

The Effect of Collaboration on Fluency of Writing in Iranian Intermediate EFL Writing Context

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Abstract - Writing in a foreign language has always been regarded as a complicated task by EFL learners. It is no longer an individual activity but an interactive process through which social abilities of the learners are reinforced. To promote interaction in the writing class, collaboration has been suggested to be advantageous. The present study aimed to examine the impact of practicing in pairs on the writing fluency of Iranian EFL learners. The present study was an attempt to investigate the effect of collaboration on the writing fluency of Iranian EFL learners. To achieve the goal of the study 25 persons were pooled out from among the 38 persons who were learning English at Iran-Mehr institute in Tehran. The researchers used Oxford Placement Test in order to sample the homogenous group. The sampled participants were divided into five groups of five. Each group had a leader who supervised her members while writing. The participants had non-collaborative writing for six sessions and six other sessions of writing with collaboration supervised by the researchers and leaders. At the end of each phase the participants took a test. The results of the tests were compared using the SPSS software. The obtained results showed that collaboration and sharing the ideas had a significant effect on fluency of writings produced by the participants.

Keywords: Collaborative Writing, individual and pair work, Fluency

1. INTRODUCTION

The ability to write effectively is becoming more significant in today's communication and academic settings and improving the writing ability of the learners which is assuming an important part in L2 language education (Ghoorchaei, Tavakoli, & Nejad Ansari, 2010). One popular method of writing instructions is the use of group work in which students in groups of two or three write collaboratively in both first (L1) and second (L2) language learning (Adams & Hamm, 1996). Studies in L1 instruction have shown that EFL learners working in pairs are exposed to a variety of different viewpoints which help them to develop critical thinking skill (Barnes & Todd, 1977; Slavin, 1991). Moreover, group work in L2 educational environment has shown that L2 learners obtain many opportunities to use the target language for different functions (Storch, 1999).

The interest toward collaborative writing had begun in the early 70s' through the work of pioneer Kenneth Bruffee who argued that by making students write compositions and fictions in pairs, students produced better texts in comparison to the times they wrote alone (Bruffee,

1973). The feedback that the learners receive from this new model of writing can be extremely positive since collaborative writing is reflective both of the business world and the academic field in which students study (Bruffee, 1984). Thus, collaborative writing in the learners' writing achievement in the classroom setting can positively improve in paired writing environment (Gebhardt, 1980, 1981).

There were also evidences of positive effects of interaction during writing task, especially at college level (O'Donnell, Dansereau, Rocklin, Lambiotte, Hythecker & Larson, 1985). For instance, (Clifford, 1981) studied college freshman performance in collaborative writing environment contended that students who wrote in groups learned more from each other than those students working individually. Daiute's research (1986, p. 389) confirmed earlier studies that "students who collaborated made significant improvement over students who wrote individually", and that the group work was better than the best work of any members of the group.

Topping (2001) defines paired writing as a structured system for effective learning in writing. Since the paired or group approach is potentially a viable alternative which addresses some of the concerns surrounding the more traditional approaches, the purpose of this study is to investigate how learners working together perform in a writing task. Therefore, the goal was to collect a sample of Iranian EFL learners writing at an intermediate level working in pairs and then compare them with another writing sample of EFL learners working individually. The basic assumption behind the research was to find out the effect of collaboration on the writing fluency. This has been previously done by Wigglesworth and Storch (2009) on EFL advanced-level learners but the writers focused on collaboration in an assessment context. As a result, the present study aimed to investigate whether collaboration between members of a pair helps them to write more fluent texts through interacting, giving and receiving feedback from each other. Similarly, the current study also tried to examine the influence of collaboration and pair working for duration of six sessions to compare the degree of improvement in the writing fluency of text written individually or in pairs.

Following the above mentioned lines of research, the present study tries to shed some light on the effect of collaboration on fluency of writing task and addressed the following research question:

RQ. Does collaboration have any significant effect on the fluency of writings developed by intermediate Iranian EFL learners?

