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Impact of Discussions on Task Performance among Malaysian Tertiary-Level Students with Mixed Proficiency

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Abstract

Investigation on the use of discussions during task performance among Malaysian students from a degree in psychology programme is the objective of this study. The participants selected had completed a product-centred English course which focused on communication at the workplace, academic writing and reading for academic purposes prior to data collection. A group-writing task in the form of producing a memorandum was performed by the participants in this study. Research instruments used to obtain data of the student collaboration were interviews, diary entries and observations. Consequently, benefits and challenges on task performance derived from the use of discussions were obtained. It could be concluded that student collaboration among mixed proficiency students should be monitored closely so that the collaborators regardless of their proficiency could mutually benefit from the sessions.

Keywords: Collaborative Writing, Memorandum, Discussions, Benefits, Challenges.

Introduction

Collaborative work has been viewed favourably and used by many teaching practitioners in the classroom. Rice and Huguley (1994) define collaborative writing by focussing on the basic undertakings which are performed by more than an individual in producing a single text. Furthermore, the process of writing includes sub-tasks such as generation of ideas, conducting research, planning, drafting, revising and editing (Rice & Huguley, 1994). Another group of researchers have also expanded sub-tasks involved in collaborative writing as brainstorming, having collective effort on brainstorming, outlining, drafting, reviewing, revising and copyediting (Lowry, Curtis & Lowry, 2004). Many teaching practitioners use collaborative writing widely in their classrooms. There are many benefits gained by ESL learners in the course of collaboration (Storch, 2005; Watanabe & Swain, 2007). There are perceived academic and social advantages (Brown, 2008), increasing motivation (Ariza, 2016; Schwartz & Gorbatt, 2017), benefitting tertiary-level readers and writers in text revision (Ranjbar, Ghonsoonly & Hamedan, 2017) and establishing a sense of accomplishment on

collaborators (Chao & Lo, 2011). Additionally, when learners work in a small or medium-sized setting and being entrusted with problem-based learning and analysis of case studies, their interest, independent learning and critical thinking skills can be honed (Richards & Schwartzstein, 2019).

While collaborative work is generally viewed as advantageous, successful group discussions do not occur spontaneously (Gavelek & Raphael, 1996; Lewis, 1997). Therefore, it is crucial that much research should be conducted to obtain insights on the process of collaboration among students. The findings will increase knowledge of both instructors and students on discussions so that its use can be refined. The research questions for this study are:

1. What are advantages of using discussions observed in this study?
2. What are challenges faced during discussions observed in this study?

Theoretical Background

The theoretical basis for collaborative work is Vygotsky's sociocultural theory. It places much importance on the central role of culturally constructed tools and artefacts. When they function in the context of social relations, they help to mediate and improve human forms of thinking and development (Vygotsky, 1978; Vygotsky, 1981). Vygotsky regards the possibility of improvements in learning through mediating roles of artefacts, tools, symbols and language (Lantolf & Appel, 1994).

Mental processes result from being actively involved in social activities and communication with others (Wertsch, 1985). This includes direct interactions with others at societal and institutional levels in order to create meaning. Additionally, culture, social and discursive practices are crucial for meaning making during verbal exchanges with others (Wertsch, 1985).

Learners can improve on their learning through their own construction of knowledge during collaboration. Scaffolding which is regarded as assistance provided by capable peers to less abled ones during groupwork makes knowledge building and motivation boosting possible (Vygotsky, 1978; Vygotsky, 1987). Specifically, reasoning skills are honed when learners receive help from their peers in the form of clear guidelines (Waggoner et al., 1995).

The use of collaboration in writing has been used widely. It is due to two main factors which are the features of workplace writing and the use of technology such as the advent of Web 2.0 applications (Storch, 2019). It has been found from studies that it is common for collaborative writing to be used at the workplace due to the involvement of colleagues in team projects rather than solitary writing (Mirel & Spilka, 2002). Furthermore, the improvement of technology such as the use of Web 2.0 applications in the forms of blogs, wikis, and Google Docs has made writing more inclusive than before. The applications have proven to be user-friendly and ease the process of shared writing (Hyland, 2016; Vandergriff, 2016).

Methodology

Participants

All of the participants in this study are female students. They were First Year Degree in Psychology students from a private university-college in Malaysia. A majority of the Psychology students comprised the female gender.

The participants had mixed proficiency in English. Lori obtained an A while June scored a B+ and both Oon and Ned possessed Bs for the English course they had completed in the previous semester of their studies. Then the participants formed a group to perform their

memorandum-writing task. Pseudonyms were used by the researcher to describe the participants in this study. This was due to the researcher's intention to maintain confidentiality of the participants.

Memorandum Writing Task

A writing task in the form of the production of a 150 to 200-word memorandum was given to the group to perform in this study. The participants had to discuss and write a memorandum from a manager to the staff in a department regarding maintaining the cleanliness of washrooms. They were taught on the appropriate format, tone and language when producing memoranda in their English classes.

