THE EFFECTS OF THE NUMBER OF PARTICIPANTS ON COLLABORATIVE L2 SUMMARY WRITING

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Abstract:

This study investigates the relationships between the number of participants in summary writing and the quality of their final summary writing. A total of 52 participants aged 16, participated in this four week, mixed-method study. The participants' overall scores and analytic scores were analysed with paired t-test (individual and collaborative group) and independent t-test (pair and groups of four). The paired t-test results for the overall scores revealed that collaborative writing improves students' final summary writing and the analytic scoring revealed that the participants in the collaborative groups had improved in three out of five components. The independent t-test results for the overall score showed no significant improvements but there were improvements shown by groups of four in the mean score value. On the other hand, the analytic scoring results revealed that the participants in groups of four had improved in all five components. The majority reacted positively and agreed that the collaborative task had improved their vocabulary knowledge compared to grammar and content.

Keywords:

Collaborative Writing, Summary Writing, Learners' Perceptions, Quality Of Writing, Socio Cultural Theory

Introduction

The ability to write in English Language is a vital skill in today's world of education and international affairs. Biria and Jafari (2013) mentioned that writing is a "complicated process through which ideas are created and expressed". Besides that, inevitably writing a precise and

fluent essay is not an easy task. In fact, writing has been deemed as the most difficult task as compared to listening, speaking and reading in language learning.

Although writing has always been seen as an individual task, more and more researchers are encouraging the process of viewing writing as a joint activity in order to promote interaction among the learners while they are writing together. Thus, the interaction will enable the leaners to learn from each other. Researchers have also been viewing writing as a form of "social-context phenomenon" that has set forth Vygotsky's social interaction theory as the theoretical framework for mediated learning in writing (Biria & Jafari, 2013).

Apart from essay writing, summary writing has been recognized as a highly important and essential skill not only in language learning, but also in most areas of a student's academic career. It is because summary writing is highly useful in both writing and reading in academia (Johns, 1985). Many researchers found that most of the students had failed to use the summarization rules effectively and concluded that the students were weak at summary writing.

However, writing in Malaysia received negative perceptions among ESL learners who view it as a skill they like the least (Chan & Ain, 2004). Chen and Su (2011), claimed that students tend to copy text which is considered as an act of plagiarism when they were asked to summarize a long academic text. Similarly, in another context, Anis and Vahid (2015) stated that the participants need extra courses to help them improve their organization and vocabulary skills in ESL writing immediately. Norma Othman (2009), on the other hand claimed that participants were not able to differentiate the main and supporting ideas, thus failed to summarize the given passage.

In order to elicit the learners' opinion and issue faced during the task, a few researchers had combined self-reflection with collaborative writing, (Blum & Fernandez Dobao 2013; Lin & Maarof, 2013; Shehadah, 2011; Storch, 2005). From the self-reflective reports, it was found that a majority showed positive response towards collaborative task.

Hence, this study has aimed to identify the effects of collaboration on L2 summary writing. It has also set out to examine if the number of participants has an effect on the quality of their summaries and the participants perceptions on such collaboration. Besides, this present study is also to examine the perceptions of the participants in collaborative writing when they work in pairs and groups of four.

The study will answer these questions:

1. To what extent does collaborative writing have an effect on the quality of students' summary writing?
2. Does the number of participants in collaborative writing task have an effect on the quality of students' summary writing?
3. What are the perceptions of the learners on collaborative writing?

Literature Review

Collaborative Writing

Collaborative writing is not exactly a new concept in university settings as compared to the school setting. It is used in universities to train the graduates to collaborate, as workforces usually require them to have teamwork. On the contrary, in normal school setting, students are being evaluated as individuals so that their performances can be gauged separately (Wigglesworth & Storch, 2009). Writing has also been regarded as a communication procedure where the social abilities of the learners are being emphasized as compared to writing individually.

Researches in second language learning have focused more on collaborative oral productions and the influence of native and first language in second language learning. As compared to investigating the effectiveness of collaborative work for oral production or spoken discourse, researches are now focusing more on examining the benefits of collaborative work in terms of writing (Meihami, Meihami & Varmaghani, 2013). Storch (2005) pointed out that past researches all focused on the results of the participants' attitudes and motivation towards spoken activities and role plays rather than written activities.