Based on the above questions, the following hypothesis were formulated:

H0: Collaboration does not have any significant effect on the fluency of writings developed by intermediate Iranian EFL learners.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Writing as the visual channel and the productive mode of language is a vital skill for the L2 learners to develop their language knowledge and the teaching of this skill has become central in second language classrooms (Hyland, 2003). Writing, like listening, is often slighted in

language classes. Especially because of the powerful influence of audio-lingual method in ELT, the oral skills have received major attention and writing has been considered less important (Matsuda, 2003). This view toward writing makes speaking the focus of language teaching in the classroom. However, White (1981, as cited in Nunan, 1989) suggests that writing should be taught separately from speaking in L2 learning.

Thus writing, as a way of expressing ideas, thinking, and learning content (J. Foster, 2008), must be regarded as an essential tool for language learning as well as communication (Tynjala, Mason, & Lonka, 2001). Hudelson (1988) states that L2 learners can learn how the target language works through producing language output. According to Hinkel and Fotos (2002), the role of language output in L2 learning is not less than language input because one has to be understood, as well as to be able to understand while communicating.

Along with the shift from the teacher-centered classroom to the student-centered acquisition of communicative competence, communicative approaches encourage the language students to learn the second language through contextualized and meaningful communication. Collaborative learning as a system of concrete teaching and learning techniques underlying the communicative language teaching emphasizes active interaction between students with different skills and background knowledge (Tsai, 1998). Collaborative learning is a situation in which two or more people interact with each other to trigger learning mechanisms.

In the same vein, Social constructionists claim that knowledge is negotiated and best acquired through interaction. One of the most well-known theories of interaction is Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) which refers to the discrepancy between the student's actual developmental level and potential or proximal level (Vygotsky, 1978).

Collaborative learning focusing the active role of students in the class has owed much credit to constructivism. The main focus of constructivism has been student-centered learning. Constructivism embraces Vygotsky's perspective regarding social interaction as well as Piaget's approach to learning in which students play an active role to learn on their own. It is evident that L2 learners take accountability for their own learning, especially when they contribute to collaborative language output activities. Tsui (1995) defines SLA as: Input refers to the language used by the teacher, Output refers to language produced by learners and interaction refers to the interrelationship between input and output with no assumption of a linear cause and effect relationship between the two. (p. 121)

Since a great deal of attention has been paid to input and interaction in SLA (Gass, 1997), researchers have perceived that L2 learners should be also placed in situations of producing target language (see Gass & Selinker, 2008, for a review of input, interaction, and output research). Swain (2005) states that learners' speaking or writing facilitates language learning when engaging in collaborative learning activities. Participants make use of problem-solving dialogue to solve their linguistic problems regarding the task. Furthermore, collaborative dialogue forms an important part of peer interaction.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1. Participants

The participants of the present study were selected from the population of Iranian EFL students studying English in Hiran institute in Ahwaz (Iran). An OPT test was administered to choose 25 homogenous participants with an intermediate level of proficiency. The reason for selecting intermediate students was that they were required to write essays of 250 words and it was believed that students of elementary with low level of L2 proficiency cannot write scripts with significant difference. On the other hand, advanced students were so developed that may not provide a clear picture of the effect of pair versus individual writing. These learners were able to develop various genres of writing such as descriptive and argumentative styles. They had also been instructed how to develop letters in various formats such as business, formal and informal letters. They were all native speakers of Persian who were learning English as a foreign language. The other subject about the participants was that they were selected from among the female learners since the researchers had definitely easier access to this type of population. Their age range was between 19 and 25 years and all were females.

3.2. Procedure

As mentioned in the previous sections of this thesis and in order to answer the research question presented in this study, the researchers followed these procedures. First, 25 intermediate EFL learners who were studying at Hiran institute in Ahwaz were selected. The participants were familiar with writing paragraphs since they were practicing writing paragraphs using various genres of writing. The sampling was based on their scores on the proficiency test they had taken. The learners whose scores fell between one SD below and one SD above the group mean were selected as the main participants of the study.

