Collaborative Writing in Summary Writing: Student Perceptions and Problems

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Abstract

This study investigated ESL students’ perceptions and problems on the use of collaborative writing approach in writing summaries. The study involved 30 Malaysian students enrolled in an Academic Writing course at a college in West Malaysia. The students completed two summary writing tasks collaboratively in two class meetings. A 25-item 4-point Likert scale questionnaire was administered and semi-structured interviews were also conducted with 10 randomly-selected students. Analysis of the data indicates that most of the students perceive collaborative writing positively and consider it useful in enhancing their writing and language proficiency. Problems that occurred during the collaboration process were also identified and discussed.

Keywords: collaborative writing; summary writing; sociocultural; ESL writing; perceptions; writing pedagogy

1. Introduction

Of the four language skills, writing is considered as one of the most important skills, particularly in an academic setting such as in schools, colleges and institutions of higher learning. Although writing can be an enjoyable, creative and even cathartic experience, the way ESL writing is taught and learned in Malaysia has led to negative perceptions among learners who view it as a skill they like the least (Chan & Ain, 2004). Among the different genres of writing students have to undertake in the course of their academic career, summary writing appears to be one of the most difficult to master. Although summarising is a complex activity that can impose an overwhelming cognitive load on students (Kirkland, 1991), in an academic setting it is a highly essential and necessary skill.

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Collaborative writing emphasizes interactive teaching and learning, a departure from the more traditional, teacher-dominant classroom that has been the norm in Malaysia. Collaborative writing has great potential as a pedagogical approach, as research has shown that it encourages reflective thinking and a pooling of knowledge about language (Elola, 2012). From a sociocultural perspective, collaboration affords learners to engage in scaffolding, where they are able to guide each other through the complex process of linguistic problem solving, even though as individual novices, but collectively as experts (Donato, 1994). In languaging, learners use language in an attempt to make meaning and to deliberate about the best way to articulate that meaning (Swain, 2000).

1.1 Problem statement

Summary writing has been recognized as a highly important and essential skill not only in language learning, but also in most areas of a student’s academic career. It is a highly useful and sophisticated skill, associated with both reading and writing (Johns 1985), contributes to academic success (Kirkland, 1991), and promotes dialectic thinking by forcing students to articulate ideas not their own (Bean, 1986). However, as pointed out by Messer (1997), summary writing is a skill which is difficult to teach, learn and evaluate. Some of the factors affecting successful writing performance, in particular, in summary writing include L2 proficiency, content schemata, affect, formal schemata, cognitive skills, and meta-cognitive skills (Kirkland, 1991). Past research also indicates that when asked to summarize a lengthy academic text, L2 learners tend to copy from source texts, which is an act considered as plagiarism (Chen & Su, 2011).

Nambiar (2007) asserts that summarizing is a difficult and cognitively demanding task. It is not an easy skill to acquire because it involves the ability to reconceptualize material, in which the learner has to be able to move from the specific and local to the general or macro. In addition, they have to present the information they have gathered in a clear and concise manner. Norisma et al (1997) found that students generally used the copy-delete strategy in summarizing whereby they copied sentences from the source text. Another finding was that the participants resorted to the sentence-combination strategy and used incorrect conjunction words to join the sentences. The researchers inferred that most of the students had failed to use the summarization rules effectively and concluded that the students were weak at summary writing. In another study involving 60 ESL secondary school teachers, Normah Othman (2009) found that the teachers reported on students’ inability to differentiate between main ideas and supporting ideas in the summary text. The students also had difficulty in using their own words in writing their summaries. These limitations were further compounded by the large class sizes and the emphasis on exams which served as barriers to the teachers in providing adequate feedback to students.

Second language research on summarizing skills has largely focused on the reading component, neglecting the writing component (Messer, 1997). Although studies on reading comprehension are important, of no less significance is the output component where learners have to combine their dialectical, organizational and linguistic skills in producing a piece of written summary.

In light of the difficulties in the learning and teaching of summary writing in ESL classrooms, it is thus important to examine approaches to teaching and learning the skill. Collaborative writing, which has been found to have encouraging effects on students’ ESL writing (Storch, 2005; Watanabe & Swain, 2007; Wigglesworth & Storch, 2009; Shehadeh, 2012), may possibly be a viable approach in the teaching of summary skills. However, to date, few studies have been conducted on using collaborative writing in summary writing, specifically in the context of the Malaysian ESL classroom.
1.2 Research objectives

The objectives of the study were to investigate:
1. Malaysian ESL college students’ perceptions of the use of collaborative writing in writing summaries.
2. The problems, if any, faced by Malaysian ESL college students during the collaborative writing process.

