Improving ESL Students' Essay Writing in Malaysia

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Abstract

The purpose of this research is to study how effectively collaborative writing essay can help to improve ESL students' essay writing skills. The main aim of the study is to ascertain if collaborative writing helped to improve students' essays in aspects like organization, development and structure. This study aims to determine if students who are engaged in collaborative writing show a greater improvement in essay writing compared to students who write using the traditional (syllabus based) writing method. The effects of the collaborative writing method on the attitudes and perception of the learners were also established. The findings of the study showed that the students are able to generate ideas and develop a change in attitude towards writing after going through the collaborative writing treatment. The findings have established that Collaborative writing is a strategic tool to help students write well in ESL classes and in line with the findings of other scholars mentioned in the literature review.

Keywords: ESL Students, Malaysia, Collaborative writing, ZPD, essay writing, group task, attitude

Introduction

According to Arkoudis and Tran (2007), writing as a form of thinking is fundamental for academic success of students. Hyland (2011) maintains that the ability to be able to sustain an argument and synthesize ideas to write in proper English sentence for the purpose of academic success is a tedious chore for students. Richards (2008) notes that being able to write in either first or second language is one of the most challenging tasks for students and not many can fully master it. Furthermore, writing is an ability to integrate every skill and it's a productive and complete learning process (Abdullah 2011). It is a productive learning process whereby ideas and data required are gathered before finalizing a text. Barkley, Cross, and Major (2005, p.256) define that in collaborative writing, students write an essay in pairs or groups. Every member of the group contributes at every stage of the writing process. This means that in pairs or groups, students will produce a better piece than when they work alone. The quality of the end product will be improved by combined efforts and strengths of all the students in the group through the Collaborative writing strategy. According to Noor Hanim Rahmat (2011) an ideal writing classroom should make space for students to be able to brainstorm and generate ideas in class and prepare the first

draft of an essay in class. M. Naser, &, M Azmi. (2018) also found statistically significant correlation between writing and speaking proficiencies in their study.

Students should go through the whole writing process and be given an opportunity to contribute ideas for the content. Discussions should be open to generate ideas amongst students. After this, the next step would be to sit down and plan the draft. All this should be done under guidance.

Literature Review

According to Agustina (2013) feedback from interviews with senior high school students as well as her own teaching experiences show that students still experience difficulties when it comes to writing business correspondence. Collaborative tasking is defined by the social constructivist theory therefore writing is considered a social act (Yang 2014). Man develops through social activities therefore children's linguistic development is developed through social interaction (Shehadeh,2011). When students complete a task in groups like collaborative writing, interactions take place and scaffolding is provided by teachers and peers. Alwasillah (2008) supports collaborative writing saying that it is a method that helps students to learn from mistakes and weakness, be it their own or others. Rahim et al. (2008) too agrees that writing process should be taught using the collaborative techniques. Kurniawan (2008) carried out a case study on the collaborative technique and has proven how effective it is. Vygotsky argued that "social interaction precedes development; consciousness and cognition are the end product of socialization and social behavior" (Heidar, 2016). The foundation of collaborative writing was built on this Vygotskian notion of having to cooperate with others by contributing ideas in order for quality learning and growth to take place (Heidar, 2016).
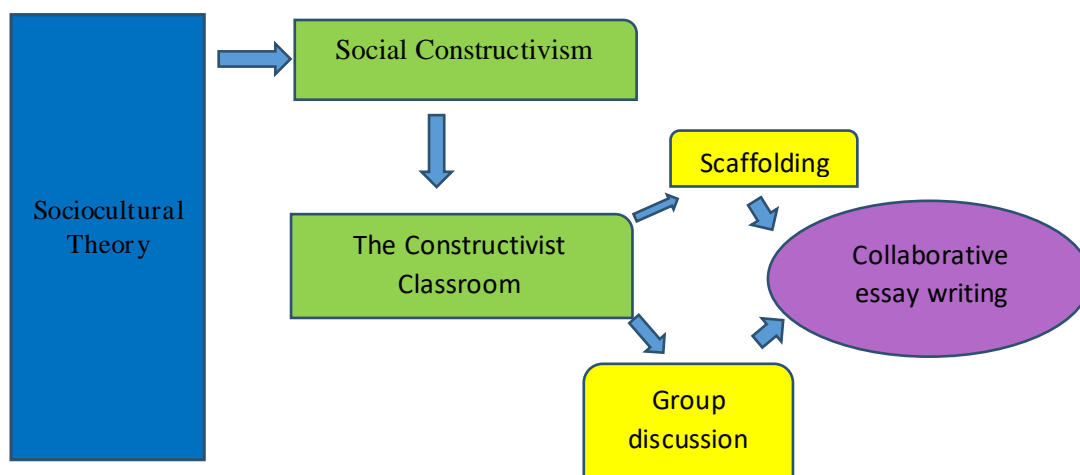
Figure 1   **Theoretical framework for Sociocultural Theory**