The researcher allowed the participants to self-form their group in order to perform their collaborative writing task. It was due to a request from the participants that they preferred to work with friends they knew well. After the group was formed, Lori was appointed as the group leader. The participants needed 2 sessions of collaborative writing to perform their writing task with each session lasting one hour and thirty minutes.

Data Collection

All of the discussions were video-taped in order to enable the researcher to observe the sessions in detail. In addition, the participants were interviewed individually and produced individual diary entries after every collaborative session. They were used to increase understanding of the episodes which occurred from the participants' viewpoint.

The researcher was physically present to observe the discussions, too. Observation notes were produced to record down significant episodes which occurred during the sessions. The different research methods used in this study provided triangulation of data.

Findings

All of the participants were encouraged to reflect on their experiences critically. In addition, the researcher attempted to comprehend significant situations during the sessions from her own perspective. Therefore, input from both participants and researcher made it possible to answer both research questions formed for this study. The findings from this study are divided into two categories which are namely, benefits gained by collaborators and challenges faced in the course of collaboration.

Research Question 1: What are advantages of using discussions observed in this study?

Benefits Gained from Discussions

There are four advantages of using discussions discovered in this study. They were obtained from the observations of the collaborative sessions, interview sessions and diary entries produced by the participants. The benefits which the participants experienced ranged from preventing errors, completing task successfully, having a systematic approach in performing task, sharing of knowledge and filtering of ideas to be used in writing.

Error Prevention

The participants stated through their interviews and diary entries that discussions enabled them to avoid making mistakes in their task. It was observed that Lori who had higher proficiency than her group members provided important guidance during their groupwork. It was pertaining to the sub-tasks performed during the writing process and editing of the written product.

Lori guided her group in using the correct format, adopting appropriate tone and selecting suitable content for the memorandum. She reminded the group of the importance in referring constantly to their class notes on the correct layout of their writing. In addition, she corrected her friends from using too direct and confrontational phrases in order to maintain a sense of professionalism in the memorandum. She explained to her group, too, that they should describe the problem in the first paragraph, state actions to be taken against the staff if they fail to follow instructions and end the writing courteously in the last paragraph.

Task Completion

The group was able to perform the task successfully through their discussions. It was evident that Lori played an important role in facilitating the sessions smoothly. She was capable of obtaining much co-operation from her group members during the sessions.

The group was able to use the correct format, produce suitable information and construct appropriate sentences for a workplace document which could be challenging when performed individually. Lori provided ideas to her group members when they were unable to think of the appropriate content to write about. Her group members felt at ease in performing the writing task together due to her effective guidance. The group members praised her and were satisfied with the collaboration when expressing their opinions on the collaboration through their interviews and diary entries. They described the sessions as, "… satisfied with leader help us write well.", "Can finish work fast. Thanks to leader 😊" and "Glad that our leader is good".

Systematic Approach

The group approached the writing task in a systematic manner due to their responsible group leader, Lori. She placed much effort in facilitating the sessions successfully. Their discussions could be divided into three major stages which were focussing on the format of the memorandum, deciding on suitable content and simultaneously editing and checking on their work as they wrote the memorandum.

It was discovered from the diary entries and interviews that the participants were satisfied with their collaboration. Lori stated that "I am happy with my group and I assist my friends in writing". Her group members expressed their approval of their sessions by "Group leader very helpful. She help us a lot." and "We work step by step. Can write well".

Knowledge Sharing and Filtering of Ideas

It was observed that knowledge sharing occurred during the discussions. Lori who had high proficiency in English was willing to share her knowledge of the format of a memorandum, appropriate content for the task and language skills. Her group, in hand, were receptive to her input.

Lori guided her group in using the correct format by constantly referring to her class notes. She insisted that her group referred to them by placing them in the middle of their table so that they could refer to it easily. In addition, Lori assisted in selecting and filtering ideas presented by her group members for the writing task. She provided the rationale of rejecting certain points such as finding a long lecture from the manager in guiding the staff on how to use the washrooms inappropriate for the staff might retaliate against the manager. Lori, interestingly, reminded her group not to be too detailed when describing the dirty conditions in the washrooms because the information could be offensive to the recipients.

Information obtained from the interviews and diary entries revealed the participants' satisfaction with the discussions. Lori expressed her willingness in assisting her group by saying, "… we all refer to my notes on how to write memo together. I brought them so we could read as we write." Her group members stated that, "Really good Lori remind us of memo notes", "We give ideas and discuss … can write memo in the end" and "Lori change our point so that can improve."

Sharing and co-construction of knowledge is also a benefit experienced by participants in two studies. Firstly, it is a study which investigated Malaysian students using collaboration while attempting summary writing (Ong & Nooreiny, 2013). The results revealed that team efforts enabled them to carry out sub-tasks such as paraphrasing, condensing, organising and creating coherence in their writing. Secondly, sharing of knowledge was experienced by medical students while conducting an online problem-based learning activity (PBL) in a study carried out by a group of researchers (Lee et al., 2017). It was discovered that the students learned to co-regulate their task performance in the process of applying their comprehension to make good decisions on communicating bad news to their patients.