2. Literature Review

Collaborative writing is a “highly essential writing and group act in which prominence is likely to increase”, according to Lowry, Curtis, and Lowry (2004, p. 66) and has been defined in many ways. One of the earliest definitions is accorded by Allen (1987) who describes it as collaborators producing a shared document by engaging in substantial interaction and sharing decision-making power and responsibility for it. Dale (1994) on the other hand, focuses on the dialogic quality of collaborative writing – it stresses the context of the writing situation and the relationships of the students as they interact. Rice and Huguley (1994) offer a definition which emphasizes the primary activities of collaborative writing; it is performed collectively by more than one person to produce a single text and writing is any activity that leads to a completed document, including idea generating, researching, planning and organizing, drafting, revising, and editing. Collaborative writing is an iterative and social process that involves a group focused on a common objective that negotiates, coordinates, and communicates during the creation of a common document (Lowry et al., 2004) through mutual interactions, shared expertise and joint decision-making throughout the whole process (Yong, 2006).

Collaborative writing is underpinned by Vygotsky’s sociocultural theory, where social interaction is an integral component of learning. An aspect of this theory relevant to collaborative writing is the concept of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) where group members use mediational means collaboratively to create, obtain, and communicate meaning (Moll, 1989). Scaffolding is a construct related to ZPD and the Vygotskian premise of learning as a socially constructed process. Donato (1994) specifically looks at collective scaffolding where he notes that the learners were individually novices, but collectively experts, guiding each other through the complex process of linguistic problem solving. By collaborating with each other in creating and communicating meaning, learners are able to engage in the composition process with more clarity and understanding. Languaging, another sociocultural construct, is a term coined by Swain (2000) to mean the process of using language in an attempt to make meaning, where thinking is articulated and brought forth. In collaborative dialogue, which emerges when learners engage in problem-solving together, they ‘language’ about language, an act in which they deliberate about the best way to articulate their meaning.

Studies conducted on the effects of collaborative writing on overall writing performance found improvements in students’ writing. Students’ writings were found to be more grammatically accurate (Storch, 1999; Storch, 2005; Wigglesworth & Storch, 2009), more linguistically complex (Storch, 2005), and had better content, organization and vocabulary (Shehadeh, 2012). In general, the students had positive perceptions of collaborative writing. Positive responses included pooling of resources and opportunities to compare ideas (Storch, 2005), perceived academic and social benefits (Brown, 2007), and a sense of accomplishment from editing each other’s work (Chao & Lo, 2011).

3. Methodology

The subjects were an intact group of 30 students enrolled in an Academic Writing class at a college in West Malaysia. The study employed the survey and the interview as methods of data collection. Collaborative summary writing activities were implemented in the class over a period of two weeks followed by the distribution of a 25-item 4-point Likert scale questionnaire for the students to complete in the classroom. A semi-structured interview was conducted with 10 randomly selected participants.
3.1. Instruments

The two instruments used were a 25-item 4-point Likert scale questionnaire and an interview protocol. The questionnaire was constructed for the purpose of assessing students’ perceptions of their experience in the collaborative process of completing two summary writing tasks in the classroom. The items were developed based on past research on collaborative writing (Brown, 2008; Chao & Lo, 2011; Donato, 1994; Elola, 2011; Kessler, Bikowski, & Boggs, 2011; Shehadeh, 2011; Storch, 2005; Wichadee, 2010; Yong, 2006). The questionnaire consisted of 25 items based on five variables: motivation, collaboration process, co-construction of knowledge, academic effects and problems. The content of the questionnaire was face and content validated by two experts in the field of TESL. The questionnaire was tested on a similar group of students and the overall internal consistency was found to be acceptable (Cronbach’s Alpha at 0.85).

The interview protocol comprised semi-structured questions to elicit students’ perceptions of using collaborative writing in summary writing. There were three general questions included in the interview protocol intended to address the two research objectives.

3.2. Procedures

The study was carried out in the fourth week of a 14-week semester. In the first three weeks, teaching input was provided according to the scheme of work for the course. The input included parts of speech, types of sentences, transitions, pre-writing, paragraph writing, editing, unity and coherence. A content component was also integrated into the classroom instruction, wherein the class participated in a directed discussion on a selected topic. The purpose was to familiarize them to a more interactive, participative classroom environment. In week four, summarizing skills were taught, and an in-class summary writing task was assigned to be completed by the students in self-selected groups of three. Students completed the entire process in their group – reading the passage, identifying main ideas, deleting irrelevant points, combining ideas, and writing the summary in their own words. They participated in the key activities identified by Lowry et al. (2004) to comprise collaborative writing: brainstorming, converging on brainstorming, outlining, drafting, reviewing, revising, and copyediting. The activities were conducted over a period of two weeks (two three-hour classes) and the students completed two summary writing tasks collaboratively. They then completed the questionnaire in class and 10 participants were randomly selected to be interviewed by the researchers. Informal, semi-structured interviews were conducted individually to ensure privacy and confidentiality.

