THE EFFECTIVENESS OF GROUP WORK ACTIVITY TO ENHANCE STUDENTS' WRITING SKILLS IN ACET LANGUAGE CENTER

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ABSTRACT

Over the years, peer response including group work activities confirms its important role in learning a foreign language, especially in writing skills which was most paid attention in teaching and learning in Vietnam. This research aimed at the effectiveness of collaborative work to students in English writing classes. Thirty six pre-intermediate students in two different writing classes of ACET language center have participated in this survey. At the end of three-month course, they provided their own opinions for the group work activities whether it contributed to their writing. Their ideas revealed from the questionnaires confirm the effectiveness of group work activities in developing students' writing skill as well as their suggestion to apply this activity to all other English classes.

Keywords: Group work, peer response, group contribution, group discussion, cooperative work.

Introduction

For decades, one of the biggest hurdles in teaching English as a second language is to prepare learners with reasonable and communicable skills to use language adequately. Developing student's four language skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing has been an important goal in teaching EFL (English as a foreign language) because it is important not only in communication, but also in the path to academic achievement. In the past, most of traditional teaching and learning method was teacher-centered, which students were listeners or audiences who only listened and repeated passively what instructors taught and followed their commands (Chaudron, 1993). Recently, language learning methods have shifted from the process of habit formation through imitation, practice and reinforcement to the more active process of generating and transforming knowledge (Sharwood-Smith, 1981). Based on the perspective point of language (that was defined as the method of human communication), learning language through social interaction with others is the most powerful and effective way that humans could learn and develop effectively their language. Therefore, work group or cooperative learning could be a very important means for learners to acquire the second/ foreign language (L2) (QiaoMengduo, 2010). Work group or cooperative learning normally involved in the instructional use of small groups, (even a pair work), in which individuals worked together to accomplish specific tasks, which could be designed for highly structured process of team work

(Wright & Bailey, 2004). A cooperative learning pattern, in order to built a safe and supportive learning environment, promoted positive collaborative interaction among students; which allows student to engage into more enjoyable, interesting and promoted learning activities than other learning patterns such as competitive and individualistic modes (Deng Xiao-ming, 2007). Nowadays, the research of learning second language through group work has seen an enormous growth of interest in the construct of different tasks, from various teaching strategies of collaborative language teaching such as pair wok, group work and jigsaw models(Bafile, 2008; Hedeen, 2003; Holliday, 2002; Joe, 2008; Johnson & Johnson, 1995;) to different objectives for specific language skills such as pronunciation (Hsuan-Yu Chen, 2010), vocabulary (Hoai Huong, 2006) , grammar, listening, speaking, and reading. However, there was a little of work done in researching for the effectiveness of cooperative learning to enhance students' writing skills. The purpose of this study was extremely important to find out the role of group work, collaborative work in enhancing writing skill of learners, student perceptions on participating with team work in order to maximize the benefits of cooperative learning, and whether it was applicable or not to be applied in different levers of learning and other skills.

Literature Review

For the last twenty years, ignited by the opening of national economy to the world, English learning has emerged as the most demanding language for various Vietnamese learners. This high demanding rate in learning English requires the design of new and better education systems by educators and teachers to replace an outdated curricula and teaching methods of current teaching and learning system. As the result of these urgent changes in education system, it was necessary to have academic studies which focus on the improvement of teaching and learning English as a second language. Cooperative learning for language learners has attracted a greater level of interest due to its tremendous benefits for encouraging students to participate actively in language interactions and realistic language activities. Research in cooperative learning for second language learners has been well documented for developed countries where the education system was built and designed effectively by the planning educators.

It should be fully emphasized that the contribution of previous studies has advanced our knowledge on specific affective roles in cooperative learning. From the cooperative learning historical context, most of studies investigating the roles of group work learning based on two majors theories of language learning: the psycholinguistic theory of interaction, contributed largely by the work of Long (1983), and the socio-cultural theory of mind, which builds on the work of Vygotsky (1978). Both theories emphasized on the importance of interaction for learning. The benefit of cooperative learning was also evaluated based on both different strategies of individual, competitive, and collaborative learning models.

In Vietnam, due to the traditional education systems based on the teacher –centered models, there were not many studies investigating the effectiveness of cooperative learning on English learning. For instance, from a study (Hoai Huong, 2006) named "Learning vocabulary in group work in Vietnam", the author discussed how vocabulary learning occurred in the two student group settings, and this study also pointed out how the students were engaging into new words, concepts and cultural practices. Hoai Huong (2007) also

presented another paper which mentioned about how the senior student acted as the more knowledgeable peer, adopted the role of teacher, and contributed substantially to the group work and teaching style.