Social interaction is emphasized as the basis for cognitive development in the sociocultural theory that underpins this study. The most basic belief of this theory is that every child's cognitive growth is a result of social interaction. This theory plays an important role in impacting the classroom practices (Bergin & Bergin, 2012). Ajayi (2008) purports "the sociocultural framework provides a dynamic interaction, interrelation, and interconnection of theory and practice in such ways that theories are grounded in specific contexts of practice and, in turn, these practices inform theories" (p. 654). Ultimately, the constructivist classroom, which capitalizes on the nature of social learning and utilizes scaffolding and group discussion, can create an effective learning environment, if conducted correctly by teachers (Bergin & Bergin, 2002). Williams (2012) stated that the findings of these studies revealed that by using collaborative writing activates, learners could benefit from the mechanism necessary for learning through a verity of language processes. He states that collaboration which involved in these tasks is the important factor of improvement in different writing components including accuracy, fluency, and complexity. Williams argued that the need to produce output is more likely to encourage learners to process language more deeply, notice gaps in their inter language, and reflect on language use.

Methodology

This study was carried out among the Form 4 students of a school in Perak, Malaysia. The main purpose of this research is to study how effectively collaborative writing essay can help to improve ESL students' essay writing skills. The research used a quantitative approach in data collection and was supplemented by some amount of qualitative data. The research was carried out using two groups of students in a class; the experimental group which was taught using the collaborative learning method and the control group which was taught using the traditional learning method. Research design is as shown in Figure 2.
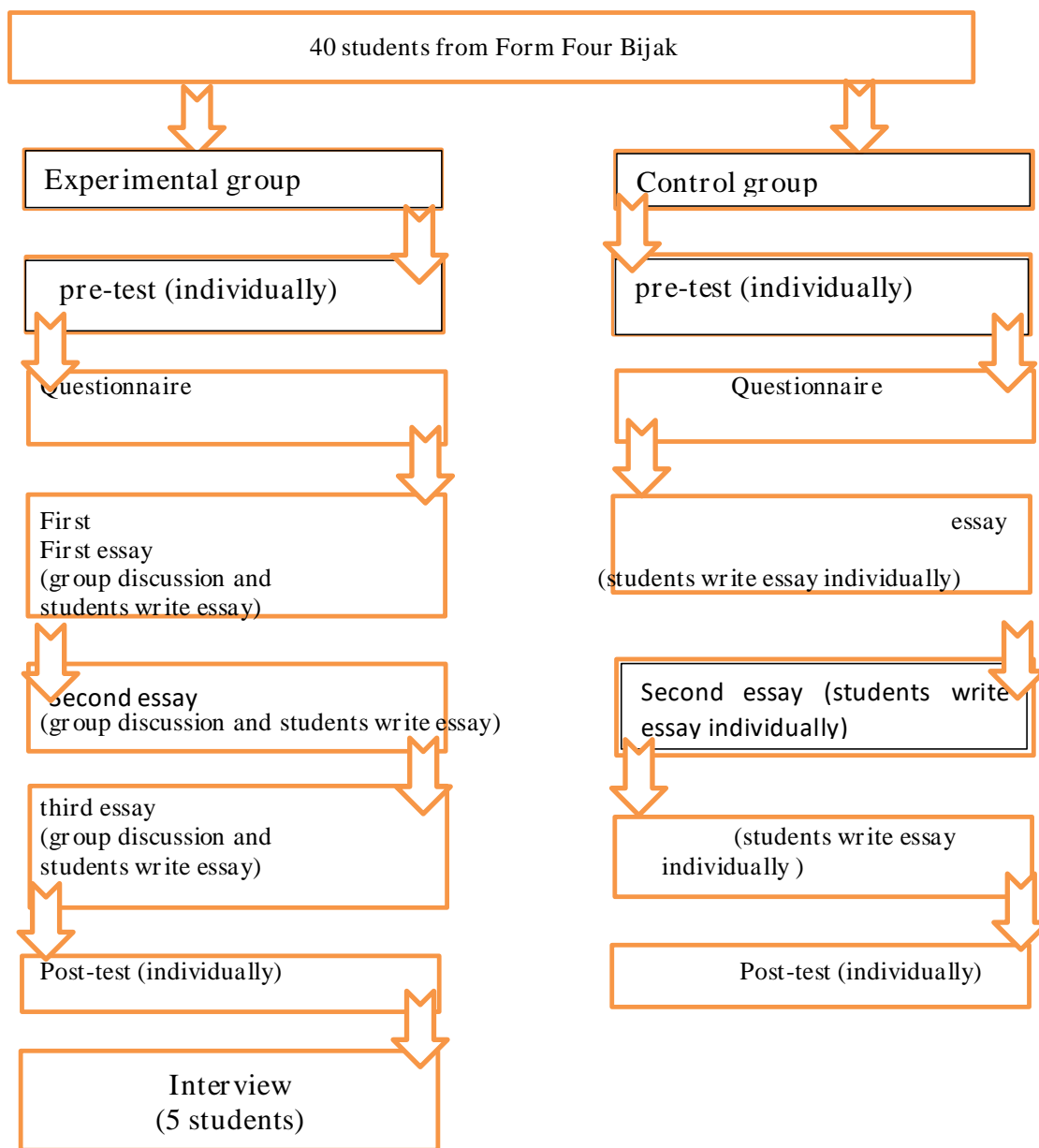
Figure 2

