Collaborative Writing: Emirati Freshman Students' Experiences

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Abstract— It is often thought that writing is an individual activity, which can be improved with individual students' engagement in multiple drafts. Communication on how to improve drafts normally takes places between students and the teacher, with very limited input from peers. However, our nature as social beings allows for and requires instructional design geared towards interaction-intensive learning experiences - and writing instruction is not immune to this. Carefully planned writing tasks can serve in this role. This paper reports the findings of a small-scale study in which student perceptions on collaborative writing were investigated. Student perceptions matter since they help identify how successful instruction has been, and inform the teacher about future initiatives to better cater for student needs. To this end, the opinions of sixty-four freshman Emirati students in a writing intensive course were collected using two data gathering instruments for quantitative and qualitative analyses. Results showed that the students perceived collaborative writing as fairly compatible with their Emirati culture. It was also found that the students were particularly happy that their collaborative writing experience contributed to a variety of skills including English, teamwork, and active learning. However, they did express some concern about it in terms of time-management, conflicts among group members, and some students' irresponsible behavior.

Keywords— collaborative learning, collaborative writing, group work, team-work

I. INTRODUCTION

Writing is often considered to be an individual activity. However, when the collective nature of certain societies as well as the amount of teamwork in the modern work-place are considered, we actually need to approach writing from a different perspective: collaboration. In simple terms, collaborative writing can be defined as "the production of a text by two or more writers" (Storch, 2016). Previous research has investigated collaborative writing focusing on discrete writing activities, without much interest in how it can be applied more broadly, such as a variety of tasks culminating in a whole-project document. The benefits of collaborative work in writing intensive courses have been well-documented (Nunn, Brandt, & Deveci, 2016; Nunn, Deveci, & Salih, 2015). However, much of what has been said seems to have been narrated from the perspective of writing instructors, without extensive literature on how students perceive their collaborative writing experience. Their opinions do matter since it is these that should determine the effectiveness of any

instructional intervention and approaches to learning (Diseth, 2007). Prompted by this belief, this study sought answers to the following questions:

1- According to freshman students, how compatible is collaborative writing with the Emirati culture?

2- What aspects of collaborative writing are freshman students happy about? As well, what aspects of it do they have concerns about?

II. COLLABORATIVE LEARNING AND COLLABORATIVE WRITING

Collaborative writing is based on the principles of collaborative learning. In fact, the social constructivist approach to learning gave way to collaborative learning. According to this approach, small group work is more motivational since it allows for deeper understanding through students' use of self-regulation skills (Van Merrienboer & de Bruin, 2014). The teacher who works in collaboration with students assumes a different role. He is not the sole owner of information anymore. Students do not wait passively for him to transfer knowledge. Rather, they are actively engaged in seeking knowledge, making sense of it through their own experience, and evaluating learning both for themselves and the others involved in the process. For these things to happen, the teacher needs to provide "rich environments, experiences, and activities for … collaborative work, problem solving, authentic tasks" (Ndon, 2011, p. 253). When writing is taught in this fashion, students will be in a better position to analyze arguments in texts and incorporate these in their own writing (Speck, 2002). Their constant interaction with their peers and the teacher facilitates their development of lexical features, coherence (Talib & Cheung, 2017), and grammatical structures. In this way, they gain clarity in writing (Fong, 2012).

Another benefit of collaborative writing stems from the immediate audience and instant feedback to which writers receive access. These encourage them to compose their text with a specific audience in mind and to be clear with their messages (Porto cited by Grief, 2007). In terms of the latter, Dale (cited in Speck, 2002) states that collaborative writing teaches students cooperation and negotiation skills, which are essential elements of teamwork in the work-place. Speck (2002) notes that collaborative writing projects help university students acquire skills they need as future writers in business, government, and industry where much writing is done in collaboration with others. He states, "students can learn how to

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work with people, how to compromise effectively, [and] how to value differences" (p. 22). Research has shown that university students' collaborative writing experiences make them more accountable not only for their own learning but also for their peers' (Fong, 2012). They develop a sense of responsibility for sharing their expertise and their newly acquired information with their peers. They are also encouraged to negotiate successfully in face-to-face interactions as well as on online platforms. Taken together, these point to the potential of collaborative writing to promote excellence and harmony in group/team work.

