

# COLLABORATIVE LEARNING IN WRITING CLASSES: BENEFITS AND CHALLENGES

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Collaborative learning is considered a critical skill in the 21<sup>st</sup> century because of various benefits this teaching approach can bring to language learners.

Collaborative writing tasks are defined as tasks in which learners are required to work in pairs or small groups to complete a jointly written text (Swain, 2001). In other words, collaborative writing offers English teachers and students opportunities not only to improve literature review, academic reading and writing, but also to stimulate reflection, knowledge sharing, and critical thinking (Hadjerrouit, 2011). In addition, these tasks encourage students to utilize a range of social skills that can help promote accountability, cooperation, and community (Sukirman, 2016). Furthermore, Foster (1998) observes that collaborative writing tasks can maximize students' interaction in the target language.

Other studies also revealed certain difficulties students encountered while learning writing collaboratively. Some of these include increased stress, logistical problems, target language usage, a conflict with personal learning style, and issues of fairness (Sukiman, 2016).

While learning academic writing, English majored students in Vietnamese universities often encounter challenges in organization, grammar, vocabulary, supporting ideas, unity and coherence (Thao & Quyen, 2020). Collaborative writing has been introduced as an effective strategy to make writing lessons more engaging and to reduce stress for both teachers and students. The present study aims to explore

collaborative learning at Thuyloi University and try to answer a research question: *“What are benefits and challenges among English majored students when they learn writing collaboratively at Thuyloi University?”*

## 2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study used a quantitative method with a survey questionnaire carefully adapted from Abde & Farrah (2015). The survey contained 16 Likert items and was given to English-major students in two essay writing classes at Thuyloi University. The teacher of these two classes employed a collaborative writing strategy from the beginning to the end of the course. Her students were divided into groups of three or four. She assigned tasks, and guided them through reading, making presentations, creating outlines, and writing essays. After the course, 59 students received the questionnaire via a google link, and 34 responded. The data was analyzed using Excel software

## 3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

**Table 1. Benefits and challenges of collaborative learning**

Items	Mean	Sd	SD & D (%)	N (%)	A& SA (%)
1. Collaborative writing is an effective strategy that results in better, more accurate and complex essays.	3.88	0.97	8.85	8,85	82.3
2. Collaborative writing makes the task more enjoyable and interesting, and motivates to write	3.97	1.14	11.9	11.7	76.4

Items	Mean	Sd	SD &D (%)	N (%)	A& SA (%)
3. Expressing my ideas to the group improves my communication and negotiation skill	4.11	1.03	8.9	2.9	88.2
4. Collaborative writing helps in improving my writing skill in general.	3.76	1.04	8.9	23.5	67.6
5. Collaborative writing helps in understanding and considering multiple viewpoints .....	4.29	1.00	6.0	2.9	91.1
6. Collaborative writing helps in constructing a strong argument.	3.76	1.04	8.9	23.5	67.6
7. Collaborative writing helps me verbalize ....	3.76	1.07	11.9	17.6	70.5
8. Collaborative writing stimulates critical thinking skills	3.94	1.04	8.9	11.7	79.4
9. In collaborative writing, everyone performs an equal amount of work.	3.38	1.12	27.6	32.3	40.0
10. Collaborative writing helps in improving grammatical accuracy and learning vocabulary.	3.85	1.04	38.3	17.6	44.1
11. Collaborative writing helps me receive useful feedback	4.0	0.98	6.0	11.7	82.3
12. It is unfair that all the members get the same grade.	3.47	1.07	17.7	35.2	47.0
13. Some members do not accept opposing opinions.	3.41	0.85	11.8	47.0 5	41.1
14. Some members control the discussion without giving others an opportunity to explain .....	3.20	1.06	23.6	38.2	38.2
15. Collaborative writing consumes a lot of time.	2.79	1.12	38.4	35.2	26.4
16. Members discuss their ideas in Vietnamese, which decreases the chances of improving .....	3.20	1.0	26.6	41.1	32.3

### 3.1. Benefits of collaborative writing

The findings revealed that collaborative writing was an effective learning strategy with over 80% of respondents concurring that learning in the group bettered their essay writing skills (Mean = 3.88, Sd = 0.97). Collaborative activities also received positive feedback from participants when they could construct a strong argument (Mean = 3.76, Sd = 1.04), express more ideas (Mean = 3.76, Sd = 1.07) and promote critical thinking (Mean = 79.4, Sd = 1.04). More significantly, nearly all students in the two writing classes expanded their understanding and embraced different viewpoints on a certain topic thanks to this teaching approach (Mean = 4.29, Sd = 1.00). Most respondents expressed a preference for writing with their peers because they could receive useful feedback (Mean = 4.0, Sd = 0.98).

### 3.2. Challenges of collaborative writing

The first factor to consider was fairness. Only 27.6% of participants agreed that all group members performed an equal amount of work. Around 40% of students remained neutral, and nearly 50% of participants felt it was unfair when they got the same grade. Moreover, most respondents found it difficult to be involved in an effective group discussion, with just more than 20% of respondents reporting that they had opportunities to explain their ideas, and almost half stayed neutral when being asked about the acceptance of opposing opinions. Students in these classes also highlighted the problems of time (Mean = 2.79, Sd = 1.12). Vietnamese language use in group discussions posed another drawback (Mean = 3.20, Sd = 1.0). Over 40% of students reflected that they had not made obvious improvement in grammar and vocabulary during the collaborative writing course.

In general, this learning strategy can improve students' writing skills by promoting critical thinking and creating an engaging environment for learners to share and discuss ideas. It also encourages teamwork and pair work skills. However, there are considerations

relating to fairness in assessment on students' performance, communication challenges, and time constraints. These findings from this study are consistent with previous studies which mentioned challenges in collaborative writing regarding assessment (McDonough et al., 2018), how to best pair students (Storch & Aldosari, 2013), how to monitor equal participation (McDonough & García Fuentes, 2015), and learners' usage of their first language (Brooks & Donato, 1994).

Because the abovementioned benefits seem to outweigh the challenges, collaborative learning should be emphasized in writing classes (Surkiman, 2016). It is thus critical for teachers to plan the whole course and each lesson carefully. This teaching method should be introduced at the first lesson with teachers' detailed list of tasks for their students. Students can choose their group members, then the teacher assigns the tasks with time allowed for each group to complete. This can solve the problem of time constraints. To deal with the challenge of fairness, each group should have a group leader to monitor, record and report task completion levels. This can help the teacher to decide on students' marks at the end of the semester. Some rules in communication and English language usage should be issued by teachers from the beginning of the course to avoid some conflicts among group members and to maximize opportunities for improving English communication skills. Teachers must be the referees of the whole collaborative writing process who will give detailed records and reliable feedback on students' performance.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

This study aims to investigate the benefits and challenges of collaborative writing in English classes. Some pedagogical recommendations for addressing drawbacks have been offered. However, the study still has some limitations. Firstly, the findings of this research are not easily generalized due to the limited number of participants. Moreover,

this article only reveals the benefits and challenges that students encountered. How teachers perceive collaborative learning, and how they can evaluate and assess their students' performance are two big questions to answer in further research.

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