

# Collaborative Writing as a means of Making Students Aware of the Process of Writing

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Writing is usually considered as an individual exercise. However, when it carried out as a group activity with a common goal of producing a text, it can result in increased levels of motivation and greater awareness about the techniques and the organizational patterns of writing. This paper discusses the findings of a classroom research done by the researcher in the Department of English Language Teaching of Gauhati University, Assam. It discusses how the author, an ELT practitioner, obtained positive results when she carried out the technique of collaborative writing with her students who were struggling to incorporate the writing techniques they were practicing in the academic writing class to writing for other papers in the course. The paper also shares the experiences of the problems faced by the author in trying to teach writing in this new manner.

Writing in an effective and coherent manner is a skill that does not come easy to most people. This can be attributed to inadequate or lack of training in writing. With this 'lack' in mind, the 'Academic Writing Paper' was introduced by the Department of English Language Teaching (ELT) of Gauhati University to develop the writing skills of the postgraduate students. The Academic Writing paper is concerned with the teaching the techniques of writing along with different aspects of grammar and vocabulary.

But, it was soon realized that though the students practiced the techniques in the academic writing class, they failed to transfer them to any other kind of writing, viz., writing in examinations, assignments etc. As such, the purpose for which the Academic Writing paper was introduced was not fulfilled. Moreover, the students started losing their motivation as they were not able to relate what they were doing in the writing class to any kind of writing done outside the academic writing class.

In one of the feedback sessions, the students shared with the teacher that the inability to 'transfer' the skills taught in the academic writing class to other types of writing was discouraging them from really practicing those skills. The researcher who teaches in the Department of ELT recognized this aspect of the writing problem and decided to use **collaborative writing** as one of the means of tackling this serious problem. According to Wajnryb (1990), in collaborative writing, students sit together in groups or pairs to produce a piece of writing through decisions taken together after intensive discussions. Research has revealed that collaborative writing can bring about significant developments in the writing skills of students.

The Academic Writing book that is used to teach writing to the post graduate students in the Department of ELT deal with general

topics viz. *Introducing Myself, A Person Who Has Made a Difference, Earthquake, Why I Don't Have A Credit Card* and so on. Since the students write on such general topics in the academic writing class, when faced with the task of writing on topics specific to their coursework, they tend to draw a blank. The researcher felt that if the students could be made to consciously 'think' of the writing strategies and 'apply' them to their writing, it might result in making them more 'aware' of those strategies.

The researcher also became aware that if the students were made to sit in groups and plan and organize their writing on topics selected from other papers, it would enable them to 'transfer' what they learn in the writing class to the rest of their academic work and be more 'aware' of the transfer. According to Neomy Storch (2013), the emphasis is more on the organizing a written text if the objective of collaboration is to produce a well organized piece of writing.

This argument finds further support from Christopher Mulligan and Russell Garofalo (2011), according to whom this kind of collaborative exercise might be useful in making students aware of the pattern and sentence structure of what they write which otherwise they may not give much importance to.

This paper will describe the collaborative strategy used by the researcher and will also discuss the extent of success it achieved. It should be borne in mind that more than focusing on the **final product** of the students' writing, the main objective of this study was to encourage the students to consider the **process** of writing and be aware

of the different aspects of writing.

## **Methodology**

### **Choosing partners**

For this study, students were made to sit in groups of three and were allowed to select their group members. It was seen that the students chose their friends as their group members. The researcher felt that since she was trying a new and unfamiliar way of making them work, confidence in each other and comfort level would play a major part in the exercise. This decision was further encouraged by Cote's (2006) argument that for students to benefit from collaborative writing tasks, the teacher must first establish an environment of mutual trust and respect among the members of the class. Christopher Mulligan and Russell Garofalo (2011) agree with Cote (2006) when they state that enabling students to choose their partners in the initial stages could facilitate collaborative learning.