However, collaborative writing can be time-consuming. It is not always easy to learn different ways in which the writing process can be implemented in the classroom and ways in which learning can be evaluated (Speck, 2012). Also, since students work together, they may face difficulties in collaborating with others who have different learning styles or communication methods. Shea (1995) also notes that some students in the group may dominate others, inhibiting learning.

III. METHODOLOGY

A. Respondents

Sixty-four freshman students in ENGL112 during the fall of 2017 participated in this study. Thirty-one (48%) of these students were male, and thirty-three (52%) were female. Their ages varied from 19 to 21. The mean age was 20. All the students were Emirati.

B. Data-collection

Data were collected using two instruments. The first one was a survey titled "Collaborative Writing Satisfaction Scale." The twenty-nine items in the survey comprised five interdependent, and often mutually inclusive, sub-domains: active learning, innovation, general skills, English language skills, and team skills.

The second data-collection instrument was a discourse completion task, which required students to finish off two sentences: "I like collaborative writing because … ", and "I don't like collaborative writing because … ." Since this section was voluntary, only 35 of the students completed it.

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The first research question asked the extent to which students thought collaborative project writing was compatible with their Emirati culture. Results are summarized in Table 1.

TABLE 1
COMPATIBILITY OF COLLABORATIVE PROJECT WRITING WITH STUDENTS' CULTURE

	Min	Max	x̄	SD
Total (N=64)	1	5	4.38	0.79

Table 1 shows that the overall average for compatibility of collaborative writing with the Emirati culture was 4.38, which indicates a strong affirmative student perception. The Emirati culture emphasizes interdependence among group members. The nature of collaborative learning emphasizing each

person's responsibility for his own as well as his peers' learning is, therefore, compatible with the Emirati culture. A collectivist approach to learning underscores cooperation among peers with a view towards ensuring group success (Nguyen, Terlouw, & Pilot, 2005), which was essential in this study since the participating students were to produce one collective report for the course. Considering the students' upbringing in a collectivist culture, I had also expected the students to be attracted to collaborative writing experiences. This supports the observation that students' preferences for instructional activities are determined by their dominant cultural orientations (Holmes, Sherman, & Williams-Green, 1997).

The second research question was related to students' perceptions on different aspects of collaborative writing. Results are summarized in Table 2.

TABLE 2.
SATISFACTION LEVEL WITH DIFFERENT COLLABORATIVE PROJECT WRITING ASPECTS

	Min	Max	x̄	SD
General skills	17	35	28	3.83
English language skills	14	32	26	3.88
Team skills	10	28	20	3.65
Active learning	8	25	19	3.11
Innovation	5	19	14	2.98
Total	*52*	*129*	*106.55*	*14.78*

Table 2 shows that the overall level of student satisfaction with collaborative writing was 106.55, which indicates a fairly high degree of satisfaction. This score was mainly influenced by the students' positive perceptions on particular sub-domains, one of which is "general skills". This was followed English language skills. The students felt that their collaborative writing experience gave them the opportunity to improve their grammar and vocabulary with the help of their team-members. Team skills were also thought to be affected positively by the students' engagement in collaborative writing. However, the students were not very convinced that their collaborative writing experience allowed for innovation.

Quantitave data were supported by qualitative data from the discourse completion task, the analysis of which revealed the themes in Table 3.

TABLE 3
BENEFITS OF COLLABORATIVE PROJECT WRITING EXPERIENCE

Benefits	f	%
Editing	31	32
Generation of ideas	29	30
Work distribution	14	15
Diversity of skills	14	15
Leadership skills	2	2
Awareness of vocabulary	2	2
Awareness of others' cultures	2	2
Preparation for future profession	2	2
Total	*96*	*100*

Table 3 shows that the most frequently mentioned benefit of collaborative project writing was editing. The students often

referred to peer feedback as a contributing factor. In this way, it was felt that "team members fill each other's gaps in writing." This supports the argument that collaborative writing provides an opportunity for immediate feedback (Grief, 2007), as well students become accountable for their own as well as their friends' learning (Fong, 2012).

The second most commonly mentioned benefit was related to generation of ideas, helping students to be more creative. Students wrote that sharing knowledge with others "brings new and fresh ideas to the table," and "make[s] the task more creative and easier to accomplish."

The third most common benefit was related to time management, which was positively affected by work distribution. Equal distribution of work helped them produce more in a shorter period of time. As a result, in the words of a student, "it lessens what's on our table and reduces stress."

