

Understanding Collaborative Academic Writing among Beginner University Writers in Malaysia

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Abstract: The paper investigates collaborative academic writing among beginner university writers who enrolled in Bel311; English for Academic Purposes. The paper investigates the difficulties faced by beginner academic writers and proposes recommendations to help these writers to be better collaborative writers. The students were required to write term papers in pairs as part of course requirements. The students were required to write outlines, first drafts and the final drafts for their term papers. Writing term paper in pairs was the students' first experiences in writing collaboratively in English as during Semester 1 and 2 of their diploma programs, these students were given individual writing tasks. Therefore, students found difficulties in finding the time to write together, compromising different ideas, negotiating conflicts, adapting with different personalities, styles of writing and different levels of language proficiency. Lecturers had to spend time teaching students not only writing skills but also negotiation skills and interpersonal skills dealing with their writing partners. The paper emphasizes the importance of understanding the nature of collaborative writing and beginner writers in order to help our beginner writers to collaborate with each other successfully in order to be efficient collaborative writers.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Writing proficiency develops over time. It begins as an association of ideas, growing knowledge of stylistic conventions and the use of processes for planning, evaluating and revising. Writing becomes more unified as writers write for an audience and transform experiences into knowledge (Bereiter, 1980). As writers become more proficient writers, “knowledge-telling” is transformed into “knowledge-transformation” to develop knowledge, ideas and personal awareness (Bereiter & Scardamalia, 1987). Working collaboratively may seem to be a norm for university students as per their courses requirement. This activity is especially frequent for subjects that require students to write reports and term papers. To collaborate in writing assignments means that students have to work as a team of two and more in order to accomplish a goal as required by the project within specified time frame. Working collaboratively in a writing project may seem an ideal way for students to minimize work in a project and to reduce assessment work for the instructor.

However, working collaboratively for a writing project may pose some problems for students, specifically the problem of team members’ commitments to the writing project. A lot of university students may be bogged down by various tasks in the semester. Commitment may be an issue in a team as every team member depends on another to complete the task. They may put other tasks as the top priority in their lists and disregard the team writing project. Other problems that might exist are differences in writing styles, differences in individual efforts, power struggle in the team and unequal contributions from team members and also unequal distributions of work among team members (Chisholm, 1990).

Despite the problems that exist, university students should realize that writing collaboratively seem to be the common requirement in the working world. Odell and Goswami (1982) as cited in Colen and Petelin (2004) stated, “Across professions, industries, organizations, departments, and functional areas, writing is a common job requirement: Many people must write with some skill in order to succeed with (indeed, to retain) their jobs.”

Collaborative writing does indeed have its benefits and drawbacks. As students progress to fulfill the writing task, they may have acquired certain negotiation skills among them in effort to accomplish their collaboration goal. A study on a project team writing in a technology company conducted by Hansen (1995) as cited by Colen and Petelin (2004) found that “writing takes place through negotiation and collaboration – and in some cases, amid political wrangling and power conflicts.”

Therefore, due to the awareness about the problems and politics of collaborative writing, this study was undertaken to discover the emerging conflicts and negotiation that students made in order to ensure the success of their collaborative writing tasks.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Teaching and learning in today’s era has become more challenging. Since students are exposed to technology specifically the internet and other types of gadgets that allow them to get information fast, they sometimes don’t look up for teacher’s help in getting what they want. As a result of this globalization era, teaching and learning especially in the developed countries especially Malaysia in this context should be shifted from teacher-centered to more on students-centered.

One of the methods to do this is by adopting collaborative learning. This is proven by Smith & MacGregor (n.d.) in their article entitled "What is collaborative learning?" They refer to collaborative learning as something that represents a significant shift away from the typical teacher-centered or lecture-centered milieu in college classrooms. In classrooms, the lecturing/listening/note-taking according to them again may not disappear entirely. However, it lives alongside other processes, but are based on students' discussion and active work with the course material. In this context, teachers are seen as expert designers than expert transmitters.

Before further explanation is given on collaborative writing, it is beneficial to look at what writing is. Chitravelu, Sithamparam & Teh (1995) define writing as a system for interpersonal communication using visible signs or graphic symbols on a flat surface such as paper, cloth or even stone slabs. Every language has its own graphic symbols. These graphic symbols will help us to communicate our ideas to others. In teaching and learning, writing collaboratively in groups or pairs will further enhance students' creativity where these students will have the opportunity to reveal their talents by using these graphic symbols.

