

Esl Undergraduate Sudents' Perceptions of Collaborative Writing Project

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ABSTRACT

Writing in the English language is difficult for many ESL learners. Engaging these learners in a collaborative writing process can help them discover their writing problems and perhaps solve the problems simultaneously. The present study was based on a collaborative writing project assigned to undergraduates as part of their writing course assessments. The objective of the project was to determine whether it could help improve the students' writing skills, motivation to write, and develop their vocabulary. A total of 971 undergraduates with MUET Band 1-5 participated in this four-week writing project. The undergraduates were asked to produce a booklet consisting of at least ten pictures with written descriptions, which demonstrated their ability to use various sentence structures. Upon completing the project, the undergraduates completed a survey. The descriptive analysis done on the survey data showed that 100 percent of the undergraduates agreed that their involvement in the project increased their motivation to write. 97.66 percent of them positively perceived that the project helped them improve their writing, and 97.77 percent agreed that the project enabled them to add more vocabulary to their repertoire. Further analysis of the data revealed that the students could identify their writing problems from the writing project assigned. These findings imply that a properly structured writing project can help motivate students to write and improve their writing skills.

Keywords: *collaborative writing project, writing problems, motivation, vocabulary, ESL learners*

1. INTRODUCTION

Writing is part of important tools to communicate and interact with people. The ability to form grammatically correct sentences and deliver meanings to readers is the main element in writing skill [1]. It is also every ESL learner's dream to be able to produce a perfect (organised, neat and free from error) piece of writing [2]. Nevertheless, conveying these meaningful and comprehensible messages is very cognitive challenging to second language (L2) learners. Writing skills of an individual and their intrinsic motivation are seen to be less effective compared to cooperative learning [3].

As for Malaysian tertiary students, having the advantage to learn writing in English Language since primary school still does not guarantee that they do not make and repeat the same mistakes in writing. Mistakes in grammar (sentence structure, tenses and subject-verb agreement), punctuations, spelling, vocabulary and coherence of ideas are so prevalent.

A study conducted by Bani Younes and Salamh Albalawi (2015)[2] shows that tenses contributed to 29% of total grammatical errors done by the participants, and subject-verb agreement contributed to 28% of the total grammatical errors done by the participants.

Since writing is so crucial in language production, a lot of efforts must be taken to help the L2 learners to develop their writing effectively. The L2 learners themselves must also put extra efforts to learn the rules in spelling, word order, sentence structures and higher-order skills so that messages will get across well in any contexts and situations. This can be possibly achieved from varieties of writing practices and tasks. According to Nalliveetil and Mahasneh (2017)[4], writing activities that are commonly done in the classroom daily include note-taking, note-making, paragraph writing, information-gap activities, integrated language skills activities and periodical writing tests. Writing activities can be done either individually or collaboratively. Writing in a group could promote a supportive environment for the students. Zeng (2018) [5]

stated that students will be able to learn a lot from their peers in all writing stages. For example, they can exchange ideas, help with each other's lack and get inspiration from each other. These chances help them to be less worried that the ideas will be rejected by the teachers. The group gives each member the confidence and interest to keep on writing and improving their writing competency. This is truly a positive learning environment that is necessary in the education setting in which it promotes cooperative and communication skills among the society. If the teachers continue to encourage the students with collaborative writing tasks or projects, it is undoubtedly able to lead the students to gradually learn and develop new ways of thinking and approaches to common topics that they usually write. To let them explore the world through better language production (in writing specifically) is actually encouraging them to be more creative and this will finally produce a more civilised society.

Even though collaborative writing is seen as an ideal strategy to teach writing to the ESL learners : however, to date, not many studies have been conducted to see the effectiveness of it in improving an ESL learner's writing skills and motivation to write especially in the context of Malaysia tertiary education. Most studies only focus on the writing strategies employed by ESL learners such as generating ideas using their first language (L1) knowledge, highlighting the four writing stages including editing and revising [6] as well as the process writing approach practiced by teachers to teach writing [7].

