Article

Making Sense of Collaborative Writing: A Student-Experience-Based Perspective

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A B S T R A C T

The present study examines four pairs or eight students who wrote their creative writing assignments collaboratively. As opposed to the popular view, which stated that writing is one of the most difficult subjects to learn for EFL students, many studies have reported that collaborative writing (henceforth CW) is regarded as a technique that can improve students' productive writing skills to a great extent. The researchers would like to see how effective CW was for the students who did their writing assignments with their pairs by employing a qualitative case study to examine the eight students' experiences in writing their essays and fictional stories. The researchers wanted to know why some students could adapt to this learning model, and others faced some problems or failed to achieve the target of learning outcomes. Opened-ended questionnaire and in-depth interviews are used to elicit data from the students. The first pair was the most successful example of partnership in writing since they opened themselves for critiques and suggestions. In contrast, the second pair had some problems that disturbed their collaboration as they did not seem to open themselves for critiques and suggestions. The third pair failed to do an effective partnership because they could not solve problems that blocked their cooperation right from the beginning. The fourth pair found their way for an effective collaboration when they opened themselves for critiques and suggestions. The success or failure in the partnership heavily depends on each student collaborator's willingness to open themselves for criticism and suggestion.

INTRODUCTION

It is a commonly held belief that writing is a difficult skill to be learned and mastered for many EFL students (Lee, Bernstein, and Georgieva, 2019). In Indonesia's context, writing skills teaching tends to impose students with a set of rules and rarely pay attention to genre-based approaches (Hyland, 2008). In the words of Hyland, the students only memorize rules and practice different types of writing. One of the consequences of this has made many Indonesian students who learn English cannot master writing well. They struggle with ungrammatical sentence constructions, inappropriate dictions, lack of coherence and cohesion, and unclear tone of their writing. Among the many approaches introduced to offer a solution to writing skills problems is a collaborative writing, in which students can be assigned to work in a

group or pairs to learn together and to improve their writing to a greater extent.

Teaching writing with CW techniques has been done in schools and university settings (e.g., Dale, 1994, 1997; Alwasilah, 2001; Doboa, 2012; Fong, 2012; Humphris, 2010). These studies show CW brings significant outcomes for students. Dale (1994, 1997) has explored the benefits and practices of CW for ninth-grade students in the United States. In her prior research, Dale (1994:68) finds many interesting outcomes of CW to ninth-grade students, for example: "students spent twenty-five percent of their time planning." This is a good result of collaboration than working alone. In the expansion of her research, Dale (1997) has developed and designed CW activities for the ninth-grade students in writing their stories. She prefers the term "co-authoring" to describe students' collaboration in writing their stories. Later she stipulates some good points of co-authoring: "(1) Writing is a social process. We learn—and learn to write—from the outside in; (2) Co-authoring externalizes thinking about writing and makes it explicit; (3) Co-authoring focuses on higher-order thinking: generating new ideas, reasoning, and transferring knowledge from one situation to another; (4) Co-authoring encourages positive cognitive conflict; and (5) Co-authoring emphasizes planning" (Dale, 1997:14).

One of the main differences between academic writing and non-academic writing, or in this case, fictional writing, is the format. The former requires the students to follow rigid rules such as academic phrasing, specific headings and sub-headings, the frozen style in terms of writing, and strict citation style. On the contrary, the latter permits students to unfollow all the rules, including the freedom to use non-standard language or colloquialism. The difference will allow the students to explore their imagination in writing their stories and personal essays at greater ease.

Alwasilah (2001) reported students' perceptions toward English courses at the university level. Using collaborative techniques in college students' writing tasks, he finds that students' groups report significant improvement in grammar, spelling, mechanics, content, style, and paragraph. At the end of his report, he recommends integrating collaboration into students' writing activities for significant improvement in students' writing skills.

