

Fostering Effective Writing Through Collaborative Write-Aloud in an IELTS Classroom

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Abstract—Writing has long been regarded as the most daunting skill to learn among the four language skills, especially for IELTS learners. To address this, various researches have given bases on how learners could benefit from learning writing strategies to level up their writing skill prior to writing their own pieces. This paper aimed to report students' perspectives on the use of collaborative write-aloud to help students identify their preferred writing strategies and improve their writing score in one IELTS classroom. Five IELTS learners were interviewed to collect data which were then analyzed using Thematic Analysis. The findings revealed that collaborative write-aloud helped the students choose effective writing strategies to develop their writing skill.

Keywords: Collaborative Writing, Write-Aloud, Writing Strategy, IELTS Writing, Writing Skill

1. INTRODUCTION

With the growing number of students planning to study overseas, more English learners take an international English language test to prove their English mastery, for example International English Language Testing System (IELTS), Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL), Pearson Test of English Academic (PTE Academic), or Test of English for International Communication (TOEIC). Among these tests, IELTS which objective is to test overall language skills (Brown, 2003) is mostly preferred by students who plan to study or work in the UK or Europe. Those willing to work get IELTS General, while those seeking to study get IELTS Academic. The two types of IELTS consist of four language skills test: reading, writing, listening, and speaking with band score ranging from 1 to 9. Among test-takers, writing skill is demanded as the trickiest as opposed to other skills. This is because IELTS writing skill does not only measure test-takers mastery of vocabulary, but also the understanding of the case presented in the question. For the above reason, the present research was conducted to provide an alternative as to how to teach and learn IELTS writing skill using collaborative write aloud.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 The Complexity of Writing

A great number of studies reported how among the four language skills, writing is deemed as a very complex skill to learn (Cummings, 2001; Kormos, 2012; Hyland, 2003; Reid, 2002). A good piece of writing requires the writer to master not only content knowledge, but also context knowledge, language system knowledge and also writing process knowledge (Tribble, 1996). Writing is not naturally acquired by language learners and therefore, writers should struggle and put a lot of effort to produce a manuscript.

Researches on writing mostly narrow writing approaches into two types: product approach and process approach. In product approach, students are expected to mimic the text being presented as the sample (Hasan & Akhand, 2011). This text is usually analyzed before students begin writing their pieces. This traditional way to teach writing consists of four stages: first, students learn the type of text they are going to write and study the features of the text by analyzing the model text. The next stage is controlled practice which is often done in isolation, such as writing formal sentence for formal letter practice. In the third stage, students learn how to organize their ideas and finally, they write their pieces by using the structures and vocabulary they previously taught (Steele, 2004).

Contrast to product approach, process approach is more of a cyclical approach in which learners go through drafting and receiving feedbacks from their peers or from the teachers before they submit the final draft (Kroll, 2001). Accordingly, students are engaged in varied classroom activities which develop the language use, such as ideas brainstorming, discussion, and rewriting.

Process approach is often seen as similar to Task-based Language Learning where learners are given freedom to complete the task instead of giving them vocabulary and structure samples to imitate (Hasan & Akhand, 2011). While product approach is about the finished product that can be done individually, process approach is more about what the students can do to improve their writing and therefore it involves the peers and the teachers throughout the process.

2.2 Problems and Challenges in Writing

Students at various level of English mastery encountered many challenges in writing an English manuscript including mechanical problems -like the use of punctuation and capital letters-, problems in constructing the sentence structure, vocabulary use, coherence and cohesive paragraphs which happen at word and sentence level (Karim & Maasum, 2018).

Another study reported by Rahmatunisa (2015) highlighted other types of writing problems, namely psychological problems. Not only linguistic and cognitive problems, students also find it difficult to start writing. Scott and Rockwell (1997) argued that learners' motivation and also emotions can affect the way they learn. Students who have anxiety when they learn a new language, for example, will dislike and are afraid to write.

In collaborative writing, teachers also need to be aware of students' possible breakdown when the group cannot resolve the conflict occurs around them (Dale, 1994). Hence, it is crucial for the teachers to prepare learners and to be willing to help them during the process by creating a relaxed atmosphere (Dale, 1997).

