

The Use of Peer Interactive Writing Towards the Students Narrative Writing Skills

Hairil Faiz Bin Noor Fuad
(SK KAPULU, Tenom, Malaysia)

Abstract: The purpose of this study is to ascertain the use of peer interactive writing towards the students' narrative writing skill in Sekolah Menengah Kebangsaan Elopura Bestari Sandakan, Sabah. It is aimed to look into the perception of Malaysian school teachers on the effectiveness of peer interactive writing to assist them in teaching narrative writing to the students. This study also explores the roles of teachers in managing the lesson and learners during the intervention. In addition, the students' view on how peer interactive writing can facilitate them in developing their narrative writing skills is also investigated. Direct observation and interview were used in this study. The study sample consisted of 2 classes, 4.1 with 21 students comprise of 5 male students and 16 female students, and 4.2 with 26 students comprise of 13 male students and 13 female students. The students were paired with different language proficiency. The instruments applied in the research are direct observation of teachers' behavior and open ended interviews were conducted to extract their experiences, perceptions, thoughts and feelings. Results of data analysis showed that the teachers played crucial roles during the intervention and both students and teachers gave positive views and feedbacks regarding peer interactive writing method. Implications for using peer interactive writing in ESL writing were discussed.

Key words: peer interactive writing, narrative writing skill, narrative writing

1. Introduction

Writing is one of the four language skills, besides listening, speaking, and reading, that is considered vital for ESL learners. Throughout the years, a lot of research have been conducted to find out the importance of teaching writing skills to ESL learners, and some of the notable benefits that can be gained by students are it supplements the vocabulary, idioms, and grammatical structures that teachers have been teaching in the classroom, grooms the students to be better writer in the targeted language, as well as teaches the students to “produce a well-structured piece of writing which is recognized and accepted in their academic departments” (Ismail, 2010). However, the goal of teaching writing in ESL classroom is not just merely to help students to be a better academic writer, instead, there are other types of genres in writing that can be useful for students, such as narrative writing skills. Narrative writing skills are especially important to foster students' creativity in writing, help students to develop better understanding of the targeted language through various types of language device, as well as allow students to experience a myriad categories of writing genres.

Hairil Faiz Bin Noor Fuad, Master of Education in Tesl; SK KAPULU; research areas/interests: education and methodology.
E-mail: hairilfuad@gmail.com.

Previously, teachers in ESL classrooms put too much importance on the final product of writing. In the issue of process versus product in writing, teachers that focus on product approach will measure students' essay based on a list of criteria which are the organization, content, grammatical use, vocabulary use, and punctuation as well as spelling (Brown, 2001). Although product approach is not necessarily "harmful" to be used in the classroom, research have shown that students will enjoy greater benefit when the teachers use process approach in teaching writing which focus on the process of writing, guide students to comprehend their own writing process, instill varieties of writing strategies - pre-writing, drafting, and rewriting, provide students with time to produce their essay, as well as allow students to receive feedback throughout the whole process of writing (Brown, 2001). One of the method of instilling process approach in teaching writing is through the use of peer interactive writing, since it allows power shift in the classroom that is usually dominated by the teachers, and giving freedom for students to review and give feedback to each other's works.

As mentioned above, when teachers focus on product approach in teaching writing, they will put emphasis on the final product, and this is what usually happens in a writing classroom where the students only receive the feedback from the teachers after they have submitted their work, and sometimes students will receive half-hearted feedback such as "good", "try again" or "well-done", and this consequently decrease students motivation in writing since they perceive that the teachers undervalue their work. To combat this issue, and at the same time to promote process approach in writing classes, teacher can use peer interactive writing as a solution to this problem. Research on peer interactive writing, which is also known as peer feedback, peer editing, peer response, or peer review have shown that this approach will give a lot of benefits to the students. By using peer interactive writing, students will gain more confidence and reduce apprehension related to writing tasks, give opportunity for students to receive more comments from individuals and allow them to develop and practice various types of language skills, and motivate students to actively participate in the classroom (Bijami, Kashef & Nijad, 2013). In addition, Sanford (2012), has found that through peer interactive writing, writing will be viewed as a collaborative act, students will be validated as intelligent commenters on writing and ideas, writing will be implemented as process and tutors' time will be utilized effectively by increasing student usage.