According to Butler (2001), collaborative writing refers to sharing written documents during the process of writing. One person may share a draft with one or two others with the goal of getting suggestions for improvements. The reviewer may add comments and suggestions, but does not edit wording, syntax or organization. In some other cases, two or more people can co-write the document. If this happens, the co-authors do edit wording, syntax or organization. As for students, they probably need proper guidance and enough knowledge on sentence structure to edit the work if the lecturer wants them to do so. Usually the students are asked to share their ideas, find sources which are related to the topic discussed and together write and edit their work before submitting it.

In order to achieve maximum students' participation in collaborative writing, help is needed from the lecturers as well as other staff in the faculty and university. It is better to have a faculty that works together as a team in order to be much more successful than a number of independent teachers working alone. When a faculty works together as a team, its potential rises because individual teachers are given opportunities to share what they know and can do. At the same time, they can learn more from the knowledge and skills of others and are able study common issues which are related to students' performance (<http://parca.samford.edu/Payoff%20from%20Faculty%20Teamwork.htm>).

To ensure successful learning, Lam & Wong (2000) as cited in Lourdunathan & Menon (2005), believe that learners should exhibit appropriate cooperative behavior and peer support. This is important because some students have difficulties in organizing their ideas and are weak in English. This can hinder them from participating in their collaborative work. Besides, many ESL and FL students dislike writing in English and they perform poorly in it. This is because of their poor command of the language and they keep repeating experience a failure. Thus, to overcome this problem, other friends in the group should encourage and support them. Hopefully, by this help, these students will have the courage to contribute to the discussion and therefore are able to produce good written work together. When these students do their discussion in groups brainstorming ideas for their writing, they tend to exchange ideas and at the same time tend to argue as well in order to come up with good points to be included in their writing.

The students of BEL 311 are the students of L2 (a language which is not a native language in a country, but it is widely used as a medium of instruction). These students have problems when it comes to grammar especially the subject-verb agreement. These students are the Bumiputras (a Malay term widely used in Malaysia, embracing ethnic Malays, Javanese, Bugis, Minang and other indigenous ethnic groups such as Orang Asli in Peninsular Malaysia and tribal people in Sabah and Sarawak). Malays they speak Bahasa Malaysia that doesn't have rules regarding subject-verb agreement (Surina, 2009). This directly will pose problems in their writing as well. The examples are as the following:

Abu (singular subject) pergi ke kedai.

Abu and Amin (plural subjects) pergi ke kedai.

[The two examples show that the verb (pergi) is the same].

One of the common problems that affects second language performance is the interference of L1. This, of course, may also become a drawback for peer collaboration to produce a good piece of writing. The second language learners may opt to think in their own mother-tongue when discussing ideas with their peers. Communication among peers also may be solely done in the first language since everyone is familiar and feel comfortable to use it. Thus, in many instances, the writing of the students consists of language structures which are not acceptable in English. In a study done by Bennui (2008), it was found that 28 third- year English minor Thai students have difficulty to think in English and this subsequently causes L1 lexical interference in their written English.

Bhela (1999), in his study on Spanish, Italian, Vietnamese and Cambodian participants, claims that the second language learners fail to organize their L2 knowledge of structural entities into appropriate and coherent writing because they tend to rely on their first language structure to produce their work. The structures of their L1 and L2 have significant differences, thus, errors are heavily found in their second language output.

Successful collaborative writing requires peer interaction. According to Wenger (1998) as cited in Yong (2010), collaborative writing involves mutual engagement from the individuals in community to develop a sense of identity. The engagement “draws out the competence of each individual to create ‘complementary’ contributions.” Yong (2010) stresses that teachers should stress on the significance of mutual interactions and taking complementary roles as students were interacting with one another in completing the task as such in planning, generating ideas and responding to one another’s points of view. In addition, learning to listen well to one another should also be emphasized. Yong (2010) discovers that in the process of writing, the interactions among group members could help the students learn from their peers, share knowledge and make decisions collaboratively, utilize strategies and deal with conflicts.

In a study on three fifth-grade classes conducted by Allal *et al* (2005) to find out the role of social mediation in the development of the students’ skills in text production and revision, the researchers found that students’ interactions during the writing tasks such as in revising the drafts, confronting each other and joint revision of the texts had a positive impact on students’ time investment on the writing task that led to improvement of the text quality.