Diversity of skills was another theme that occurred in the data. The variety in skills such as reading, organization, and computer allowed students to produce better quality work, and to learn from each other. One student said, "[Muna's] reading skills definitely helped me to understand my own text better. In this way I was able to write better." On the other hand, students' social skills were mentioned as factor contributing to their satisfaction with their collaborative writing experience. It was indicated that a member's outgoing personality "melted the ice at the beginning of the course" helping the team to build stronger bonds.

Leadership skills, increased awareness of vocabulary, enhanced awareness of others' cultures, and preparation for a future profession were also mentioned as benefits of collaborative writing. In terms of leadership skills, one student said, "I was chosen as the team-leader, and this helped me improve my skills of leading and guiding other students." Two students referred to their increased cultural awareness developed through interaction with other students. Lastly, two students pointed out the skills they practiced through collaborative writing which will be useful when they start working as engineers. These findings are particularly important to note since they evidently prepare students for cooperation and negotiation skills they will need in their work places upon graduation (Speck, 2002).

Data were also collected on the students' opinions about the negative aspects of their collaborative writing experience. A summary of the results is given in Table 4.

TABLE 4.
NEGATIVE ASPECTS OF COLLABORATIVE WRITING EXPERIENCE

Negative aspects	f	%
Clashing opinions	15	23
Members' careless work	11	17
Time management	11	17
Overpoweredness	9	14
Lack of language skills	9	14
Style clashes	7	11
Personality clashes	4	6
Total	66	100

The most common negative theme was clashing opinions. The students often mentioned that it was not always easy for them to convince their team-members on different points. One student said, "Because I have to stick with others' idea, I can't write my own thought and feelings."

Careless work and time-management problems appeared in the data set with the same frequency. It was mentioned that certain members depended on others to produce work; therefore, they put in limited amount of effort into the project. A student referred to last minute work, "Some students write in the last few minutes, they don't care about others and the mark." Such irresponsible attitudes may indicate a lack of respect for the task at hand as well as for team-members. Research by Iqbal, Velan, O'Sullivan, and Balasooriya (2016) also found that similar behaviors such as passivity, irresponsibility, and unreliability often created resentment among group members with an adverse effect on learning. However, Iqbal et. al. (2016) also state that these may not necessarily impact interaction among students. This may be true for the student teams in this study as well. With an Emirati background, these students have a collectivist culture. Members of collectivist cultures normally refrain from explicit complaints and expressions of dissatisfaction, which may result in unharmonious relationships (Reisinger & Turner, 1999). In fact, Arabs have been observed to be "soft on people" to avoid losing face, even at the expense of the task at hand (Al-Omari, 2008).

The students also mentioned time-clashes between schedules as a factor causing time-management problems. Some students also mentioned social aspects of team work as a factor causing time-management problems. One student said, "Distraction is created by chatting about topics unrelated to the project."

Nine students mentioned that certain members tended to dominate the writing process, leading them to feel overpowered. Those with better English were thought to impose their own style on the whole team.

Some students' lack of language skills was mentioned as a negative aspect, too. Responses by students with stronger English skills included remarks on their peers' lower levels of English limiting the overall quality of work. Worried about receiving a satisfactory grade, these students were reluctant to give such students a big role in writing.

Another theme was related to clashes between student writing styles. The student responses showed that working with people who used a different writing style than theirs was confusing.

Personality clashes were also mentioned as a factor reducing their level of satisfaction with collaborative writing experience. It was mentioned that shy students often did not want to share their work with others, which created some tension between teammates. On the other hand, some outspoken students were felt to be too blunt.

V. CONCLUSION

Collaborative writing as a collaborative learning experience offers significant benefits. When social aspects of learning are

taken into consideration, how much we can learn from others as well as contribute to their learning becomes more visible. A constructivist view of learning also underscores the significance of interaction between students, along with students and the teacher indicating that it is through this interaction that students "change or reinforce conceptions… . Having an opportunity to present one's own ideas, as well as being permitted to hear and reflect on the ideas of others, is an empowering experience…[which] facilitates the meaning-making process" (Brooks & Brooks, 1999, p.108). Obviously, these benefits are not without challenges, as has also been reported in study. However, it is clear that the challenges are not insurmountable as long as they are tackled in pedagogically and culturally sensitive ways. Only in this way can students be helped to turn the challenges of collaborative writing into opportunities for academic and personal development.

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