



EFL STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF COLLABORATIVE WRITING IN SMALL GROUPS: THE CASE OF LIBYAN UNDERGRADUATE THIRD YEAR STUDENTS

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Abstract:

The importance of collaborative writing (CW) is well attested in teaching English as a foreign language (EFL). This study investigated third-year English language students' perceptions and experiences with CW and the ways to improve this type of writing. Both a questionnaire and semi-structured interviews were used to collect data. The participants showed a high preference for CW; they believed it is useful and effective. However, they mentioned some factors that affect their work such as dependent group members and conflicting ideas. Furthermore, the findings indicated that writing teachers can play an important role in improving CW practice by following certain strategies, such as clear division of CW group work and fair assessment. Based on the findings, some suggestions are proposed to enhance CW practices in EFL classrooms.

Keywords: EFL writing, collaborative writing, teachers' role

1. Introduction

For many years, English as a foreign language (EFL) teachers have used different methods to teach English writing. One of those methods is collaborative learning. Collaborative learning (CL) can be an effective method to motivate students, encourage active learning and develop communication among EFL students. Roberson and Franchini (2014, p.280) emphasize that for group learning to be effective, students need a clear sense that group work is 'serving the stated learning goals and disciplinary thinking goals' of the course. Learning a second language in a communicative

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environment involves a variety of pair or group work. Depending on the learning situation, group work can be useful or challenging for a teacher to implement (McDonough, 2004).

Many factors might influence collaborative writing (CW), such as members' perceptions, attitudes and willingness to co-operate as a team. Campell and Li (2006) believe that students' perceptions and attitudes towards group work play an important role in the outcome of the group. Based on this and on the increasing use of CL in teaching writing, there is a clear need to investigate students' perceptions of working in groups.

Therefore, this study aims to investigate Libyan EFL students' perception of their CW. The findings would give teachers a general overview of their students' perceptions and preferences in learning, which could help them in modifying their teaching techniques.

2. Literature Review

According to Salas (2005), 'grouping' means putting students to work together, in other words, to co-operate and collaborate, and the term CL reflects this idea perfectly. In fact, the focus of various studies (Dornyei & Malderez, 1997; Brown 2001; McClure, 2001; Gaith, 2002; Mackey, 2003) has been on the use and the effectiveness of CL inside the classroom. For instance, Gaith (2002) focused on the importance of the psychological factors in creating a rewarding environment in the classroom and concluded that the social support among the students working together may influence their achievements. Moreover, group/pair work that mainly requires CL is supported by the social constructivist perspective (Vygotsky, 1978).

Smith and MacGregor (1992) defined CL as *"an umbrella term for a variety of educational approaches involving joint intellectual effort by students, or students and teachers together"*. Ortoleva (2016) believed that CL *"comprises a number of different situations in which learners are required to work together on a set of tasks. The scenario is usually quite precise and specifies how the work should be organized, distributed and planned over time"*. Dornyei (1997) looked at CL as *"giving and receiving ideas and clarification, providing task-related help and assistance, exchanging resources and providing feedback"* (p. 484).

Brown (2001) stated that collaboration among the students in the group is one of the important elements when students must work together to complete their task. If each member of the group conducts his/her assigned task, this may increase the students' interdependence.

2.1 The role of teacher/student

Certain steps must be followed by the language teacher to engage his/her students in CL. Holladay (2017) stated there are three basic steps to make CL in a writing class successful. The first step is creating an atmosphere of trust (1) between the teacher and the students and (2) among the students themselves. This could be effective, especially

with anxious and inexperienced students. The second step is designing meaningful tasks with clear objectives so the students might become aware of the relationships among the activities, the other work in the course and the grading of their writing. The last step is introducing the students to (1) the goal of the activity or the task and its steps and (2) the role of each member in the task. In simple words, CL is about students working together in small groups to achieve a certain goal.

CL changes the idea of teacher-centred lectures into student-centred lectures, as Sansivero (2016) indicated when he referred to CL as a methodology that converts the teacher-centred classroom into a student-centred classroom. According to Holladay (2017), CL is rooted in the learning theory of Vygotsky (1978). Smith and MacGregor (1992) stated that CL activities could vary widely depending on the task itself, but most centered on the students' participation and application, not simply the teachers' explanation and presentation of the material.

