Group Conflict During Collaborative Writing

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Abstract

Since the current workforce environment required team work, learning to write collaboratively is important. Collaborative writing is based on socio-cultural theory in second language learning. This paper seeks to explore the types of conflicts that occur during collaborative writing among a group of ESL / EFL upper intermediate students in a preparatory programme. It also students how these conflicts are solved among the group members. A group consisting of four members was chosen for this study from an ESL /EFL upper intermediate writing classroom. Data collection process included audio and video recording of collaboration sessions, semi-structured interviews and students' journals. The results of this study showed that there were two prominent types of conflicts that occurred during the collaboration, namely substantive conflict and procedural conflict. Both these types of conflicts were found to be useful as the group was able to negotiate disagreements and come to a consensus. The result show that in order for a collaborative writing session to be successful, conflict management and resolution among the members is crucial.

Keywords:

Collaborative Writing, Substantive Conflict, Procedural Conflict, Argumentative Essay, ESL/EFL Learners

Introduction

Collaborative writing is "the production of a single text by co-authors or group authors" (Ede & Lunsford, 1985, p. 14. Storch (2019) also agrees with this definition by saying that it is an activity when two or more writers work to produce a single piece of written work. The co-authors may take part in all the stages of the writing process such as brainstorming, planning, writing the drafts, revising or dividing the work and editing. This is also supported by Zaky (2018) who claims that collaborative writing involves all the writing process from brainstorming all the way to editing and publishing. It also includes group formation and delegation of tasks in order to complete the work. Much attention has been bestowed on collaborative writing since the early 1970s when Bruffee (1973) argued that students produced better work when the write in groups. Learning to collaborate is important to develop team spirit which is applicable in work places that often involve team projects (Strauss, 2001). Through collaborative writing, the group members share the responsibility of the written product through idea generation, negotiation, decision-making, grammatical accuracy check, and sentence structure check (Yong, 2006). Social interaction gives students the opportunity to learn more appropriately (Vygotsky, 1978). Through social interaction in a collaborative writing group, the members have a better chance of improving their language proficiency as they speak the target language, at the same time improving critical thinking and problem-solving abilities as well. In the ESL / EFL contexts, collaborative writing is a vital writing activity as it is a social process involving teamwork in order to complete a written work by engaging in acts such as negotiation, delegation communication and problem-solving in the process of

completing a written assignment (Alhadabi and Karpinsji, 2020, Abrams, 2019). Although there is an increase of research in the are of collaborative writing, most studies focus on promoting interaction among L2 learners (Chen and Hapgood, 2019); not much research has been done in the area of conflict during collaborative writing. Since the participants of this study are from various countries, the social interaction during the collaborative writing session helped to improve the participants' language proficiency as they were forced to speak a language that all the members could understand. Students face conflicts when there are different views among the group members and these disagreements lead them to reconstruct their thoughts (Yong, 2006). Studies in the local context have yet to look at the effects of different types of conflict among group members. Therefore, this study aims to analyse the types of conflict that occur during collaborative writing.

Literature Review

The significance of collaborative writing as a way to improve language and writing in second language learning is drawn from a sociocultural perspective (Storch, 2019). Vygotsky (1978) recognised that knowledge is constructed through interaction with other people. Additionally, a learner's cognitive development is enhanced when the learner gets involved in a setting that is culturally, linguistically and historically formed. Sociocultural theory emphasises the importance of social interaction and material environment for cognitive development. The main tenet of sociocultural theory is that learners learn new knowledge that adds up to their current knowledge from the interaction with others. Ellis (2000) highlights that learners, normally co-construct the activity that they get involved in. Learners learn while they participate in a sociocultural activity of their learning community. For the L2 learners, their learning community happens to be their classroom where the cultural and linguistic inspirations are encouraged through interaction with their peers or teachers. Vygotsky believes it is important that socially rich situation be made available to the learners for better cognitive development and to provide opportunities for the less proficient learners with more information and knowledge by their more capable peers. He also realised that there are stages of developments that are not necessarily the same for all learners. Villarreal and Gil-Sarratea (2019) found that although collaboratively written papers were shorter, they were more accurate and contained more lexically and grammartically complex sentences compared to those written individually. Villarreal and Gil-Sarratea (2019) also highlighted that these collaborative written work was better organised in terms of content and structure. A study by Coffin (2020) that investigates the process of implementing collaborative writing in EFL/ ESL classrooms reveals that both students and teachers perceive that collaborative writing activity has positive influence on the students teamwork, communication and problem-solving skills. Besides that, Pham (2021) found that collaborative study has great effects on students' writing fluency in both collaboratively written paper and individually written papers. This is also supported by Anggraini et. al (2020) who found that collaborative writing strategy helps students in terms of idea generation besides tapping into their prior knowledge in developing their writing on an assigned topic. This study also highlights the positive perception that students have on collaborative writing. In another recent study to explore higher-proficiency students' motivation in L2 collaborative writing, Chen (2021) found it is possible for students with similar proficiency to have different levels of motivation that affects their participation. Chen (2021) also highlighted that knowledge of collaborative writing, beliefs and past experiences of the activity and perceived value are three major factors that influence students' motivation in collaborative writing. Based on the above review, it is quite clear how many of the latest studies have barely looked into the conflict aspect of collaborative writing. As such, this study analyses the types of conflicts that occur during collaborative writing among students from different cultural background. Putnam (1986) identified three types of conflicts, namely, substantive conflict, procedural conflict and affective conflict. Affective conflict focuses on the collaborators' personality instead of the procedure or the task, whereas procedural conflict focuses on everything from agreeing on where to meet at an expected time, to voicing their opinion and solving disagreements. If the procedural conflict is not addressed quickly, it could be disruptive towards the group function. Substantive conflict, on the other hand, focuses on taking into account the alternatives and voicing