4. Analysis and findings

4.1. Student questionnaire

Descriptive statistics (frequencies and percentages) was used to analyze participants’ responses. The results were tabulated according to the five constructs: motivation, collaboration process, co-construction of knowledge, academic effects and problems. The participants’ responses to the survey show that most were supportive of the activity and found collaborative writing to have a number of benefits. On average, 95.33% of participants had a positive response towards using collaborative writing in summary writing in terms of academic effects, 94.99% in terms of motivation, 95.84% in terms of co-construction of knowledge, and 97.5% in terms of the collaboration process. In particular, the participants felt that collaborative writing helped them understand more about summary writing techniques such as paraphrasing, condensing, organization and coherence; improved their confidence to write in English; allowed them to share ideas, pool their knowledge and talk about the best way to use language in their writing in terms of grammar, vocabulary, sentence structure and spelling.
The problem faced by most of the students during the collaboration process was their limited English proficiency during group discussions with 73.33% finding it a problem. Other problems included a reluctance to offer opposing views, inability to finish the task in the allocated time and being more accustomed to writing alone.

4.2. Interviews

A majority of the respondents had a positive view of collaborative writing and perceived it to be helpful in developing their language and writing skills, while one respondent disagreed that it had any significant effect on her writing after participating in the collaborative writing activities. The respondent felt that there was not much impact on her writing because the group discussed in their L1, Chinese, and “some not paying attention when someone is giving idea”, and also related that when there was “some different idea on the same topic, there was conflict”.

On the other hand, the positive changes that most of the respondents felt occurred in their writing include a wider range of vocabulary, better content, greater grammatical accuracy, and a variety of writing styles. For example, Student 1 (S1) said, “I learned words I don’t know from each other. We can discuss how to write down better sentence with different words, not just use the same words.”

Many of the respondents felt that the collaborative approach helped to increase their confidence in summary writing. For instance, student S6 said, “I always disliked writing because don’t know what to write. Working together is okay because I get more ideas. Then I don’t feel so scared to write.” A few other respondents also expressed that they had more confidence to write after collaborating with their classmates, as they now had more ideas, they were not so worried about their grammar and vocabulary, and they could share the responsibility of the summary writing among themselves.

Several other benefits identified by the students in their interview responses corresponded with sociocultural features of collaborative writing, specifically the co-construction of knowledge and languaging, where students discuss about the best way to articulate their meanings in the target language.

Most of the respondents concurred that knowledge construction during the collaborative process had an impact on their writing. For instance, S9 expressed that during the collaboration, “we will combine all our opinions, and then we will think together, this opinion is right or wrong, useful or un-useful”. She further added that learning about other people’s opinions was important: “We can, in this teamwork, learn how to hear other people’s opinion, and how to renew the opinion, how to change, or how to upgrade the opinion”. S2 had a similar viewpoint, “I think my writing improved a bit because I have more things to write after discuss with group members. If I work by myself only, I only have my own opinion.”

The respondents also stated that they enjoyed the opportunity to discuss and talk to each other about the best way to speak English to express their thoughts and ideas. The consensus among the interview responses was that the act of languaging had a positive impact on their writing, as it improved grammatical accuracy, vocabulary usage and sentence structure. According to S10, “Actually, we can also exchange our knowledge about English and writing skills to each other. If I do it myself, never improve and learn. I just write a same thing only if not working together with classmates.” In terms of vocabulary, some respondents felt that they could ask others for the meaning of words they did not know and had a chance to be corrected if they used the wrong word. In terms of grammatical accuracy as well, a number of respondents stated that corrections in wrong usage from their peers was useful, and they could also emulate their peers’ writing and learn from it. These statements from the students indicate that the elements of collaborative writing – the co-construction of knowledge and languaging – were perceived to be beneficial in developing their language and writing skills.

The interview also revealed students’ perceptions of the problems of collaborative writing. The main problem faced by most of the students during the collaboration process seems to be their limited English language proficiency. Student S7 said, “In the group, difficult to communicate in English. Because our English not good. So we use Chinese. I think better if speak in English.” The respondents felt that interacting in English would go a long way to improving their language proficiency, but a lack of that very proficiency prevented them from doing
so. Some of the other problems faced by the respondents corresponded to the survey findings and included an unwillingness to voice out an opinion for fear of offending others. A number of the respondents reported at times they would keep silent even if they disagreed with other group members’ opinions because they did not want to offend their friends and were unwilling to get into arguments because of it. Other problems included taking a longer time to finish the writing task in a group than they would if done individually, being more accustomed to writing alone than in a group, domination of discussions by certain group members, unfair distribution of work, and arguments and conflicts due to differences in opinion.