2.2 The benefits and drawbacks of CL in EFL writing classrooms

As Kung (2002 as cited in Sajedi, 2014, p.1565) stated, CW is 'a method to deal with the low linguistic level of exchange as planning, negotiating meaning and reviewing which makes the task goal-directed and the students more reflective'. The writing process involves different stages, including brainstorming, drafting, getting feedback and rewriting. Learners need to go through these stages to develop their writing skills. To achieve this goal, teachers occasionally depend on pair and/or group work, which could be beneficial for learners if there is a positive social interaction. Okada (2006, p.662) states that *"when students are learning a foreign language together, learners share their strengths and weaknesses with others. Peer interaction results in effective learning, as learners complete a task that they may not be able to do individually"*.

Although CW provided the students with some benefits, it has some drawbacks. According to Kwon (2014), sharing and discussing with other students not only provided students with more ideas and examples but also led to some difficulties in reaching an agreement on direction for their writing. For instance, having too many different opinions made students spend more time on the decision-making process, which slowed down their improvement. Some students' efficiency depends on their partners. The students' varying proficiency level was an issue in group work and CW.

Similarly, Storch (2005) found that during writing as a group, some students were not comfortable with giving their opinion and their lack of confidence about their language prevented them from participating with their colleagues. Time management was another issue. It has been found that students who work in pairs or groups take a longer time to complete the tasks than those who work individually (Storch, 2005; Watanabe & Swain, 2007).

Yong (2006) found that low-level proficiency was a factor that might hinder students' collaboration and writing progress because it prevents group members from expressing themselves clearly. Moreover, some shy students did not like to work in groups.

Recent research often claims that students feel anxious in sharing their writing and reading in groups. In Bentley et al.'s (2013) study, students listed some drawbacks of working in groups, including relying on others, lacking time management, and having poor commitment and attitude. Group work might affect students' performance inside the class, either positively or negatively. From a pedagogical perspective, if learners work on a certain task, this does not necessarily mean they appreciate the group work.

A review of the relevant literature shows there are studies on the general topics of CW. There has been limited research, however, about EFL students' perceptions of CW in the Libyan context, where individualism is more common than teamwork. The researchers hope the outcomes of the study can fill this gap in the literature by providing insight into undergraduate EFL students' perceptions of their CW experiences and the factors that might affect their work.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

Both qualitative and quantitative tools for data collection and analysis were adopted in the study to ensure methodological triangulation (Cohen et al., 2007). Data were gathered from a questionnaire and semi-structured interview.

3.1.1 Questionnaire

A questionnaire was designed by the researchers to investigate students' perception of working as group in writing classes. The questionnaire comprised three sections (A, B and C). Section A consisted of 13 'yes' or 'no' questions about the objectives and the obstacles that might face the respondents while working as a team. Section B had 8 items concerning the respondents' individual and group experience. Section C contained 3 open-ended questions in which the participants had the opportunity to express their thoughts and views about their experience of writing in teams. The questionnaire thus had a total of 24 items.

The questionnaire was piloted to check its clarity. Then, it was revised by two faculty members from Sabratha University to ensure its validity. Prior to distributing, the questionnaire was modified in light of the feedback from the faculty members.

3.1.2 Semi-structured Interview

The data from the questionnaire was supported by semi-structured interviews with 10 students. The semi-structures interview questions were intended to elicit in-depth their views about group work.

Fifteen students volunteered to be interviewed individually, of which 10 showed up. The interview lasted about 20 minutes. It was conducted in English.

3.2 Participants

The study participants were 43 third-year writing students in the Department of English, Sabratha College of Arts. The participants were 8 males and 35 females whose ages ranged from 20 to 24 years old.

3.3 Data Collection and Analysis

Upon obtaining permission from the head of the Department of English and the writing teacher, the researchers met all third-year students to explain the aim of the research. The students were told that their answers would be confidential and that filling out the questionnaire and participating in the interviews were voluntary. Then, the questionnaire was distributed to the students in person. The total administration time was estimated to be approximately 15 minutes.

For the questionnaire, the collected data were analysed manually and then presented in figures. For the interview, the findings have been transcribed to extract the main themes. Then, the main themes were identified by looking at the questionnaire and the interview because they both complemented each other.