Research design

Based on their previous exam results all forty students were of average proficiency and competency in English. These participants were chosen at random irrespective of their race, gender and social background. These students did not come from an English-speaking background and seldom used the language outside the classroom. Participants were informed that they would be divided into groups of six or work as individuals and collaborative writing will be incorporated into the essay writing lessons.

This study was carried out using 5 sets of instruments: the pre-test, post-test, questionnaires, field notes from observations and interview questions. Lesson plans were prepared for both, the controlled and the experimental group. An assortment of data collection methods had been used in previous studies on collaborative writing studies; written texts (Storch, 2002), audiotape recordings (Yong, 2006), interviews (Corden, 2001), questionnaire (Yong, 2006). All these techniques have proven effective and useful for researchers.

The scores for both the pre-test and post-test were calculated to obtain the mean scores. These scores were obtained after an experienced teacher marked the essays using the Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia (SPM) marking scheme. SPM is the Malaysian Certificate of Education which is a national examination taken by all the fifth form secondary school students in Malaysia. The independent t-test was applied to test the difference between the mean in both the groups. These tests were important in determining whether the changes were due to the treatment or some other variables. A paired t-test was also used to compare the means of both groups.

Questionnaires were analyzed to see the student's backgrounds and their feelings about using Collaborative writing style for essay writing. The scores were tabulated according to frequency counts. While the questionnaires had controlled answers, students were free to give their answers during the interviews. Their answers were analyzed using the deductive approach to see how the students felt about using the collaborative method in writing essays.

