

Collaborative Academic Writing: Challenges and Difficulties of English Native and Non-Native Speaker Students on an Academic Skills Module in a UK University

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Abstract

Collaborative learning has recently gained increased importance in teaching, learning, and assessment in higher education (Storch, 2005; Luna & Ortiz 2013; Jalili & Shahrokhi, 2017). Working collaboratively means that students can help each other and make themselves more independent learners. Students' experiences writing collaboratively are said to have a positive impact on their overall academic performance and writing development. However, collaborative academic writing does not seem to be given the necessary attention in the literature. The present study attempts to explore this neglected area by addressing the challenges and problems faced by students when working and writing collaboratively. Participants were both English native and non-native students enrolled on a Year 0 (foundation year) taking an academic skills module in a UK university to prepare themselves to cope with their various disciplines of study. The study adopted a qualitative methodology where data were collected via focus group interviews. Results showed that students reported a number of challenges and difficulties when working together. The pedagogical implications for EAP will be presented and discussed.

1. Introduction

Many previous studies have addressed collaborative learning and, more specifically, collaborative writing, as an important component in students' writing development for both general and academic purposes (Shafie, Maesin, Osman,

Nayan, & Mansor, 2010). There is also evidence that collaboration in writing can lead to reflection on language production and meaning making (Swain, 1995, as cited in Kessler, 2009, p. 80). Collaborative writing is also believed to contribute to increased complexity in writing and a willingness to utilize peer feedback (Sotillo, 2002) as well as an increase in grammatical accuracy and overall quality of writing (Storch, 2005). Another recent study found that collaborative writing fostered more accurate L2 written productions compared to individual writing (Jalili & Shahrokhi, 2017). In light of this evidence, studying collaborative writing could have potential implications for developing and enhancing academic writing pedagogy.

Collaborative learning seems to have become a trend in the 21st century in universities due to the changing nature of education following recent advancements in technology and the internet and the concomitant shift in students' learning styles. Collaborative learning is defined by Smith and MacGregor (n.d.) as "an umbrella term for a variety of educational approaches involving joint intellectual effort by students, or students and teachers together." Usually, students are working in groups of two or more, mutually searching for understanding, solutions, or meanings, or creating a product. Collaborative learning activities vary widely, but are mostly centred on students' exploration or application of the course material, not simply the teacher's presentation or explication of it. This seems to indicate that collaborative learning emphasises the role of learners as active members in the teaching and learning process which has increasingly become learner-centred. It has long been argued that students learn best in a more learner-centered, collaborative learning context compared with individualistic and competitive learning settings (Johnson & Johnson, 1994; Vygotsky 1978). This is because collaboration maximizes learners' engagement and involvement in language practices and challenges their existing language knowledge in a more effective learning environment (Willis, 1996). Collaborative learning also emphasizes active interaction between students with different skills and background knowledge, thus enhancing the learning experience (see e.g., Tsai 1998 as cited in Biria & Jafari, 2013, p. 165; Gass & Selinker, 2008).

The present study attempts to explore elements of collaboration in academic writing with a view to emphasizing the importance of a social practice

that could potentially contribute to students' overall academic performance on writing tasks assigned at university.

2. Collaborative Writing

Collaborative writing generally refers to situations where learners work together with shared responsibilities to produce a written text (Storch, 2005). The theoretical and pedagogical perspectives supporting collaborative writing are arguably situated within the social constructivist view of learning, which views writing as a socially situated act. Indeed, the use of small groups or pairs in collaborative writing resonates with the social constructivist view of learning. This view largely draws on Vygotsky's work, which sees human development as inherently a socially situated activity. Within this framework, group and paired work provide learners with the opportunity to participate in activities that foster interaction and knowledge co-construction (Storch & Wigglesworth, 2009, p. 157). There are numerous reported benefits of collaborative writing in the literature. Collaborative writing can have a number of benefits for the overall development of students' academic writing, since it helps maximize learners' engagement and involvement in language learning practices by providing them with opportunities to interact and challenge their language knowledge in a more effective learning environment (Storch, 2005; Willis, 1996). It can also improve learners' writing fluency compared to writing individually (Biria & Jafari, 2013). Furthermore, collaborative writing has been shown to enhance students' academic writing development as, when working collaboratively on a writing project, students can develop and share different formal aspects of language, promote their critical thinking, and raise their awareness of the use of various academic writing mechanisms such as spelling, capitalization, and the overall rhetorical aspects of writing (Luna & Ortiz, 2013, p. 143). However, a few studies in the literature (e.g., Shafie et al., 2010; Mutwarasibo, 2013) have reported various challenges and difficulties when students engage in collaborative writing tasks such as difficulties finding the time to write together due to study pressure and the conflicting timetables of group members involved in a collaborative writing task. Another challenge is related to the collaborators' conflicting opinions and difficulties reaching compromise and negotiating the

different and sometimes contrasting ideas contributed by different people in the same group. Moreover, adapting to different personalities, different styles of writing, and different levels of language proficiency has also been found to cause challenges (Shafie et al., 2010). Difficulties in connection with different strategies for planning, organization, cohesion, coherence, and grammar are also a reported challenge in collaborative writing contexts (Mutwarasibo, 2013).