3.4 Research Questions

This study aims to answer the following research questions:

1. How do students perceive group work in their writing class?
2. What factors might affect their writing as group?
3. What do students suggest for improving the use of group work in writing classrooms?

4. Findings and Discussion

This section discusses the findings of the study in light of the research questions outlined in Section 3.4.

4.1 Findings

The presented results derive from the questionnaire and the interview. The results of the questionnaire are presented in percentages, while interview extracts are used for explanations and examples.

4.1.1 Students' Perceptions of Working in Groups

From the questionnaire, 93% of students are interested in writing in groups, while 7% of students mentioned they prefer writing individually. In the interview, the majority of students showed interest in this type of work by using emphasizing words. For example, student 2 said 'Yes, of course. It gives us the chance to share ideas and opinions. Student 3 said 'Yes, of course. I like it very much, especially when you work with someone whom you know well'. Student 4 said 'Yes, it is an effective way of learning, especially in writing. We can get information from each other'.

However, three interviewees did not prefer writing in groups. Student 7 said 'To be honest, no. It is more comfortable to work alone as you can express your feelings and your thoughts without barriers. You can just be free in your writing'. Students 6 and 8 were more flexible in their opinions. Student 6 considers writing in groups important but 'not that important as I cannot handle the whole group'.

In a follow-up question about why they prefer group work, all students agreed there are some benefits to writing in groups. Sharing ideas and opinions were put forth as the main advantage among all the students. Sharing experiences and accepting different opinions was not an easy job for some students because it needs good communication skills. Furthermore, Kung (2002 as cited in Sajedi, 2014, p.1565) explores how CW is 'a method to deal with the low linguistic level of exchange as planning, negotiating meaning and reviewing which makes the task goal-directed and the students more reflective'.

Accordingly, students 1, 2, 3, 7, 10, 11 and 12 stated that sharing different perspectives on the same topics could help students in writing because this is considered brainstorming. Which is a key element in the writing process. Students 3, 5, 9, 11 and 12 believed that group work might help in the accuracy of writing as because students can check their grammar, spelling and structure when there is a mutual feedback. As Okada (2006, p.662) observed, "*when students are learning a foreign language together, learners share their strengths and weaknesses with others*". Thus, CL is considered a gate of sharing and learning new ideas and developing soft skills that ". . . result in effective learning, as learners complete a task that they may not be able to do individually" (Okada, 2006, p.662). Working individually may hinder students from discovering, applying and enjoying learning.

Another important benefit that a good number of the students agreed on is that a group work is helpful when there is a misunderstanding of the teacher's instructions. For example, student 5 states clearly that 'If there is a misunderstanding of the instructions that a teacher gives, a group work could eliminate the misunderstanding'. This result appears to support previous research (Damon, 1984; Bejano, 1987) showing the following advantages: students can confront each other to try to resolve any disagreement, give each other feedback and speak at a level that other students can understand.

One more advantage mentioned by some students is that their speaking skills can be improved alongside their writing skills because the students need to discuss, argue and agree on the topic and outline before they start writing. This is consistent with Asfeldt's (2017) findings that showed participants learned from each other and that collaboration enhanced their self-confidence and self-esteem.

4.1.2 The Factors Affecting Students' Writing in Groups

In the questionnaire, students ticked the following factors they thought negatively influenced their group work. The results are presented in Figure 1.