### **Instructions by the teacher**

It was assumed that the students had practiced the following aspects of writing in the academic writing class.

- Write an introductory paragraph with an appropriate thesis statement
- Write body paragraphs using appropriate transition signals and topic sentences
- Write a proper concluding paragraph
- Use adequate grammar and vocabulary

Also, the following processes were assumed to be familiar to the students.

- Brainstorming Session (or read the text)

- Make notes
- Write an outline of the essay (introduction with the thesis statement, topic sentences of the body paragraph along with the transition signals, concluding paragraph)
- Complete the outline of the essay
- Check the first draft for repetition, redundancy, unity, coherence, grammatical accuracy
- Redraft (if necessary)

Based on the assumption that the students knew how to perform the above functions in writing, the teacher asked them to write an essay (paraphrase) after reading the text on '*Why we should have a syllabus*' (*English for Specific Purposes* by Hutchinson and Waters, 1987) in which the reasons for having a syllabus are listed.

The steps that were followed are mentioned below.

- Read the text on their own
- Make notes (branch notes or list notes) after reading the text
- Share their notes with their group members, discuss and make changes if necessary
- Make an outline of the essay based on the notes with a proper introduction, topic sentences for the body paragraphs and a conclusion
- 'Flesh out' the essay
- Revise as a group and make necessary changes
- Discuss with the teacher

## Results

The students were engaged in the following activities during the exercise.

1. They were discussing the techniques of writing that they had practiced in the academic writing class.
2. They were checking the essay for unity and coherence, for appropriate transition signals, for a proper introduction and conclusion
3. They were choosing the appropriate vocabulary, arguing and debating as to the use of certain structures, correcting one another
4. They were taking decisions together and helping each other in taking those decisions. For example, the text that they were required to paraphrase talked about the advantages of using a syllabus and the dangers that underlie the use of a syllabus. They took decisions as to whether they should write all the points together in one paragraph or each point would be written as a separate body paragraph. They also discussed the thesis statement, took decisions on the transition signals they would use, whether they should summarize the main points in the conclusion or give an opinion or add something extra.
5. They also discussed the final outcome of the collaborative effort, whether it was too casual or too stiff or 'academic'.

Barring one group, the rest were able to write well organized essays on the given topic. Though there were grammatical mistakes and problems in the use of vocabulary, a

remarkable improvement was noticed in the way they wrote in groups as opposed to how they wrote individually. Though it helped in making the text clearer to the students, this exercise also helped in focusing on the language and techniques of academic writing.

### **Feedback received**

The students informed the teacher that in the collaborative activity on writing they were performing the activities mentioned above that made them think about the different aspects of writing. They said that since they were working with their friends, they were not stressed about the final outcome and were more focused on 'how' to write. The focus was more on the 'how' rather than on the 'what'. They claimed that they had gained in confidence and would be able to write more confidently as they discovered things which only they knew in the group and some things that they learnt from their friends. Discussing how to write made them aware of the different aspects of writing which they said they would not ignore in future. However, as in any kind of group endeavor, the collaborative writing exercise was not without its demerits.

### **Problems faced**

As in any kind of group activity, there were instances of one student trying to dominate the proceedings, thereby influencing the style of the essay. Also, in some cases, one group member was seen to be doing most of the work. Lastly, this kind of work may tend to become disruptive and chaotic if

proper instructions are not given. However, Trimbur (1989) has called this difference in opinions and debates as 'cognitive conflict', a process of intellectual negotiation and collective decision making.

### **Conclusion**

The collaborative writing activity is a conscious process in which learners discuss, argue, justify, negotiate and finalise a written product. They do it as a group and in doing so, they become more conscious of the different aspects of writing. However, the teachers need to be on their toes and make frequent rounds in the classroom in order to ensure that the students are following the instructions and everyone in the group is contributing to the process of writing. In the words of Speck (2002), the teacher acts as an 'expert mentor' who enables students to take the responsibility of their own learning.

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