Wigglesworth and Storch (2009)'s study were not only to compare language performances in collaborative writing, but also the types of processes that were involved during the writing activities. The study revealed that participants spend more time on composing, with planning taking up the second place and finally revising. Besides, the comparison of collaborative task revealed that pair work contributes positively on accuracy, compared to fluency and complexity.

Fernandez Dobao (2012) conducted a research comparing individual, pair and group of four and the results showed a high increase in the level of accuracy. This study further supported Wigglesworth and Storch (2009) as they mentioned that collaborative writing encourages the pair to maximize their linguistic resources when solving problems.
To date, there are studies on collaborative writing which involve essays and graphic prompts compared to summary writing. Sajedi (2014) conducted a research on summary collaborative writing and found that pairs performed well in a few components.

Learners' Perceptions Toward Collaborative Writing

A number of studies have been conducted on learners' perceptions toward collaborative writing. Lin and Maarof (2013) in West Malaysia required 30 students to state their perceptions and problems faced during collaborative summary writing and the study revealed that majority were positive toward collaborative summary writing as it has been beneficial for them. However, when asked about the problems faced during the task, a substantial number of participants stated their preference toward working individually.

In another setting, Fernandez Dobao and Blum (2013) examined 55 intermediate Spanish learners. The participants were asked to complete the task in pairs and groups of four and majority of the participants reacted positively toward the experience. However, four out of 55 learners had reservation toward the condition because they preferred writing at their own pace and developing their own ideas instead of sharing or discussing with others.

In sum, majority of the participants in the previous studies stated their positive preference toward the condition. In most of the studies, the number of participants was mainly two (pairs). Besides, there were a few other studies which examined the respondents' perceptions in pair and small groups but did not focus exclusively on writing (Brown, 2009; Garret and Shortall, 2002; McDonough, 2004; Riley, 2009).

Methodology
This is a mixed method within subject research design and the study employed a quantitative and qualitative approach. The participants for this study were selected based on convenience sampling. There were 52 Form Four students from a private Chinese Independent School in Kuala Lumpur. Participants were in the range of intermediate to advanced level of proficiency. Their level of proficiency was determined based on their English subject results in PT3 which was within the grade of A to C. These 52 individuals formed 26 pairs as well as the 13 groups. Pair refers to two participants whereas groups consist of four participants.
The data were derived from, first, summary writing produced by individuals and second, summary writing produced by pairs and groups of four. A survey questionnaire was used to gather students' feedback on collaborative summary writing.

Brown and Bailey's (1984) marking scheme (Appendix A) was employed to mark the summary scripts and the questionnaire for the third data was adapted from the previous study (Fernandez Dobao & Blum, 2013) (Appendix B).

Participants were required to produce a one paragraph summary of about 130-135 words on the given passage. In the first and the fourth week, participants were required to write one summary individually. In week two, the 52 participants were divided into two groups and they were randomly asked to form pairs and groups of four. The participants have been coded. Pair 1 to pair 12 in week 2 performed the task in group 8 to group 13 in week 3, whereas, group 1 to group 7 in week 2 performed the task in pair 13 to pair 26 in week 3. Finally, a survey questionnaire adopted from Fernandez Dobao and Blum (2013), was given to the participants.

Findings and Discussions
Research question one has been divided into two different parts. In the first part, participants' performance as overall was discussed whereas, in the second part, participants' performance as individual on five different components of the summary writing (organization, logical developments of idea, grammar, punctuation, spelling and mechanics and style and quality of expression) was discussed. The pre- test and the post-test scores were analysed by using paired samples t- test.

The mean score value of post-test is higher than pre-test (pre-test= 61.5769, post-test= 64.3846). It revealed that the research results are significant ($t=-3.454$, $df=51$, $p<0.05$). This shows that there is a significant improvement in participants' performance by engaging themselves in the collaborative task. This finding is in line with the previous studies conducted by Fernandez Dobao (2012) and Sajedi (2014).