2. Problem Statement

Writing is an important skill to be taught to the students, but also considered by many, as the most difficult. One of the components of writing that is taught to primary and secondary school in Malaysia is narrative writing, and this component is tested in all three stages of standardized examination in Malaysia which is Ujian Penilaian Sekolah Rendah (UPSR), Pentaksiran Tingkatan 3 (PT3), as well as Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia (SPM). Although students have been exposed though this component of writing throughout their school years, a lot of students still have difficulties producing essays that are in line with one of the objectives of the KBSM curriculum (2000) which is to ensure that the students will "listen, view, read and respond to different texts, and express ideas, opinions, thoughts and feelings imaginatively and creatively in spoken and written form".

A lot of issues contribute to students' failure to meet the standard that is required by the KBSM objectives, such as limited exposure to narrative writing text which leads to limited vocabularies and poor sentence construction, lack of intrinsic motivation towards writing task, and lack of guidance from the teachers in developing narrative writing skills.

Thus, in order to ensure that the students perform well in their writing section part, teachers in Malaysia have been trying to come out with methods and approaches that could help students in their narrative writing skills, and one of them is peer interactive writing. As mentioned previously, a lot of research have found that peer interactive writing to be beneficial to students. Some of the benefits are through peer interactive writing has positive impact in decreasing the level of apprehension level for students related to writing task as well as having positive effect on the development of students' composition writing ability (Jahin, 2012). Of course, like other approaches, peer interactive writing also have its flaws such as students provide feedback that is not beneficial in revision, students often ignore textual and semantic error and tend to focus on surface errors, and students usually face difficulty in deciding the validity of their peer's feedback (Leki, 1991).

Based on the previous research on the effectiveness of peer interactive writing, this study will focus on narrative writing component and address several issues. The first issue is how do teachers in Malaysian school setting view peer interactive writing as a tool that can help them in teaching narrative writing. Since English is a second language in Malaysia, do the teachers think that their students have the capacities to review each other's work and provide constructive feedback? Moreover, since Malaysia curriculum system is very much exam-oriented, teachers are often viewed as the sole focus in the classroom and the only knowledge-provider in the classroom setting, which leads to the second issue is how students think peer interactive writing can assist them in developing their narrative writing skills. Do students, from their point of view, think that they have what it takes to assist their friends in their writing process?

In addition, teachers in Malaysia often are pressured to ensure that the students will do well in the standardized examination, and teachers often feel pressured to achieve the objectives of KBSR and KBSM, and the latest KSSR and KSSM with the limited periods of time given to them, which raise question on the third issue which is, what are the difficulties that the teachers face in implementing peer-interactive writing in their classroom. Thus, the findings of this study may enlighten ESL teachers, especially in Malaysian school setting, on the effectiveness of peer interactive writing students' narrative and writing skills and whether it can be implemented in their current practice. The purpose of this study was to find out the effects of peer interactive writing towards the students' narrative writing skill.

3. Objectives of the Study

- 1) To examine the perception of Malaysian school teachers on the effectiveness of peer interactive writing to assist them in teaching narrative writing to the students.
- 2) To explore the roles of the teacher in the implementation of peer interactive writing in teaching and learning or narrative writing.
- 3) To investigate the students' view on how peer interactive writing can facilitate them in developing their narrative writing skills.

4. Research Questions

This study seeks to find answers to the following research questions:

- 1) What is the perception of Malaysian school teachers on the effectiveness of peer interactive writing to assist them in teaching narrative writing to the students?
- 2) How do the teachers play their roles in the implementation of peer interactive writing in the teaching

and learning of narrative writing?

- 3) What is the students' view on how peer interactive writing can facilitate them in developing their narrative writing skills?