According to Bereiter and Scardamalia (1987) as cited in Rouiller (2005), writing usually suffers from lack of interaction that stimulates oral production in conversation. Greater disagreement can be expected when two persons focus on the same text. In a comparative study on four writing conditions (presence/absence of peer interaction and of revisions lessons), Russel (1985) as cited in Rouiller (2005) suggests that peer conferencing seems to be effective for both poor and good writers. However, poor students are dependent on other students’ questions as compared to good writers who can think critically when revising the text on their own. According to Reid as cited by Shahrina & Norhisham (2006), “Peer review provides students with authentic audiences, discussion that leads to discovery and necessary peer feedback. “ Therefore, in order to help students to be better writers, they should work collaboratively since this activity helps them to generate more ideas and improve their skills in writing as well as in thinking.

Peer feedback has also proven to have an impact on affect, increasing motivation through the sense of personal responsibility and improving self-confidence (Tapping as cited by Kurt & Atay, 2007). In their study also, Kurt & Atay find out the effects of peer feedback on the writing of Turkish Prospective Teachers (PTs) of English, the results show that the peer feedback group experienced significantly less writing anxiety than the teacher feedback group.

According to Rollinson (2005), “Peer response operates on a more informal level than teacher response. This may encourage or motivate writers or at least provide a change form (and a complement to) the more one-way interaction between the teacher and the student, where the student may end up making revisions without necessarily agreeing with or even understanding the teacher’s authoritative comments. The writer receiving comments from peers retains the right to reject comments and is thus

more able to maintain the possession of her own texts.”

When students go into a classroom, they bring with them their cultural and religious beliefs, previous life experiences and knowledge about the world. In short, their actions in the classroom are influenced by their background. Studies have shown that the way students learn is influenced by their cultural traditions and beliefs. One’s cultural orientation was found to affect student satisfaction with collaborative learning (Liao, 2004). Individuals, who are more individually-oriented, from individualistic cultural traditions, tend to work more effectively on their own, whereas those who are more group dependent and display more cooperative behaviours, would tend to work more effectively with other people.

Malay students, in particular, have their own cultural beliefs when it comes to interaction with others. The Malays they prefer to be neutral and to save face in giving their opinions. This is because they believe that putting forward conflicting ideas will cause them to lose face (Yong, 2010). This is in contrast to other cultures that believe the opposite; acquiring conflict resolution is seen as one of the crucial aspects of social skills (Johnson, D. W. & Johnson, R. T., 1999). The Malays’ practice also includes providing brief, sympathetic responses, and when making a remark, one should do it in a subtle manner. Others prefer to be quiet and reserve their judgments on any matters. These elements can be found in Malay students’ interaction with others. Some may not portray these very clearly but they can be identified if observed carefully by one who is familiar with Malay culture.

The constructivist approach emphasizes on learning as a socially active and creative interactive process learners construct new ideas based upon their prior knowledge (Bruner, 1990). Knowledge develops through dialogic negotiations of meanings in the target language with its various socio-cultural expressions. Language is learnt through exposure and interaction with language in authentic contexts by performing tasks and solving problems to ensure high level of participation. This is supported by Lave (1988) as most learning occurs naturally through authentic contexts and “apprentice-like” situations.

The community of practice complements and substitutes formal learning mechanism as learning take place within social participation within community of practice (Wenger, 1998). Lave and Wenger (1991) suggest a community practice consists of social interactions, identities, knowledge, understanding, language and language use of that community of practice. Learning in communities of practice is in form of situated learning as a result of participation. There is a gradual acquisition of knowledge and skills as novices learn from the context of everyday activities from the communities of practice.

In a study of a community of writers at an urban nonprofit organization, Beaufort (2000) explores the roles the writers played and the roles new writers played as they were integrated into the community following an apprenticeship model. Fifteen roles were observed ranging from observer, reader/researcher, clerical assistant, author, inventor, and coach. New or less experienced writers learned the process through taking on roles reserved for novice writer such as the clerical assistant which allowed for extended observation of the expert writers at work. New employees gained both experience and responsibility through this model, which exhibited Lave and Wenger’s (1991) legitimate peripheral participation. The results suggest writing skills are acquired through a social process and analysis of expert performance is needed to help transitional writers to become expert writers. Experienced writers act as mentors to illuminate the tacit components of the writing process to transitional writers.