Performance of Individuals on The Quality of The Summary Writing
In this section, participants' performance as individuals on five different components of the summary writing (organization, logical developments of idea, grammar, punctuation, spelling and mechanics and style and quality of expression) was discussed. To identify if collaborative writing has an effect on the quality of students' summary writing, all the participants' mean scores of all five components from the pre-test and post-test were compared. The total value will reveal if the participants have improved in the final summary writing. Positive value in the total column indicates improvements and negative value indicates that the participants did not improve in that particular component after being engaged in the prolonged task. (**See Table 1**)

Table 1: Individual Performance On The Analytic Scoring

Components	Scores for each component	Pre-test	Post-test	Total	Improvements
Organization	20	14	15	+1	performed well
Logical development of ideas	20	13	14	+1	performed well
Grammar	20	11	12	+1	performed well
Punctuation, spelling and mechanics	20	12	12	0	no improvements
Style and quality of expression	20	11	11	0	no improvements

Table 1 shows the individual performance in the final summary writing after engaging in prolonged collaborative task. The results revealed greater improvements in terms of their organization, content and grammar but not punctuation, spelling and mechanics and style and quality of expression components. The results are in line with the previous finding (Storch, 2005 & Chao and Lo, 2011) however, it is contradicted with the previous study conducted (Sajedi, 2014 &Shehadah, 2011). In sum, the overall score of the individual and collaborative groups showed that the participants had improved in their final task after engaging in the prolonged collaborative activity.

Overall Score of Summary Writing (Pairs and Groups of Four)
Research question two was designed to answer if the number of participants in a collaborative task affects their performance in summary writing (overall and L2 development). To answer the question, the scores for the pairs and groups in both weeks 2 and 3 were analysed by using independent samples t- test. Then, the quality of their summary writing (organization, logical development of ideas, grammar, punctuation, spelling and mechanics and style and quality of expression) were discussed in the following section.

The t-test results for weeks 2 and 3 are statistically not significant (t=-1.355, df=17, p>.05), (t=-1.299, df=18, p>.05). Based on the 95% confidence interval of the difference for both weeks (-9.0470, 1.96927), (-13.33462, 3.14414) zero is inclusive, so the research result is not significant. However, there were some improvements as revealed in the mean score value. The mean difference value of 3.53577, 5.0953 between pair and group in both weeks shows

improvement when participants performed in groups of four. Almost 44% (0.441107) performed better when they were in groups of four in week 3.

Performances of Pairs and Groups of Four on The Quality of The Summary Writing
To identify if the number of participants has an effect on the quality of the final summary writing, the scores for the analytic components of the summary writing (the five components) were examined. Similar to research question 1(second part), the mean scores for each component produced by pairs and groups were compared to answer the question. As explained in the methodology section, participants have been coded. To obtain a within-subject comparison, the mean scores of the same participant in both conditions were compared i.e. the scores of the summary components produced by participants in the paired condition, pair 1 to pair 12 in week 2, have been compared with the scores of the summary components produced by the same participants in the group condition as group 8 to group 13 in week 3. Likewise, the mean scores of each component produced by group 1 to group 7 in week 2 have been compared with pair 13 to pair 26 in week 3.

The mean scores obtained by group 8 to group 13 in week 3 have been compared with the mean scores obtained by pair 1 to pair 12 in week 2. **(see Table 2)** The total value reveals if the participants have improved in the final summary writing. Positive value in the total column indicates an increase in performance and negative value indicates that the participants did not improve in their performance.

Table 2: Mean Scores Obtained By Pair 1 To Pair 12 And Group 8 To Group 13

Components	Scores for each component	Mean scores of pair 1 to pair 12 in week 2	Mean scores of group 8 to group 13 in week 3	Total	Improvements
Organization	20	11	12	+1	performed well
Logical development of ideas	20	11	15	+4	performed well
Grammar	20	10	12	+2	performed well
Punctuation, spelling and mechanics	20	12	13	+1	performed well
Style and quality of expression	20	10	12	+2	performed well

Table 2 shows the comparison on the mean scores between pair 1 to pair 12 in week 2 and group 8 to group 13 in week 3. The results revealed that participants had performed well in all five components when they perform the task in groups of four in week 3. Greatest improvement is shown in the logical development of ideas component.