Research Question 2: What are challenges faced during discussions observed in this study?

There are three problems identified in the course of using discussions to complete the writing task in this study. They were obtained from the observations of the sessions, interview sessions and diary entries produced by the participants. The challenges range from situations in which there was unequal amount of contribution among participants, insufficient knowledge gained by participants with high proficiency and a lack of ownership among participants with low proficiency.

Unequal Amount of Contribution from Group Members

Most of the participants were observed to be passive during the discussions. The most active participant was Lori, the group leader. She was solely responsible in facilitating the sessions and contributed the most ideas for the task.

Lori was instrumental in ensuring that the discussions were carried out smoothly. She guided her group in focussing on four important aspects of writing which were format, content, appropriate language and tone required in the production of a memorandum. She insisted that they wrote their memorandum by referring constantly to their class notes on memorandum. Lori regularly provided her own ideas when her group failed to contribute input in the course of discussion. She revealed through her interviews and diary entries that, "Friends reliant on me. They try to contribute. But English language phrase, sentences, mostly that, I must provide. They dunno." Furthermore, her friends were appreciative of her efforts and described her as "very helpful leader" and "Lori in charge and we can write a memo".

The findings obtained from this study are similar with results from a study investigating how collaborative learning outside the classroom contributes to the enhancement of student learning (Hernandez, 2012). It was found that the participants, too, faced challenges in the course of collaboration. They were having different levels of commitment, handling dependent group members and being unable to fit into the group.

Participant with Higher Proficiency Not Gaining Much Knowledge

The researcher observed that Lori was providing information to her group all the time. She had a better level of knowledge and higher proficiency in English than her group members.

Therefore, her group members with lower proficiency depended on her continually when performing the writing task.

Lori expressed her frustrations of not being able to gain more input from her group members during her interviews and when producing her diary entries. She felt that, "the task wasn't challenging but my friends didn't add more ideas which could be useful", "They only relied on my points. Are they correct? 🙁" and "I felt so tired teaching and teaching all the time!" However, Lori was also understanding towards her passive group members and attributed their predicament to "not confident in expressing their views" and "maybe friends unprepared for discussions?"

It is important to provide a list of sub-tasks to be performed by individual group members during collaborative work. A focus on the process or procedures of discussion may indeed be useful to ensure a fair contribution of work among group members (Lewis, 1997; Mercer, 1995). Therefore, group members are able to concentrate on the work assigned for they are given specific sub-tasks to perform individually which eventually lead to the completion of the task.

Lack of Ownership among Students with Lower Proficiency

It was evident that there was a lack of ownership towards the writing task among the participants with lower proficiency. Lori being the group member with the highest proficiency in English was very active during the discussions. It could be due to her high sense of responsibility as the leader and accountability of having to contribute more since she had a good command of English.

Oon and Ned seemed uninterested in the writing task. They refused to read the instructions provided by their instructor thoroughly. They constantly checked with Lori on the format of the memorandum without referring to their own class notes. In addition, they were very quiet and did not provide much input during the discussions much to Lori's frustrations.

Furthermore, Lori was solely responsible in introducing topics to be discussed by the group. None of her group members initiated in providing relevant matters that they should focus on when carrying out the writing task. In addition, they did not take Lori seriously when she instructed them to use their handphones to research on their topics. They instead focussed on reading their messages and playing games during the discussions.

Lori revealed her frustrations with her group through the interviews and diary entries. She was of the opinion that "… I feel correctness is important so I spent some time to edit. But my friends were unhappy …", "… dunno how they can ignore details and simply write?" and "… maybe can write better if friends research to know more about topic".

Low-achieving students may face difficulties when working with high-achieving peers. It has been discovered that the former may be neglected in heterogeneous groups (Bennett & Cass, 1988). It is because when capable learners take control of the collaborative situation, they may not realise that less capable peers need more time to perform the task. Furthermore, high-ability students may be in total control of the task by completing it but are oblivious to the struggles encountered by their peers with low ability (Bennett & Cass, 1988).

Conclusion

The findings in this study revealed benefits and challenges faced by students with mixed proficiency during collaboration. The advantages are preventing errors, completing task successfully, having a systematic approach in performing task, sharing of knowledge and filtering of ideas to be used in writing. However, the challenges identified during collaboration

are unequal amount of contribution among participants, insufficient knowledge gained by participants with high proficiency and a lack of ownership among participants with low proficiency.

It is important to group students for collaborative work with much consideration. Findings from a study has discovered that more interactions may occur in groups with a ratio of one high achiever with two low achievers (Bennett & Cass, 1988). Therefore, a group should have a balance of students with different abilities.

The findings from this study will also equip instructors with knowledge and awareness of the need to refine discussions among students. They will then be able to assist their charges in becoming effective collaborators. Consequently, the students will be able to have meaningful interactions and productive discussions with others.

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