2.3 Collaborative Writing

Collaborative writing refers to the process of writing a text which is done by two people or more and involved text production and interaction among the writers (Storch, 2018). In the field of second language acquisition, interaction is deemed crucial to engage learners in negotiating meaning (Long, 1996) and notice the language structures and forms. According to Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory, expert learners will assist the novice writers in writing their pieces –termed as “scaffolding”- which is eventually internalized by the novices. Such interaction will later enable them to work independently.

Producing text is also important for the learners to notice the gap in their linguistic knowledge and reflect on the language they use to be processed deeply (Swain, 1995). Learners therefore need to be encouraged to produce their text in an appropriate and accurate manner so that they can move to the higher proficiency level (Swain, 1985).

When learners work together to produce a joint manuscript, they share joint responsibility and ownership and involved in “languaging” which leads to immediate feedback throughout the process of writing. Such feedback is different from delayed feedback obtained in individual writing as teachers or peers give feedback only when the text has been entirely finished (Storch, 2018).

Although collaborative writing gains more attention from teachers and researchers, there had been mixed results over the quality of the text produced compared to individually written texts. Some studies revealed a better writing quality and others revealed an opposite outcome. Shehadeh (2011) conducted a longitudinal study on writing and reported how collaborative writing resulted in better writing ability in terms of developing ideas and sentence structure, but show no positive results on the accuracy. However, studies by Fernandez Dobao (2012), Wigglesworth and Storch (2009) showed that a text written collaboratively show better grammatical accuracy as compared to those written individually.

2.4 Collaborative Write Aloud

Utilizing collaborative write-aloud means students write collaboratively, and in this context they write in a big group consisting of six students. They share ownership and responsibility over the quality of the text they produce. Throughout the process, they need to think aloud so that other students can give their opinion or give some immediate feedbacks. They also discuss the best way to express their ideas. The teacher serves as the facilitator by helping students to type the text they formed and show it through projectors. For the present research, they engage in collaborative write aloud in eight meetings lasting for 90 minutes during which they focused on writing Task 1 (a report) which includes questions to report and summarize graphs, tables, pie charts, processes, and also maps.

The following is the collaborative write-aloud procedure used in the present research:

- a) Students and the teacher chose one question
- b) Students made an outline together
- c) Students worked together to form sentences
- d) The teacher wrote the sentences the students formed in the laptop which is shown to them
- e) Students added new sentences and corrected their friends' mistakes.
- f) The teacher gave feedback to their final essay, corrected the mistakes, and gave an alternative to write the sentences.

2.5 IELTS Writing

IELTS test-takers are required to complete two tasks: IELTS Writing Task 1 and IELTS Writing Task 2. The two texts have several differences in which Task 1 is more like a report text where the test-takers need to report and summarize a graph or table, while Task 2 is more like an essay in which test-takers are required to give their opinion on a given topic. Test-takers are given 20 minutes to complete Task 1 report consisting of at least 150 words and 40 minutes to complete Task 2 essay consisting of at least 250 words. Task 2 has more score weight than Task 1 and both of the test are then averaged and rounded to get the overall band score.

In Task 1, test-takers are given various forms of graphs to be described and summarized, such as bar chart, pie chart, tables, maps and process questions, making it more like a report text than an essay. In Task 2 which is more like an essay, students are given varied questions to state their opinion and stance regarding an issue, such as to explain advantages and disadvantages and also to write cause and solution of a particular issue. Most universities in English speaking countries required students to get at least overall band score of 6, which means they should be able to present a well-organized essay with logical ideas and show a range of vocabulary and grammatical structures.

3. METHODOLOGY

The present research employed a qualitative approach. Five IELTS learners are chosen to be interviewed using individual semi-structured interviews to gain an in-depth data. The five participants are chosen as they are the most active learners in the classroom. They have an overall IELTS score ranging from 4 to 5.5. The results of the interviews are then analyzed using thematic analysis (Clarke and Braun, 2013) to be discussed and linked to the previous research and theories. To further elaborate the data, the present research also revealed the teacher reflection on the implementation of collaborative write aloud which is done by classroom observation in eight meetings.

Table 1. Overview of the Research

Methods	Participants	Data Collection	Sampling	Purpose	Data Analysis
Qualitative	Five IELTS learners	Semi-structured Interview	Purposive Sampling	To gain in-depth data	Thematic Analysis

The research design is chosen as the nature of the present research is to gain an in-depth understanding of the students' perceptions regarding collaborative write-aloud, their perceptions on the writing problems they encountered and also the methods they used to overcome the problems. Another reason to choose this design is because of the small number of participants that can take part in this study, due to the small size of the class which only accommodates 12 students.