disagreement which is more advantageous compared to affective and procedural conflicts. Substantive conflict puts off consensus thus allowing possibilities to surface.There have been a few reserch that documents conflicts faced by writers during collaborative writing. Burnett (1991) presented an observation based theory and model of conflict in collaboration. The model supports substantive conflict as an important element of successful decision-making among collaborative writers. The study shows that delaying consensus gives the collaborative writers the chance to engage in substantive conflict and to be able to produce a document of a higher quality. Lamonica (1996) carried out a case study to investigate the interrelationships of the processes such as conflict, creativity and collaboration in a section of English- introduction to prose fiction. The study hypothesised that conflict is an important aspect throughout the collaboration and that avoidance of premature consensus lead to a better success. Her finding was not conclusive and she suggested that further investigation should be done to test if these hypotheses are valid. Lee (2011) who highlighted that there were not many research carried out especially in the ESL context to see how students arrive at decisions, conducted a study to describe the decision-making processes during collaborative writing of an argumentative essay. The patterns of decision-making were identified based on Burnett's (1993) categories. Lee found that the participants spent more time on forming sentences from their ideas that planning. She also found longer turns and more patterns for the category of voicing explicit disagreement. In addition, the participants also faced some conflict due to their knowledge of writing. Yong (1998) carried out a case study on three students to find out how group members develop their ideas during their interactions and to explore their perceptions towards collaborative writing. The findings showed that the collaborators were occupied in a productive interaction throughout the writing sessions as they contributed ideas, giving alternatives and monitoring their work. The conflicts that her participants faced helped them to reconstruct their thought and reconsider their views. Besides that, they also had positive perceptions towards collaborative writing.

Research Methods

The study was conducted in an English Lanugage Centre (ELC) at a private institution of higher learning in Malaysia. The Language Centre offers English Improvement Program which includes Listening and Speaking, Reading, and Grammar and Writing. This study was conducted in the Grammar and Writing class. Prior to the implementation of the study, participants who joins entirely on voluntary basis were required to fill in a consent form. For the purpose of this study, the participants names have been replaced with a pseudonym in order to protect their identity. The students were asked to form groups of four members to carry out their writing tasks. The participants' age ranged from 17 to 25 years. The students are from various countries such as China, India, Indonesia, Iraq, and the United Aram Emirates (U.A.E). The study emphasised on argumentative writing as this mode of writing generates a lot of cognitive processes which trigger discussions among participants. After each collaborative session, the participants were interviewed individually. The participants were asked about their experience working as a group, their group interactions, and things that they learned from the collaboration. Group interactions during collaboration were audio and video-recorded. Participants also wrote down their experiences and perceptions on collaboration in journals after each collaborative writing session. The audio-recordings and interviews were tanscribed verbatim. The transcriptions of group interactions, interview responses, and data from journals were analysed qualitatively. The transcriptions of group discussions were segmented into episodes. One episode represents a topic of discussion. Critical incidents were selected for in-depth analysis. The purpose of the transcription was to observe the different kinds of conflict that occurred during collaborative writing. For this purpose, the identification of the three types of conflict by Putnam (1986) was used to identify the different types of conflict that occurred during the collaborative writing sessons.

Results and Discussion

The group chosen for this study is a group of close-knit friends however, they did face some conflicts during their collaborative writing sessions. This group was also having so much fun that they even laughed about their conflict. They solved conflict most of the time through humour.

a) Substantive Conflict

Substantive conflict focuses on taking into account the alternatives and voicing disagreement which is more advantageous compared to affective and procedural conflict. Excerpt 1 from the group's first task entitled "Gay marriage should not be legalised" shows the group facing a substantive conflict as one of the members voiced her view that was against the group's view and provided her justification.