2.1 Writing for Learning in the Discipline

Learning to write effectively is crucial for learning and success at university and effective academic writing is arguably, as suggested by Murray and Moore (2006), “a continuous process involving reflection, improvement, development, progress and fulfilment of various types and in varying measures” (p.5). Moreover, writing develops students’ understanding and construction of subject-based knowledge (e.g., Berkenkotter & Huckin, 1995; Carter, Ferzli, & Wiebe, 2007; Leki, 2007). Writing can indeed help students learn and acquire disciplinary knowledge because they must read and engage into disciplinary materials in order to complete assigned writing tasks. For instance, in Leki’s (2007) study, EFL/ESL students claimed that they benefited from writing in their discipline and acquired disciplinary knowledge. This is because they spent more time with the disciplinary material, manipulating it and thus becoming more consciously aware of aspects of it. Collaborative writing at university can therefore help students become better writers in their disciplines and thus socialize and acculturate within their disciplinary discourse communities or communities of practice. This is due to the fact that students become acquainted with the practices and conventions of their disciplines of study through participation and engagement in specialized disciplines which can be viewed as tribes and communities whose members share common beliefs, practices, conventions, and views towards knowledge and the world (see e.g., Becher, 1990; Pinch, 1990). However, students might find it rather difficult, particularly at their early stages of study, to become inducted into their chosen disciplines. As new members of these communities, students need to go through an apprenticeship period where they undergo a process of gradual enculturation into these communities and their practices (Lave & Wenger, 1991).

Based on these previous findings, the aim of our study was to explore the problems, difficulties, and challenges experienced by EAP foundational students who were required to write collaboratively. The aim of collaborative writing tasks in this context was to prepare the students to write at university and thereby enhance their ability to effectively learn in their prospective disciplines of study. The overarching objective of the study was to propose implications and recommendations that could better inform the design, development, delivery, and evaluation of collaborative writing tasks in the context of the study and beyond.

3. Methodology

3.1 Participants

The data were collected from seventeen students, twelve native and five non-native speakers of English, from a mixed class. They were enrolled on *Year 0*, which is the *Foundation Year*, on a humanities course at a large UK university with a high number of enrolments of both home and international students. All participants were preparing to study for bachelor's degrees in the humanities, including sociology, linguistics, politics, history, and literature. The course was intended to enhance students' academic literacy and language skills to prepare them for study in their prospective disciplines. Students also took subject classes simultaneously with the EAP and subject teachers engaged in collaboration in order to gear the EAP provision towards the language demands of the subject content.

3.2 The Collaborative Writing Task

As part of the course and their academic writing skills development, learners were required to write a 1000-word collaborative piece following a collaborative oral presentation. They were asked to discuss mainly the important findings of research into the topic chosen for their oral presentation, which was related to their discipline of study, and explain the wider implications, describe the research strategy, acknowledge weaknesses, and make recommendations. The collaborative writing task comprised 15% of their overall coursework.

They were instructed during the lectures on how to write such types of academic work, provided with the necessary language support and a potential four-part structure to follow, but were also allowed to decide themselves on how they would organise the whole process of writing. For this task learners had to work in the same group they were in for the oral presentation for which were allowed also to decide themselves the composition of the group provided that the groups do not exceed four members.

3.3 Data Collection

Data were collected through focus group interviews and group logs which students were required to complete during their assigned collaborative writing tasks. The purpose of the logs was to give a clear idea to the EAP tutors of (i) the frequency and the location of their meetings with group members and who was present, (ii) what issues they discussed and (iii) what decisions were made as well as how the process of writing was carried out. The students were also asked to award themselves a group mark for collaboration, teamwork, and participation (see the appendix). Students were asked to keep and complete logs throughout their work on the tasks and to submit both their collaborative writings and their logs. Focus group interviews were conducted retrospectively at the end of the term in order to collect additional data, after the students had submitted their logs and the collaborative writing assignments. The interview questions were centred on students' problems and challenges with regard to collaborative writing as well as their overall perceptions and attitudes towards the experience of working together to produce their collaborative writing tasks. Interviews were transcribed verbatim and both the interview transcripts and the narrative data from logs were coded thematically and analysed.