5. Literature Review

Peer-interactive writing is one of strategy implemented based from a collaborative writing approach. A collaborative writing approach encourages teacher to engage students to work together in pairs or in groups to produce a complete text. A collaborative learning strategy is referring to the theory of learning which was posited by Vygotsky's theory of ZPD; zone of proximal development (1978), working with others can provide the opportunity for learners to work at a level slightly above their usual capacity, as co-operating with others who know a little more about achievement. Thus, through collaborative writing technique students are allowed to work together to discuss and exchanging ideas towards completing the writing task. Collaborative writing strategy has been studied numerously in these recent years. The studies were conducted in order to find out the product from a collaborative writing activity and how it helps the students and teachers to elevate the teaching and learning of English language.

A study by Storch (2015) asserted that the products or completed texts between individual and pairs are being compared and he found that pairs produced shorter texts, but texts that had greater grammatical accuracy and linguistic complexity; in addition it was neater. Text produced through pairs was more competent to complete the text almost accurately. It gives the idea that the process of working together collaboratively meant that the students were giving each other helpful feedbacks, support and guidance as they went along. As a result, students will be able to produce more accurate and more complex text.

A recent research by University of Wisconsin-Madison (2014) suggested that in order for a collaborative learning with peers to be successful, there are four themes should be implemented in the classroom as a guidelines to conduct collaboration between the teachers and the students; teachers develop classroom norms of effective group work, teachers assist in providing language support, students are grouped strategically according to the deciding factors such as social, personality and emotional development, teachers should engage the students by creating assignments in meaning making and last but not least, it is the whole school responsibility to conduct a collaborative project because the planning needs specialist practitioners in the field. Because of these themes, some of the teachers still do not prefer this approach "as it is considered as difficult for the teacher to handle and often unpleasant as it takes a long time and leads to disagreement because of the conflict in working styles of the students" (Garofalo & Mulligan, 2011).

However, many current researchers have identified the benefits that collaborative writing approach brings into the classroom. For instance, Suwantarathip and Wichadee (2014) reported through a study of using Google Docs for collaborative writing activity towards the students' writing skill. For this study, students used Google Docs to write instead of the traditional pen and paper, except they have to do it collaboratively in groups. The researcher reported that the samples t-test analysis from the post-test indicates that through working with group the students performed better. They mentioned that the improvements took place because of the collaboration method; in which the students were given the opportunity to read, review and correct their group members' writing. They were also provided with feedback which enables them to learn about their writing problems in different aspects. Those feedbacks can lead to revisions of students' product and improvement of writing errors

such as vocabulary, organization and content.

Peer interactive writing also expands the students in many ways other than their writing skill. For instance, Garofolo and Mulligan (2011) referred peer interactive writing as a collaborative tool that promotes the students' social development as they developed sense of responsibility and opportunity to get close with their classmates. They also found that students are less stressed as their effort is shared, thus it makes them become more motivational as they are sharing single grade. In addition, the students in their study noted that they were able to brainstorm ideas for the tasks deeper because they challenge each other to discuss the topic. Through the sharing of ideas, they were able to develop the topic in many different ways on so many different levels, thus contributing more ideas to be developed and making the content of their product richer.

To support the above statement, Brodahl, Hadjerrouit, & Hansen, (2011) referred to collaborative writing as a constructivist learning tools. Peer interactive writing aligns with the constructivist approach as it promotes collaboration, it is meaningful, authentic, and active and manipulated by the participants. It means that the students, who are the subject target, controls the way they learnt and complete their own tasks.

Research has examined many angles of peer-interactive writing through collaborative writing approach as an instructional strategy in the English language classroom. As the teachers consider whether to implement peer-interactive writing in their lesson, it is worthwhile for them to read similar projects and the result it provides. While some researcher has identified the challenges of collaborative writing such as time constraints, planning and cooperation from colleagues, the majority of the findings support collaborative writing strategy in order to achieve the objectives in the students' writing skill.