Table 3: Mean Scores Obtained By Group 1 To Group 7 And Pair 13 To Pair 26

Components	Scores for each component	Mean scores of group 1 to group 7 in week 2	Mean scores of pair 13 to pair 26 in week 3	Total	Improvements
Organization	20	12	11	-1	did not perform well
Logical development of ideas	20	12	14	+2	performed well
Grammar	20	12	11	-1	did not perform well
Punctuation, spelling and mechanics	20	11	11	0	no improvements
Style and quality of expression	20	11	11	0	no improvements

Table 3 shows the comparison on the mean scores between group 1 to group 7 in week 2 and pair 13 to pair 26 in week 3. The results revealed that participants had performed well in only the 'logical development of idea' component when they performed the task in pairs. They did not show any improvements in 'punctuation, spelling and mechanics' and 'style and quality of expression' components. As for the organization and grammar components, they performed better when they were in the 'group' condition.

Questionnaire
The third research question of the study concerned with problems or issues arising after completing the task individually, in pairs and in groups of four. Responses for question number four, an open- ended question with no rating scale, were divided into three parts as the question demands a lengthy response.

As for this part, analysis of questions one and two showed that, a majority of the participants stated that pair work is helpful (94%) compared to group work (90%). The most prominent reasons were, they were able to complete the given work within the stipulated time and collaborated well with their partners compared to being in groups of four. This could be due to the number of participants where there were only two participants in pair and they were able to solve language-related problems in a faster manner compared to groups of four. However, as mentioned earlier, participants will only benefit from collaborative task, if they engage themselves in the discussion actively in order to solve the language problems (Fernandez Dobao, 2012). On the other hand, when these participants were asked about their preference for collaborating (pairs or groups of four) in question 5, a majority agreed to groups of four (46%) compared to pairs (40%). As discussed earlier in the above section, this might be due to the participants' learning environment. Since collaborative writing is a novel strategy for the participants, they might state generally that pair work or group work is helpful but when they were asked about their preference personally, a majority might choose groups of four based on their experience.

On the other hand, 7 out of 52 participants stated their dislike for collaborative writing. The main reason for this was that these students preferred to have their own style and liked to work according to their own pace and at their own time. It should be noted again that not all learners can collaborate well in pair or group as there are individual differences. This result reflects the previous research conducted by Watanabe and Swain, 2007 and Fernandez Dobao, 2012.

Next, it can be concluded that the number of participants who saw a positive influence of collaboration in questions six, seven and eight, perceived vocabulary (58%) as slightly higher than content (46%) and grammar (50%). These participants were able to improve their vocabulary and also learnt the choice of words to be used in summary writing from their members. This finding also reflects the previous study conducted by Fernandez Dobao and Blum, (2013) where their participants, 31 out of 55, showed greater positive influence in the vocabulary element.

The analysis of the questionnaire for questions nine and ten on the other hand, showed that the participants had improved in their lexical knowledge (92%) compared to their grammatical knowledge (83%). Hence it can be concluded that, participants stated that they had improved well in vocabulary knowledge in both parts of the questionnaire (part 1 consisted of questions 6, 7 and 8 whereas part 2 consisted of questions 9 and 10).

This could be due to the participants' attitude. Most of the participants usually write down any new vocabularies that they had learnt with the meaning and memorize them. Later on, they use those words in their writing. So, this attitude might lead the participants to learn new words from their partners hence be one of the reasons of the participants' preference over vocabulary component compared to the other two components. However, sometimes their choices of words do not fit the writing context.

In sum, a majority of the participants explained that they were able to improve their vocabulary and grammar knowledge mostly through collaborative task as they got an opportunity to share, exchange or discuss their ideas with their partners and being taught or guided by their expert members during the task. Thus, it improved their knowledge both lexically and grammatically. This finding also supports the results of one of the questions in research question one, the study on the summary writing components. It revealed that the participants had improved significantly (60%) in their grammar and style and quality of the expression (vocabulary) compared to the other three components: logical development of ideas (56%), organization (29%) and punctuation, spelling and mechanics (37%) after being engaged in the collaborative activity.

