to demonstrate whether the collaborative writing instruction conducted in the IALM in college English writing instruction is superior to usual writing teaching method in improving the students' writing proficiency, we only need to use an Independent Samples T Test to analyze the scores of the posttest of the selected subjects from the experimental group and the control group. The outputs are listed below.

Table 4.9. Independent Samples Descriptive Statistics of Posttest of the Selected Subjects of the Experimental Group and the Control Group

subjects		N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
posttest	1.00	27	7.0074	1.31498	.25307
	2.00	17	6.1706	1.23378	.29923

Table 4.10. Results of Independent Samples T Test on Posttest of the Selected Subjects of the Experimental Group and the Control 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	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
									Lower	Upper
posttest	Equal variances assumed	.007	.935	2.104	42	.041	.83682	.39775	.03414	1.63950
	Equal variances not assumed			2.135	35.802	.040	.83682	.39190	.04186	1.63178

Table 4.9 shows that the mean score of the selected group of subjects in the experimental group is higher than that of the selected group of subjects in the control group. And the significant difference of Levene's Test for Equality of Variances in Table 4.10 is $.935 > .05$, which means that the variances of the posttest scores of the selected groups of subjects are equal. So we should look at the data in the row of "Equal variances assumed". As is shown in the Table 4.10, the *P* value of t-test for Equality of Means is $.041 < .05$, which means that there is a significant difference between these two selected groups of subjects at the level of $.05$. Thus, the writing proficiency of the selected subjects from the experimental group is much higher than that of the selected group of subjects from the control group. Therefore, we can conclude that the collaborative writing instruction conducted in the IALM in college English classroom settings is more effective in improving the students' writing proficiency than the usual writing teaching method.

To further analyze which aspect of the writing proficiency develops much more, we need to use Independent Samples T Test at the $.05$ level to test whether the posttest mean scores of theme, diction, structure, cohesion and grammar of the selected groups of subjects in the experimental group and the control group are significantly different. Theme1, diction1, structure1, cohesion1 and grammar1 refer to the scores of pretest. Theme2, diction2, structure2, cohesion2 and grammar2 refer to the scores of posttest. The first step is to test whether they are at the same level at the very beginning. The output of the SPSS is listed below.

Table 4.11. Independent Samples Descriptive Statistics of Theme, Diction, Structure, Cohesion and Grammar of Pretest of the Selected Subjects of the Experimental Group and the Control Group

subjects		N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
theme 1	experimental group	27	1.0111	.21897	.04214
	control group	17	1.0059	.23041	.05588
diction 1	experimental group	27	1.0852	.17030	.03277
	control group	17	1.0353	.17657	.04282
structure 1	experimental group	27	1.0481	.18475	.03555
	control group	17	.8765	.24630	.05974
cohesion 1	experimental group	27	1.0370	.10432	.02008
	control group	17	.9882	.13173	.03195
grammar 1	experimental group	27	1.0333	.23697	.04560
	control group	17	1.1000	.26220	.06359

Table 4.12. Results of Independent Samples T Test on Theme, Diction, Structure, Cohesion and Grammar of Pretest of the Selected Subjects of the Experimental Group and the Control 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	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
									Lower	Upper
theme1	Equal variances assumed	.041	.840	.076	42	.940	.00523	.06917	-.13436	.14481
	Equal variances not assumed			.075	32.837	.941	.00523	.06999	-.13720	.14765
diction 1	Equal variances assumed	.002	.961	.933	42	.356	.04989	.05348	-.05803	.15781

	Equal variances not assumed			.925	33.219	.362	.04989	.05393	-.05980	.15958
structure1	Equal variances assumed	1.644	.207	2.636	42	.012	.17168	.06512	.04026	.30310
	Equal variances not assumed			2.470	27.240	.020	.17168	.06952	.02910	.31425
cohesion1	Equal variances assumed	.547	.464	1.364	42	.180	.04880	.03577	-.02339	.12099
	Equal variances not assumed			1.293	28.405	.206	.04880	.03773	-.02844	.12605
grammar1	Equal variances assumed	.821	.370	-.872	42	.388	-.06667	.07644	-.22093	.08759
	Equal variances not assumed			-.852	31.553	.401	-.06667	.07826	-.22616	.09282

