

FOREIGN LANGUAGES AND VIETNAMESE

THE USE OF GROUP WRITING IN IMPROVING WRITING SKILL OF STUDENTS AT THE INTERMEDIATE LEVEL AT HANOI UNIVERSITY OF CULTURE

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ABSTRACT: The article focuses on the use of group writing in improving the writing skill of students at the intermediate level at Hanoi university of Culture. The aim of the study is to discuss the benefits of group writing activity and the effectiveness of using group writing activity for students at intermediate level at Hanoi University of Culture. The data collected from the questionnaire delivered to 100 students and the same number of students observed by the teacher. The results have revealed that the group writing activity is clearly better than the non - group writing activity. To be specific, the percentage of students' interest in group writing activity were increased nearly twice in comparison with that in non - group writing activity. This is because the group writing activity involves idea sharing, mutual assistance, group members' feedback and teachers' help and assessment. In other words, the students could cultivate their writing skills through peer interaction and learners and the teacher interaction.

KEY WORDS: Group work; group writing; writing skill; cooperative writing; writing activity.

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1. Rationale of the study

With the growth of English as language of international communication, many people find it necessary to master four skills. Of the four skills, writing is believed to be one of the most 'hard bone' skills as it requires great attention, patience, experience, frequent practice and technique. Not only that, students must have knowledge of language formality and some skills such as grammatical, expressive, rhetorical and organizational skills. Another factor which is reported to de-motivates students' interest in writing is the teaching method. To be specific, the teachers are said to be in complete control of the writing process. They focus too much on the interpretation of grammar or on the method of memorization so there is little scope for students to think critically or students haven't got many chances to really involve in the writing process. Therefore, writing can cause students to be stressed and unenjoyable. According to Sokolik (2003), writing is the mental work, which involves inventing ideas, thinking about how to express them, and organizing them into sentences and paragraphs that will be clear to readers. Similarly, Carroll (1990) states that when writing, students should know how to construct a sentence, subjects and verbs must agree in number, the reference of pronouns should not be ambiguous, there should be consistency of person and tense and correct spelling, punctuation, capitalization, and word usage are required. Clearly, the complexity of the writing skill itself and the traditional learning and teaching style can lead to low stimulation of students' writing skill.

With a view to adopting a new method of teaching writing in English classrooms, this study investigates *The use of group writing in improving writing skill of students at intermediate level at Hanoi University of Culture*. The aim of this activity is to improve learners' writing ability through cooperative learning or group work which provides learners favorable conditions to write the language more effectively.

2. Aim of the study

In order to find whether the group writing can develop writing skills of students at intermediate level at Hanoi University of Culture, the study is conducted to answer the two following questions:

1. What are difficulties met by students in writing skill?

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2. How effective it is to use group writing in improving writing skill of students at the intermediate level at Hanoi University of Culture?

3. Content

3.1. The definition of group writing

When defining group writing, Brookes & Gundy (1990) state that using group writing encourages collaboration for idea generation, enables groups to contrast their work with that of other groups. Stephen (2011) also supports group writing activity, he argues that working in group writing, one may learn a lot by listening to other people's ideas and have more opportunity to negotiate. Nystrand (1986) compared several college classrooms and found that students who responded in a group to one another's writing regarded the exercise as substantive reconceptualization of the text, whereas those who worked alone were concerned only with the mechanics of editing. Similarly, Donnell and her colleagues (1985) studied college students working cooperatively to create sets of explicit instructions. Not only did students who wrote cooperatively write more explicit instructions than a comparison group who wrote alone. Clearly, group writing is a collection of individuals in which each member has the chance to exchange, discuss and present his/her opinion about the writing topic(s) assigned by the teacher. Moreover, group writing activity can help reluctant learners overcome the barrier of anxious psychology as they are allowed time to think things before contributing to the group's whole assignment. In a group writing activity, learners can assist each other to determine the writing purpose, develop ideas and stimulate each other to have constant feedback and cross-checking. There are, however, some main difficulties in implement group writing activity. To be specific, group writing activity is sometimes messy, time-consuming to organize and can cause noises which affect pedagogical environment. For the students, they are used to learning from the teachers, they do not have the habit of cooperating and getting knowledge from peers. In short, any discussion has two sides. However, many researchers have reported group writing activity have more advantages than disadvantages and have positive effects on the development of writing ability in language classroom.