Hence, it is such a great idea to first consider the students' perceptions of the collaborative writing task assigned to them, so that they and their instructors could identify what to focus more in upgrading the students' writing skills.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Collaborative writing project

Different approaches in writing tasks which are interesting may be able to help the ESL learners to improve their writing skills. Writing has always been associated with individual work like writing short paragraphs and essays since school. Attention should also be given to assigning writing tasks differently like a group project. This collaborative kind of project is able to improve students' writing in various aspects. ESL learners who are given a chance to have this co-learning experience in a collaborative writing project will grow and produce mature writing. To read, give feedback and revise each other's works allow them to always be aware that their works are going to be read by someone else and this sparks excitement in them and will encourage them to write more [5]. Collaborative writing projects will allow learners to discuss and generate more ideas for their writing and improve their grammar and vocabulary usage. A study done by Dobao (2012)[8] showed that learners

portrayed accuracy in grammar and lexical usage when working in pairs or small groups. They wrote more accurate texts when working collaboratively in group than individually.

2.2 Motivation to write

Many studies have proven that motivation is the key that drives towards success in all learning activities. In fact, learners will find writing activities more meaningful and interesting when they have good motivation for learning. A study conducted by Dang (2019)[9] shows that more than half of the participants (77%) claimed that they could not learn writing skills easily due to lack of motivation. This is due to the fact that the nature of writing lessons in Vietnam is more stressful when every lesson always comes with homework. It is clearly seen here that even though motivation is just a plain factor, it still affects the success of a language learner.

2.3 Vocabulary and ESL learners

It is well informed that one of the challenges faced by ESL learners in learning a second language is lack of vocabulary. The inadequacy of vocabulary knowledge may lead to difficulties in the learning process. Issues related to vocabulary have always been talked about when it comes to writing problems. ESL learners in Pakistan for example, have been facing issues in English writing and one of them is lack of vocabulary. They had little knowledge of vocabulary to be used appropriately [10]. This vocabulary issue is also seen in a L2 writing work which was translated from L1 writing. A study conducted by Tavakoli, Ghadiri and Zabiri (2014)[11] depicted that the translated work still showed that the learners had a limited amount of vocabulary in L2. The same goes to Malaysian tertiary level students. They are seen to have a limited number of vocabularies. This is further supported by Zuriyani and Mohamed Ismail (2019)[12] in their study which has proven that several Malaysian students who took an English course at one of the public universities had a very small size of vocabulary (2,000 words).

Many learning strategies can be adopted and adapted by ESL learners during the learning process. There are direct and indirect strategies. In acquiring new English words, learners can adopt social strategies in which these strategies allow learners to learn new words through social interactions [13].

2.4 Writing problems (grammar, punctuation, spelling, vocabulary)

Problems in grammar, punctuation, spelling and vocabulary are so rampant in ESL learners' writing products. The problems in grammar include errors made in subject-verb agreement, singular/plural forms of nouns and verbs, verb tense conjugations and sentence

structures. Besides that, problems in punctuation shows that some of the errors made are represented in the form of run-on sentences and the absence of comma (,) in the dependent clause at the beginning of a sentence [2]. There are also several categories that contribute to spelling errors in writing which are: substitution, omission, addition, disordering, segmentation and ‘unrecognisable’. The current study was guided by the following research questions:

- 1) Does the writing project motivate them to write?
- 2) Does the writing project help the students to improve their writing?
- 3) Does the writing project increase their vocabulary range?
- 4) What are the writing problems that the students were able to identify from the writing project?

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Participants and procedure

This study involved 971 undergraduates from different academic programmes and language proficiency who enrolled in a university writing course, BBB 3101 (Academic Writing Skills). They were required to produce a booklet that consisted at least 10 photos with 100-120 words of descriptions. The students were given a list of themes that they had to choose from in producing the booklet such as: students’ activities, academic facilities, ecosystem and sustainability and university facilities. Proper instructions were given via an infographic poster posted on the university learning management system, *e-pembelajaran*.

Besides, topic on sentence types was taught to them prior to the study as it was part of the writing project requirements. The writing project was completed gradually in four weeks which also included parts where they had to video record and update their group discussion or progress on the work, attend a two-hour editing workshop, submit a draft to their instructor and make corrections based on their instructors’ feedback. A final writing was submitted after the corrections were done and before they completed the writing course, all of them were required to answer a set of questionnaire to know their feedback on the writing project.

3.2 Instrument

The questionnaire answered by the students consisted 29 items. Among the items asked were related to their perceptions of the writing project and their writing problems that they were able to identify upon completing this writing project. The questions related to this study employed several formats like Yes/No (accompanied with justifications), Likert Scale and Multiple Choice.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 1 Does this OPOWER writing task increase your motivation to write in English?

| Answers | No. of responses | Percentage of responses |
|---------|------------------|-------------------------|
| Yes | 942 | 100% |
| No | 0 | 0% |

Table 1 presents the results of the participants’ motivation to write in English after their involvement in the writing project. All of them agreed that the project increased their motivation to write in English.