From Table 4.11 and Table 4.12, we can find that there are no significant differences between the mean scores of theme 1, diction 1, cohesion 1 and grammar 1 of the experimental group and the control group. The *P* values of Levene's Test for Equality of Variances of theme 1, diction 1, structure 1, cohesion 1 and grammar 1 are .840, .961, .207, .464 and .370 respectively, all of which are bigger than .05. It suggests that the variances of the pretest scores of the selected group of subjects in the experimental group and those of the selected group of subjects in the control group are equal. So we should check the results in the row of "Equal variances assumed". The *P* values of t-test for Equality of Means are .940, .356, .012, .180 and .388 respectively. All of them except that of structure1 are bigger than .05. So they can be regarded as of the same level. However, the *P* value of structure1 is .012<.05, which means that the mean score of the selected group of subjects in the experimental group is higher than that of the selected group of subjects in the control group. The selected groups of subjects in the two classes are significantly different in their proficiency of structuring the essay. Therefore, the mean scores of structure 2 of the selected subjects in these two classes are not reliable in explaining their change of proficiency of structuring the essay after the experiment. The second step is to compare the other four pairs of mean scores to see whether the new writing teaching method has improved them more than the usual writing teaching method. The results of the analysis of SPSS are listed below.

Table 4.13. Independent Samples Descriptive Statistics of Theme, Diction, Cohesion and Grammar of Posttest of Selected Subjects of the Experimental Group and the Control Group

subjects		N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
theme2	experimental group	27	1.4074	.28001	.05389
	control group	17	1.2471	.31448	.07627
diction2	experimental group	27	1.4148	.28107	.05409
	control group	17	1.2118	.29556	.07168
cohesion2	experimental group	27	1.3370	.25290	.04867
	control group	17	1.2235	.23593	.05722
grammar2	experimental group	27	1.4074	.32335	.06223
	control group	17	1.2529	.27413	.06649

Table 4.14. Results of Independent Samples T Test on Theme, Diction, Cohesion and Grammar of Posttest of the Selected Subjects of the Experimental Group and the Control 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	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
									Lower	Upper
theme 2	Equal variances assumed	.276	.602	1.764	42	.085	.16035	.09091	-.02311	.34381
	Equal variances not assumed			1.717	31.179	.096	.16035	.09339	-.03007	.35077
diction 2	Equal variances assumed	.006	.941	2.288	42	.027	.20305	.08876	.02393	.38217
	Equal variances not assumed			2.261	32.854	.031	.20305	.08980	.02032	.38578

cohesion 2	Equal variances assumed	.388	.537	1.487	42	.145	.11351	.07634	-.04056	.26757
	Equal variances not assumed			1.511	35.948	.140	.11351	.07512	-.03885	.26587
grammar 2	Equal variances assumed	.541	.466	1.633	42	.110	.15447	.09460	-.03644	.34537
	Equal variances not assumed			1.696	38.249	.098	.15447	.09107	-.02985	.33878

As is shown in Table 4.14, the *P* values of Levene's Test for Equality of Variances of theme 2, diction2, cohesion 2 and grammar 2 are .602, .941, .537 and .466 respectively, all of which are bigger than .05. It suggests that the variances of the posttest scores of the selected group of subjects in the experimental group and those of the selected group of subjects in the control group are equal. So we should check the results in the row of "Equal variances assumed". The *P* values of t-test for Equality of Means are .085, .027, .145 and .110 respectively. All of these *P* values except that of diction 2 are bigger than .05. Thus, there are no significant differences in their proficiency of theme, cohesion and grammar between the selected groups of students of the experimental group and the control group. They are only significantly different in the proficiency of diction. Therefore, we can conclude that the collaborative writing instruction conducted in the IALM in college English writing instruction is especially effective in improving the students' ability of diction than the usual writing teaching method.