Doboa (2012), under collaborative writing, investigates the effect of collaborative writing on the text produced in L2 classrooms by groups, pairs, and individuals. She looks at how the students work in groups, pairs and individuals try to fix their grammar. Her findings are encouraging because she finds the accuracy of texts in terms of grammar produced by groups is higher than pairs' work. The ones made in paired writings are also significantly accurate than the ones who write alone. Therefore, it can be concluded that collaboration improves students' grammatical skills significantly.

A study conducted by Fong (2012) examines eight students of advanced diploma in Economics with Chinese origin. The students use the approach of collaboration in writing up their 2.000-word long reports of any business topic. His findings show that these students have achieved better results, and they also use technology to discuss their collaborative reports. Their economic reports gain greater accuracy in terms of contents, and they also learn how to develop interpersonal skills during the process.

Humphris (2010) sets students to make revisions toward their writing using paired collaboration. Her findings show that the students' writing outcomes are improved with some strategies they have done collaboratively. She concludes that her students learn a lot from working together to revise their texts. They know why they have to change, to add, and to substitute parts of the texts. So, it can be concluded that collaboration improves students' grammatical and revision skills in revising their texts.

Despite its popularity of CW for teaching and learning academic writing and non-academic writing, only a handful of studies are available in the Indonesian context (e.g., Rezeki, 2017; Supiani, 2017). Previous studies only limit the use of CW in teaching academic writing in the Indonesian context. However, to best our knowledge, there is hardly any study that looks at CW's effectiveness for composing creative writing such as fictional stories and personal essays. The following study aims at filling in the gap. Our study is guided by a research question: "Why do some students succeed in paired writings, but others failed to do so?"

As for the theoretical framework for analyzing our qualitative data, the researchers use a proposed theory introduced by Fung (2010). Her theory evolves and is built on her doctoral study in 2006. This theory is the offshoot of some theories developed by other experts over time. She proposes five defining features of CW as follows: (1) Mutual Interaction; (2) Negotiation; (3) Cognitive Conflict; (4) Shared Expertise; and (5) Affective Factors.

The first feature, *mutual interaction,* refers to how writers or pairs engaged in writing their assignments. In this stage, students work together to generate ideas, to contest ideas, to think about what they should do with their ideas later on. The second feature, *negotiation,* is when both students should discuss the differences and problems and

try to find a solution. The third feature, *cognitive conflict,* is when they are compelled to decide on something. Both students should negotiate their views to reach a consensus. The fourth feature, *shared expertise*, is related to how each student negotiates job descriptions in their assignment. The fifth or the last feature, *affective factors*, is closely related to emotional factors such as trust, reliability, commitment, and respect, which underlie the collaboration within the pairs.

METHOD
This study used a qualitative case study to collect data and to analyze them. A case study was chosen because this study paradigm allowed the researchers to explore and to describe a phenomenon in context using different data sets to see the insight of issues under investigation (Baxter and Jack, 2008; Creswell and Poth, 2018; Silverman, 2014). Yin as cited in Baxter and Jack (2008) commented that the design of a case study is used to answer "how" and "why" questions. This study's case was the eight students who worked collaboratively to produce their creative writing assignments for introduction to creative writing class.

The eight participants were English department students who had completed the course *Introduction for Creative Writing*. These eight students were coded as A1, B1, C1, and D1 for the analysis. They worked in pairs in their writing assignments. The researchers used them as *purposive sampling* because they were bounded with the case or cross-case and had rich answers for the posed research question (Creswell and Poth, 2018; Silverman, 2014).

There were two ways to gain data for this study. First, the researchers asked the participants to complete an open-ended questionnaire. Among the questions that researchers asked are follows: "How do you work with your partner in writing your assignments?", "Why do you choose to work with this topic?", "What will you do if you have some problems with your writing partner?". Second, the researchers did an in-depth interview using the Cisco WebEx software since the teaching and learning had been shifted online amid the COVID-19 pandemic. The interviews ran for 30 minutes to 45 minutes for each group. The interviews were conducted in English.

