

EFFECTIVENESS OF COLLABORATIVE LEARNING FOR IMPROVING LEARNERS' WRITING PROFICIENCY IN ENGLISH CLASSROOMS

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ABSTRACT

The success of language teaching and learning depends on collaborative atmosphere between the teachers and students in the class. Collaborative learning is a learner centered approach for language teaching and learning. It engages learners to work collaboratively with teachers. This study aimed at investigating the effectiveness of collaborative learning for improving learners' proficiency in English classrooms. The study was based on an experimental research design. For this purpose, I selected 50 students from grade 12 in the academic year of 2020. Among them 25 were selected for experimental group while 25 for control group as sample population of the study. Pre-test and post-test items related to writing proficiency were used as the tools for data collection. The study revealed that students of experimental group made better progress in improving writing skill than the students of control group in the post-test which confirmed the effectiveness of collaborative learning in teaching writing. Those who were engaged in free writing in collaboration with each other created better written texts than those who wrote writing texts individually by themselves. Besides, the students of experimental group obtained 19.42 average score whereas the control group obtained 14.82 average score out of 25. Thus, collaborative learning contributes to improve students' writing as it assisted them to produce the quality of their writing.

Keywords: collaborative language learning - critical thinking - learner centered-instruction - writing proficiency

INTRODUCTION

Collaborative learning is a learner centered approach where students work together in small groups to accomplish a common goal. In

this regard, Cohen (1994) states in collaborative learning, learners attempt to solve the assigned task collectively in small groups and each of them has to contribute efficiently. Even the learners who are backward in their studies can perform well when they do the tasks in groups. Collaborative learning encourages learners to work in teamwork in order to maximize their own and others learning (Johnson & Johnson 1999). At present, teaching learning strategies are shifted from teacher-centered to learner-centered as learners are no more the empty vessels to be filled in, rather they need to be the co-creators of knowledge; who are willing to take ownership of their learning and contribute to the improvement of understanding.

In collaborative learning, the learners learn through activities based on team work. Collaborative learning usually involves small groups of learners to work together as a team to solve a common goal' (Graham 2005). It engages groups of learners who work together for finding a solution to the problem. When the learners learn in groups, they feel more relaxed to share the facts with each other and learn many new things from the group members. In course of working together, they naturally take part in the assigned task spontaneously with high motivation and they contribute in groups

Collaborative activities also offer mutual support for planning and implementing lessons, assessing students' progress, sharing professional concerns, and addressing students' learning needs. In the same context, McInerney and Robert (2004) state, "Collaborative learning involves a group of two or more learners working together to achieve a common goal respecting each individual's contribution to the whole" (as cited in Kozar 2010). Most importantly, such work in teaching allows more opportunities to teachers in improving their classroom pedagogy. In addition, it assists them to understand the content apparently and develop individual learning potential. Collaboration engages student-student, student-teacher and student-content interactions (Schmid *et al.* 2014). Since there is face to face interaction and mutual helpfulness atmosphere, the learners have a chance to practice the language through social skills with their group mates by the exchange of information between them to increase the learning of others. In this way, they learn better and retain more rather being the passive learners in teacher-centered language classroom. Regarding this, Sukirman (2016)

maintains collaboration supports learners to develop writing through peer learning in groups as every individual takes responsibility of their own and each other's learning.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Through collaborative learning, learners learn to write sharing information to produce a new piece of writing. This type of learning becomes more effective when students share their ideas, experiences, and perceptions with peers (Jonassen & Kwon 2001). In this regard, Jacobs (1998) states, "In cooperative learning, teachers teach students social skills so that they can work together more efficiently" (as cited in Freeman, 2008). In collaborative learning, there is face to face interaction and mutual helpfulness atmosphere where the learners have a chance to practice the language through collaborative social skill with their group mates by the exchange of information between learners in groups to increase the learning of others. Furthermore, Storch (2001) mentions that group work provides learners with more chances to employ the target language in low anxiety atmosphere and boost up their motivation. Storch (2002) pointed out that a collaborative learning strategy in writing classes is helpful for brainstorming and discussing collaboratively and it is also supportive to the peer review and editing. In this line, Storch (2002) also found that writing collaboratively encourages the learners to share responsibility for making decisions on all aspects and categories of writing, including content, structure and language. Similarly, another study of Storch (2005) examined the effectiveness of collaboration in improving learners' writing texts written in groups with others written independently. The students working collaboratively recorded their conversations while completing their compositions. The study showed that the students working collaboratively produced short texts than the students who wrote individually and it facilitated them to construct better and more complex written texts.