4. 2 Qualitative Analysis

4.2.2.1 Developing Learners' Interest

To demonstrate the students in the experimental group develop stronger interest in English writing and English learning than the students in the control group relies on the data from classroom observation and students' diaries.

According to the instructor's notes, it is said that:

- (1) "The students in the experimental group felt very excited about the new form of writing activity when the first collaborative writing activity was conducted. The discussion was very heated."
- (2) "The students in the experimental group seemed to be more enthusiastic in the second writing activity. Because it was a love story that could give the students space to conceive the evolution of the plot of the story, they felt free and confident to express their own ideas. So the discussion was so heated that they were not willing to leave when the class was over."
- (3) "After the three activities implemented, it seems that the students become more active in the classroom activities. And they are more willing to do the role-play with classmates with whoever sits besides them. But the students in the control class prefer to stay silent and alone when they are

asked to practice oral English when they sit besides another ‘stranger’. Actually most of the classmates are still strangers for them for they learn in a comparatively isolated environment. They listen to the teacher’s lectures and complete the tasks on their own. It seems that they are not so familiar with others except for their roommates.”

These three extracts show us that the students develop great interest in this new kind of college English writing activities and English learning as well. They are so absorbed in the discussion that they “are unwilling to leave when the class was over”. And after three collaborative writing activities conducted in the IALM in the experimental group, the students become “more active in the classroom activities”. But the students in the control group “prefer to stay silent and alone when they are asked to practice oral English when they sit besides another ‘stranger’.”

Besides, the students diaries can also demonstrate that the learners in the experimental group develop stronger interest in college English writing and learning. According to the data collected from the diaries, it was found out that eighty percent of the students in the experimental group were in favor of this collaborative writing activity and they learned a lot from it when the first collaborative writing activity was conducted. Eleven percent of the students did not show any attitudes towards the activity, misunderstanding the instruction of the teacher. They only talked about the content of the essay itself. And about one percent of the students showed their disapproval of this activity. When the third collaborative writing activity was conducted, even the students who once showed disapproval against the collaborative writing began to take to it. The typical extracts that contribute to this are listed below.

- (4) “...I think this activity is good for us because we can learn a lot of things such as communication and cooperation. ...”
- (5) “The activity is of great value. ...It is a good way to promote our English, especially to our ability of English writing. It also makes a great contribution to our skills of cooperation. ...Our ability of thinking also had a great improvement. ...I learned more words. And more importantly, it presents me much happiness in learning English.”
- (6) “...Sometimes we do not do well. So we must correct it and improve it. ...The great discussion put us in a happy mood, in which we learn so quickly and learning becomes an easy thing. ...”
- (7) “...The activity which we can enjoy and learn many useful things from at the same time is a good thing for us students. So I hope our class may hold more times and hope the title can be more relative with our real life. Thus, we may feel much warmer and we can give more useful and valuable ideas.”
- (8) “In fact, I did not like writing before, but I must write, because it is very important for us. But now I feel writing is an interesting thing. ...”
- (9) “... The best advantage is that we can broaden our horizon by the heated discussion.”
- (10) “...This time, the activity can help us develop our imagination.”
- (11) “...The story extension is very good. I hope our teacher can give us more chances to write this kind of stories.”
- (12) “...I found that writing a novel or short story was a very meaningful and interesting thing. We can make good use of our imagination and meanwhile we can share our ideas with others.”

- (13) "...This is really a good way to communicate with classmates. Once in my opinion I thought it is a bad thing for us to do the homework. Now, I really take to finish the work. I can get much experience...."
- (14) "...As far as I am concerned, this way not only improve our writing level but also listening level. I think this method should be carried on as soon as possible and as widely as possible."
- (15) "...It can practice speaking and listening. It is a great help to us to improve the ability of writing. ...But I did not know how to speak what I wanted to say and I could not understand what my classmates said. Some words I did not know how to say, so I must ask the classmates in Chinese or look up the word in the dictionary."

