

In the name of God



SHEIKHBAHAE UNIVERSITY

SCHOOL OF FOREIGN LANGUAGES

**The relationship between individual versus pair
writing tasks and levels of fluency, complexity and
accuracy in EFL writing by Iranian learners**

A THESIS SUBMITTED IN THE PARTIAL FULLFILMENT
OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF MASTER
OF ARTS IN TEFL STUDIES

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December 2012

To

My Parents

For Their Faithful Love and
Support

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Acknowledgements

I am grateful to the following people who assisted me in this dissertation. In the first place, I would like to express the deepest appreciation to my supervisor, Dr. Afghari, for his advice, persistent help, guidance as well as invaluable suggestions and feedback from the very early stage of this research.

I would also like to thank Ms. Younesi, Mr. Bazdar & Mr. Rezapourian who have helped me throughout the years of my study. I also benefited from their sincere & persistent assistances.

Last, but not least, I would wholeheartedly like to give my immense gratitude to my parents, without whose support and warm encouragement my dream of pursuing further studies would not have come true.

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List of abbreviations

EFL: English as a Foreign Language

ESL: English as a Second Language

TOEFL: Test of English as a Foreign Language

Abstract

This study aimed at investigating the relationship between individual versus pair writing tasks and levels of fluency, complexity and accuracy in EFL writing by Iranian learners. To achieve this goal, two groups of students were selected from upper intermediate classes of Kish Institute and then asked to write six argumentative essays on different topics in different sessions. The analyses seek the identification of the fluency, accuracy and complexity levels in learners' writings and the computation of their grades. Analyses include measuring fluency by average number of words, T-units and clauses per text. For measuring the complexity, the proportion of clauses to T-units was calculated. For measuring accuracy, the proportion of error-free units of all T-units and error-free clauses of all clauses used. The correlation coefficient between grades of students and accuracy level in individual groups was .49. Findings also illustrated that the correlation coefficient between grade of students and fluency level was .61 in this group. Finally, the correlation coefficient between grades of students and complexity level was -.13 which demonstrated a negative correlation between these two variables. The findings also showed that in pair groups, the correlation coefficient between the grades of students and accuracy level was .548. It also revealed correlation coefficient between grade of students and fluency level was .399. Ultimately, correlation coefficient between grade of students and complexity level was .067.

Key terms: fluency, accuracy, complexity & T-units.

]

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

1.1. Introduction

Nowadays, technological advances, evolving working dynamics and cultural shifts all mean that writing carries much more weight than the past and undoubtedly influences different aspects of our daily life. Because of the arguable fact that the way we write reveals our background knowledge, predicts academic success, affects our relationships, creates new opportunities in our lives and enhances critical thinking capabilities (NCTE, 2008), it can be stated that writing deserves to be taken more seriously not only by teachers and students, but also by researchers, educationalists, psychologists and those involved in language assessment. In addition, poor writing can lead to many communication problems, especially different levels of misunderstanding in cross-lingual and cross-cultural settings.

Out of the four fundamental language skills in the language learning process, “competent writing is frequently accepted as being the last language skill to be acquired for native speakers of the language as well as for foreign/second language learners.” (Hamp and Heasley, 2006:2). EFL learners’ success in English writing brings them benefits not solely in their English learning but also in their life-long careers as Glazier (1994: 3) contends, “Being able to write in English is essential in college, and it probably will be an asset in your career.” For numerous EFL learners, nonetheless, English writing appears to be challenging (Harmer, 1992). In terms of fluency, Nunan (1999) maintains that producing a coherent, fluent, extended writing piece is likely the most difficult thing in language since the reader has to comprehend what has been written without asking for clarification or relying on the writer’s tone of voice or expression.

The nature of writing itself is not interesting enough to motivate English learners to practice regularly (Hedge, 1991: 6). To a preponderance of EFL learners, nothing is more discouraging than doing a writing task and knowing that it will come under the eyes of the teacher, who will consider it as a source of errors to be corrected as Hamp and Heasley (2006: 2) stated:

“Few people write spontaneously and feel comfortable with a formal writing task intended for the eyes of someone else. When the “someone else” is the teacher, whose eyes may be critical, and who indeed may assign an individual assessment to the written product, most people feel uncomfortable.”

According to Abu Rass (2001), Several students not purely encounter the insipidity in writing but find themselves in a hide-and-seek game with ideas as well since they normally have to write about what is assigned by their teacher rather than about what bears much relevance to them, as Byrne (1991: 5) pronounces, “Being at a loss for ideas is a familiar experience to most of us when we are obliged to write” and Tho (2000: 36) echoes that sentiment, “Non-native writers may not have enough ideas to write down or, even worse, they have nothing to say.”

