STUDENTS' EXPERIENCES IN
COLLABORATIVE EFL WRITING

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Abstract: *This study reveals EFL students' reflection on working collaboratively during writing class. By nature, writing is a solitary activity. When students collaboratively write their essay, it will be conflicting situation for them. Revealing students' views, feelings, and aspirations about collaborative writing becomes an academic effort to add knowledge about collaborative writing in EFL context. The study is approach through narrative inquiry which primarily focuses on EFL university students' written narratives. By purposefully selecting the two students EFL students who join in EFL writing class with collaborative writing activities (pair or small group work), they were asked to give written respond based on statement starters available in narrative frames, then, they were interviewed to gain deeper information about their reflection. The findings reveal that students, firstly, felt hard to come in one decision during the interaction for drafting the essay. Being intensively exposed by collaborative writing activities, then, students are able not only develop their writing performance, but also other skills such as social interaction, negotiation, and responsibility. As a teaching technique, collaborative writing opens opportunities for having both instructional and nurturing effects for students.*

Key Words: *collaborative EFL writing, teachers' and students' experiences*

Introduction

In EFL writing context, collaborative writing has gained its popularity. Teachers of writing apply collaborative writing as the way to improve students' writing skill, and later, it also

provides other benefits for students such as having good negotiation skill (Fung, 2010; Mulligan & Garofalo, 2011; Shehadeh, 2011). Related to working definition of collaborative writing, Storch (2011) defines that collaborative writing is an activity in which students write together in pairs or small group to produce a text.

When students are involved in collaborative writing and given space to share their experiences, it can provide pointers with regard to the design features of a "good collaborative task" (Bremmer, et al, 2014, p. 165). A case study was done to understand EFL students' participation in group peer feedback revealed that students' motives could influence students' participation in group peer feedback activities, engagement with the peer feedback and their subsequent revisions (Yu & Lee, 2014). Specific studies on collaborative writers' stories confirmed that they experienced the tensions during a decade of writing collaboratively that gives useful insights for other writers and collaborators and those who seek caring, responsive, nurturing writing relationship, autonomy, and sense of classroom community (Douglas & Carless, 2014; Houat 2012).

For many EFL writing students, the experience of writing with other students in a group can be terrible one. They may be faced with more competent language users, and they may be concerned about their ability to contribute, and about the attitude they may encounter from others in the group (Wigglesworth & Storch, 2012). For sure, these situation become important to share. A study on how do learners experience joint writing focusing on university students' conceptions of online collaborative writing and task environment found that students commonly consider that online collaborative writing as document production or co-construction of personal understanding which was effectively done if it was supported with various procedural, functional and behavioral scaffolds (Limbu & Markauskaite, 2015).

This present study explores collaborative writing focusing on students' experiences. The contribution of the research is to add knowledge about collaborative in EFL context, specifically, in writing classes. By exploring students' experiences, collaborative writing can be better understood. Furthermore, exploring students' experiences thoroughly describes the potency and the complexities, the challenges, and the success and unsuccess of collaborative writing in EFL context. Based on the above description and explanation, the present research is going to probe the research question: *"What learning experiences using collaborative writing have been important to students of EFL writing?"*

Review of Literature

To facilitate the students in meaningful writing process, collaborative writing could be the answer. It is relevant to the pedagogical view of writing that is it a process of discovering and making meaning. At the technical level, collaborative or joint writing is not very different from individual writing. They both serve similar sub-tasks such as planning, drafting, editing, and revising. But, in collaborative writing, students must share their thoughts early with other friends by discussing, negotiating, and building knowledge (Limbu & Markauskaite, 2015) and it is performed collectively by more than one person to produce a single text and writing is any activity that leads to a completed document (Lin & Maarof, 2013:601).

The effects of collaborative writing on students' grammatical/linguistic competence (the knowledge of language code: grammatical rules, vocabulary, syntax, spelling) were shown from the findings revealed by Storch (2005) collaborative essay grades were higher than those done independently and tended to have greater grammatical accuracy. Two aspects of linguistic competence, grammar and vocabulary, again, are clearly described by Mulligan and Garofalo (2011; Dobao, 2012). This study also reveal the improvement on student's discourse competence that is the students' essays are more carefully organized as well as Nuemann and Mc Donough's study (2015) confirms that collaborative pre-writing stimulates student discusses content and organization.