4. Findings and Discussion

In this section we will report on the main findings that address our research question based on data collected from the interviews and the logs: *What challenges and problems do learners encounter when working and writing collaboratively?* Overall, participants reported a number of challenges when writing together. When asked to reflect on their experiences regarding working collaboratively,

researching, and preparing for their assigned collaborative writing topics, they reported some stress due to the concurrent deadlines of other assignments and limited time:

We all were stressed and had limited time to meet deadlines due to the fact that we were busy with the several assignments that were due the same week (S1).

Agreeing on the chosen topic was also listed as another challenge since not everyone in the group could agree on the same topic due to different opinions on what they would feel more comfortable with. Agreeing on the right time and place for group meetings was one of the first challenges:

One of the first challenges we faced was to come together. It was difficult for us to come together, finding a day and sticking to it as we all have different timetables (S2).

...one of the main challenges the group faced was being able to meet up with other group members. Each group member had different timetables and different occupations to accommodate at divergent times which made it arduous for the whole group to be able to discuss matters that affected the whole presentation (S4).

In fact their logs revealed that some groups did not manage to meet with all their members on all occasions before the submission deadline and the learners indicated that "the team met but probably not often enough".

These findings corroborate what is reported in the literature (e.g., Shafie et al., 2010; Mutwarasibo, 2013) and highlight the importance of minimizing such challenges in order to develop and sustain the practice, which is necessary if the skills gained from collaborative writing are to have a positive impact on the student's' academic writing development in their prospective degrees.

Learners also mentioned technical challenges:

...one of us had problems with the laptop. It suddenly stopped working and connecting to WIFI. Therefore, it was hard to work together even though we managed to compensate and use computers in the library (S1).

Moreover, the interviews also confirmed what participants reported in their logs, that is, that group work did not always appear to operate effectively for various reasons, including a lack of communication within the group and people being distracted:

The collaborative reflective writing was a difficult task for different reasons. First of all, it was completely different from what we are used to doing. Then, coordination was a difficult process in our group. Some did more work than others, we did not discuss a lot about what we should do (S6).

Participants also mentioned that constructive peer feedback and negative criticism from peers were not always as well received as the same from the lecturer:

The process of actually writing about our subject was done fairly well in terms of the individual (efforts), but I felt that when it was time to merge the distinct pieces of work into one cohesive presentation, we struggled to be critical of each other's mistakes (S5).

Their group logs also indicated that some groups had "some difficulties in resolving all differences of opinion" despite being a good team. This finding stands in contrast to those of researchers studying criticism in peer feedback (e.g., Zeng, 2006; Hirose, 2009 as cited in Biria & Jafari 2013, p. 166) who found that peer criticism had a positive impact on student's writing. The present study suggests that the learners were uncomfortable being critical of their peers in their groups despite their knowledge that a group mark would be allocated. This is in line with Hong's (2006) findings which indicated that students' attitudes toward peer feedback activity in L2 was negative and did not necessarily make students more comfortable and confident in the writing learning environment. The present finding could perhaps be attributed to the different educational and cultural backgrounds of both the English native and non-native learners.

Additionally, participants cited difficulties in terms of the writing structure of the collaborative task, which was somewhat surprising since they had been provided with a structure to follow in advance. The groups were allowed to decide by themselves how to organise the whole process of writing. However, perhaps this was why the problem arose: Rather than engaging in the whole process of writing together the learners decided that each of them would work individually on one or two parts before piecing the full text together as it emerged from their completed logs for their particular group. As a result of working individually, they often discovered repetitions and overlaps:

In terms of organization of (the) collaborative writing task, we found difficulty to structure it properly. Even if we divided the work, we had similar ideas more or less and we felt we were a bit repetitive and overlapped some thoughts in different parts despite proofreading the whole work. But we did correct each other and improve the overall work in terms of organization of ideas (S9).

Different writing styles, mixed proficiencies academic language, or only having non-native speakers in a group were also considered problematic:

During the writing phase the hardest part for me was to let all the different academic styles work together (S15).

It was challenging to decide what type of language to use, because I made it sound as formal as it could get but it felt strange to use pronouns (I, we, me, us...) (S11).

Of course, the fact that in my group there were only foreigners didn't help and we were never sure of the right way of expressing our thoughts (S15).

Since good writing in general and academic writing in particular are learned skills even for native speakers, it was interesting to find that the learners whose mother tongue was not English, even those with a high level of proficiency, seem to believe that the native speakers could perform better on an academic writing task. One lesson in this case is that, in a mixed class, careful attention should be paid to the assignment of students to groups, ensuring that at least one native speaker is present in each group.

However, not all students perceived the collaborative task as beneficial for enhancing their academic writing to a high extent. Since the assigned collaborative writing task was provided within an academic skills module and required only a limited number of words, one participant pointed out that it was not a really useful task for his/her academic skills improvement:

I don't believe it improved my academic skills because it was a paragraph each, so it didn't stretch us (S3).