Above and beyond the dearth of motivation, time pressure also hinders learners' writing effectiveness. In the EFL classroom, students tend to be compelled to perform their writing tasks within a certain length of time. Thus, numerous students occasionally cannot accomplish their tasks (Crossley, McCarthy & McNamara, 2010). Weir (1990: 61) said that:

"Time pressure is often an unrealistic constraint for extended writing and writing timed essays is not normally done outside of academic life. For most people the writing process is lengthier and may involve several tasks before a finished version is produced."

In this respect, Chandrasegaran (2002: 14) indicates, "A problem to be expected in the writing classroom is that some students take much longer than others to write the required parts of the essay. Many never finish their writing in class."

Among the numerous factors involved in the development of writing, writing individually or in pair is believed to have a particularly prominent role to play.

Moreover, the crucial role of writing individually or in pair in second/foreign language learning and teaching has been acknowledged in theoretical and empirical in some foreign communities. Wolf (1994, 91) says that: "writing in collaboration rather than individually, which aims to improve social aspects of a learner dealing with encouraging and motivating writing activities. It was a difficult task in previous times but with the emergence of the technology in educational settings, it has become a motivating task for the language learners".

Also, writing needs practicing and internalizing a set of structures that can promote a balanced development of learners' fluency, accuracy, and complexity in the target language. As Skehan (1998) emphasizes, "the more the task is planned, the less computational work needs to be done during the task performance. Things being equal, the result is more, when attention is given as a general tool to achieve a variety of goals such as greater fluency, accuracy, and complexity" (p. 73). He also distinguishes three aspects of linguistic performance: (a) Fluency, which is concerned with the learners' capacity to produce language in real time without any pauses or hesitations. Fluency is measured in different ways, such as speech rate, length of the run, pause length, false starts repetitions, and reformulating; (b) Accuracy, which is the extent to which the language produced conforms to the target language norms. There are different research studies for measuring accuracy either as an error free piece of language or accurate use of specific forms (Skehan and Foster, 1997); and, (c) Complexity which is the elaboration of the language produced by EFL learners. Researchers usually measure complexity by relating how much subordination are used per T-units or C- units.

Hence in EFL contexts, conducting more studies aiming at gaining a better and deeper understanding of this area seems necessary and justifiable.

Although some research studies on the effects of pair writing tasks have already been conducted in some countries, this area of research is still more or less unexplored in Iranian EFL contexts. Hence, conducting more studies aimed at gaining a better and deeper understanding of this area seems necessary and justifiable.

1.2. Statement of the problem

Today, writing regarded as an important factor among the students of foreign language learning. Teaching how to write is a main concern of many language teachers. Different theories have variety of assumptions about how to teach the writing skill to students. However, there are still some problems with teaching writing among EFL and ESL teachers. Some believe that writing should be taught as an individual activity. They base their techniques on individual teaching. By contrast, some other teachers see writing as a collaborative process. They state that this kind of writing activity can enhance the ability of writing among learners(Saenz &Huer, 2003).

Generally, writing tends to be thought of as an individual activity, although a small number of studies have documented the advantages of collaboration in writing in the second language classroom (e.g. Dicamellia and Anton, 1997; Storch, 2005; Swaine and Lapkin, 1998).

Particularly, in university contexts, group or pair assignments are widely used in many disciplines. In addition, collaborative writing could be used in second language classroom assessment contexts as a formative assessment.

Unfortunately, research which compares texts produced by learners collaboratively to texts produced individually, and implications of this for assessment practices, is rare. In other words, there are few studies on collaborative writing effects among EFL/ESL scientists.

This study aims to see to what extent collaborative writing practice can result in the improvement of writing skill in EFL setting. In other words, this study is an investigation of using collaborative writing in second language contexts and comparison of the performance of two groups of second language learners: one group works individually and the other group works in pairs (each pair produces a single text).

1.3. The aim of the study

This study aims to see to what extent collaborative writing practice can result in the improvement of writing skill in EFL setting. In other words, this study is an investigation of using collaborative writing in second language contexts and a

comparison of the performance of two groups of second language learners: one group works individually and the other group works in pairs (each pair produces a single text).

1.4. Significance of study

The main objective of this research study is to investigate whether learners working in pairs produce better texts than learners writing individually. The study is aimed to help teachers to explore the kind of processes in which the students engage during writing activities. In addition, collaborative assignments can significantly enhance student learning in other ways. According to Storch (2005), some of these enhancements include:

- _ they allow students to learn from each other,
- _ expose students to points of view besides their own,
- _ foster discussion and debate,
- _ open students' eyes to how their work compares to that of their peers, giving them a better sense of their own strengths and weaknesses as writers and thinkers.
- _ encourage students to consider their audience, an important aspect of learning to write effectively and yet a component missing in many traditional assignments.
- _ teach students to negotiate the issues inherent in any collaborative venture.