FINDINGS

Idea development during all three tasks appeared to be similar. Almost every process had a similar pattern. Group members contributed ideas and these ideas were quickly expanded by the others. While expanding on ideas given, members either tried to simplify the ideas or give alternatives. As this occurred, some members were also prompting others to contribute.
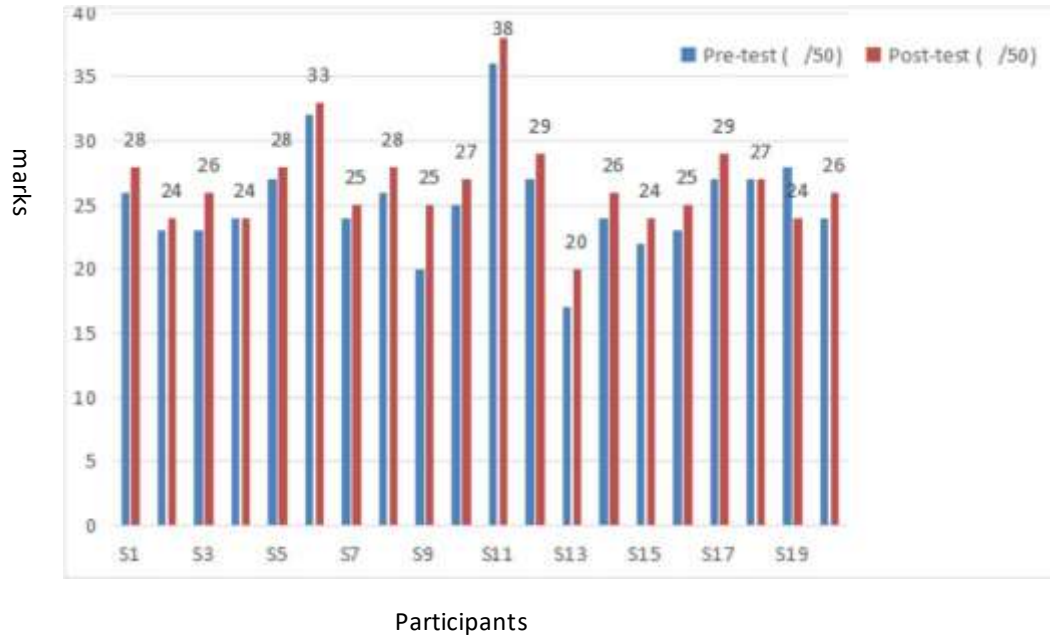
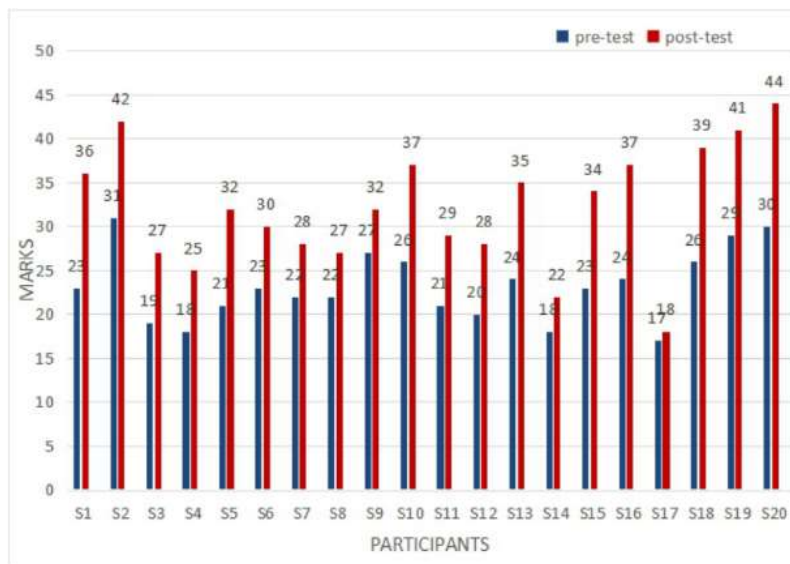**Figure 3 Scores of the pre-test and post-test (control Group)**

Figure 4   Scores of the pre-test and post-test (Experimental Group)

According to the research results as shown in figure 3 and 4, students in the experimental group have shown more improvements compared to students in the control group. A paired-samples t-test

was conducted to compare results in a collaborative writing class for the experimental group. There was a significant difference in the scores for experimental group pretest (M = 22.15, SD = 5.204) and posttest (M = 31.15, SD = 8.074) conditions; t (19) = -10.411, p = 0.000. These results suggest that collaborative writing improves the essay writing abilities of students in an ESL class. A paired-samples t-test was conducted to compare results of the traditional writing (using the prescribed syllabus) scores of the control group. There was no significant difference in the scores for control group pretest (M = 21.70, SD = 6.036) and posttest (M = 22.3500, SD= 5.98485) conditions; t (19) = -1.716, p = 0.103. According to the sig. (2-tailed), there isn't much difference between the two means. This means that there was not much improvement in the students' ability to write essays after the ten weeks.

Meanwhile, in the questionnaire section, most of the students agreed that they found writing tough and a majority of the respondents were in favor of collaborative writing. Based on the questionnaire a good number of students preferred to work as a group while doing essays. They were of the opinion that collaborative writing helped to lessen their anxiety and stress. In the interview too, students in the focal group had expressed their preference to collaborative writing.