In addition, Pham-Ho (2013) also contributed his study for the learning and teaching activities for the writing subject at the Ho Chi Minh City Open University (HCMC OU). This study opens and points out the benefit as well as students' writing development after applying peer response in the writing session. This was a new method in teaching writing and it shows out the positive result. However, the limitation in this study was that it's just researched within two writing classes in HCMC OU, not expanding to all writing classes or connecting to other universities.

Obviously, within four main skills, writing seems to be the hardest one for Vietnamese students to grasp. So many methods and activities were applied in writing classes in order to develop students' writing skills already. Among them, we could find out learning in group, collaborative learning or we could consider them as group work activities were most applied nowadays in all writing classes in every language center as well as in national universities. The purpose of the study was twofold. First, this study would assess whether students satisfy with group work in the English Writing class or not? Second, this study evaluates the applicability of the group work into other English classes besides the writing class. This study was executed in order to reveal the findings for the three following questions:

1. What activities did the learners do during the group discussions to prepare for their writing?
2. What are the students' reflections on the application of group work activities in the English classes?

Methodology

Participants, context and measures

Thirty six EFL high school and freshmen students, the age range from sixteen to twenty years old, participated in this research. They passed the entrance examination to these writing classes which required for the pre-intermediate students. Currently, they were joining and learning in the two writing classes in the Australian Center for Education and Training (ACET). Before joining these writing classes each student had at least five years learning English in both Vietnam state schools and language centers. They were familiar to dealing with four English skills. However, this was the first time they learned writing skill with the application of group work activities.

These writing classes in ACET lasted in fifteen sessions, equivalent to 15 weeks. Each session conducted in two hours in the evening. Thirty six pre-intermediate students were divided into two classes conducted on Monday and Friday with seventeen students on Tuesday and Saturday with nineteen students. These two classes were leaded by the same foreign language teacher as well as the same training for writing skill. During two hours working and learning together in the session, one topic was given out as the writing topic for students to write. For first five minutes of discussion in group of four members, students explored, brained storm and listed out needed vocabularies as well as the short outline supporting for the topic writing. Then, representative of each group presented group discussion work in aapproximate three minutes. They had an hour to conduct and complete their topic writing. They would work in group again in ten more minutes to check for group members' writings called peer response activities. Then There were three more

minutes for group representative to talk about which errors or mistake that they recognized. The rest time of class was used for teacher and students working together. They recognized and classified the unique mistakes and common mistakes, listed out some solution or recommendation to adjust or correct them. At the same time, they also raised up some solutions that helped learners to avoid repeating these mistakes. After working in class, students went home and rewrote their writings according to the correction and comments from teacher and group members' reviewing. The last version would be submitted to teacher on the next two days by their own emails.

Data Collection and Analysis

In conducting this research, as an administrator in ACET language center, I came and visited two English writing classes in the ACET on their last learning day of the course. Since after spending fifteen weeks in learning writing, learners had a general view of teaching method applied in these courses. And by this time, they could give us the high reliable answers. With supporting from the academic department and teacher allowance, I had fifteen minutes to contact to students in each class and deliver the prepared questionnaires. Those questionnaires were used for the purpose of asking their feelings and reflections after learning an English writing class with group work activities application. Then I had chances to interview three unpredicted students with unstructured questions for the left time. The Statistical Product and Service Solutions (SPSS) with the version sixteen was used to analyze all the collected data. All the answers from the Likert scales questions were entry into the analysis system for results. All the statistics were shown in type of table with clear information of the Mean, Std. Deviation, Min and Max scores. Moreover, basing on the collected information, some charts were drawn in order to illustrate these evidences.

Findings and discussion

It was easy to get back whole of thirty six in these two writing classes since none of students was absent on the last day. As an advantage for this study, the amount of students was not too many so it was convenient for researcher to deliver the clear instructions to students. All of received questionnaires were valid for this careful explanation. In the questionnaire, eight first questions were used to gather students' ideas and opinions for the group contribution while they were in pre-writing time. Next eight questions (from question number nine to question number sixteen) showed the results of post-writing session. Two last questions (from question number seventeen to question number eighteen) got evidence whether learners liked to apply collaborative work in all English classes.

Secondly, getting results from the questionnaires, the researcher found out the answers for two included matters which were representative for the two research questions in this study:

1. What activities did the learners do during the group discussions to prepare for their writing?
2. What are the students' reflections on the application of group work activities in the English classes?