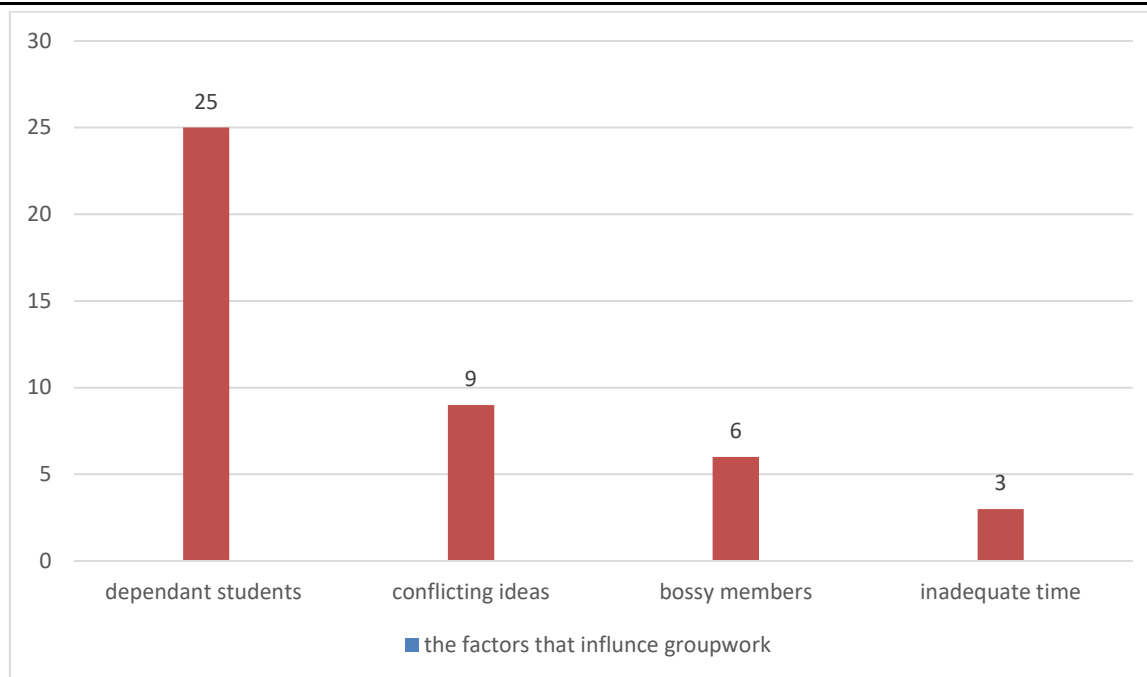


Figure 1: The factors that students indicated affected their group work

Dependent group members are the main factor that influences students' attitudes towards group work. Twenty-five students identified this as a challenge. The response was supported by students' answers in the interview.

Five interviewees (students 1, 2, 3, 4 and 8) believed that group writing is so demanding for the 'active' students (their term). For example, student 1 said 'Some of the students depend on one student and they just keep silent', while student 4 stated 'some students do not put all of their efforts in working as a group as they might be absent minded, lazy or just busy doing something else'. Similarly, student 8 stated that 'usually the good students do the whole work. I do not prefer group writing because you might put all of your effort and the weak student do[es] nothing'. According to Yong (2006), the shy and the low proficiency students may feel less confident to contribute to their group and thus participate less in the group work.

Misunderstanding among the students is another disadvantage that nine students shared in the questionnaire. The conflict might appear when some students do not agree with the opinion of their colleagues and insist on including theirs. This was supported by the interview responses of students 10 and 12, who stated 'The situation could be even worse when the group members are friends'. As student 8 said, 'In case of your friends' opinion is not right and you tell him that, this could cause troubles among students who are friends'. This could be more difficult to handle when some group members are bossy, as stated by nine students. Bossy students believe their opinions and writings are the best and they can get 'mad easily', as student 5 noted.

Another factor extracted from the interviewees' answers is that a group work might be time-consuming. The interviewees gave different situations that could end up with wasting time. Student 3's answer was the most direct: 'you might spend a lot of

time to come up with one idea'. Student 11 stated 'the misunderstanding among students that might end up with not accepting each other's opinions can be a main reason for wasting the group's time'. Similarly, Storch (2005) found that students who worked in groups took a longer time to complete the tasks than those who worked individually. In Bentley et al.'s (2013, p.17) study, students listed some drawbacks of working in groups as 'uneven contribution, rely on others, poor commitment and attitude, poor time management, [time-consuming], low ability and contribution'.

4.1.3 What Do Students Suggest to Improve the Use of Group Work in Writing Classrooms?

The majority of interviewees (students 2, 3, 4, 6, 7, 8, 10 and 11) believe that teachers should evaluate them individually despite their preference for writing in groups. This would encourage students to do their job 'perfectly' in the group because they will be evaluated based on their participation. Consequently, each student will recognize the importance of his/her role in the group. As student 8 put it, 'the group might get [an] A+ because of the work of one student only. This student certainly needs to have a higher mark'.

This individual evaluation cannot be held without a through observation. For instance, student 1 said that 'teachers should do that to know the points that they need to focus on and prepare activities that suit this'. Student 7 believed the observation might enable the teacher to know whether the students follow the rules and learn from the groups.