According to the extracts listed above, we can see that the learners in the experimental group can not only improve their writing proficiency (learn new words and phrases and develop better arguments, etc.), but also develop their listening, speaking skills and ability to cooperate with others. The important thing is that the learners feel "happy" in the process of writing. They develop great interest in English writing and desire for more this kind of writing activities.

4.2.2.2 Developing Learners' Self-awareness

Because it is impossible to delve into the inner world of the students through the classroom observation, the demonstration of the students in the experimental group developing clearer self-awareness than the students in the control group can only be relied on the data from the students' diaries. Many students report in their diaries that they realized their strong points and weak points in English writing and English learning and tried to solve the problems by using new learning strategies. The typical extracts of the students' diaries that support this are listed below.

- (16) "...Through this activity, we can find our disadvantages and improve our expression skills."
- (17) "...I realized the power of team work and found out some shortcomings of myself at the same time. What's more, I have made determination to learn English well."
- (18) "...During the writing, I find it is difficult to describe my idea clear in English, some words I want to use are difficult to me. So I think it is necessary to remember more words. ..."
- (19) "...The activity this time is more difficult than the previous two. ...I realized that my listening ability is poor. So I must do more listening training in the future."
- (20) "...I am very sorry that I have only written few sentences. ... I feel a little upset. The other group members could listen to the whole article but I could not. I think I should spend more time in listening."
- (21) "...I found in this way I did improve my ability of listening and also writing."
- (22) "...After class, our group discussed the listening. I found I made a mistake in listening. When I listened, I paid more attention to words that means I did not care more about the whole passage. Next time, I will try to change."
- (23) "...In this activity, I realized that I should spend more time on English."

According to the extracts listed above, we can find out that the students reflect upon themselves in the process of interaction with others. The feedback of group members serves as a "mirror" for them to

know more about themselves. The performance of other students provides them with a good model and stimuli that remind them of their shortcomings and motivate them to learn harder towards a certain direction.

4.2.2.3 Developing Good Interpersonal Relationship

To prove that the students in the experimental group develop better interpersonal relationships with classmates than the students in the control group depends on the data from both classroom observation and students' diaries.

According to the instructor's note in extract (3), we can find that the students in the experimental group become more active to interact with classmates in the role-play activities for the good interpersonal relationship between classmates enable and facilitate them to do so. However, the students in the control group are reserved for most of the students sit beside them are "strangers" to them. Because of the grade language teaching model, the students in one English learning class may belong to different classes (divided for the sake of management and supervision of the students) or even different departments. As the students in the control group listen to the teacher's lectures and complete the learning tasks on their own, it seems that they learn in a comparatively isolated environment. And the data from the students' diaries can also demonstrate that the students in the experimental group develop good interpersonal relationships. The following extracts are some of the typical ones.

- (24) "...For different people have different ideas, we cannot put down our final results in such a short time. So we were asked to write a short passage and then the group leader can choose the most wonderful sentences. ...This activity is not only good for our speaking, writing but also useful to improve friendship between classmates. ..."
- (25) "...I had learnt how to get along well with my classmates. Everyone is different, so I should choose different ways to get close to them. I also learned how to get messages from many ways, such as words, body language. The third, keeping calm is important, especially when I met problems. ...All of us built deep friendships even though we barely know each other before the activity. ...It helps me with my ability of talking, thinking and writing. ..."
- (26) "...We can learn and remember some new phrases from the activity. We can make friends and exchange our ideas. ...It can make us feel a part of the university community. And I hope we have more chances to debate."
- (27) "...We can practice our spoken English in communicating with our partners. On the other hand, we can make friends by talking with each other. But it is too hard to get together after class. ..."
- (28) "...we are in a team. We must throw away the idea that mine is best. We must discuss and choose the best to finish our task."

According to these extracts, it is found out that the students in the experimental group develop better interpersonal relationships with classmates. They learned how to "get along with classmates" and how to tolerate (e.g., "we must put away the idea that mine is best"). They "develop deep friendships even though they barely know each other before the activity".