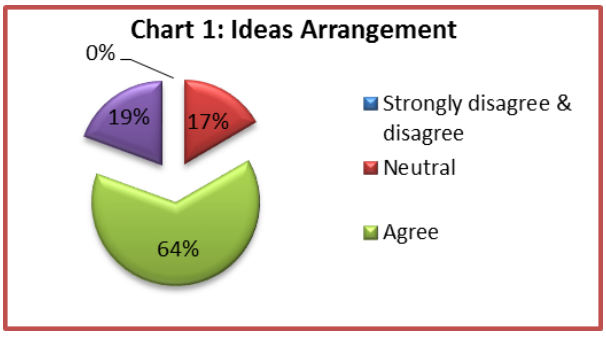
For the first matter, among eighteen questions in the questionnaire, first sixteen ones would reveal the response from the participants. Quite different from (Weijen, Bergh, Rijlaarsdam, & Sanders, 2009); (Lundstrom & Baker, 2008) and (Kibler, 2011), from their studies, frequently, collaborative works were considered as the activities handled in the post-writing. In this research, group work was handled in

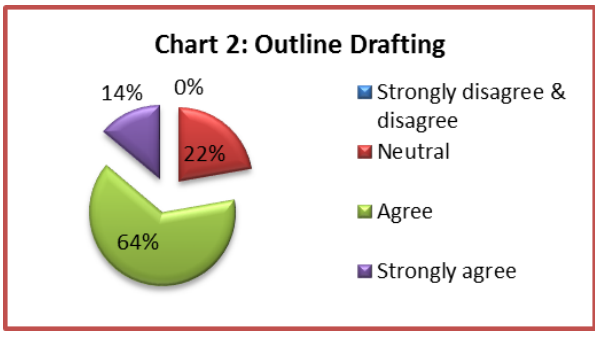
both pre-writing and post-writing sessions. Eight first questions refer to the activities of pre-writing group discussion when all group members joined in brainstorming, building up outline, ideas arrangement and key words collection. (Those activities were confirmed by all students while they answered the question 1). Below table 1 displayed the results of item 2 to item 6, the activities students carried out in pre-writing discussion.

Table 1. Activities in pre-writing group discussion

Descriptive Statistics					
Questions	**Valid Numbers**	**Mean**	**Std. Deviation**	**Min**	**Max**
2. Your confidence when joining in group discussion in pre-writing?	36	3.72	.77	1.00	5.00
3. You brainstorm in group discussion to get as many ideas as possible.	36	3.69	.78	2.00	5.00
4. You list out keywords for the topic while group discussing	36	3.63	.76	3.00	5.00
5. You draft outline in group discussion	36	3.75	.80	2.00	5.00
6. You arrange your ideas while discussing with your friends	36	3.80	.62	3.00	5.00

As could be seen in table 1, all of participants agreed that the activities such as brainstorming, keywords, outline drafting and ideas arrangement during the discussion helped them prepare their writing better. For instance, the mater of discussing about ideas arrangement in writing mentioned in the question 6 (M = 3.80), there were nearly seventy percent of participants agree and more than ten percent of them strongly agree for this element. This was clearer for readers when you looked at the below chart 1 where the percentages were displayed clearly. In the same vein, another element also got the high agree was outline drafting discussion in question 5. (M = 3.75). Chart 2 showed us the participants' response for this factor in the percentages. Over fifty percent students agreed for the important of discussion about outline draft before writing. That information reflected the vital and necessary of group work in the pre-writing part. However, the below charts: 1&2 also gave us information about neutral responses (17% for ideas arrangement and 22% for outline drafting) because students had no consideration for these matters. It could lead us to further research later on to find out whether these neutral participants concerned for these matters. Whether that did not make sense to them or since they did not recognize the role of pre-writing discussion.





Generally, after pre-writing discussion, participants also revealed that they gained so much useful information to prepare for their writing such as brainstorming for ideas, draft outline, ideas arrangement, choosing keywords through the presentation of group representative in front of class. However, there were few students preferring ten to five minutes for discussion which would be better to express all their needed information. This was also the result of the study for the matter of what learners' reflections on discussion activities were and what they gained after pre-writing group work.

