

Sri Rejeki Murtiningsih

also known as Jackie, received her undergraduate degree in English education from Universitas Negeri Yogyakarta (UNY) and earned her masters in education from Flinders University of South Australia. After receiving her Ph. D in education from the University of Oklahoma, Jackie Murtiningsih started teaching in the English Education Department at Universitas Muhammadiyah Yogyakarta. Her research interests include teaching ESL/EFL reading and writing, reflective practice, and curriculum development. She can be contacted to jackie.murt@umy.ac.id

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Collaborative Writing in an EFL Context

ABSTRACT

Working collaboratively has been widely promoted in education. In the area of English language teaching and learning, working collaboratively can frequently be seen in speaking activities, in which students were assigned to practice speaking with their peers. Unfortunately, working collaboratively in writing is not as popular as in speaking. This study aims to explore the collaborative writing in an EFL context. As a part of a bigger study, the data were collected through out a semester and integrated with weekly meetings, which aimed to reach several objectives through a variety of activities, including group painting, individual writing, and collaborative writing. A total of 64 freshmen that were divided into two groups participated in the study. In the collaborative writing activity, students were instructed to do group painting and write a story written in groups based on their paintings. Each member of the group took turns to write the story, which cohesiveness and coherence should be given attention. Students were given freedom to choose their own topics for painting and writing to encourage them express their ideas. The data were gathered through class observation and students' reflection that was submitted at the end of the semester as a part of class assessment. The observation revealed that students faced some challenges when performing the tasks. Time management, student interdependence, and types of writing were among the issues emerging in collaborative writing activities. From students' reflection, it was found that while most students stated they enjoyed the activities, one student expressed that the collaboration did not work as well as she had expected.

INTRODUCTION

Learning practices in English language classrooms across Indonesia have long focused on the teacher-centred approach to learning, that is, teachers as the main

subject who deliver the lesson while students as the listeners. In this approach, teachers usually stand in front of the class telling the students what to do with the workbooks and telling them the answers of the questions. This may lead to students' dependence to the teachers and lessen students' independence in learning. In addition to this, English teachers teach the lesson using Bahasa Indonesia, due to lack of English proficiency. At the same time, many students learn English passively and have little efforts to improve their English proficiency at their own personal time. They spend much of their time doing things that do not support their English learning, such as watching television, playing online games, or scrolling their smartphones. Students depend too much on the teacher and study for test purposes only. The teacher and student aspects contribute greatly on students' development of English language skills.

Making students more independent has been a big issue for English language teachers, especially for those who teach in the area where independent learning is not culturally encouraged – like Indonesia. Many English teachers, especially in the higher education context, have been trying to use a more student-centred approach that sees students actively being engaged in their language learning. A variety of teaching techniques that are more student-centered have been endlessly implemented to improve students' language proficiency. For example, many students are encouraged to work collaboratively with their peers to work on a project and present it in front of a group of an audience.

Applying the student-centered learning in English classes can be an alternative way to

develop students' language skills: listening, reading, speaking and writing. Writing has been considered as one of the most difficult problem because "it remains unclear how students acquire the skills needed to produce an effective piece of writing in another language" (Khanalizadeh, 2012, p. 334). Thus, it is imperative for English as a foreign language (EFL) teacher to develop students' writing skills to help students' success in learning a language.

In many EFL contexts, writing has not been promoted as a continuous activity. In China, for instance, Lo and Hyland (2007) state that writing activities have been focused on achieving good grades in examination and grammatical accuracy. In Indonesia, the common practice that takes place in the EFL higher education contexts is that students are asked to produce an academic paper at the end of the semester. Unfortunately many teachers have been quite reluctant to provide feedback to students' writing, especially error correction. This might be caused, as Bitchner, Young, and Cameron (2005) argue, by practical reasons and ability and willingness of the teacher.

One way to develop students' writing skills is to have students actively participate in the language learning process, which is by collaboratively working together with their peers in order to better acquire the language. By having students working together, a teacher actually creates the environment for students to learn from each other (Lantolf & Thorne, 2007). The learning environment can help students be less dependent on the teacher. In addition, this method can be a way to shift the paradigm from the teacher-centered approach commonly found in English language classrooms in Indonesia.