6. Methodology

6.1 The Method and Procedures

6.1.1 Sampling

The participants of the study were two teachers and 47 students of form 4.1 form 4.2 in SMK Elopura Bestari Sandakan. The students in the first class consisted of 21 students (4 male students and 17 female students) while the students in the second class consisted of 26 students (13 male students and 13 female students). In advance, the students were required to write a narrative on a given topic.

6.1.2 Instrument

The instruments that had been applied in the research were direct observation by using observation checklist form as a tool and it is only conducted for the teachers, structured interviews with both teachers and students which were related to experiences, perceptions, thoughts and feelings towards the use of peer interactive writing as an intervention for their narrative writing skill.

6.1.3 Data Collection

Data had been collected during and after the implementation of the intervention. There were two instruments which had been used for this study which were observation checklist form and structured interview. The observation checklist form had been conducted during the observation in the classroom. The researcher had observed the teachers and the behavior of the teachers in the class to find out which behavior that contributes to the implementation of activity. The interview was used for both teachers and students. The protocol for the interview of the students consists of 8 questions while the teachers' protocol consists of 10 questions. A pilot test had been conducted to check minor errors and adjustment in the protocol.

6.1.4 Data Analysis

The data gathered were gathered, saved and labeled. All the analysis of data had been guided by the research questions. The data were organized by generating categories, thus assembling them through the generated theme with similar patterns. To ensure the credibility and trustworthiness of the data, triangulation of the data were made to show a synchronization between the collected data.

7. Results and Discussions

RQ1: What Is the Perception of the Teachers on the Use of Peer Interactive Writing to Assist Them in Teaching and Learning of Narrative Writing?

The first research question intended to find out the perception, thoughts or opinions from the teachers who were using peer interactive writing in their lesson. The method used to collect data to answer this question was through a structured interview. The teachers answered ten questions in the interview regarding their roles, opinions and thoughts of the intervention. The interview data were transcribed, saved and labeled. The data was further analysed by classifying and interpreting, thus themes were explored and determined.

From the data that had been analysed, there were two major themes that contributed to the positive perceptions of the teachers for the intervention. The first was peer interactive writing encourages the students to collaborate and instill cooperative learning. The second theme was peer interactive writing promotes independent learning among the learners. The teachers had observed that through peer interactive writing, the students help each other in completing the writing task. For example, I1 stated that,

“...they could also learn from each other such as new vocabularies or other ways to write...” (I2Q2)

“...they managed to help each other and share each other’s ideas which make their writing easier to complete...” (I2,Q9)

According to Garofolo and Mulligan (2011), peer interactive is a collaborative tool that promotes the students’ social development as they developed sense of responsibility and opportunity to get close with their classmates. These responses were predictable as one of the objectives of peer interactive writing is to promote collaboration among learners and encourages them to share ideas among themselves. This statement is further supported by the responses from the other teachers (I2) which she responded that,

“...I believe that by working with each other they will discover and perhaps each other’s writing styles, learn new vocabularies and so on...” (I2Q2)

“...They were working well with each other and managed to complete the activities in the given time...” (I2Q8)

From the result shown, we can see that the teachers have positive perceptions towards the intervention. Peer interactive skill had encouraged the students to learn collaboratively and independently in completing their writing task. It enhances the learners’ skill, not only in language but also in their social skill as well. Collaborative writing is a constructivist learning tools, thus the students control the way they learn and complete their own tasks. (Brodahl, Hadjerrouit & Hansen, 2011)

The teachers were also surprised to find out that through peer interactive writing activity, the students were able to be more independent. According to I1,

“...as the students worked independently with their pairs, I monitored and guided them whenever necessary...”
(I1Q6)

From the response above, the teacher played her role in monitoring and guiding the students only if the students' needs it. By working in pairs, the students had moved away from dependency of the teachers. This is also further supported by the data from the second interviewee,

“...secondly...(the goal) for the students to learn how to be independent writer...” (I2Q2)

“...I think they were surprised that they managed to complete the essay without my help...” (I2Q9)

RQ2: How Do the Teachers Play Their Roles in the Implementation of Peer Interactive Writing in the Teaching and Learning of Narrative Writing?