Next, the researchers introduced a topic to them to develop the topics into paragraphs. The topic was a causal one. The writings were corrected and the five top ones were chosen as the leader for each group since the researchers would divide the participants in five groups later. The five leaders took part in a training course conducted by the researcher. In the training course which lasted for one session, the researchers taught them how to control and supervise their group members. Naturally, it has to be mentioned that at the end of training course, these leaders achieved to the qualitative level which there was no significant difference among sample groups.

In the first phase of the main study, the participants had to write without any collaboration for 6 weeks. In the first six sessions of the study, the researchers just introduced the topic and the topic was to be developed into a paragraph by each participant individually. After this phase the participants took a test as a non-collaborative one, they were asked to write about following topics: “social lesions”, “population development”, “good friend specifications”, “doing exercises”, and “peace in the family environment” in thirty minutes, the researchers assessed their writings based on the TEEP criteria the results of which were recorded for the comparison purposes. The next six sessions were devoted to collaborative writing. The leaders were responsible for implementing collaboration in each group and the researchers introduced them

topics. The topics varied and were of different genres as “specifications of choosing job”, “culture and tradition”, “weekend holidays”, “second language learning”, and “self-confidence”. The participants had to develop the topics into paragraphs and asked them to write a composition based on their favorite subject in thirty minutes. They shared their ideas and collaborated with each other. The researchers controlled both the participants and the leaders while they were collaborating and writing. Next, the researchers assessed their writings and recorded the results for later analysis.

3.3. Research Design and Analyzing the Data

In the present study each participant took two tests under two various conditions, the statistical procedure used for the study was paired samples t-test. In a study in which the participants are measured at the beginning of the study, given a treatment, and measured again. Thus, each participant has two measures, often called before and after measures. An alternative design for which this test is used is a matched-pairs or case-control study. In this study, the participants took part in non-collaborative writing first. The same participants had different performances either in collaborative writing or in writing without collaboration. Thus each participant achieved more than one score. These scores were compared using the SPSS software. The results of the SPSS procedures or the output of statistical procedures with their interpretations are given in the following chapter of this thesis.

3.4. Instrumentation

The instruments which were used for this study could be divided into two major ones. First, an OPT (Oxford Placement Test) test was administered to choose 25 EFL learners at an intermediate level of proficiency. The subjects were chosen on the basis of their scores on the OPT test, that is, those participants whose scores fell between one standard deviation below and one standard deviation above the mean were chosen as the participants of the study. The other instrument which was used for the sessions of writing was Passages volume one which is written by Jack C. Richards. The prompts and topics used in this book were chosen for the writing practice of the two groups since the book included interesting topics. Of course the researchers herself managed to select those topics which were interesting enough and introduced them to the participants to write on.

4. STATISTICAL CALCULATION

The researcher’s main goal is to give the results for the quantitative data, to infer them and then to discuss the results. To do this, the researchers presented the statistical procedure results summarized in a series of tables. The tables report the results of the matched t-tests regarding the probable causal relationships the variables of the study. Then the inferences made from the data. Based on the drawn inferences, the suggested hypotheses were either accepted or rejected.

In this study the dependent variable used was text information structure where the emphasis was directed towards the accuracy, fluency, formality and the style of the

participants' writings and also collaboration writing was independent variable. The participants had no collaboration in their writings for the first phase while they had collaboration in their writing during the following six sessions of sessions they had. Then they took a test of writing the results of which were recorded for statistical analysis. The text information structure was assessed according to the rubric provided by the TEEP guidelines. At the end of the collaborative writing sessions which lasted for six weeks, the participants took a test of writing. The results of these tests have been brought in the following sections.

4.1. Testing the Hypothesis and Answering the Research Question

As it was explained in the present study, the following one research questions were posed: "Does collaboration have any significant effect on the fluency of writings developed by intermediate Iranian EFL learners?" Based on the above research question, a hypothesis was posed. To verify the hypothesis, the obtained information was tabulated in the tables which are brought in the subsequent sections of the study.