While it is believed that many English teachers in the Indonesian higher education contexts have experimented a variety of writing activities, research on collaborative writing in Indonesian contexts has been scarcely conducted. The objective of the study is to investigate the extent to which the collaborative writing work in an EFL context.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The theory that underlies this study is socio-cultural perspectives from Vygotsky (1978). In his book, *Mind and Society*, Vygotsky (1978) maintains that children learn from other people around them. When they learn their first language, for example, they will acquire the words from adults who communicate with them or with other adults. Similarly, when children get older and go to school, they may also learn a new language that is used by the people around them. Vygotsky (1978) also asserts that human development is inherently a socially situated activity, which implies there is always a need for humans to get together with others to achieve a certain goal.

In the case of learning a foreign language learning like English, language learners can learn and acquire English from the people around them. Learning from their teachers and their peers is also a form of learning from their environment. Peers and teachers who speak English can provide environment for English language learners to acquire English faster, which in turn, would influence their language proficiency. To make sure that the environment supports learners' language development, English teachers can design language learning activities that require students work collaboratively. Working

collaboratively would require students to communicate to each other in the target language.

Following Vygotsky, Lantolf and Thorne (2007) also argue that second language learners learn the target language through internalization and imitation. By this, they mean that language are obtained from the interaction with the people around them and that the learners would carry the language into future performance. Imitation, according to Lantolf and Thorne (2007), plays an important role in language acquisition as it involves psychological and neural processing to actually produce the language. This is especially true when a language learner tries to imitate the teachers to speak or produce a word in the target language.

While speaking skills may have been the most visible skills that language learners can acquire from collaborative working, the other language skill, such as writing, can also enjoy the advantages of collaborative working. In addition, collaborative writing is also grounded in both social constructionist and cognition theory. They provide important insights for knowledge construction. In social constructionist theory, the emphasis is on students' discourse as a means of learning and writing as a manifestation of internalized social interaction. According to Vygotsky (1978), children learn new ideas through their social contacts. By getting in contact with each other, it could give them some advantages during their peer discussions about writing. This kind of learning is also based on the co-author working in the students' ZPD (Zone of Proximal Development). Vygotsky mentioned that children can accomplish tasks and solve problems under the assistance of a more capable peer (Vygotsky,

1978). Furthermore, collaborative writing allows students to have more feedback, which can occur either from the teacher or the peers since there are less group of students compared to many individual students. The feedback is also more detailed and constructive to create a better learning process.

LITERATURE REVIEW

WRITING SKILLS IN LANGUAGE LEARNING

In a preliminary study, it was found that English language students in Indonesia viewed that speaking is the favorite skills of all language skills: listening, reading, writing, and speaking. It was also revealed that writing was considered to be the most difficult skill in learning a language because it heavily depends on the vocabulary mastery (Nation, 2009) and grammar to convey meaning. In addition, Elola and Oskoz (2010) mentions that activities that many teachers design for their classes focus more on English speaking skills, rather than writing skills. There has been a number of attempts to improve students' English writing, e.g. by performing grammar correction towards students' writing.

On the other hand, writing skills are actually depended on the external and internal factors (Lo and Hyland, 2007). The external factors that influence writing skills include activities provided by teachers, language input, and peer collaboration. Internal factors refer to learners' attitudes, personal motivation and learners' perception on the activities. These two factors intertwine each other. Teachers play a very important role in English learning. This refers to the fact that the activities that a teacher designs would highly relate to students external motivation in writing,

which will lead to students' engagement in writing. This includes providing a non-threatening environment for the students to engage in writing activities.

Lo and Hyland (2007) designed a writing program in which the writing topics were related with students' environment and real readers. They applied discussions, demonstrations, and exploration to engage the students before they started writing. After conducted the procedure for six meetings, students were seen to be more motivated and engaged in writing. Their compositions were longer and showed better contents. This might indicate that students would likely perform better when they are provided with more opportunities to write that makes sense to them.

COLLABORATIVE WRITING

To consider that every single writing activity in an English class is conducted individually is probably too extreme. Speck (2002) maintains that every writing activity would have involved other people indirectly. For example, doing brainstorming with others, getting feedback from teachers, having conversation with friends, and researching the topics together are all evidence that writing processes cannot be done individually. However, collaborative writing in this study means that students with a friend or two to actually produce a piece of writing together.

Collaborative writing, though it is not common in Indonesia, has been practiced by many English teachers around the world. The common practices that takes place around the collaborative writing activities are asking students to do peer review (Storch, 2005). In peer review activities, students are usually asked to provide suggestions

to their friends' writing (Rollinson, 2004). This activity requires students to reflect on their own learning and, at the same time, students have to review the lessons that they have had. Storch (2005) argues that collaborative writing should be pushed a little further than providing feedback to their peers. She then did a collaborative writing in which students worked in pairs and wrote a piece of writing together. The results showed that the grammatical accuracy of the pieces of writing that the students produced were higher than when the students did the individual writing. Also, the pieces writing from students' collaborative work displayed higher levels of language complexity and were more succinct. The results also showed that the collaborative writing activities received positive from the students. They enjoyed the activities and considered them helpful to improve their writing skills.