Excerpt 1

52. S: If boy and boy get married the moral val- where is the moral value, right? How to say?
53. N: And how can be boy and boy married?
54. W: Yes, boy and boy can… just-
55. N: Ya *lah*, boy and boy-
56. L: Actually
57. S: Actually? You agree?
58. N: Continue
59. W: Actually you agree
60. L: Ya, I think, just I think is ok
61. S: I think you give me, give us the reason why you think agree, disagree
62. L: I think everyone has the, everyone have chance to choose
63. S: Ya, they have chance to choose, but why don't they choose a girl?
64. N: girl
65. S: Why they must choose a boy?   (laughs)
66. W: Why must choose a boy
67. L: Why must choose a girl?
68. S: Of course god decide like that, why you must change the thing?
69. N: Yeah, act normal, normal
70. L: Everyone have their own habit, their habit, yeah?
71. S: Habit, yeah
72. L: So, I think they choose boy is ok
73. S: Ok, they choose, how they going to have a baby?
74. W: If ok, but the society
75. N: baby?
76. L: They can, who said married must have baby?
77. S: Purpose of a marriage is to get a baby
78. N: is to get ah
79. S: Most of them. 99%
80. L: If I get married I don't want get baby (W laughs)

81. S: Really?
82. L: Yeah
83. S: I will tell him later (all laugh)

As shown in Excerpt 1, Ling agreed with gay marriage to which Sonia questioned her for agreeing and Ling justified her stand. This substantive conflict led to further questioning by Ling's group members and their elaboration to justify why gay marriage was not acceptable. Sonia and Nuren used their understanding about the purpose of marriage from their cultural background which was to raise a family. Ling countered by saying that she did not want a baby. Though the conversation was getting a little heated, they still managed to joke as Sonia said that she would tell Ling's boyfriend about Ling not wanting a baby. This made all the members laugh and it helped to calm the situation. This corresponds with Martin et al. (2003), who claims that the usage of affiliative humour could reduce interpersonal tension thus promoting relationship building.

b) Procedural Conflict

Procedural conflict focuses on everything from agreeing on where to meet at an expected time, to voicing out their opinion and solving disagreements, however if this kind of conflict is not addressed quickly, it could be disruptive towards the group function. In this group, the procedural conflict in terms of solving disagreement takes place as shown in Excerpt 2. It is a continuation of Excerpt 1.

<u>Excerpt 2</u>

87.   S: I think so, give me more points, why you say disagree?
88.   L: Ok, you should tell me why you agree
89.   W: Because err people, how to say? People will not err-
90.   S: People will, will look down, right?
91.   W: Yeah, will look down-
92.   S: If boy and boy get married and they walk I the street- yeah
93.   L: Not all the people, like the same ah, not all the people same-
94.   W: But not all the people will agree ⌐ if they see-
95.   S :   Agree ⌐
96.   N: Agree right? ⌐
97.   N: If you walk through the street, maybe they will look down to you. Ahh
98.   L: Ok, if they should not be
99.   S: Legalised ⌐
100.   W: Legalised ⌐
101.   L: Legalised, they also love the boy, right? but they also love boy, if they love boy, they don't care is
102.   S: Marriage or not
103.   L: Yeah
104.   S: What will, will do? That's the question right?
105.   L: Yeah, yeah, also don't have baby and, and like this
106.   S: K, tell, give your point
107.   N: So how? Agree or disagree
108.   S: She must agree, so, you must, we must make her to agree, so give your points, what you think now?

...
202.   L: Ok, I agree with you. But I keep my opinion. After this I will
203.   S: Fight again, right?
204.   L: Yeah   (all laugh)
205.   S: Ok

Sonia pressed Ling for more reasons, however, Ling rebelled by asking Sonia to present her reasons to agree with the topic to stop Sonia from questioning her. In this case, the procedural conflict took place as the group tried to solve the disagreement among them, this was done by negotiating and explaining their point of view. Sonia pointed out that Ling had to agree with the majority, but she maintained the discussion in a negotiation manner as she asked for more points. Although Ling stood with her decision, she decided to follow the majority as she realised that they had limited time. Though they said that they would debate again later on, they just laughed about it and got on with their work. When Ling was interviewed about how she felt about being forced to follow the majority, she just laughed and said that she understood that gay relationship may be quite new to her group members as shown in the interview response below:

> Oh, it must be new to them maybe that's why they cannot understand why I think that it's okay. But I don't be angry with them, they're my friends. It was fun. Sonia and I always fight. Argue, yes... but we are close... you know, after this semester I will miss them so much.

Here, it is evident that no matter how much they argued during the collaboration, it did not affect their interpersonal relationship as they were very close friends. This group was a very collaborative group. They managed to overcome their differences and conflict very quickly. This could be because they were very close-knit.

Conclusions

This group faced substantive conflict, however, they managed to put their arguments and disagreement behind very quickly. Humour was also part of the group's way to ease the tension they faced. This study provides insights into conflict resolution in a multi-cultural collaboration which is applicable not just in ESL / EFL context but also in professional situation. The findings can help future collaborators to avoid pitfalls in order to collaborate successfully.

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