Common goal, shared beliefs, harmonious interaction, and cooperative process are the fundamentals of successful collaboration (Jeon 2010). Sharing similar teaching beliefs help to have a smooth and effective collaboration. In addition, teachers who take part in collaborative activities promote their social interaction like conflict management and creative problem solving. Learners develop their own learning collaborating with

their teachers and peers (Woolner *et al.* 2012). This study justifies that collaborative learning promotes learners to clear their ideas through debates and discussions with teachers and peers. In this vein, Laal (2013) states collaborative learning provides feedback to manage conflict resolution. When a student engages in writing individually, he/she may face difficulties in generating ideas. On the other hand, collaboration enhances various skills such as group management and self-management, effective planning and decision making, higher-level thinking, leadership, presentation, communication and cooperative skills. In the same line, Mandusic and Blaskovi (2015) also claimed collaboration improves and develops critical thinking skill in learners.

In collaborative writing, learners share ideas and effort from every group members at every stage of writing which supports them for pre writing, drafting, revising and editing (Veramuthu & Shah 2020). Collaborative writing creates opportunities to the students to interact and share ideas with peers on the assigned task. Peer support is more effective than teachers imparting knowledge about writing. Besides, it prompts conversation among peers which gradually leads them to feedback (as cited in Veramuthu & Shah 2020). The previous studies in this field have revealed that collaborative writing maximizes students' motivation and boosts their self-confidence. Therefore, while sharing knowledge and views and solving problems, students take charge of their own learning as well.

RESEARCH GAP

The brief review of available literature on collaborative learning in English classrooms reveals that effectiveness of collaborative learning is taken positively in foreign contexts; however, its effect in improving students' writing skill in teaching and learning English language in the context of Nepal has not been studied so far. The contexts are not always the same. The findings got from one context cannot be generalized in other contexts. In spite of wide use and effectiveness, collaborative learning is much less practiced in Nepalese context to improve students' writing skills. Therefore, I intend to investigate the effectiveness of collaborative learning in English language classrooms in Nepal.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Writing skill is one of the most complex tasks in second language learning. Both teachers and students employ a range of strategies to enhance writing proficiency. Traditional approaches of developing writing skills emphasize primarily on accuracy and disregard to a great extent the process of writing itself. I also experienced that teaching and learning English language are usually dominated by teacher-laden dictation and lecture-based instruction. In Nepalese context, English language teachers both in community and institutional schools are considered as the main source and centre of knowledge delivery and unquestioned authorities. In such a situation engaging students in learning process through discussion and interaction is challenging. As I experienced in schools, my interests were rarely addressed by my English language teachers. They taught me writing without engaging me in discussion and interaction rather they directly dictated me the ready-made answers. Regarding this, Bruffee (1986) declares when teachers engage learners in collaborative learning through group work and discussion; they facilitate them to interact with each other collaboratively. Likewise, Richards and Rodgers (2001) believe that learners in cooperative environment take responsibility of their own learning throughout the process of planning, monitoring and assessment because there is direct involvement of learners in interaction.