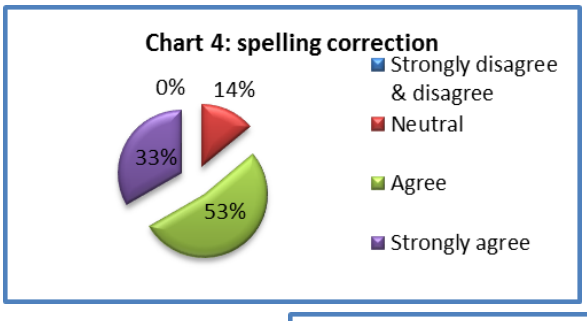
Continued to the eight first questions, the next eight ones would bring students' responses to the group work contribution in the post-writing. Table 2 would be clearer to show us the finding results:

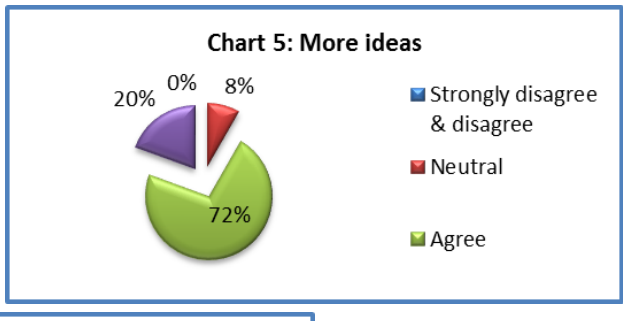
Table 2. Learner's reflection on activities in pre-writing group discussion

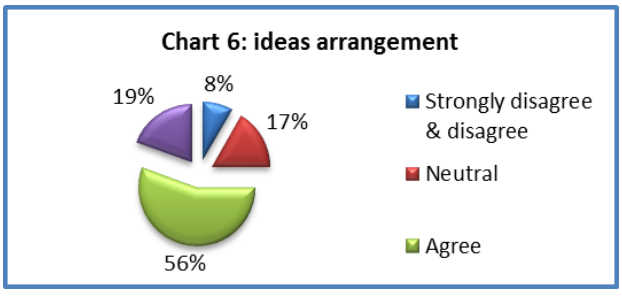
Questions	Valid Numbers	Mean	Std. Deviation	Min	Max
10. Receiving your writing with your friends' feedback, your words choice was better and more suitable	36	3.63	.63	3.00	5.00
11. You gain more ideas for your topic writing	36	3.94	.58	3.00	5.00
12. You have better ideas arrangement	36	3.83	.84	2.00	5.00
13. Your sentences were reconstructed in better ways.	36	3.55	.87	1.00	5.00
14. You have more spelling correction	36	4.08	.69	3.00	5.00

This result indicated that the collaborative work in post writing was very important for the development of students' writing skill. Table 2 described some components conducted in post writing group discussion as: spelling correction, sentences' reconstruction, ideas contribution as well as words choice (students mention in the question 9). It was not too difficult to find out the mistake of spelling for correction was the most common factor that all learners paid attention to. (M = 4.08). The second element which got high agreement from participants was gaining more ideas for your topics. (M = 3.94). Ideas arrangement was considered as the third frequent factor that was responded high agreement from the participants. The three charts: 3, 4 and 5 as the below would give us an overview and clear acknowledgement. The finding from chart 3 illustrated more

than fifty percentage of participants agree for the important role of peer response for checking spelling mistakes in post writing discussion. The strongly agreement also seized more than thirty percent. For these two aspects, it was easy to recognize in the chart 4 and 5 that none of them responsed as disagreed or strongly disagreed. Among three most high response elements, idea contribution was one of the factors that much support for the student to make their writing better in meaning as well as covering wide range of knowledge.







Similarly, the result in chart 6 pointed out that more than fifty percent of participants agreed and nearly twenty percent of them strongly agreed that the necessaries of contributing ideas arrangement should be much paid attention since it affected directly to the quality of student's writing. On the other hand, chart 6 also gaves us the number of eight percent of students who disagreed or strongly disagreed for the importance of ideas arrangement. This was also another matter that we should take time to make clearer later. As ideas arrangement belonged to writing organization, with clear, smooth and logical organization, your writing would get more successful than writing some separated parts to build up writing. It shared the same view with other researchers in the literature review part when they considered collaborative work as a contribution to the writing successfulness.

In general, group activities were conducted two times during the writing session. In the pre-writing, many activities were carried out such as ideas brainstorming, topic key words, outline drafting, ideas arrangement while they were in group discussion. These activities supported learners with a solid foundation in order to build up their writing topic. In the same vein, activities in post-writing as grammar and spelling checking, coherence, ideas arrangement, word choices and sentences links assisted learners to make their writing more beautiful. Therefore, it was really essential to have group work activities in writing class. One time was in pre-writing to create the good frame and one was in the post-writing to decorate the paper. All these helped construct as wonderful paper as students could do.