Instead of instructional effects which is discussed in the following section, nurturing effects of using collaborative writing in L2 writing context is also significant to explain. Collaborative writing provides opportunity for using and reflecting language use, for engaging with the moves, developing writing and social skills through interactions with their peers (Storch, 2007; Fung, 2010). Writing collaboratively builds sense of collaboration, autonomy, classroom commmunity which is great for social skill development, stress reduction and time-saving, and motivational effects (Houat, 2012; Mulligan and Garafalo, 2011).

The above discussion shows that collaborative writing is very dynamic topic and activity for writing classroom. The benefits of collaborative writing will become the main reason for applying collaborative writing. However, possible challenges will also become important points to concern. When writing is seen as solitary activity, how can the writing classroom accommodate this, and how to build sense of participation among members of the collaborative group. The issue of fairness in gaining the score should be another consideration to think since collaborative text is the production of all members which sometimes not all are involved or participated in producing the text. In this sense, collaborative writing should be prepared and handled properly to achieve the optimal benefits.

Methodology

Narrative inquiry is used in this study as the device to understand students' experiences (Lawler, 2002). As other qualitative researches, the researcher became the key instrument. The research instrument was narrative frame which was used to collect students' experiences. Students' experiences were built in past (introduction to collaborative writing), present (current experiences with collaborative writing), and future (future goals and aspirations on collaborative writing). Purposeful sampling was applied to select students based on their 3 semesters involvement in collaborative writing. Among 61 students enrolling Writing III at semester 5, there were 2 students who met the criteria. They enrolled continously three semesters to writing courses which have applied collaborative writing. With these three semesters involvement, they are considered as informants who can share the richness of experiencing collaborative writing classes.

After students finished compliting their three semesters collaborative writing classes, narrative frames were distributed. Then, semi-structured interview was done after the participants finished writing the narrative frames. The interview with the students outlined a set of issues related to their first engagement with collaborative writing activities, their current moment of having collaborative writing, and their reflections and future aspiration about

collaborative writing. The interview was tape-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Then, I identified elements of a story, and organized the elements into logically ordered narrative based on literary elements of setting, characters, actions, problem, and resolution. This step also allowed me to build past, present, and future experiences. To make it visible in my restorying process, I determine the themes. When restorying process occurs, it refered to the time when I write the narratives in my words which potentially can destroy the real meaning conveyed by teachers and students in their original narratives.

To maintain the accuracy and crediblity of narrative account, I keep collaborating with the participants throughout the process from the time of collecting, restorying, and reporting their narratives. The report on finding is finished after validating process such as member checking, triangulating the data source, and searching for discomfirming evidences.

Findings

Theme 1: Feelings the Wind of Changes

The findings of the study reveal that the first time students were taught by using collaborative EFL writing made them confused, difficult and tired. Entering new nuance from the mainstream writing class raised students' diverse feelings about collaborative writing. The confusion was from a situation when in a collaboration, students seemed like making scream one with another. Students were busy to state the ideas without any ending. Feeling uneasy to express idea and to reject or receive other's idea resulted confusing condition, therefore, they cannot start to write anything yet. Both students narrated that:

> *'Feeling distracted and confused with this method, at first, something strange, it was like making yell with another' (S1SE.1).*

> *'it's difficult not knowing anyone but we have to various ideas into difficult task' (S2SE.1).*

Working together to produce one piece of writing collaboratively was kind of place that was full of competition to win the most acceptable idea. Competition is valued as negative thing for S1 who experienced that settling down idea to write as the initial stage of writing process was uncomfortable phase With more ideas came up to the group discussion more conflicting situation happened. The same feeling happened to S2. Writing one topic with others, sometime, took long time to have fixed idea that is really tiring.