To get the data, the following research questions are used as the guidance of the research:

1. What are the problems that the learners encountered when they learn IELTS writing?
2. How do they overcome the problems?
3. What are the learners' perceptions regarding collaborative write aloud in their IELTS classroom?

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The findings of the research are presented in three subsections, namely problems encountered by students during the writing process, strategies employed by the learners to overcome the problems, advantages in utilizing collaborative write aloud, and drawbacks of collaborative write aloud.

4.1 Problems Encountered by Students during the Writing Process

The interviews with the five participants resulted in data about the many problems encountered by the students during the IELTS writing process. The data were then coded and categorized into several themes as follows:

a. Writing cohesive paragraphs

During the IELTS writing process, students struggled to write a cohesive paragraph. The teacher also observed that the students often had problems in making their sentences "on track". Most of the time, when the students were able to produce more than 150 words-essay, some of the sentences are repetitive and hardly linked to the previous sentences they wrote. The students also struggled to choose correct cohesive devices to connect their sentences. To illustrate the problem, #student D said:

"We wrote the outline, we knew where we will go, but then, in the real writing process, I rewrote all the sentences and ended up not using the outline I listed. Maybe I did it because I was panicking, or maybe it is just that when I wrote them down for real, I thought a better way to organize my ideas."

A similar result was also reported by Rahmatunisa (2014) where one of the students claimed that organizing ideas into one good piece of writing is difficult even though they had previously made an outline or mind map. They often ignore the outline and went on with the new ideas and paragraph structure they found which made it difficult for the newly made paragraph to be on track.

b. Using advanced vocabularies

The students also admitted they had difficulties in using advanced vocabulary for their essay, mainly because they did not get enough exposure on the use of those vocabularies. The students admitted they often understand the meaning of the words but got puzzled when they had to put them into writing as mentioned by #student C:

"To get a higher score, I need to use uncommon words instead of settling with basic vocabularies I had and remembered. I always try to use new advanced words in my writing, even though I often make mistakes when doing so."

For the students, writing with advanced vocabulary is a serious matter because only then they can show their range of vocabulary and get a good score just like what has been described in the band score criteria. In accordance to this, the teacher also confirmed that the students put a great effort on using advanced vocabulary. Most of the time, students were stuck with the same words and ended up repeating what they had written, resulting in a low score.

Sometimes, students also made mistakes when they attempted to use advanced vocabulary in the essay, and ended up using wrong words making the paragraph hard to understand.

As students are not exposed to the word over time and in various contexts, it is understandable that they misuse some vocabularies (Martin, 1984). Furthermore, not all the students learn how to use the words in a meaningful context, making it much harder for them to remember the words and how they should be put in a sentence.

4.2 Strategies Employed by the Learners in Writing

The learners employed varied strategies in dealing with the problems they encountered when they write an IELTS essay. The first strategy used by most of the learners is reading and analyzing various sample answers which are available on their course books or on the internet. They wrote down the typical outline and common collocation and sentences used by the writers. They later copied those words in a new topic as stated by #student B:

"I read a lot of sample answers on the internet and on books. Usually I write them down and try to use them in my writing. It helps me to be familiar with the words."

Secondly, the learners also tried to enhance their writing score by asking feedbacks from the teacher. They listed the misused vocabularies, incorrect grammar, and also other problems found in their writing. Sometimes they also asked for advice from their peers when they were stuck in writing the sentences. Another strategy used by the learners is by memorizing new words they learned during the class. This includes the sentence structure, collocations, idioms, and common words used in a particular topic. One student also stated that they need to regularly memorize and use these words; otherwise they will forget it, as mentioned by #student A:

"I always memorize new vocabulary and try to use it as frequently as possible. Once I skip doing this, I would forget all those words".