5 Conclusion

Generally speaking, the study reached the objective of proving the collaborative writing instruction conducted in the IALM has more advantages than the usual writing teaching method. The major findings of the present study are summarized as the following points:

1) According to the statistical analysis of the writing scores of the selected groups of subjects in the experimental group and the control group through SPSS, it is found out that the mean score of the selected group of students in the experimental group is significantly higher than that the selected group of students in the control group. So the writing proficiency of the selected subjects from the experimental group is much higher than that of the selected subjects of the control group. Therefore, we can conclude that the collaborative writing instruction conducted in the IALM is more effective in improving learners' writing proficiency than the usual writing teaching method.

2) According to the statistical analysis of the scores of theme, diction, structure, cohesion and grammar of the selected groups of subjects in the experimental group and the control group, the collaborative writing instruction conducted in the IALM is especially effective in improving learners' ability in diction among the five aspects of writing proficiency. This is possibly because the students are better motivated to use new words and consult the dictionary to learn the words and expressions mentioned by their group members in order to get more "comprehensible input" and produce more "comprehensible output". Another possible reason is the peer pressure. The learners may want to give their peers good impression that they are good at English. So they will try their utmost to use the new words to draw their attention. The students who do not know the words may pretend that they know them already for the sake of saving face and spend more time in learning them after the gathering. They also will prepare some new words or expressions to use in the next writing activity. And the students who have gained special attention in the group will try harder to keep this good impression among group members. Therefore, this process may carry on in a virtuous circle. Though the students in the diaries mentioned that they also learned a lot on grammar, cohesion, sentence patterns and thinking, the statistics does not show any significant change in their scores in these aspects. The possible explanation for this is that the improvement in these aspects will take a long period of time. It needs further exploration in the future.

3) The data collected from the diaries and classroom observation show that most of the learners like the collaborative activities, especially the story extension and dictogloss. The learners in the experimental group develop greater interest in English writing and learning than the students in the control group. They claim that they have more chances to express their own ideas to communicate with others in a happy mood. They report in the diaries that they start to take to English writing and learning even though they do not like English writing before.

4) The data from the students' diaries also reveal that the students in the experimental group develop clearer self-awareness. They realize their advantages and shortcomings and get to know how to improve in the future learning through the self-reflection and interaction with peer students.

5) The data from the classroom observation and students' diaries also prove that the students in the experimental group develop better relationships between each other. Some of them become good friends

even though they have not even known each other before the collaborative writing activities. The friendship is not only good for their English learning and promotion of their ability of communication but also good for enrichment of the experiences of college life.

The findings of the present research shed light on the following aspects of English language teaching.

Firstly, learner autonomy does not imply learning in isolation but should be cultivated in interaction. Only in the interaction can the learner realize their weak points and be motivated to learn in certain direction autonomously. Only in interaction can the learners get more “comprehensible input” and “comprehensible output”. And only in interaction can the learners achieve the requirements of the present college English curriculum in which listening, speaking and learner autonomy are given the first priority.

Secondly, the IALM which is a possible way to ease the situation that posed by the large class is very effective in English writing instruction in the present study. It can and should be applied to speaking, reading and listening instruction in the future.

Thirdly, the grouping of students in collaborative activities should also take the students’ learning styles, language proficiency and other individual factors into consideration. In the students’ diaries, they report that “they and their classmates are at the same English level”. So they “both have difficulty in writing and expressing” and there is “a limit for them to improve themselves”.

Last but not least, the collaborative writing activities conducted in the IALM does not exclude the individual writing tasks completely. According to the students’ diaries, though some of them admit they have learned a lot from the collaborative activities, they still “prefer the individual writing assignments sometimes for they can better give play to their talents”. Thus, the new form of writing instruction should be combined with the usual writing teaching method. For example, we can ask students to discuss in groups or in the whole class and then write individually or to write individually and then discuss together to compose an essay together based on what they have written. The present research explores the possibility and effectiveness of applying the IALM to college English writing instruction through collaborative writing activities. The future researches are expected to apply this learning mode to listening, reading and speaking instruction. Moreover, it is a good attempt to apply the IALM to teaching English majors or middle school students.

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