Another study on collaborative writing is also conducted by Khatib and Meihami (2015). His study shows that a group of students who did collaborative writing outperformed their peers who did writing without the collaborative activities. The collaborative groups' writings were better in terms of content, organization, grammar, vocabulary, and mechanics. Hodges (2002) argues that collaborative writing had encouraged students to "redraft their work purposefully and explicitly in pursuit of particular creative effects" (p. 4). Redrafting seems to be the reasons why collaborative writing would benefit the students.

To do the collaborative writing, Mulligan and Garofalo (2011) also did the collaborative writing with their students. Although issues of fairness in task distribution among students should be considered by the teachers, they claimed that

collaborative writing did have positive impacts to their students' writing, as well as their speaking skills. They suggested several steps that teachers could take to carry out collaborative writing. The first, as they suggested, is to pair students, either choosing their partners themselves or being chosen by the teachers. Mulligan and Garofalo (2011) suggested teachers to rotate partners to avoid to encourage students to work with different people with different levels of proficiency. The second step is to provide opportunities for the pairs to brainstorm the topics they want to write about. This step can also be used to talk about the organization of the writing piece. The next part is by encouraging students to meet outside class hours to do research to support their ideas. This step is followed by the students working in class to outline, plan, and write the first draft. Teachers may provide suggestions on the outline. After this, students are to submit the first draft and returned with comments and suggestions. Students then work on the second draft based on the comments and suggestions and receive a grade. This cycle may continue with students assigned to do different roles, so they can explore other roles.

While collaborative writing is useful for students, not all students are willingly involved in the activities. Storch (2011) maintains that many students had persistently been reluctant to engage in collaborative writing. Students did not show positive attitude, which might have been caused by their personal experience on doing collaboration with their peer. On the other hand, Storch (2011) also points out that students with low level second language proficiency may not get the advantages of collaborative work if they are not

paired with students with a higher level of language proficiency. Also, Storch (2011) suggests that collaborative writing activities need to be monitored to ensure the activities work effectively.

METHODOLOGY

This study is a part of a bigger study that required students to work collaboratively. Various activities, such as painting, reading, and discussions were also performed to these groups to create a positive learning environment that engaged students. Individual story writing activities were conducted prior to the collaborative writing ones to provide scaffoldings to familiarize students with the upcoming activities. The collaborative writing activities were conducted for one meeting as a part of series of other activities. Two groups with a total of 64 freshmen enrolled in a course were involved in this research. The course syllabus showed that the course was to teach argumentative writings. The data obtained were mainly based on the teacher/researcher's observation during this particular activity on students' interaction with their group members. During the observation activities, the teacher's role was, among others, to remind the students to follow the time frame and to provide further information when necessary. Another set of data was also collected through students' reflection, which were submitted at the end of the semester as a part of course assessment.

THE TASKS

The students were first divided into several groups of four or three students. Students were then asked to make a piece of artwork, which was

painting in groups with free topics. They were allowed to discuss the concept of their painting prior to the painting activity or to paint on the paper right away and discuss the concept of the writing while painting. This discussion was intended to establish a learning environment for the students to contribute providing ideas for later activities, which was collaborative writing. After painting, students were instructed to write a story based on the painting they created; thus, the painting was actually an idea generator for students to construct a story. On a piece of paper, each member of the groups took turn to write a painting-based story. The second student would continue the story from the first member; the third member would do the same as his counterpart. At the end of the meeting, the pieces of writing that students' produced were displayed on the wall along side with the painting.

FINDINGS OBSERVATION

Based on the observation, most students seemed to enjoy the writing activities. Some groups could really work together to create a piece of writing. Each member took turns to write on a piece of paper. During the collaborative writing activities, some interesting issues emerged:

Time management. The duration of the whole meeting was 200 minutes each. Although some of the instructions were clearly given in the previous meeting, e.g. how much time for painting and collaborative writing, students spent more time in the painting activities. This might have indicated that students enjoyed the activity because they had not done a similar activity. As a

result of the extended painting time, the allocated time for the collaborative writing was not sufficient for students. Some groups appeared to be rushing when the time of the course meeting was over, which led to some students did not receive equal amount of opportunity to express their ideas in writing.