4.3 Advantages of Utilizing Collaborative Write Aloud

Most of the students are quite unsure of what to do first and what to do next when it comes to IELTS writing. As they have very limited time to do it, they need to have a clear idea on what to do in order to finish writing the essay in the given time (20 minutes for Task 1 and 40 minutes for Task 2). By implementing collaborative write aloud the students admitted to get three benefits:

a. Uncovering the thinking process

It is difficult for the students to know what needs to be done to write a better essay, mainly because they do not know the writers' writing process. They can easily find the sample answers and learn from them, but sometimes they struggled to understand how to go there. By having collaborative write aloud, students can experience the first hand what happened in the process of writing a good essay, for example #students B explained:

"The most difficult part of writing is how to organize the ideas so it can flow smoothly and not repetitive. I read many sample answers but I cannot understand how a writer can do it in the real writing process. It turns out that such thing is possible!"

b. Being aware when making mistakes

Collaborative writing benefits from the real-time feedback from the writers (Storch, 2018). Each writer will check and correct grammatical mistakes or vocabulary misuse in the sentences, resulting in better language use. Students also stated that they learned how to spot mistakes throughout the process. By writing collaboratively, they also pay more attention to the correct use of grammar and vocabulary.

c. Learning how to manage time

Another advantage of using collaborative write aloud is learning how to manage time during the writing process. When learners read sample answers available on google or books, they may never know how to manage time to write the essay. This is different from when learners work together and create a text; they will carefully manage the time, as mentioned by #student A:

"When you write alone, you lost track of the time. When you write together with your peers, you pay attention to the time management. You write more carefully and you will write a better essay."

4.4 Drawbacks of Collaborative Write Aloud

a. More pressure in participating in the writing process

Contrary to studies which claimed that collaborative writing may reduce students' stress, students in this present research admitted that they felt more nervous when giving opinion or when forming the sentences. Some students prefer to write down the strategy and not really took part in the writing process. Some of the learners were aware of their friends' writing skill. When they realized they had worse score on writing and less knowledge on grammar or vocabulary use, the learners felt more pressure in participating in the process of writing since they need to think

aloud. Dale (1994) argued that teachers should be aware of the learners' motivation and emotion by creating a more relaxed class so that students can better engage in the activities. Students who are not afraid to be ridiculed when making mistakes are more likely to participate and communicate wholeheartedly during the collaborative learning process.

b. Cognitive conflict

As learners are engaged in a shared ownership of the final writing product, conflict is bound to happen in the process of reaching a consensus (Fung, 1994). There are a mixed response regarding conflict. Unresolved conflicts which are related to personalities or affective aspects may be counterproductive for the group (Storch 2002; Tocalli-Beller 2003; Fung, 2010), while typical conflict may push learners to be more creative and improved their writing quality (Tocalli-Beller 2003). Conflicts can also provide varied ways in looking at things which results in better choices of words and sentences.

c. Smaller group

The collaborative write aloud in this present research involved twelve students in the process. For collaborative writing, this number may be quite too big, so some students may not really participate in the process, as admitted by #student E:

"Maybe it will be better if we do it in a smaller group. Everybody can participate in the writing process, instead of doing it with twelve students like now."

5. CONCLUSION

The present research aimed to gain an in-depth understanding of students' perceptions regarding collaborative write aloud in IELTS writing class. The five participants purposively chosen were interviewed. To obtain more data, teacher reflection is also used as the source of the data. The data revealed that the students encountered linguistics problems, cognitive problems, and psychological problems in the process of writing. To overcome the problems, students read lots of sample answers and analyzed them before they begin writing their own essays. Students also took advantage of teachers' and peers' feedbacks to improve the quality of their writing. Regarding collaborative write aloud, the students stated that they got some benefits, such as, uncovering the thinking process, being aware when making mistakes, and learning how to manage time when they write the essays. Although collaborative write aloud helped them to write better, they also experienced some drawbacks. The students felt more pressure in participating in the activity due to their low self-esteem and also due to the different ability in writing, which is contrary to the previous research which claimed it helped the learners to reduce the writing anxiety. The students also suffered cognitive conflict during the writing process which may result in unresolved conflicts.

Having analyzed the findings, it is important for teachers to try using collaborative write aloud in their classes due to the positive feedbacks given by the students regarding the use of this method of teaching. Secondly, it is also crucial for the teacher to always observe the class and analyze students' problems in the writing process so that students always have positive attitude towards writing.

The present research is done in qualitative manner resulting in findings which cannot be generalized to another context. Future researchers are suggested to conduct similar study on this topic using quantitative manner and involve more participants. Future researchers can also conduct a classroom action research with pre- and post-tests, and use this method as a way to teach writing, so that it can be further analyzed the effectiveness of this method.

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