Table 2 I noticed that my English writing has improved from this OPOWER writing task

| Answers | No. of responses | Percentage of responses |
|-------------------|------------------|-------------------------|
| Strongly Agree | 186 | 19.75% |
| Agree | 555 | 58.92% |
| Slightly Agree | 179 | 19.00% |
| Slightly Disagree | 6 | 0.64% |
| Disagree | 5 | 0.53% |
| Strongly Disagree | 11 | 1.17% |

Other than their motivation to write has increased, the project was also able to improve their English writing. This is shown in Table 2 where it is seen that a total of 920 participants from 942 of them (97.66%) agreed that the writing project improved their English writing. Only a small group of the participants (2.34%) disagreed that the project improved their English writing.

Table 3 I learned more new English vocabulary from this OPOWER writing task

| Answers | No. of responses | Percentage of responses |
|-------------------|------------------|-------------------------|
| Strongly Agree | 221 | 23.46% |
| Agree | 551 | 58.49% |
| Slightly Agree | 149 | 15.82% |
| Slightly Disagree | 3 | 0.32% |
| Disagree | 5 | 0.53% |
| Strongly Disagree | 13 | 1.38% |

The analysis of the data further indicates that a large group of the participants (97.77%) agreed that the writing project made them learned more new English vocabulary. Whereas only a small group of them (2.23%) believed that they did not learn new English vocabulary from the project.

Table 4 From this OPOWER writing task, I know that my problem in writing is/are ...

| Answers | No. of responses | Percentage of responses |
|---|------------------|-------------------------|
| I have limited English vocabulary. | 637 | 67.62% |
| I do not use tenses correctly. | 512 | 54.35% |
| I do not use correct English phrases. | 478 | 50.74% |
| I do not use word categories correctly in my sentences (e.g adverbs, adjectives, verb, pronouns.) | 475 | 50.42% |
| I write sentences in English, but with Malay language structure. | 386 | 40.98% |
| I cannot form complete sentences. | 214 | 22.72% |
| I do not use correct punctuation. | 196 | 20.81% |

Table 4.1 Classification of writing problems among participants based on the writing project

| Writing problems | No. of responses | Percentage of responses |
|----------------------------------|------------------|-------------------------|
| Limited English vocabulary | 637 | 67.62% |
| Incorrect tenses used | 512 | 54.35% |
| Incorrect use of English phrases | 478 | 50.74% |
| Incorrect use of word categories | 475 | 50.42% |
| L1 interference | 386 | 40.98% |

| | | |
|--------------------------------------|-----|--------|
| Inability to form complete sentences | 214 | 22.72% |
| Punctuations | 196 | 20.81% |

Further analysis of the study also shows that participants were able to identify some writing problems upon the completion of the project. Most of the participants believed that they had very limited English vocabulary (67.62%). Besides, 54.35% of them noticed that they had problem in using correct tenses in their writing and 50.74% of them claimed that they had been using incorrect English phrases in their writing all this while. Half of the participants (50.74%) also admitted that they had problems in English writing with the incorrect use of word categories. The other writing problems that the participants identified are: First language (L1) interference (40.98%), inability to form complete sentences (22.72%) and punctuations (20.81%).

The findings above suggest that the writing project designed for the students (OPOWER) that consists the element of photo descriptions managed to increase their motivation to write as well as improve their English writing. The designed writing project was also able to help them learned new English vocabulary in the process, and most importantly, from this collaborative writing project where participants had the chance to discuss in group while completing the task, it allowed them to realize some writing problems that they had.

This study believes that the right choice of writing tasks assigned to students does play its role in producing the positive feedback described above. For example, learners can integrate the vocabulary that they learned better by doing some group practices and activities with peers [14], and it is also worth noting that the collaborative aspect of the designed task allows the participants to actively involve in the learning process while working on the project and helping one another [15]. This kind of social environment helps to minimize the participants' writing anxiety and gradually enhance their writing performance [16]. All in all, this study agrees that students' motivation to write in English can be nurtured from properly structured writing activities.

5. CONCLUSION

Finally, it should also be noted that, since the present study focused on just perceptions of the participants without observing any written work scores, the results obtained cannot be generalized. However, it is still good to know how they perceive the tasks given to them, and how they can identify their own writing problems from the project.

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