For the two different data sets, the researchers treated them equally. For the completed questionnaires, the researchers highlighted key points from their written responses. As for the audio data, the researchers transcribed the recorded interview to see the big picture of the participants' experiences in their paired writing works. From the two data sets, we "immersed" ourselves in the data to see the crucial points and recurring themes in the students' responses (Baxter and Jack, 2008; Creswell and Poth, 2018; Silverman, 2014). The researchers compared and contrasted the groups' experiences and referred to some studies on collaborative writings to analyze the case and cross-case.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION
Having examined the returned open-ended questionnaires and the transcripts of interviews, the researchers divide the findings in the two data sets into the following categories: Why the students' collaboration worked and failed; Lessons learned from their collaboration.

Why the students' collaboration worked and failed
The four pairs of students have different experiences on the techniques of collaboration for writing up their assignments. The first couple (Student A1 and partner) claims that they have a good time doing their assignments. In the interview, they both say that they always try to spend time together before they embark on their writing process. One of them remarks: "Normally, after class, we arrange a time to discuss the assignments and what materials should be read." When the class has been brought to a halt due to coronavirus, they both are compelled to use online platforms to discuss their assignments and plans.

The first couple seems to have exercised the first defining feature of CW in Fung's theory (2010), i.e., mutual interaction. They have interacted face-to-face in class and after class, before COVID-19 struck in early March 2020, and they continue to do their discussions online after that. Something intriguing behind their success story of collaboration that might have paved their way for doing their assignments is that they are good friends since long ago. Student A1 and her partner come from the same village, attend the same senior high school, and go to the same university department. Most importantly, they live in the same rent house and share the same room when studying at the university. Therefore, they know one another well, which make them have good chemistry when they work in a group.

As their work is in progress, these two students tell us that they have some conflicts. They disagree with what should be added and removed from their essay draft related to some coronavirus facts. They say there is always new information found on the internet and make the old information less valid. However, they claim that they could resolve the issue by consensus: they agree to take the most factual information. They reiterate that the key to their communication success is talking openly and giving fair judgment over the issue. Their experience has

shown that they have exercised how to manage cognitive conflict and to find a way to deal with it (Fung, 2010).

Another example of how they negotiate their conflict is when they agree on the division of jobs when writing up their essay. They tell us they decide to split some responsibilities, such as who would search for the background reading, who should type the draft, and who should check for sentence structure and references which are used. They say they are lucky that they know each other well, and things seemed to go smoothly. One of them says: "We dealt with problems with the principle of trust and commitment. As a result, we did not keep something unpleasant for long because we wanted everything to go well. We talked about every problem, from the heart to heart."

The last of the fifth component of CW's feature in Fung's (2010) theory, affective factors, is also found in the first couple's experience. When the classroom lectures are cut off because of the COVID-19 pandemic, they have to continue their discussion using technology. Student A1 remarks that one of the biggest problems in online discussion is the unstable internet connection. She and her partner often could not communicate with Zoom because of the poor internet connection in their village. In this situation, she says: "I had to trust my friend and kept my commitment high to finish the assignment". To overcome the problem, they switch to low technology, such as WhatsApp, to keep their jobs going. It was not as comfortable as they talked in Zoom. However, they could keep their progress to meet the deadline that fast approaching.

If student A1 and her partner work well with their collaborative writing activities despite some hurdles, different experiences are described by the second couple or student B1 and her partner. For the first defining feature of CW, mutual interaction, student B1 and her partner actively engaged in face-to-face interaction in class and after class before the pandemic struck. Based on what she explains, after the lectures brought to a sudden stop, she and her partner continue discussing their assignments and final project through WhatsApp. However, something that differentiates student B1 and her partner from the first pair is that they do not feel passionate about their collaboration. In student B1's words: "I don't like [CW] because two people, of course, have different ideas. In my case, my partner and I always have different opinions and ways to see the problem."