5. Discussion

5.1. Students’ perceptions of the use of collaborative writing in their summary writing

From the survey findings and interview responses, the majority of respondents had a positive perception towards the use of collaborative writing in the classroom in terms of a variety of aspects. In terms of motivation, students felt that collaborative writing had improved their confidence to write in English. This finding echoed the results of past research such as Shehadeh (2012) whose subjects found collaborative writing to enhance their self-confidence, and Yong (2006) who proposes that collaboration fosters camaraderie and self-confidence. Two sociocultural constructs commonly identified in collaborative writing, the co-construction of knowledge and languaging, were also cited by students as major benefits. Most of the respondents agreed that they discussed about the best way to use the target language to express their ideas, in terms of grammar, vocabulary, sentence structure, and spelling, among others. This corresponds to instances of languaging or language-related episodes identified in Swain (2000) and utilized as a variable in a number of studies on collaborative writing. It was shown, for instance, that frequencies of language-related episodes corresponded to quality of written text produced (Watanabe & Swain, 2007). Furthermore, the interview responses suggest that the respondents perceived collaborative writing to have had a positive impact on their grammar. This is in line with numerous past studies (Storch, 1999; Storch, 2005; Wigglesworth & Storch, 2009) which found that collaboration had a positive effect on overall grammatical accuracy. Storch’s 2005 and Chao and Lo’s 2011 studies also revealed that students perceived greater grammatical accuracy to be one of the benefits of collaboration.

5.2. Problems faced by students during the collaborative process

The second research question examined students’ perceptions of the problems they faced when using collaborative writing in the classroom. The highest number of respondents found lack of English proficiency to be a problem when they collaborated with their group members. In interviews conducted with students, Yong (2006) also found that lack of proficiency was a factor that might hinder smooth collaboration and writing progress as it prevents group members from expressing themselves clearly. Some of the respondents that Storch (2005) surveyed also noted lack of confidence in their language skills as a reservation they had about engaging in collaboration. Other problems that students faced during collaboration was an unwillingness to offer their opinion for fear of offending others, also noted in Storch (2005) and the inability to finish the writing task in the allocated time. It has been found that students who worked in pairs or groups took a longer time to complete the tasks than those who worked individually (Storch, 2005; Watanabe & Swain, 2007).

The benefits of collaborative writing noted by the participants may stem from the fundamental tenets of sociocultural theory that underpins collaborative writing, in that external, social activities are the main basis for cognitive development. Shehadeh (2012) uses sociocultural theory to explain that both cognitive development and language development occur on the inter-psychological plane and are eventually represented intrapsychologically, through the process of approximation and internalisation. Hence, learners first collaboratively construct knowledge as a joint activity and then transform it into a mental activity through the two processes.
6. Conclusion

Research and empirical studies on collaborative writing have generally been very supportive of its use in the ESL classroom. As was the case with this study, a vast number of past studies examining students’ perceptions of collaborative writing had similarly positive responses. The findings of the many studies suggest varied advantages of collaborative writing, be it in terms of communicative skill, language proficiency, construction of knowledge, or assessment of written work.

However, not much Malaysian-based research has been conducted to investigate the effects of collaborative writing on students’ writing performance, nor to examine in depth and detail students’ perceptions and the problems experienced in collaborative writing. To date, studies on collaborative writing in summary writing are scarce, the latter a highly difficult yet essential skill in academic contexts. This study elicited students’ perceptions of using collaborative writing to write summaries. Understanding learners’ views enables teachers to tailor writing activities according to students’ needs and to prepare students well before initiating any collaborative activities.

In present day classroom, educational needs and approaches are changing and educators need to explore various approaches, methods and pedagogies to address these changing needs in their teaching and learning. Implementing a collaborative environment in the writing classroom (as opposed to mere group work) is not without its challenges. Factors such as class size, time constraints, and teachers’ ability to facilitate and guide students in the process of collaborative summary writing are some of the concerns that would need to be addressed. A needs analysis and research on teacher training programmes using the collaborative approach to summary writing should be conducted before any changes in their pedagogical practice is to be applied. Research on collaborative models of teaching writing could be disseminated to schools to foster awareness of this approach.

Although collaborative writing may not be likely to yield immediate results and transform learners into great writers, the benefits and advantages of this approach to general learning have been shown in numerous past studies. In view of the lack of interest and ability in the writing skill of the majority of Malaysian students today, a more interactive pedagogy utilising the collaborative approach is a viable alternative to the traditional method of teaching summary writing.

References