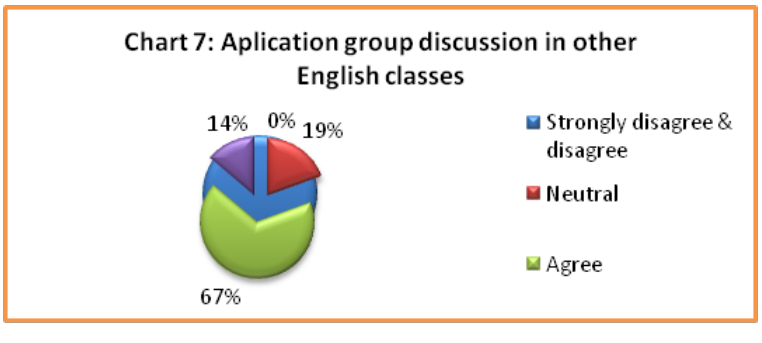
Coming to the two last questions in the questionnaire, they were related to students' point of view in applying group discussion in other English classes. Most of students informed they were joining two

different English classes as the same time. One was the current English writing class in ACET; the other could be general English or English for specific purposes classes, in their schools or even in another language centers. Then, below table 3 showed readers that major of students preferred to implement the group discussion into other English classes. (M = 3.80). This was similar to apply collaborative work not only in writing skill but also in other English classes including four skills.

Table 3. Application group discussion in other English classes

Questions	Valid Numbers	Mean	Std. Deviation	Min	Max
18. Do you prefer to apply group discussion in General English?	36	3.80	.71	2.00	5.00

More detailed information was shown in Chart 7 with the percentage display. Readers could recognize nearly seventy percent students would like to join this group work in all English classes, especially there was none of them belongs to the disagreement or strongly disagreement group. This idea supported to some previous researchers while they were studying about the effectiveness of peer response, collaborative group work in learning second language. Bell, 1991 and Paulus, 1999 (cited in (Lundstrom & Baker, 2008)) also shared that reviewing other students writing could develop their own writing in all levels of students. While Bruffee,1978; Lockart & Ng, 1995; Paulus, 1999; Hyland, 2000 raised up their studies in peer review part would help students develop their writing skill more beneficially than learning alone.



Lastly, after dealing with these two last questions in the questionnaire, we also solved the research questions at the same time that whether students in English writing classes in ACET were satisfied with the collaborative work and students' opinions about applying this method in all other English classes. For the satisfaction, as Lan stated that she was so happy to join this class since apart from developing writing skills, she also developed speaking skills and her confidence in group discussion. (Nguyen Hoang Lan, personal communication, 2013). "I feel so free to raise my own idea within my group. With group's idea contribution, I'm more confident when I present group's idea in front of class" Binh said. (Nguyen Thanh Binh, personal communication, 2013). Generally, students showed that they were much interested in the group work activities both in pre-writing and post-writing parts in writing class. Among group discussion activities in pre-writing, including ideas brainstorming, topic key words, outline drafting, ideas arrangement…, ideas

brainstorming was the one brought much attention and benefit to students. While in post-writing, grammar and spelling checking, coherence, ideas arrangement, word choices and sentences links…, ideas arrangement and sentences links got much students' attention. Thanks to group activities, students helped together having a right direction for their writing as well as good preparation their papers.For the aspect of wide range application, so many students agreed that this method was very effective in learning English and it should be applied in a wide range. However, as some of them informed that it was hard to apply it into Vietnam state schools since the learning curriculum and program were so hard and much different from language centers' ones.

Conclusion

The aim of this study was to determine whether the students in ACET language center satisfy with the application of group work activity in writing class during their course or not. At the same time, we also got their contribution for the application of collaborative work in other English classes, a part from English writing classes. Most of students were very happy with the group discussion in pre-writing and post-writing parts in class. They gained many advantages from those activities. And more than half of them preferred to apply this type of activity in other English classes, besides English writing classes. This shared the same result with Lundstrom and Baker's study in 2008 that both givers and receivers writing feedback gained advantages and development when they were in collaborative work.

However, some limitations could be recognized in this research since this study was conducted in a language center which was quite different conditions from the Vietnam state schools. As Lundstrom and Baker (2008) stated in their study that the effective feedback needed both students and teachers training and spending much time during the course, so it was hard for both teachers and students in Vietnam state schools to deal with this case because of their tie and strict curricula and programs. Another restriction from this study was that this survey was just conducted by students who were in English writing classes. I haven't contacted to students who were in other English classes such as General English Class, ESP classes, English Communication Classes etc. Those students who were in English writing class, they spent the whole session in building up ideas and writing while students in other English classes, they had to deal with other three skills such as reading, speaking and listening skills. The time for writing was not as much as it's in writing class.

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