> *'I wanted to compose case A, and my partner intended case B. Sometimes, it seems like a competition to decide which idea is good to write' (S1SE.2).*

> *'If the idea was rejected by the other member, we had to redo it from a scratch' (S2SE.2).*

The issue of paratism appeared when students were not active to contribute any ideas as stated by S1. Ironically, S1 cannot do anything facing this situation which was unfair. S2 shared similar story about having problematic partner in S2's narrative stated that:

> *'If one of them do not speak up, cannot be called as collaborative then,...that person will be referred to as parasite' (S1SE.3).*

'having a partner who didn't contribute to give ideas was unavoidable point that make us cannot go further' (S2SE.3).

In contrary to the irritable faces expressed early on, next stories students shared show them enjoying collaborative writing. Both S1 and S2 reflected the beauty of collaborative writing as the place to gain much ideas and to learn for the betterment. The interaction existing during the writing process, resulted stimulating dialogue among members. As stated that:

'I like it because it gave me space to select the most suitable idea, ... Both ideas and critics from collaborative partner sometimes are more brilliant than I have ever thought' (S1HE.1).

'I like it because in many ways, I can learn 'things' from other people'. No matter who your pair is, how smart or awful he is' (S2HE.1).

Time by time, the joy of collaborative writing was felt by students simultanously. Feeling comfortable and shifting S1's view about 'competition'. The negative sense of competition, later, shifted into positive one. The same changing feeling expressed in S2's narrative

'the class was comfortable. Every member of the class create competitive atmosphere which force everyone to compete one another by offering criticism and the other will immediately give a feedback' (S1HE.2).

'the class was amazing, the teacher was great in giving direction and the partner changing randomly' (S2HE.2).

Students can identify which activities they liked most from the collaboration after having closer look on face-to-face interaction. For S2, discussion session was comfort zone for him as stated that. Discussing the topic, outlining, drafting, and revising the draft invited students to any strengths and weaknesses of the draft.

'I enjoy brainstorming as it is a key process in collaboration, and I like most when giving argument in which everybody has to speak about the topic' (S1HE.3).

'I like discussion session, because we have another people to talk, those who are different will see our weaknesses' (S2HE.3)

Theme 2: Viewing Now and Then

From time to time following writing class with collaborative activity, students were able to closely see their collaborative writing class. Based on the story, S1 evaluated that the issue of paratism cannot be solved. It was indicated by S1's behavior for doing nothing when having a parasite partner and keep saying that. In line with S1 who struggled with parasitism, S2 referred to the same idea, that was passiveness. S2 storied that:

'Again, parasite is crucial aspect in collaboration that should be solved by both teacher and students' (S1Ev.1)

'Moreover, having a partner who didn't contribute to give ideas or passive partner was unavoidable' (S2Ev.1).

Not only see what other friends did in collaborative writing, S1 and S2 also shared their own roles. S1 contributed much on grammar to the draft. Once in a situation when S2 became the owner of selected idea, S2 contributed to the idea development

'My contribution was mostly on grammar as I realized that my grammar knowledge was better than content' (S1Ev.2).

'My role/position/contribution, after having little chat we choose one. We let the owner of the idea to make outline' (S2Ev.2).

In term of matching system, S1 shared his unsatisfied evaluation. S1 evaluated that the group formation with low and low formation did not work for collaboration. S2 differently evaluated about high-low, low-low, and high-high formation. S2 pointed that formation of high and low basically was not contributing factors to the success of collaboration

'When students are low and low, so they did not support one another' (S1Ev.3)

'It doesn't matter about high and low students, it depends on their will to learn from other or not' (S2Ev.3).

Due to the key idea of effective collaborative writing, S1 and S2 mentioned different conception. S1 evaluated that a collaboration invited all members spirit to fill each another as contributing factor to the success. S1 storied that. S2 formulated about effective collaboration, even, he still hesitated whether his definition was correct or not. It was indicated by the time to finish the project. S2 said

'The key of collaboration is 'complementary' meaning that other can see my strength and weakness vise versa' (S1Ev.5)

'Effective collaboration, I don't know, when we divide the part, I think it was fastest one' (S2Ev.5).