A few participants expressed dislike toward collaborative writing as they would like to write the summary according to their own pace and improve or prepare themselves for the examinations however, these participants chose helpful or positive preference when they were asked if collaborative writing had improved their task performance or developed their L2 summary writing during or after engaging in the activity. Therefore, more awareness should be raised among the participants before the activity to explain about what they were going to be engaged in (Fernandez Dobao & Blum, 2013). Hence, it should be noted that, mainly only active participants were able to benefit from the task. As stated by Watanabe and Swain, 2007

and Fernandez Dobao, 2012, not all participants are able to collaborate and solve the language related problems due to various factors such as, personalities and preferences.

Conclusion

This study examines the relationships between collaborative summary writing, number of participants and the quality of final summary writing produced by the participants in the post-test. Besides, it also elicits participants' perceptions on collaborative writing. The analysis of the research questions revealed positive results from a majority of the participants. It revealed that the participants were able to improve their summary writing after engaging themselves in the treatment the improvement was not only in overall scores (pre-test and post-test) but great improvements were seen in terms of the quality of the final summary writing through three out of five major L2 summary writing components. The findings are in line with the previous study stating that collaborative writing enhances participants' writing skills, (Fernandez Dobao, 2012). However, in the survey questionnaire, participants stated that they have perceived greater knowledge in linguistic compared to content and grammar but the result in this section revealed that participants did not improve in that component.

On the other hand, the analysis of research question two revealed that groups had performed better than pairs, not significantly in the overall scores but in the mean score value (40% improvement). It can be evidenced in research question three as well when majority of the participants expressed that the number of participants in groups enabled them to discuss and relocate the points accurately. The results on the components of the summary writing (second part) again revealed groups performed better than pairs in all five major components. The most prominent component is the logical development of ideas.

Hence, the current study reflects the ideas of previous study, stating that pair or group work helped participants to improve in the quality of their final writing. (Fernandez Dobao, 2012; Shehadah, 2011; Storch, 2005; Fernandez Dobao & Blum, 2013; Lin & Maarof, 2013).

Those who preferred pair work claimed that the number of participants in group work had hindered them from completing the task and having a proper discussion but participants in groups of four claimed that the number of participants helped them to complete the task systematically as they could relocate points together, discuss and exchange their ideas before writing out the final summary.

Thus, it can be concluded that, collaborative writing especially groups of four had improved the quality of participants' summary writing. Majority of the participants expressed that collaborative writing had improved their vocabulary knowledge compared to grammar knowledge when they were asked to state their perceptions. However, from the results of the analytic components of their performances, it was revealed that they performed better in the 'logical development of ideas' compared to 'style and quality of expression' component. Participants were very receptive towards the condition as it was a novel approach applied in the summary writing classroom. Collaborative writing works well in improving summary writing. This method can be applied in the normal classroom setting to teach summary writing even with larger number of students.

Future research will need to be conducted with a larger number of participants from the same proficiency level with an extended treatment phase. The scope of the present study can also be extended by incorporating a verbal interview and Language Related Episode's (LREs) could be incorporated into the study as well to get richer and triangulated results about the experience and process. Finally, it would be more enriching if a face-to-face interview could be conducted in a future study to elicit participants' perceptions on collaborative writing as verbal interview enables the interviewer to probe more from the participants.

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1. How helpful do you think it is to work in pairs in class?

   ☐ Not helpful

   ☐ Helpful

   ☐ Very helpful

   ☐ Extremely helpful

   Why?

2. How helpful do you think it is to work in small groups (group of four students) in class?

   ☐ Not helpful

   ☐ Helpful

   ☐ Very helpful

   ☐ Extremely helpful

   Why?

3. How did you complete the writing task last week?

   ☐ In a group of four students

   ☐ In a pair

4. How would you describe the group or pair in which you worked? Did it work well? How collaborative was it? Did you all get to contribute in a balanced way?

5. This writing task can be done in group of four, in pairs, or individually. Which of these three options would you have preferred? Why?

6. If you had written the text individually instead of in a group or pair, how do you think its content would have been?

   ☐ Better

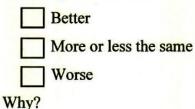   ☐ More or less the same

   ☐ Worse

   Why?

7. If you had written the text individually instead of in a group or a pair, how do you think its vocabulary would have been?