3. DIFFICULTIES FACED BY BEGINNER WRITERS

3.1 Unable to work together with partners

Beginner writers have conflicts from having different personalities and characteristics and working styles. This is due to the fact that beginner writers are not familiar with academic writing and collaborative writing. Conflicts can be caused by conflicting assumptions and practices which can improve the quality of writing but may waste time and money (Bernhardt & McCulley, 2000; Burnett,

1993, Cross, 1994). At times, collaborative writers need a mediator in order to help them to resolve their conflicts before they could resume writing collaboratively successfully (Cross, 2001). Collaborative writers need to be aware of two types of collaborative power relations such as hierarchical and dialogic in any collaborative attempts (Ede and Lunsford, 1990). In order to promote better collaboration, it is imperative to for members to be familiar with the discourse of the community. In this case, in order to be collaborative academic writers, beginner writers need to be familiar with academic writing. Bruffee (1984) argues that people become assimilated acculturated into a discourse of the community through the process of collaborating with its members. The process of collaboration can be considered as an assimilation process of new members of the community (Paradis, Dobrin, and Miller, 1985). Beginner writers need to be taught interpersonal skills and communication skills. They need to be sensitive and cultivate diplomacy with members of their collaborative writing groups.

3.2 Poor language proficiency

Beginner writers have poor language proficiency. Due to this factor, they were not able to conduct discussions in the target language effectively. Warschauer (1997) as cited by Shih-hsien Yang (2007) argues that oral language proficiency is very important for any language learners because it is the skill that they mostly used. Beginner writers need to participate in oral discussion during their collaborative writing. The language these students use is definitely the target language which is English in this case. When discussing ideas for writing they will do this orally before they are able to produce a piece of written work. As beginner writers possess low language proficiency, the students chose to communicate in their first language which hinders them to improve their writing skills. Peer collaboration among second language learners may not be successful if interference of L1 is not overcome. The study by Sharifah Zakiah et al. (2009) as cited by Wee et al. (2009) reveals that the most frequent grammatical errors committed by UiTM students are noun number, subject-verb agreement and verb tenses. Collaborative partners should be reminded and given help in these particular areas to avoid interference of L1 in their writing.

Moreover, in individual or collaborative work, many second language learners will resort to their L1 when they are facing problem in writing. They sometimes use their L1 grammatical rules when writing sentences. This causes errors in their writing because there are differences of grammatical rules between their L1 and L2. According to Saadiah Darus and Khor Hei Ching (2009), to produce good and acceptable sentences, students should understand the differences between L1 and L2 and this can be done by giving emphasis on the different concepts, appropriateness of rules and application of correct strategies. They believe that this could help the second language learners after they discovered the interference of L1 in the 70 essays of form one Chinese students in Malaysia.

3.3 Poor research skills

Beginner writers have poor research skills. This is caused by beginner writers do not properly practice their research skills. Beginner writers do not know where to find the materials for their writing and when to use these resources in their writing. This inability to do proper research skills lead to lack of critical thinking in their academic paper. Beginner writers are unable to evaluate and investigate their resources. In addition, they fail to express their ideas and support their ideas with evidence.

3.4 Have limited time to discuss

Beginner writers noted that they had a limited amount of time to collaborate on the task given. In other words, they felt that they were not given ample time to work on the task. However, respondents were not asked to specify the specific reasons that had led to this problem. This was also a problem shared by respondents of a similar study carried out by Neo (2004) on some Malaysian university students who had to collaborate to create an educational website. In fact, in that study, insufficient time was the number

one problem, i.e. biggest problem, that the students faced. Another study by Raja Maznah (2004) also identifies insufficient time as a weakness of the collaborative learning experience the respondents had. This means that teachers must allow the students to have enough time to spend working on the assigned task. They need to consider factors such as the complexity of the task that is given, as well as the students, when allocating the amount of time for them to complete the task. A teacher must allow enough time for the students to work comfortably together by not setting impossible deadlines. They must remember that students have commitments toward other subjects and a lot of other things too.