Most of the students (ninety percent) agreed that they received a lot of help from friends during group writing process. This was quite evident as the focal group was observed. Each time a member had trouble putting his/her thoughts in words the others immediately expanded on it. When a group member was unable to find an appropriate word, the others gave suggestions. About eighty percent said they were more aware of grammatical errors when they write in groups. This can be observed during the interactions between the members of the focal group where students who made mistakes were notified and corrected by the other members. Even if they were not very sure about the mistakes, they tried to get confirmation from other groups. The majority of participants agreed that generating ideas was easier with so many minds working on a single task. Observations on the experimental group showed, as students contributed simple ideas, others expanded on the ideas and later more was added to it to make it something very complex. Questions asked, clarifications added, and logic questioned; all these helped to expand and rationalize the ideas. In particular, peer feedback can improve the quantity and quality of peer talk and increase student interaction and negotiation in the writing process.

Students also thought that, while discussing and interacting with their group members and with the support and guidance from their teacher, they improved their English vocabulary, gained new ideas and perspectives, and enhanced their learning about text coherence. Furthermore, the feedback they received was at their level. The majority of respondents in the questionnaire agreed that it was easier for them to understand their friend's explanations. They became more aware of the mechanics of writing. Getting feedback is important to learners because it helps to "teach skills needed by learners to improve their writing proficiency" hence producing written texts with lesser errors and more clarity (Williams, 2003). Receiving feedback can enhance learning and help learners to improve their

knowledge in linguistics and understand the skills of writing better. Most students found essay writing very stressful, but ninety percent students who filled in the questionnaire found the entire collaboration writing very much relaxed. Students observed that group writing helped to foster better relationship among students. Group interactions help students to get to know each other better and get a communal feeling. Although each student contributed a small part towards the task, the goal of the entire team was taken into consideration. Everyone was working towards the success of the group.

Data from the questionnaires and interviews showed that the interaction that occurred throughout the collaborative writing enhanced the students' communication skills. Since there was no teacher present during the group discussions, students did not feel embarrassed to attempt speaking in English. This was observed during the expansion of ideas and logical clarifications given when ideas forwarded were challenged, during the collaboration in writing. Group settings are the perfect way to get students thinking. When children are around their classmates working together, they get exposed to the thought processes of their peers. They learn how to understand how other people think and that their way is not the only route to explore. While observing the groups at work, it was evident that collaborative writing encourages information exchange and idea sharing.

The first interview question was an attempt at self-assessment. It was also an exercise to see if collaborative work had helped students to internalize and reassess themselves. It encourages the students to gain useful inputs about the level of their learning and how to improve it. Using self-assessment in group writing also means that students reflect on their role in the group and it is a learning process to provide self-improvement (Hubert, 2010). Students diagnose their own weaknesses and improve their writing performance as well as assess their own writing (Nimehchisalem et al., 2014). When the students in the focal group gave themselves a score and reasoning, it showed that the self-assessment had been a success. All the students were very honest and the fact that the weakest student agreed that he had improved with each task, showed the effectiveness of collaborative writing.

Observations during the experimental group discussions did show certain students assuming the leadership role. They had actually done a good job in explaining the task to the others. This is relevant to the ZPD where a better peer helps the others to recognize their potentials. This is the Vygotskian notion upon which the foundation for collaborative writing is built on (Heidar, 2016). According to Vygotsky, development is preceded by social interaction. When students collaborate and socialize in contributing ideas, the end result will be growth and quality learning. In fact, this study pointed out that being a part of a collaborative writing team motivated students because the end results were beyond their expectations (Dobao & Blum, 2013). They were able to produce better essays compared to the time when they wrote individually.

The students in the experimental group agreed that the feedback they received during the group work helped them to improve their work in individual writing as well. During the group work, researcher was able to observe how students questioned and corrected each other. All the students said that interaction with their peers helped them realize the importance in improving their essays and this is in line with studies conducted by Ong & Maarof (2013). This was especially true during feedback and editing sessions. the students found that the interaction with their friends encouraged a lot of thought-provoking activities. There was a lot of dialoguing, questioning and correcting. According to Latawiec, Anderson, Ma & Nguyen-Jahiel (2016), this is known as the negotiation process. This process promotes reflection and critical thinking among the students.

Conclusion

As collaborative writing techniques is only one of the many approaches, researchers interested in writing, should consider to carry out other studies to discover more techniques. Future studies should observe and explore how different learning styles influence the quality of students' writing. Apart from writing, research can be carried out on how to use the collaborative learning style to enhance the teaching and learning of ESL.

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