4.2. The Results of the Proficiency Test

As it was explained in the previous sections, a proficiency test was administered to a population of 38 language learners in order to sample a homogenized statistical sample for the study. The following table shows the results of descriptive statistics which is obtained from the proficiency test administration.

Table 1. The Results of the Proficiency Test Administered to the Groups

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Proficiency	38	24.00	89.00	52.2632	19.24899
Valid N (listwise)	38				

Based on the information mentioned in the table, the mean of the scores obtained by thirty eight participants in the study was 52.2632 and the standard deviation is 19.24889. Thus, those whose scores fell one SD below the mean and those whose scores fell one SD above the mean were eliminated in order to form a homogenized group of learners to participate in the study. Based on this explanation, 25 participants were sampled.

4.3. The Results of the Non-Collaborative Tests

The twenty five participants, who had been assigned to five groups, first experienced a non-collaborative writing. It must be said that the grouping was done only to control the activities of the members in an easier way. They were all females. In the following section, the results of the tests before conducting the collaboration are brought.

Table 2: The Results of Descriptive Statistics for Non-collaboration Phase

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Noncollaborative	25	12.00	16.25	14.2000	1.26037
Valid N (listwise)	25				

Based on the provided information in table 2 the mean of the participants is 14.20, the standard deviation is 1.26. The standard deviation is a number that indicates the extent to which a set of numbers lie apart. Comparing the tables 2 and 3, it seems that the scores have been similar before the collaborating process. On the other hand, there were no significant differences between the five participating groups of the study at the beginning of the study. The mean of the group performance is 14.20 as the table shows. The minimum and maximum scores obtained in the first phase of the study were 12.00 and 16.25 respectively. To sum up, the table shows that the participants had been similar as far as their writing skills are considered.

Table 3. The Results of Descriptive Statistics for Collaboration Phase

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Collaborative	25	14.00	18.00	15.9900	1.20433
Valid N (listwise)	25				

Table 3 shows the results of descriptive statistics for the collaborative phase of the study. As the information given in the table shows, the minimum and maximum scores in this phase have been 14 and 18 respectively. It seems that compared with the non-collaboration phase of the study the learners have progressed. The group mean of the participants is also 15.99, while in the previous phase it is 14.20. These differences eluded the researchers to conclude that the collaboration is effective in writing skills of language learners. Since more statistical procedures are needed to come to a logical conclusion, the researchers had to compare the results of the statistical analyses in the first phase of the study and then compare it with the second phase ones. In the following section, the researchers has provided the results of the comparative study between these two phases of the study.

4.4. The Results of the Statistical Procedures for the Matched T-test

In the following table, the results of the statistical procedures of the matched t-test have been brought. Paired sample t-test is a statistical technique that is used to compare two population means in the case of two samples that are correlated. Paired sample t-test is used in 'before-after' studies, or when the samples are the matched pairs, or when it is a case-control study.

Table 4. The Results of Paired Samples Statistics

		Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pair 1	Noncollaboration	14.2000	25	1.26037	.25207
	Collaboration	15.9900	25	1.20433	.24087

As it can be seen in table 4 the means of non-collaboration and collaboration phases are 14.20 and 15.99 respectively. It seems that the participants have had a better performance on their collaboration based tasks. The standard deviations are 1.25 and 1.20. In the following table the results of the correlations between the samples have been brought.

Table 5. The Results of Paired Samples Correlations

		N	Correlation	Sig.
Pair 1	Noncollaboration & Collaboration	25	.621	.001

As it is evident, in table 5 there is a positive correlations between the samples obtained in the study. In other words, the performances of the participants under two different conditions are correlated. The correlation coefficient is 0.62 and the p value is 0.001 which shows a strong relationship between the performances of the participants in two phases of the study. But whether the differences are significant or not caused the researchers to run a paired or matched samples T-test the results of which can be seen in the following section.