3.5 Lack of ideas

Another problem faced by beginner writers was lack of ideas. The group members could not contribute effectively to the discussions that they had due to this problem. Neo's study (2004) also reports the same problem, where some of the group members were described as not contributing toward the discussion, and in fact, they became 'parasites' to the groups. A few possible factors could have contributed to this problem, such as the task was too complicated for the students or they were not used to working in groups. It is a common practice that the students in many Malaysian classrooms only sit, listen and observe most, if not all of the time (Yong, 2010). They are so used to being passive learners because the teachers play the role of the sole knowledge transmitters. In Raja Maznah's study (2004), a similar problem was reported by the respondents, where they complained of lacking prior knowledge of the topic that they had to work on. Thus, to help students become active and able to generate ideas while working on the task, teachers could discuss matters related to the task first before giving them the instruction to work in groups. Even so, it would be a worthwhile effort to investigate the actual reasons that could have contributed to the problem lack of ideas.

3.6 Face stress during collaborative writing

Beginner writers also reported that they faced stress during their collaboration with peers. Considering that they had had problems such as unable to work with their partners, having low language proficiency and so on, it is understandable that they felt pressured while working with others. The problems contributed to stress among the students. The respondents in Neo's study (2004) also faced several kinds of problems, some of which were similar. It could be said that problems are inevitable when students are asked to work collaboratively. Nevertheless, teachers could try to reduce or prevent them from occurring by taking some measures such as preparing the students in terms of research skills and providing some background knowledge about the topic before they are asked to work on their own.

4. RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings show that beginner writers have difficulties during their collaborative writing so it is recommended the university and the lecturers provide them with the opportunities of:

4.1 Providing intensive reading program

Reading definitely helps these beginner writers with knowledge that is valuable to be included in their writing. The more they read, more ideas can be elaborated in their writing. Therefore, a good piece of writing can be produced. According to Jayakaran & Turuk (2001), "Teaching reading and writing interactively enhances students' intellectual processes. This improves their reading and writing skills in English.

4.2 Teaching Interpersonal skills

Interpersonal skills are the skills that a person uses to interact with other people. Interpersonal skills are sometimes also referred to as people skills or communication skills. Interpersonal skills involve using skills such as active listening and tone of voice, they include delegation and leadership. It is how well you communicate with someone and how well you behave or carry yourself. Also they help people further their careers. (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Interpersonal_skills). When these students work collaboratively in their writing, definitely each of them has to have good interpersonal skills. When these students work collaboratively in their writing, definitely each of them has to have good interpersonal skills. They have to be good listeners and also have good communication skills. This is important because all of them need good contribution of ideas as well as good team work.

4.3 Teaching time management

A good time management is important in accomplishing whatever task that is given. The same goes to writing collaboratively. Usually these students of BEL 311 are given time to do discussions and finally produce their own piece of writing. Before they submit their final product, they should do research and compile materials to be used as the in-text citations. Thus, they should manage their time wisely. Otherwise, they will be having difficulty in accomplishing the task given since they also have other work to do.

4.4 Providing pre-collaborative writing sessions

Since BEL 311 writing requires students to work collaboratively, it is beneficial for the students to involve in the pre-writing activity. The pre-writing activity introduces techniques that help the students discover and engage a topic. At the same time, students will be involved in multiple drafts of a work. They do discussion and get feedback and revise the drafts together. In the end, a good piece of writing will be produced.

4.5 Teaching basic research skills

These students should also know the basic skills of doing a small research. They should be taught on how to search for information which is relevant to the topic that they are working on. They should also know to do in-text citation, paraphrase, summarize and acknowledge other ideas in their work.

4.6 Providing teacher/ peer assistance

The students can be given remedial help on any areas of grammar which they are weak in. The teacher can also assist students in realizing the importance of process writing where the stages of revising and drafting should be given emphasis so that students can make improvements and refine their writing. Writing is a process of discovery and it can be achieved through peer or teacher intervention (Murray, 1978 as cited by Puteri Rohani Megat Abdul Rahim and Shazila Abdullah, 2007)

5. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, writing collaboratively will help students in their learning besides bringing out students' talents. For beginner writers this can pose some hurdles as being novice writers, they do not have clear understanding of what to expect from the task and their peers. As the writers are engaging in completing their tasks, guidance from their teachers or lecturers is expected by them. However, let the students

explore learning more among them with only a minimum help or supervision from the teachers or lecturers. Consequently, they may be able to grasp the idea of collaboration as they need to interact and communicate their ideas and to think critically in fulfilling the task at hand. In return, we will notice that these students are able to complete the task given to them excellently. The joy of collaborative writing can only be felt by these students when the teachers help them reduce the difficulties they face. Through stumbling blocks and experimentation while completing their writing tasks, the novice writers may be turned to experienced writers in the future.

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