Another point that was raised by students is a teacher observation to the whole group. This could help teachers divide roles and tasks among students and ensure that every member in the group is working. These findings complement Salas (2005) who found the importance of teaching students to take turns in their work. This could be done in the form of dividing the work among the students, which could raise their responsibility and autonomy. According to Ortoleva (2016), CL in group work needs to be organized by the teacher and distributed among learners over a period of time. The researchers believe this might result in effective learning.

Dividing the work among the students was another suggestion made by students 10 and 11. This is supported by Brown's (2001) research, which indicated it could increase the students' responsibility towards group work. In addition, this is one of the major benefits mentioned by the participants in Bentley et al.'s (2013) study research findings mentioned which is dividing the workload and this could make the students' task easier and less stressed. This might create independent learners when they feel the importance of their role in the group. When students know they will be evaluated individually, they will put all of their effort in work, which can make them independent learners.

One interesting contrast related to working within a fixed group. Student 3 said 'it does make a difference if you work with someone you know as this can create a good atmosphere and you will feel comfortable and say what you like without barriers'. In

contrast, some students believed that fixed groups are a weak point, especially if the members are friends. Surprisingly, some interviewees indicated that the teachers should change the group members from time to time and gave different reasons. This is one of the recommendations made by Bentley et al. (2013), whose findings indicated that working with the wrong people can affect the students' work negatively. This implies that putting the students in fixed groups might not be a good idea.

This contradicts with Sajedi (2014), who states that a positive social interaction would benefit learners. Some of the interviewees mentioned that when they work with their friends in which there is a positive social interaction, their outcome is not always that good. One reason is when the members have conflicting opinions; they cannot negotiate with their friends because this might affect their relationship. This contradicts what Le et al. (2018) found: the majority of their samples believed that the feeling of friendship among the group members was not an obstacle to CL. Conflicting opinions and problems in accepting each other's ideas are similar to what Le et al. (2018) found could happen as a result of lacking collaborative skills. The lack of CL, such as accepting opposing viewpoints, providing and receiving help, and negotiating, could eliminate the output of the learners. The teachers' in Le et al.' study (2019) pointed out that the lack of collaborative skills might be because students have not been used to working in groups in primary and secondary schools.

Another reason is when your friend is 'weak'. This is extracted by the researchers from the Student 9 words that 'I cannot just tell my teacher that I want to change my group because they are my friends and I hope that my teacher does not put us together in the same group'.

Overall, the use of group work emphasizes interactive teaching and learning and the transition from the traditional teacher-centred classrooms to more student-centred classrooms where the teacher plays the role of facilitator and guides students in their learning process. As Bentley et al. (2013) points out, it is challenging for the teacher to guide the groups of students to work effectively. The teacher has to deal with students' level, motivation and personality. Libyan students used to have a passive role in which they sat in rows and waited for the teacher to deliver information. However, Ismail (2011) declares that 'students had high perceptions about the importance of ESL writing skill for [not only] their academic study [but also] their future'. Therefore, as one student commented, '[w]orking in groups prepares [them] for real team work for [their] future career', especially in 'the commercial world' (Bentley et al., 2013, p.16). The idea of involving them to work in groups is challenging for both teachers and students. However, the findings of this research might help introduce CL as a good venue.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

The findings show that 93% of students prefer group writing; it has great potential for learning writing because they can share ideas and opinions. The students stated that

group work eliminates misunderstandings of the teachers' instructions and is an effective way to improve other skills, such as speaking.

Although most of the students perceived group writing positively, they mentioned some drawbacks that warrant careful consideration. For example, teachers need to consider the different ability levels of students because the low-proficiency level student will depend on the high-proficiency level students in writing tasks. In addition, conflicting perspectives among students lead to the wasting of time. The students also suggested that the teachers should evaluate them individually and that teachers should engage in observation to know whether students follow the rules and learn from the groups.

Based on the findings of the study, we suggest some practical pedagogical implications for researchers and teachers who are interested in implementing group work in EFL classrooms:

- Make group tasks and instructions very simple and clear for students.
- Divide the work to make each student feel responsible for the success of his/her group. Shared responsibility makes each group member accountable to his/her colleagues within the group and creates a positive work environment.
- Identify the factors that might influence students' work in groups to reduce the negative behaviour of some group members and to promote motivation in writing.

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