By reflecting their own ups and downs stories in experiencing collaborative writing, both students expressed their hopes to the partners. S1 shared that S2's hope concerned with students' active participation in giving information to the content of the writing. S2 narrated

'Students should be available to monitor the process of essay writing. Monitoring means correcting the flow of the writing, the content, the grammar, and word choice as well editing and reviewing the content' (S1Ho.2).

'At the same time, I would like students to, at least, read about the materials before coming to the class since the class activity will be discussion. Reading the needed materials is essential in making opinion in the discussion and later will affect their arguments in their essays' (S2Ho.2).

Struggling with different kinds of partner, contributed to S1's idea about matching system. Group with carefully formed influenced the quality of the collaboration and the writing. It was impossible to have perfect partner for the whole collaboration, but, it can be possible as far as the formation was done based on reasonable consideration. S1 shared his aspiration by writing. The chance to know more about who the partner to be should be open at the beginning of the process of collaboration. S1 wanted that 'Students are allowed to make points like

'Knowing the characteristics of the individual student is a must. It is not like whether one is competent or not, firstly, it should be about her/his personality such as potentially being selfish or not' (S1Ho.3)

'I want to work with her/him because s/he is in line with me' (S1Ho.4).

Both students agreed that collaborative writing will be useful for their future academic life. They proposed how collaborative writing should be done in the next writing class. As stated above, S1 came up with the idea of 'true collaborative writing environment' while S2 gave more practical suggestion for applying next collaboration. S2 believed that combining both individual and collaborative writing simultaneously was potential idea to the success of collaboration. As stated that 'In collaborative-individual pattern. It means that after one task is done collaboratively, the next one will be individual task and so on. With this zig-zag pattern, students can directly took the advantage of collaboration when they did individual writing.

Discussion

The nature of writing as an individual or solitary activity was commonly still in students' mind. Situating in collaborative writing, students narrated their stories and show the dynamic of experiencing it. They face double burden to write. Firstly, students thought that passing the writing process was like as a place of competition. Each student had idea to choose as group topic. Students faced complex experience about being win and loose in defeating the topic. However, once students passed the combination of collaboration and competition, they produced the best result (Browning (2012). Secondly, writing with different types of group members made the collaboration, sometimes, did not run smoothly. The issue of dominant-passive pattern was always in collaboration. Students' motives played important role in positioning to be dominant or passive (Yu & Lee, 2015).

Their study proves that when a student had negative belief about working with others reflected by feeling not interested, having no expectation from group activity, and only for following teacher's instruction, s/he will act passively (p. 584). It raised the issue of 'paratism' as said S1 in which representing a situation when one student just follow what group decided without giving any contribution. In term of group formation, both S1 and S2 preferred to choose the partner by themselves. It was in line with Russell (2010) who explored students' reflection on collaborative writing found that 'students saw the ease of communication they experienced with friends as highly significant' (p. 217). The friendship lessens difference among members and weakens inconvinience. It serves joy to finish the task.

There was slightly different feelings between S1 and S2 when firstly experienced collaborative writing. S1 preferred to write alone, it was caused by the freedom to write. In individual writing, S1 did not need to share anything with others, once, he came up with an idea, it can be developed

without waiting decision from others. It was not so easy to collaborate towards one agreement with others like in a tyranny (Pierre, 2014). On the other hand, S2 started from the beginning enjoyed writing collaboratively. He was easily stuck when the time write alone. Writing with others helped him to produce more accurate and better writing quality (Sveum, 2013; Hanjani & Li, 2014). Later, S1 and S2 experienced collaborative writing in similar way. Changing attitude from negative to positive was another result of better knowing on collaborative writing. During class interaction, they found a place to get better idea and meaningful feedback from other members. It was caused by many channels to communicate and more interactive discussion which shifted their behavior from group work to collaboration (Bremner et al, 2014, p. 165).

Experiencing total collaborative writing made both students were able to identify which activity contributed more to them. For S1, brainstorming and outlining were key points where everybody had to speak up the possible and best ideas to write. While S2, found that all discussion sessions became strong evidence for him to see the power of collaborative writing. The stimulating discussion provided rich linguistic resources to develop writing quality and opportunities to compare ideas (Storch, 2005). Dobao (2012) investigated oral interaction in pair and group work to identify Language-Related Episodes (LREs). The episodes consisted of Form-focused LRE, Lexis-focused LRE, Mechanics-focused LRE (p. 45).