The purpose of the second research question was to explore and view how do the teachers' play their roles during the implementation of peer interactive writing in the classroom. The method used to collect the data was through an observation checklist. The observation was conducted through direct observation in the classroom which the researcher observed the teachers during the lesson. An observation checklist was marked and comments were also given to further verify the teachers' behaviour. The data was analysed and interpreted through thematic analysis.

From the data that have been analysed, there were two major themes that were found in explaining the roles of the teachers during the intervention. The first theme is teacher shows a positive behavioural display towards the students and the second theme is teacher acts as learning support.

In order to develop a successful collaborative learning, teachers must develop classroom norms of effective group work (Wisconsin-Madison, 2014). Thus, to encourage positive learning environment, teachers should display a positive behaviour in front of the students. This will contribute to the learners' motivation in learning. Through peer interactive writing, the teachers had displayed a positive behaviour to support the learners.

“...they were given chances to give feedbacks and responses to their friends' writing for further enhancement...” (T2OC2D7)

“...teacher encouraged the students to work together and support each other...” (T1OC1D11)

Teacher could motivate the students through giving constant encouragement and also opportunity to give their own feedbacks to their friends. Encouragement could be given in a verbal or non-verbal form. In this case, the teacher gave verbal encouragement for the students to motivate them.

“...they were given positive comments which could help to enhance their motivation in their writing...”
(T1OC1D9)

“...feedbacks were given after they had provided their feedback with each other's work...” (T2OC2D8)

Going further, how does a teacher plays their role as a learning supporter? According to Van Den Braden (2016), it is important to motivate the students as it will keep their interest high towards the task and by organizing the task, teacher could keep the students focus on achieving the objective. Thus, a teacher should be able to manage, organize and instruct the learners for them to effectively complete the task given. Teachers assist in providing language support and teachers should engage the students by creating assignments in meaning making (University Wisconsin-Madison, 2014). Based from the data, we could see that there were some roles that the

teacher has played in contributing to the success of learning.

“...they were given examples and prompted beforehand...” (T1OC1D2)

“...the students were provided with writing prompts before the activity started...” (T2OC2D2)

“...they were given clear instruction and given chances to inquire...” (T1OC1D3)

“...the objectives were written on the whiteboard and explained to them clearly...” (T2OC2D3)

Pre-writing activity is a very crucial stage for the teacher to make sure the students understand the objective and how the task will be carried out. In this matter, the teachers have done their part in preparing the students for the writing task. Apart from that, for a better understanding, the students also need a clear instruction to perform the activity.

However, we must understand that, as a learning supporter, we should let the students do their task independently with little guidance from the teachers. The teachers behavior towards this matter are described below,

“...monitoring with minimal interruption, so as not to disturb their discussion...” (T1OC1D5)

“...yes...but not too much interruption, to not break their ‘bond’ and not to shift the focus on the teacher...”

From the result above, we can see that the teachers did monitor the students but with only minimal interruption as both teachers agreed that it will disturb their discussion and break their moment in interacting.

RQ3: What Are the Students’ View on How Peer Interactive Writing Can Facilitate Them in Developing Their Narrative Writing Skills?

The third research question was to examine the views of pupils on how peer interactive writing can facilitate the students’ narrative writing skills. The method used to collect the data was an interview. The instrument that was used to collect the data was a structured interview questions. A structured interview questions with eight questions was used to find gather students’ view on how peer interactive writing can facilitate them in development of their narrative writing skills. A thematic analysis was used to analyse the findings obtained from the interview sessions conducted.

When looking thoroughly at the data for this question, we find that there is similarity between the students’ answers. Most of them found that the peer interactive writing can facilitate them in developing their narrative writing skills through discussion among their peers. All ten interviewee responded that they learn better when they interact with their friends which become the first theme; interaction. Below are among the quotes that emulate the students’ thoughts of how the technique helped them in narrative writing;

“Something fun and a medium to connect with people.” (S1L4)

“My friends and I can share our thoughts and ideas on how to write an interesting story.” (S1L13)

“Writing in peers make student exchange ideas and vocabulary knowledge. It gives new information for those needed. It also gives opportunity to those who is lack of writing skills to learn from friends.” (S2L14)

“I want to do it with my friend so can discuss together in class. (I want to do it with my friend so we can discuss together in class.)” (S10L22)

Moreover, the respondents also felt that their interaction with the teacher had also helped them in learning how to produce a better narrative writing. The quote below support the statement that students had also learnt with

the helped from the teacher.