4.5. The Results of the Paired Samples T-test

The differences observed under the two various conditions were examined using a paired samples t-test analysis. The results of this analysis can be seen in the table 4.6 which is brought in the following part.

Table 6. The Results of Paired Samples Test

		Paired Differences					t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
		Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
		Mean	Std. Deviation	Mean	Lower	Upper			
Pair 1	Noncollaboration – Collaboration	-1.79000	1.07452	.21490	-2.23354	-1.34646	-8.329	24	.000

In this table, the p value is 0.000 based on which it can be inferred that the difference between the performances of the participants in two phases of the study have been statistically significant. According to the information given in this table, the mean is -1.79; the standard

deviation is 1.07. The t-value is 8.32. It can be interpreted that collaboration positively affects the performance of learners in the enrichment of the text information structure of their writings. The following section gives a further explanation of the results using a plot created by the SPSS software.

In the following table, the processing summary of the collaboration and non-collaboration phases of the study can be seen.

Table 7. The Results of Case Processing Summary

	Cases					
	Valid		Missing		Total	
	N	Percent	N	Percent	N	Percent
Collaboration	25	100.0%	0	.0%	25	100.0%
Noncollaboration	25	100.0%	0	.0%	25	100.0%

5. CONCLUSION

The purpose of this study has been to examine the effect of collaboration on learning fluency of writings developed by Iranian EFL learners. The research demonstrates some main implications regarding the effect of collaboration on EFL learners' writing and also states some operant suggestions for further studies in terms of improving their writing quality. One important implication of the findings regards second language instructors' attention to learning styles that will promote positive learners beliefs about learning English. The participants did note an overall preference for learning in a collaborative environment, remarking that a collaborative learning experience would have positive effect on their writing ability when the researchers asked them about their experience in learning in the second phase of the study. Participant preference for collaborative learning claim that work with a partner- trigger[s] interaction and meaningful communication in the L2, which spark positive learner attitudes towards the content. Through the creation of--- shared meaning and in the exchange of information, knowledge and expertise amongst group members, collaborative environments from empowering social contexts that are—mediated by personal relationships that develop from decision making and negotiation processes in collaborative learning environments help to establish lasting motivation for future explorations of the content in the TL, in addition to enhancing students' communicative competencies. When selecting learning styles that fit the students and the curriculum, foreign language instructors should inquire about their learner's preferred learning environments. Through administration of a survey, individual or class discussion, or other means, determining learner's preferred learning styles, then attempting to incorporate these styles appropriately into in-class and at-home activities will not only serve to boost students engagement with the curriculum, but also show the students that the second language instructor is equally invested in the learners' success in language learning.

Another implication that can be drawn involves selection of an appropriate learning style to yield increased development of writing ability. The data from this study show that the difference in reported growth in writing ability was statistically significant based on the

learning style in which the participants collaborated with each other under their leaders' supervision. Because the collaboration phase showed a significantly higher amount of growth in writing compared to the non-collaboration one, foreign language instructors should consider making use of collaborative techniques to enhance their own student's development in areas of language learning especially writing.

As a consequence, instructors using collaboration in the classroom should create activities that are multi-layered, have higher expectations and which allow the second language learners to push the limits of their comfort zone in the L2. Through the specific implications from this study will be best applied to higher educational ESL settings with advanced language learners, these suggestions could be implemented in other English language learning contexts as well. Adaptations could be made to suit the needs of learners of varying levels of English language proficiency, native language background, ages and environments of study (ESL or EFL) to effectively promote development of collaborative activities in writing skills. The results of data analysis indicated the significant relationship between these two variables effectively.

In fact the present study aimed at finding new ways to develop writing and to teach writing skill in a better way. The best way based on the results obtained from this study was incorporating collaboration as a task and engaging the class members and even assigning leaders to the groups so that the group members felt security while being guided by other members and their leaders.

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