Another issue that arose from student B1 and her partner is their lack of openness when going through CW's stages: finding ideas, outlining plans, writing a rough draft, revising successive drafts, and writing the final draft. When they work on their final project, student B1 only accept the idea of writing a short story in the genre of mystery offered by her writing partner. The reason for this, according to student B1 is: "I don't want to let my friend down". An explanation for her attitude, which does not question and challenge her partner, is because if she does that, it can be considered as a threat to her friend's "face" (Brown and Levinson, 1987). Therefore, she acts polite and unquestioned her partner because she does not want to have a conflict with her.

In Fung's theory (2010), students engaged in collaboration should exercise negotiation to check whether they understand each other and can reach a consensus over the issue. What happened to student B1 and her partner is different, in which each side seems to avoid conflict by keeping their 'face.' Since their collaboration does not run smoothly, the next feature of CW or "shared expertise" also does not operate significantly. In writing their fictional story, student B1 only contributes to a minimum degree where she just suggests storyline and characters' development, while writing up the entire text is done by her partner. The story's fine-tuning, such as grammatical corrections, sequences in the story, plot twist, and implied message mostly done by student B1's partner. The reason for this could be because student B1 does not feel the story is hers or, in her words, "I wished I could write alone."

The last feature of CW or "affective factors" in B1 and her partner does not bring positive outcomes for their collaboration. For example, B1 does not show a good commitment to engage in the process of story writing. Another aspect that student B1 also ignored is a sense of respect towards her partner. She avoids involving further in the process of writing, editing, and refining the story. She just leaves her partner to do many of the jobs alone. The situation is worsened with low contact with her partner during the lockdown at home. She becomes passive and just waits for messages from her friend, who informs their story's progress.

The third couple, student C1 and her writing partner, is an example of unsuccessful collaboration in this study. They do not seem to enjoy working together as a team in their writing assignments. They have some interactions in class, but the interactions are mostly passive, as described in C1's experience: "My partner didn't help me much when I was working in the class. She just looked at me and said: 'I don't understand.' I did most of the writing in the class. She only changed a few words and sentences." It seems that student C1's partner does not like collaboration, and she wants to work on her own. The other three defining CW features, negotiation, cognitive conflict, and shared expertise, could not be discussed

from the couple's experiences. Student C1 is 'a single fighter' in her writing activities, and her partner only contributes very little in their collaboration. What remained with student C1 is some negative impressions or affective outcomes toward her friend, in which she may judge her as 'lazy,' 'untrusted,' and 'uncommitted' person with their writing assignments. When the collaboration changed from face-to-face interaction to online interaction amid coronavirus pandemic, student C1 loses touch with her partner. She claims that her partner deliberately does not want to be contacted when she returns to her village.

The fourth couple, or student D1 and her partner, has a unique story from their experience working in a group. They start their interaction awkwardly in class when the first time they work together in a group. Student D1 describes the situation: "I wanted to work on my own. It was hard to make a decision and unite our argument". Her experience is aptly summarized by Storch (2019:40): "Writing has been generally perceived as a solitary activity, completed by the writer working alone". However, the situation changes quickly when their works are in progress, as reflected by student D1: "In the beginning, it was hard to collaborate, but later it turned out we could work together". They may have experienced some good points when working as a team rather than working individually.

This group confesses that they do some negotiations and reach several points about what story they should write, jobs that should be divided, and a timeline for their final assignment. They agree to work on a sci-fiction adventure for their fictional story. Student D1 says that she comes up with the idea while her friend helps her create some characters in their story. The best part of their collaboration explained by student D1 is: "I had to negotiate how the story should begin, how to develop the storyline, tensions, plot twist, and ending of the story. We had some heated arguments on several points, but in the end, we reached a consensus". As for the division of jobs, student D1 says: "I handled the storyline and ending of the story, while my partner took care of the presentation of the language".