Finally, students expressed the sentiment that a group mark for the collaborative writing task was unfair because there were students who did not contribute to the group work and this affected negatively those students who really worked hard:

We couldn't really measure how much each of us was working. Some of us would show up to the meetings and some others not, which was frustrating, although we used Google...(S10).

It was frustrating to have a group mark as I did almost all the job by myself as the others didn't bother to turn up and in this case their marks were higher than they should have been, whilst mine was lower (S17).

In their study of collaborative academic writing involving beginner, university student writers in Malaysia, Shafie et al. (2010) reported a range of challenges from social to language and personal issues with the students but they also suggested a number of measures that could minimize these challenges, thus maintaining and consolidating opportunities for practice. Their suggestions included the training of students on intensive reading, interpersonal and communication skills, time management skills, research skills, and teacherpeer bespoke assistance to certain students as needed. Similar issues were discovered in the present study and which resonate with the implications of Shafie's et al. (2010) findings. These challenges and difficulties, if not addressed, could discourage students, particularly foundational students, from engaging in collaborative writing tasks and activities.

5. Conclusion

This paper presented a small-scale qualitative study conducted in a single UK academic setting, but we believe that the insights gained from the study could be transferrable and applicable in other similar contexts. The study has shown that it is highly important to investigate and elicit the challenges and difficulties learners face with collaborative writing experiences so that the practice can be further improved in terms of design, assessment, and marking criteria so as to support learners' academic writing development. Based on the final collaborative writing product assessed, we believe that collaborative writing was beneficial for the academic development and socialization of students at university and academic life. To minimize the potential challenges and enhance the experience, we propose some recommendations for EAP provision in the context of the study and beyond.

First, collaborative writing tasks should be clearly assigned with clear prompts and instructions. Another recommendation is that topics for collaborative tasks should be broad enough that students can expand research and synthesize information from various sources. A clear format/structure for the writing products should be provided in advance. Additionally, EAP instructors should ensure that sufficient time is allocated in the teaching timetable for collaborative work and some of the students' meetings/sessions should be conducted in the classroom also so that they can be monitored by EAP instructors to ensure that all group members are engaged and taking part in the assigned tasks. Furthermore, an assessment and marking system for collaborative writing should be both formative and summative and it should be fair, comprehensive, and commensurate with each student's effort. Last but not least, we believe that, as our findings suggest, it is extremely important for the students to be taught not only academic writing rules but also negotiation and interpersonal skills, which are necessary for any form of collaboration.

As with any study, some limitations should be acknowledged. Our study is limited to a single context and we must therefore avoid overgeneralization. However, we firmly believe that our findings are illuminating and can be transferable to and applicable in other similar educational contexts. More research should be conducted on the challenges students face in collaborative writing in order to validate the results reported in this study. Future research could

also address more specific questions such as: To what extent does collaborative writing affect students' overall academic writing experience in the discipline? What impact do the cultural and educational backgrounds have on individual students' engagement in collaborative and group work? To what extent are native and non-native speaker students similar and/or dissimilar in performance in a collaborative writing task? More ethnographic qualitative and longitudinal studies are recommended with a range of methods of data collection and more rigorous engagement with research sites. Such studies could yield promising findings that would add to the development of research and pedagogy in collaborative academic writing and its impact on students' academic development as well as their overall process of socialization and enculturation within their chosen academic discourse communities and communities of practice.

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Appendix

Group Mark* for collaboration, teamwork and participation.

Circle the appropriate description of the group's level of work.

2	4	6	8	10
We did not function as a team at all. Meetings were infrequent or poorly arranged. We were not able to discuss matters effectively so drafting and revisions were difficult to decide. The team had much difficulty resolving conflicts and did not act in a supportive way.	We tried but did not always work well as a team. We rarely met so there was a failure to meet often enough. There was lots of difficulty when discussing drafting and revisions. Support for each other was lacking. We often had difficulty resolving differences of opinion and were not able to work cohesively.	We were a good team. The team met but probably not often enough. We were able to agree drafting and revisions but had some difficulty discussing and listening to each other, occasionally supporting each other. We had some difficulty resolving all differences of opinion.	We were a very good team. We met as planned, covered main points and sometimes achieved drafting and revisions. Members were able to get their points across and we often offered help to each other. We mostly worked together to resolve differences of opinion.	We were an excellent team. We met enough times as planned, discussed and achieved drafting and revisions. We communicated well and were supportive towards each other. We always worked together to resolve differences of opinion.
Group mark /10				

*The mark allocated for Group Work will be decided by the group members and will apply to each student in the group.