Students' interdependence. Students were randomly selected to form a group consisting of four to five people. The particular selection process was performed to avoid students to choose their counterparts who had a similar level of English proficiency. In addition, the selection process was intended to create a more supportive learning environment for students with a lower level of English proficiency. Based on the observation, some groups worked well in developing the story. These groups, regardless their diverse levels of English proficiency, were successful to support each member to write up their stories. From their piece of writing, their story was coherent although some grammatical errors were found. At the end of the activity, these groups were able to produce relatively coherent stories based on their paintings.

The other groups seemed to be not as successful as their peers. While they were able to produce a number pieces of writing based on their paintings, the writings were produced by one member of each groups only. They, however, distributed the jobs equally among each member although the jobs were not necessarily related to collaborative writing. For example, as the task on that day was not particularly on performing collaborative writing, some groups decided to distribute the responsibilities between painting and writing. Thus, those who had a higher level

of English command were selected to do the writing, and the rest of the groups were to do the painting.

Types of writing used. During the activity, it was observed that free writing was quite challenging for the students. This might have been caused by the one of the course objectives that required students to be able to demonstrate their ability to write argumentative essays. Apparently, when the students were instructed to do free writing to express their ideas, many of them chose to write a piece of narrative writing, which was taught in the previous semester. During the activities, some students explicitly expressed their opinion to the teacher that writing a narrative was quite challenging because it had a different concept of that of argumentative writing, which was agreed by some other students. Some students stated that, in argumentative writing, they were required to have an introductory paragraph, to support their ideas with evidence, and to write a concluding paragraph. Meanwhile, narrative writing did not necessarily require introductory and concluding paragraphs. This type of writing, as students claimed, was quite challenging for them because they had accustomed to write argumentative essays regardless of they.

REFLECTIONS

In the reflection, most students focused on their enjoyment of doing the painting, and paid very little attention on the collaborative writing activity. They stated that their creative thinking was evoked because they were instructed to create a story based on the painting they made. Although it was a free writing, the ideas to write the story were not completely free because their ideas

were limited by the painting.

Based on the reflection, most students stated that they enjoyed the painting and writing activities. Some of students indicated that they did not expect that their writing ideas actually came from their paintings. With regard to the collaborative writing activity, most of them wrote that they did not mind writing in groups. However, one student explicitly stated that she was actually frustrated with her group because the other members were slow in writing and too carried away with chatting and painting. She ended up writing the whole story by herself.

DISCUSSION

Unlike a study conducted by Khatib and Meihami (2015) in which they had experimental and control groups and compared the results of the writings of the students of the two groups, this study did not attempt to compare the writings of collaborative and non-collaborative writing activities. This study focused on students' reaction on collaborative writing activity. The collaborative writing conducted in the study was only conducted in one meeting with a little help from the other activity, which was painting. The painting activity was intended to help students generate ideas by discussing the concept of writing they intended to produce. The discussion was to create a learning environment for the students, as suggested by Vygotsky (1978), before they executed their action. The discussion was also used to ensure to focus students' attention on the story they wanted to create although the story might change when they finished their painting.

The study implies that EFL teachers need to

ensure that the collaborative writing activities are equally distributed among the members of the groups. Thus, each member of the group bears the same amount of responsibility for the group's success. Alternatively, setting up small groups, e.g. pairs, would be easier for teachers to monitor students. Small groups will also allow students to contribute in the collaboration, such as working on the accuracy of the writing.

Another implication of this study is that providing specific themes may be helpful for students to create a story, rather than instructed students to choose the topic. Khatib and Meihami (2015) asked their students to write a piece of writing using the topic they provided each week, which might have helped their students in the experimental group to succeed. Providing topics for students can help students to narrow down their ideas and focus their attention on the given topic. The topics are not necessarily to be academic related because students may find difficulties to develop the topics. Topics with which students are familiar will become a great contribution to students' success.

CONCLUSION

Collaborative writing may have been popular in many learning contexts. Many EFL teachers may have instructed their students to write an academic paper, bulletin boards, or many other kinds of pieces of writings. The uniqueness of this collaborative writing activity was that the collaboration was conducted on the spot and students were encouraged to work closely with one another. Through the teacher's observation, students involved in this activity seemed to enjoy the collaborative writing activity. However, not all

students were able to work collaboratively in terms of writing. Many students depended on the members of the groups due to the level of English proficiency. The reflection also showed that one student felt frustrated when her group members gave up the writing work to her. On the other side, her frustration might have been caused by her not being able to work collaboratively with students who had lower levels of English proficiency.

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