Regarding collaborative learning, Williams (2003) states that group works offer learners with the opportunity to learn in a social context. They learn better and retain more when they are passive learners in teacher-centered language classroom. Therefore, it is necessary to introduce and implement learner centered collaborative learning in teaching writing skills in community schools to minimize rote learning and teacher-centered methods of teaching. It can be an alternative approach to enhance students' writing proficiency in English language classes. I also believe effective use of collaborative learning can only make teaching writing skills interactive and meaningful. Being a teacher, I realized it is worthy to develop writing skills. Therefore, I want to examine the effectiveness of collaborative learning for improving secondary level students' writing proficiency in English.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

Interaction and collaboration facilitate to develop and improve students' writing proficiency in English. This study will be a significant in order to enhance the quality of the learners through collaborative language learning in English classrooms. It also provides them with a person whom they can gain encouragement who can offer constructive feedback on their teaching (Benoit & Haugh 2001). The study will develop the students work collaboratively and discourages the individuality and competitions generating a pleasant atmosphere (Ghaith & Kawtharani 2006). Since writing plays a major role to be skilled in English; it can be grasped through practices and experiences (Fareed *et al.* 2016). To my understanding, in the past, teachers were regarded as the source of all knowledge and information and they transferred knowledge to the learners that they needed. However, at present, the scenario of teaching and learning has been changed therefore they are regarded as facilitators and inspirers of learners to create a favourable learning atmosphere for them where they can learn language without obvious effort. Thus, the collaborative practice offers teachers with a partner to help them in the process of setting goals, making plans, delivering lessons and evaluating the outcomes.

The teaching and learning over a longer period of time in Nepal is traditional one. However, the tendency of rote learning and memorization is being discouraged at present. Particularly, the study will be useful for professional development of English language teachers regarding the effectiveness of collaborative learning. I believe collaborative learning will gear up to develop writing proficiency of the learners. The findings of this study will contribute to add new knowledge in the existing body of knowledge on collaboration in general and teaching writing in particular. Moreover, the policy makers, syllabus designers, text book writers, teachers, students and researchers who are involved in the field of language teaching and learning will be benefited from this study. Realizing the fact, I attempt to conduct this research to examine the effectiveness of collaborative learning for better writing proficiency of the learners

Research question

Is collaborative learning effective for improving students' writing proficiency in English language classrooms?

METHODOLOGY

This study was based on experimental research design. Experimental research is a research in which an intervention is purposely introduced to observe its effects” (Shadish, Cook & Campbell 2002). The study was carried out in 50 students of an institutional school of Rupandehi district. Among them 25 students were purposively selected for experimental group and 25 for control group. I taught the experimental group using collaborative approach but I taught to control group in a traditional way for a month then by administering the proficiency test to 50 students, I collected the answer sheets from them. Finally, I tabulated, analyzed and interpreted the data obtained from the proficiency test of writing to fulfill the purpose of the study using mean and percentage to find out the differences between experimental and control group of the respondents. The study was conducted using mix method. The tools used in the study for data collection were test items (three types of writing tasks with 25 full marks) related to writing skill. The grade 12 compulsory English class was selected for teaching writing skill. Therefore, I conducted the pre- test in the beginning and post test at the end of teaching using the same test items to see writing proficiency. The collected data were analyzed and interpreted descriptively using statistical tools and tables. The scores from the post-test were compared with the pre-test scores to see whether the learners improved their writing skills or not.

Data analysis

Collected information from the respondents’ proficiency test was analyzed using mean and percentage to examine the differences between the writing proficiency level of experimental and control group of the learners by using tables.

RESULTS

The results of this study have been presented in the table to provide the overall writing proficiency of students.

Respondents’ average scores in writing

The result in Table 1 shows that the experimental group of students performed better proficiency in writing than the control group which shows that collaborative learning is significant and effective to improve learners’ writing skill.

Table 1: Respondents' average scores in writing

Group	Average score in pre-test	Average score in post test	Differences	Different percentage
Controlled	10.12	11.62	1.50	14.82
Experimental	10.50	18.84	8.34	19.42

Table 1 illustrates that the average score of respondents in pre-test was 10.12 and 11.62 in post test. The average score of experimental group of students in pre-test was 10.50 and 18.84 in post test. It had increased its average score by 8.34 which were greater than the differences of controlled group. The differences percentage of controlled and experimental group in pre-test and post test was 14.82 and 19.42 percent respectively. Thus, this shows that the experimental groups of students had more effective improvement than the controlled group in writing skill.