   ☐ Better

   ☐ More or less the same
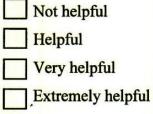
   ☐ Worse

   Why?

APPENDIX A: STUDENTS QUESTIONNAIRE

8. If you had written the text individually instead of in a group or a pair, how do you think its grammar would have been?
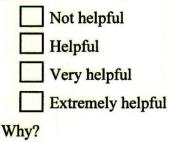
☐ Better

☐ More or less the same

☐ Worse

Why?

9. How helpful do you think this collaborative writing task was for improving your vocabulary knowledge?

☐ Not helpful

☐ Helpful

☐ Very helpful

☐ Extremely helpful

Why?

10. How helpful do you think this collaborative writing task was for improving your grammar knowledge?

☐ Not helpful

☐ Helpful

☐ Very helpful

☐ Extremely helpful

Why?

APPENDIX B: BROWN & BAILEY (1984) MARKING SCORE

Table 10.2. Analytic scale for rating composition tasks (Brown & Bailey, 1984, pp. 39–41)

	20–18 Excellent to Good	17–15 Good to Adequate	14–12 Adequate to Fair	11–6	5–1 Unacceptable–not college-level work
I. Organization: Introduction, Body, and Conclusion	Appropriate title, effective introductory paragraph, topic is stated, leads to body; transitional expressions used; arrangement of material shows plan (could be outlined by reader); supporting evidence given for generalizations; conclusion logical and complete	Adequate title, introduction, and conclusion; body of essay is acceptable, but some evidence may be lacking, some ideas aren't fully developed; sequence is logical but transitional expressions may be absent or misused	Mediocre or scant introduction or conclusion; problems with the order of ideas in body; the generalizations may not be fully supported by the evidence given; problems of organization interfere	Shaky or minimally recognizable introduction; organization can barely be seen; severe problems with ordering of ideas; lack of supporting evidence; conclusion weak or illogical; inadequate effort at organization	Absence of introduction or conclusion; no apparent organization of body; severe lack of supporting evidence; writer has not made any effort to organize the composition (could not be outlined by reader)
II. Logical development of ideas: Content	Essay addresses the assigned topic; the ideas are concrete and thoroughly developed; no extraneous material; essay reflects thought	Essay addresses the issues but misses some points; ideas could be more fully developed; some extraneous material is present	Development of ideas not complete or essay is somewhat off the topic; paragraphs aren't divided exactly right	Ideas incomplete; essay does not reflect careful thinking or was hurriedly written; inadequate effort in area of content	Essay is completely inadequate and does not reflect college-level work; no apparent effort to consider the topic carefully
III. Grammar	Native-like fluency in English grammar; correct use of relative clauses, prepositions, modals, articles, verb forms, and tense sequencing; no fragments or run-on sentences	Advanced proficiency in English grammar; some grammar problems don't influence communication, although the reader is aware of them; no fragments or run-on sentences	Ideas are getting through to the reader, but grammar problems are apparent and have a negative effect on communication; run-on sentences or fragments present	Numerous serious grammar problems interfere with communication of the writer's ideas; grammar review of some areas clearly needed; difficult to read sentences	Severe grammar problems interfere greatly with the message; reader can't understand what the writer was trying to say; unintelligible sentence structure
IV. Punctuation, Spelling, and mechanics	Correct use of English writing conventions: left and right margins, all needed capitals, paragraphs indented, punctuation and spelling; very neat	Some problems with writing conventions or punctuation; occasional spelling errors; left margin correct; paper is neat and legible	Uses general writing conventions but has errors; spelling problems distract reader; punctuation errors interfere with ideas	Serious problems with format of paper; parts of essay not legible; errors in sentence punctuation and final punctuation; unacceptable to educated readers	Complete disregard for English writing conventions; paper illegible; obvious capitals missing, no margins, severe spelling problems
V. Style and quality of expression	Precise vocabulary usage; use of parallel structures; concise; register good	Attempts variety; good vocabulary; not wordy; register OK; style fairly concise	Some vocabulary misused; lacks awareness of register; may be too wordy	Poor expression of ideas; problems in vocabulary; lacks variety of structure	Inappropriate use of vocabulary; no concept of register or sentence variety