Student D1 remarks: "I was impressed with my partner because one time she called me in the middle of the night to give some new ideas that I never thought before". From what she recalls from her experience, it is clear that she has a good impression of her writing partner. She feels comfortable with her friend because her friend is committed to their jobs and supportive when some issues needed to be settled down. At the end of the interview, both student D1 and her partner confess they are having a good time together. They say that they learn a lot from their collaboration about story writing and its complexities and how to understand each other when discussing their final assignment.

Lessons learned through their collaboration

Each of the group has learned many valuable things in the process of co-authoring their essay and stories. Student A1 and her partner are a successful example of paired collaborative writing in this study. They claim they have done the CW procedures, pooling their ideas, translating them into an essay, checking their essay grammar, refining their essay contents, and proofreading their essay before submitting it. The couple has extended the level of their collaboration to technology-based interaction as the face-to-face discussion is not possible amid the COVID-19 pandemic (Storch, 2019).

What can be learned from their experiences is that collaboration can improve their writing skills and other aspects such as teamwork, creativity, social relation with others, and discipline. One of the good points of CW for students is that it provides a sounding board when they have a problem. This is aptly recapped in Dale's words as follows: "When students write alone, they often have a hard time generating ideas and sustaining a topic; this may because writing does not provide them with a turn-taking partner, as does conversation" (Dale, 1997:x). When writing pairs have a problem, the other member can help and find a solution.

The second group, or student B1 and her partner, shows a different story, in which one student passively accepts what her partner has offered and suggested. Passivity is considered the domination of one party and the other party's reluctance to engage in equal collaboration actively (Dale, 1997). With regard to this, Dale (1997:46) argues that a good and healthy partnership should have "cognitive conflict" to foster learning and performance. The cognitive conflict concept is when both paired students try to negotiate some differences and to find their reasonable collaboration solutions. Student B1 states that her unwillingness to argue and to challenge her partner is because she does not want to disappoint her friend. Even though they manage to collaborate in their writing to produce a fictional story, it is clear that they do not have an equal position.

The third paired students or student C1 and her partner are the troubled pair since they do not feel that collaborative writing is useful in their collaborative story. This is raised by one of them that her partner helps little in story writing. Some factors may cause the failure of this couple to achieve better collaboration. One of them might be that she does not like working in a group in composing a story. Another interpretation could be that

student C1 and partner fail to discuss the job description issues or divide the responsibilities.

As for the last couple or student D1 and her partner, they manage to create a good collaboration despite some problems that block their way as an equal partner. It may take some time to learn each other's character and to support one another as they progress in their assignments. The crucial point for them is to respect one another and to grow the spirit of teamwork to write their story. Writing with a partner has been proven to have many advantages, such as developing writing and interpersonal skills with other people. As a wise word goes, "Two heads are better than one", which illustrates how important it is to develop collaborative skills to succeed in study and life.

CONCLUSION

From the four pairs of students in this study, there are several points that we can draw why they succeed in their collaboration and why the others are unsuccessful in their attempts.

The first couple, student D1 and her partner, does a good collaboration because they are good friends since long ago, and they also have opened themselves for criticism and suggestion (Fung, 2010). Fung (2010) suggests that the defining features of CW can be found in their recalled experiences.

Student B1 and her partner may need to learn CW's objectives and open themselves to criticism and suggestion for working smoothly in their paired writing. They need to suppress their ego to work successfully as a team and to develop a sense of respect for each other so that their position is equal (Dale, 1997).

Student C1 and her partner must learn CW's concepts again and learn how to work in pairs. They should learn how to interact well either in a face-to-face meeting or online interaction, fostering successful collaboration. They also need to learn how to manage conflict, to respect others, and to share their expertise.

Student D1 and her writing partner should learn how to develop good chemistry and to open a good communication channel. They manage to become a solid team after they open themselves and accept each other's strengths and weaknesses.

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