Respondents' average scores in pre-test

Respondents' average scores in pre- test are tabulated, analyzed and explained as follow.

Table 2: Respondents' average scores in pre-test

SS.N	Types of question	Controlled group	Experimental group	Difference	Different percentage
11	Paragraph writing	1.9	1.7	0.2	10.53
22	Letter writing	3.38	3.35	0.03	0.8
33	Essay writing	4.12	4.0	0.12	2.91
Total		9.0	9.05	0.17	1.88

Table 2 presents the majority of the control groups of respondents had obtained more marks in all the three test items than the respondents of experimental group. Their marks in those test items over the controlled group were 1.9 in paragraph writing, 3.38 in letter writing and 4.12 in essay writing respectively. Their marks in those test items over the experimental group were 1.7 in paragraph writing, 3.35 in letter writing and 4.0 in essay writing respectively. The total difference average between controlled group and experimental group were 10.53 percent in paragraph writing, 0.8 percent in letter writing and 2.91 in essay writing. This reveals that there is

no major difference on respondents' average score of control group average scores in pre-test.

Respondents' average scores in post-test

Respondents' average scores in post- test are presented in the following Table.

Table 3: Respondents' average scores in post-test

SS.N.	Types of question	Controlled group	Experimental group	Difference	Different percentage
11	Paragraph writing	1.98	3.18	1.2	60.60
22	Letter writing	4.5	7.22	2.72	60.44
33	Essay writing	4.12	6.5	2.38	57.77
Total		10.60	16.90	6.30	59.43

Table 3 clearly indicates that the control groups of respondents had obtained 1.98 and experimental group obtained 3.18 marks in paragraph writing. The control groups of students had obtained 4.5 and experimental group obtained 7.22 marks in letter writing. The control groups of students had obtained 4.12 and experimental group obtained 6.5 in essay writing. The total difference average between controlled group and experimental group was 6.30.

The study confirms that collaborative language learning is effective in improving students' writing skill. Thus, the study suggests the need of collaborative learning activities for two way communication that can contribute a lot to make the learning and teaching process a great success. Active participation of students is the basic requirement of such classroom. When they are made familiar with all the skills that they are required for effective writing proficiency, they learn effectively.

CONCLUSION

The study based on one month aimed at finding out the effectiveness of collaborative language learning for developing learners' writing proficiency in ELT classrooms. Majority of the respondents agree that collaborative language learning helps them improve their writing

proficiency. The study shows that students of experimental group had made better progress in improving writing skill (as they obtained 19.42 average score) than the students of control group (i.e. they had 14.82 average score out of 25) in post-test which proved effectiveness of collaborative language learning in teaching and learning writing. It is more effective than the usual traditional mode of teaching. Moreover; collaborative language learning enables learners to develop critical and creative thinking in order to boost up their inner potential capacity. Learners learn team work skills working collaboratively sharing ideas with their direct involvement.

The study was not free from its limitations in its scope regarding the number of respondents, tools implemented and the duration of study to examine the effectiveness of collaborative language learning for improving learners' writing proficiency. The future researcher can carry out similar study in the other level. Moreover, a large number of respondents should be used so that more comprehensive details could be provided. A further research is therefore necessary to be carried out including the view of English language teachers and students to investigate the effectiveness of collaborative learning in teaching speaking and reading skills in community and institutional schools in a larger scale.

The study has great pedagogical implications for implementing collaborative practices in teaching writing. The English language teachers should provide the learners enjoyable learning atmosphere collaboratively. They should also balance students' status to contribute in the given tasks so that high status students do not dominate low-status students. The teacher should provide written tasks that students cannot complete independently so that both bright and weak students can learn collaboratively sharing ideas to accomplish the shared goals in the classroom.

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