“Learn with teacher and friends together seem like this new method. (Learn with teacher and friends together just like this new method.)” (S9L23)

It concurred with Sonthara and Vanna (2009) where they stated that cooperative learning improves students' communication skills and enhances their ability to be successful in the world of work and to live in the society.

The second theme from the interview data was the ability of peer interactive writing in the easiness of understanding the technique. 60% of the interviewees answered that it was relatively easy to understand. They also like that peer interactive writing can help them make writing easier citing reasons like;

“The new method are easily and suitable for students because we can make writing easily. (The new method is easy and suitable for students because we can do writing easily.)” (S8L15)

“Writing is best. Because we can writing a story with our own idea. (Writing is the best. Because we can write a story with our own ideas.)” (S5L4)

“Yes. I learn many of it. I found many new words that I did not know before. But know I will find more new words and make my writing good. (Yes. I learnt many of it. I found many new words that I did not know before. But now I find more new words and make my writing better)” (S3L12)

In the words of McTighe and Seif (2014), contemporary education must shift from an emphasis on knowledge acquisition for its own sake to preparing learners to understand ideas and processes that they can use and apply flexibly and autonomously. It needed to be easy to understand by the students in order for them to gain something from the approach done in the class.

Lastly, the structured interview questions of “What do you like about the new method?” sought to understand better the benefits that the students thought the technique provides them. Likewise, students responded positively about the technique which showed that the technique resembles student-centered learning which was the third theme. One interviewee responded;

“I like the new method because it give me so many opportunity to make myself more better. (S4L43 &L44)

and another respondent stated that;

“I like the way my friend and I discuss the sentence and fix the grammar together.” (S8L15& L16)

From the results, we can see that peer interactive writing was able to facilitate them in developing their narrative writing skills. The student-centered learning approaches also has given positive influences as agreed by Froyd and Simpson (2010), positive influences of student-centred learning approaches benefitted to teaching on academic performance, attitudes toward learning, and persistence in programs The students were able to show progress in their ability to produce a narrative writing.

8. Recommendation

The results of this study highlighted certain issue regarding teaching and learning writing in English as a second language. First, the respondents for the study will not cover the perceptions of the total population. The study was conducted with a small convenience sample with participants from one secondary school only.

Secondly, more in-depth interviews with students coupled with the use of peer interactive writing may provide a fuller understanding of both students' and teachers' views towards peer interactive writing in the

development of narrative writing skills.

Another recommendation would be for researchers to look at the issue of validity of the study. The qualitative data itself would never give the full picture. The students themselves decide on what they will emphasize and the kind of answers they want to give. Integrating quantitative instruments may reveal students' views towards peer interactive writing and triangulation of data can be secured.

9. Conclusion

This study explored how peer interactive writing facilitates students' narrative writing skills. The results highlighted the teachers' perspectives and students' views on the peer interactive writing method.

From the teachers' perspectives, they viewed peer interactive writing positively as they claimed it to help their students to become cooperative in learning and also able to be an independent learner. Other than that, despite the approach is more to students-centered activity, the teachers understand that they also have prominent roles of facilitating the learning in the classroom. They were able to play their roles effectively by providing clear objectives, instructions and also giving the students guidance when they need it.

Going further, the findings also emphasized the students' positive perception toward the peer interactive writing and their own perceptions of their own narrative writing skills. All ten selected interviewee expressed that they were satisfied with the peer interactive writing as they were able to learn with their friends.

To sum up, the present study made a partial contribution to understand both teachers' and students' views about peer interactive writing, so that other studies need to be conducted to carefully investigated issue highlighted by this study.

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