In addition, by comparing the results of these two groups, we can understand which process is more helpful for second language learners to improve their skills. Also, teachers can shed new light on new ways of teaching writing skill in schools and universities. Also the accuracy, fluency and complexities of EFL students' writings can be compared and contribution made to better teaching and by using the results, better learning would be obtained.

Probably, the results can be generalized to English classes in universities and higher pedagogical classes to overcome some of the present shortcomings in EFL learning.

Since the importance of collaborative writing has been largely neglected in Iranian EFL contexts, the present study intends to determine the extent to which the use of

collaborative writing influences writing quality in Iranian EFL settings. Additionally, the researcher aims to examine the differences in the use of writing individually or collaboratively.

1.5. Research question

Is there any relationship between individual versus pair writing tasks and levels of fluency, complexity and accuracy in EFL writing by Iranian learners?

1.6. Research Null hypothesis

There is no relationship between individual versus pair writing tasks and levels of fluency in EFL writing by Iranian learners.

There is no relationship between individual versus pair writing tasks and levels of accuracy in EFL writing by Iranian learners.

There is no relationship between individual versus pair writing tasks and levels of complexity in EFL writing by Iranian learners.

1.7. Definition of key terms

Individual writing tasks:the piece of writing that is written only by one person without getting any consultation from any other second party.

Pair writing tasks:the writing task that is written by brainstorming of two persons and they consult hardly with each other to write every words, sentences and paragraphs.

1.8. outline of the thesis

This thesis consists of five chapters. In the first chapter the statement of the problem, the purpose of study as well as research question is presented. In the second chapter, the review of literature, previous studies and different models will be presented. The third chapter describes the participants, materials, procedures and data analysis. The

results of the study as well as discussion and conclusion will be explained in the fourth chapter. Finally, the implications and suggestions for further research will be discussed in the fifth chapter.

CHAPTER TWO: REVIEW OF LITERATURE

2.1. Overview

The previous chapter introduced the main framework of this research. In this chapter, relevant theories and studies dealing with the research topic will be elaborated on to give the readership the requisite background to the current study. So, the description of writing, detailed explanations of theories associated with the writing process, students' problems related to writing, pro and cons of pair and individual works and the effect of writing in pair or individual have all been included in this chapter. The final part of this chapter has been devoted to a brief, but informative review of previous related research carried out on the research topic at hand.

2.2. Importance of learning a second language

Nowadays most of people believe learning English is very important. According to the CIA World Fact Book, only 5.6 % of the world's total population speaks English as a primary language. That number doubles when people who speak English as a second or third language are counted.

According Marcos (2001), interest in language learning found its place in 1990s. In this connection, the role of political and economic issues in influencing people's beliefs about the importance of learning a foreign language has been a prominent one.

Today, in our increasingly globalized world, many people are multilingual because of a wide array of reasons (LRC, 2006). Marcos (2001) in his article enumerates the benefits of second language learning as personal, cognitive, academic and societal benefits. Knowing a foreign language helps individuals to communicate with peoples of other countries, to get access to more literature and sources of information and to get familiar with other cultures and customs. Also, it gives people more work-related opportunities (Villano, 1996).

Regarding cognitive benefits, some research illustrates that students who know a foreign language are more successful at solving complicated problems (Bamford and Mizokawa, 1991, cited in Marcos, 2001). Moreover, other research reveals that persons with proficiency in a foreign language do better than monolingual persons on verbal and nonverbal intelligence tests (Bruck, Lambert, and Tucker, 1974; Hakuta, 1986; Weatherford, 1986).

In academic settings, many studies have shown the advantages of learning a foreign language. Thomas, Collier and Abbott (1993) conducted a research to determine the achievement test results of students who had participated in a five-year immersion program in Fairfax county and Virginia. They found out that immersion students do better than those who have not taken an immersion course.

2.3. Language skills

The six language arts, as designated by the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) and the International Reading Association (IRA) (Standards for the English Language Arts, 1996), are listening, speaking, reading, writing, viewing, and visually representing.

2.4. The interrelationships between listening, speaking, reading and writing

According to J. Floyed (1985), the learning progressions describe the development of expertise across the four strands that relate to listening, speaking, reading and writing. Within these strands, progressions have been developed for specific areas of learning, such as vocabulary and comprehension. However, these divisions do not mean that each area of learning is isolated. They overlap one another and in some cases certain learning in one progression is a prerequisite for learning in another (Leki, 2002). According to Hartley (2007, 817), “the interrelationships between reading and writing and between listening and speaking also mean that no one strand should be considered on its own”. To emphasize the strong interrelationship between listening and speaking, there is a progression for Interactive Listening and Speaking that is repeated in both the Listen with Understanding and the Speak to communicate strands.