Reflecting the three semesters experience, S1 and S2 notified that the existance of paratism or passiveness cannot be avoided in group work. Positioning as safe player raised because there will be group responsibility, therefore, when the project was done by others, it was for all. For students, level of writing proficiency was not the only one important role to the success of groupwork. What matter for students was the relationship and the role they took. Students' narratives indicated that they did not have much problem with high-low relationship. This could be happened as the idea of collaboration has extended from more-less capable collaboration into symmetrical (equal ability) one regardless of their proficiency that allows students to discuss (Hanjani & Li, 2014). When the students face dominant-passive relationship, it was not from the influence of proficiency level (Storch, 2013).

Related to their hopes, they wanted group member was available to intensively monitor the writing process, actively involved during collaboration. Hoping such kind of collaborative behaviors was reasonable as the quaity of the writing relied much on the mutual relationship. However, students need to realize that for some students, collaborative writing was still uneasy. Lin and Maarof (2013) describe some students' problems of doing collaborative writing consisting lack of English proficiency, reluctance to give opinion, and spending longer time to finish the task (p. 604). Making realitic hopes could be started from student her/himself to positively value collaborative writing.

Moreover, knowing members personally was also key success for collaboration. It can be inferred that students preferred choosing their own partner compare to teacher-assigned partner. By choosing the partner by themselves, students knew their friends behavior and background because it was also key feature of group selection (Braine, Kerry, and Pilling 1990 in Russel, 2010). It was impossible to have perfect partner for the whole collaboration, but, it can be possible as far as the formation was done based on reasonable consideration.

Conclusion

The study reveals that students felt confused at the first time assigned to write together. They shared that they were like in a competition to win whose idea was the best to choose. Before successfully coping with competitive situation, the same time, they also faced conflicting situation on dominant-passive relationship. However, those down side of their experiences shaped their better understanding on how to harmoniously, equally, and mutually collaborate.

For students, dominat-passive and high-low relationship should be solved to create collaborative relationship. They had aspiration that teachers must have clear guidelines of collaborative writing. They wanted every single step must be clear for them, hence, students' motive to reach high equality and mutuality in writing the task will be high. Realizing the power of collaborative writing, students viewed that collaborative writing should be built based on complementary situation and interdependent relationship in finishing the writing task. It offers great opportunities to have 'share expertise' and to appreciate strengths and weaknesses.

This narrative study is not free from limitations. First, relocating students' experiences challenged me to take balance position in representing them. It was easily for me to be trapped to place them as a superhero who can solve the problems in collaborative writing. Second, students might enable to give more detailed and potentially interesting narratives and expressions if they had written and spoken in their first language, Indonesian. This narrative study is still far from perfection as it cannot catch all important experiences that reflect day-to-day experiences of students.

A number of theoretical and pedagogical implications are derived from the findings of the study. The main theoretical implication is to incorporate previous efforts to confirm the sociocultural theory as strong support for applying collaborative writing. It also strengthens how process approach pedagogy closely related to collaborative writing. Another theoretical implication of the study is the findings collaborative writing goes beyond microskill of writing. The findings shows that both teachers and students share narrative about how collaborative writing helps to improve macroskills.

From a pedagogical point of view, the findings of the study provide supplementary empirical evidences of the advantages of collaborative writing in EFL writing classroom. The social context in collaborative writing facilitated the students to learn from others. The interaction during collaboration provided rich Language-Related Episodes for better grammatical and lexical accuracy. Moreover, equal and mutual relationships gave the students stimulating space to sharpen their other writing skills.

It is suggested that teachers of EFL writing equip themselves to have good understanding on collaborative writing before applying in the classroom. It will help them to manage better collaborative writing. For students, they should value collaborative writing as a great place to interact with others for better writing performance. For future studies, exploring students' experience from all levels of proficiency will be essential area to do. Patterns of relationship existing during collaborative writing will be also important issue to investigate.

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