3.2. The role of teachers and learners in group writing activity

It is acknowledged that, group writing is an activity contributed from various perspectives; between teachers and learners and between learners and learners. In order to make group writing successful, both the teachers and the learners have to play active parts in it. The teachers generally have three main functions in a group writing activity. The first is to act as an organizer, the second is a prompter and the last is an assessor. *The teacher as an organizer*: In Harmer's research (1991), he claims that many activities cannot be succeeded without good organization. He suggests three stages in organizing an activity. They are *the lead-in* __instruct (demonstrate) __initiate. Obviously, the lead-in is referred to 'starting point' and there is a saying 'a good start makes a good end'. In this stage, the teacher should make students know briefly what they are going to do first and to do next. Then the teacher works out the instruction which should promote students' independence and creativity. Finally, the teacher initiates the activity. In this stage, students are asked to accomplish their tasks under the control of a group leader. *The teacher as a prompter*: During the group writing activity, students may 'lose the thread of what is going on', the teacher in this case should initiate 'the word -of -mouth' recommendation to encourage and proceed the writing process. *The teacher as assessor* In Harmer's opinion (1991) one of the main jobs of the teacher is to make assessment to the students' work, to know how well they are performing or how well they already performed to give feedback, correction and grading. In this role, the teacher has the chance to know the students' knowledge, skills and demand. From this, the teacher can tailor the teaching method suitably to the students' requirement.

As far as we know, the role of students cannot be short in group writing activities. Apart from the teacher's direction and assistance, students must keep active roles and are the main focus in group writing activities. It means that they are supposed to be ready to cooperate with other members in the group. Also, they should be well prepared about the social knowledge as well as skills, lexical items and grammar structures. To maintain the group writing activity, students should be a communicative learner, contributor, encourager and group leader. As a *communicative learner*, the student is willing to take risk, to learn from experience and make the learning practical and useful for them. As a

contributor, the student is ready to contribute his opinions to the group writing activity. *As an encourager*, the student should point out interesting things contributed by his group members and praise them. In this way, his encouragement will inspire the positive learning to his members and will make them have more motivation to complete the task well. *As a group leader*, he bears responsibility for working with his group members, helping decide the objectives of the group, tailor the instruction to the students' ability. In other word, a group leader makes every effort to encourage participation in group learning so that the group can benefit from the contributions of many minds.

4. Methodology

In order to get information on the target needs, the questionnaire was designed for students at the intermediate level at Hanoi University of Culture. The researcher wants to get information on students' education background, the interest in leaning writing, the difficulties met by students in writing skill, the students' opinion on the practice of individual writing, the students' opinion on the practice of group writing. The subjects of this study consist of three chosen writing classes of 100 students at the intermediate level at Hanoi University of Culture and the teacher's self - observation of these three chosen classes.

5. Lesson plan

The students will involve the group writing activity and are assigned to write the topic 'what are the advantages and disadvantages of growing old'. The basic steps for the group writing are adopted as follows: Warm-up activity; group division, teacher's suggestion; group brainstorming; group collaborative writing; teacher's observation and assessment. Before the group writing activity, students are required to watch a film quotation of an ordinary day of the old. The teacher finds that by watching the quotation, students have a clear picture of the old and got some useful ideas for the next discussion. After watching the video, the students are asked to work in group of five and to try their best to exploit all aspects of the old. The teacher will make suggestions about the advantages and disadvantages of the old such as their position in the family and society, their experience, their time, health and their psychology. The students really "enter" brainstorming with competitive atmosphere among groups under the control of leaders. While the group work is in progress, the teacher observes and sometimes mix with them to give the "word – of – mouth" recommendations or pose questions to help them maintain a productive learning atmosphere. After the group writing activity, the teacher should give feedback to motivate students to study more. For mistakes and errors, the teacher takes note the serious errors that are made during the activity. Ta Nguyen (1994) indicate there are three types of correction: *self - correction*, *peer - correction* and *teacher - correction*. (1) *Self - correction* is a good idea to give students an opportunity to correct and edit their own errors. (2) *Peer - correction* is the correction that students work together and give a hand when one is unable to spot and correct errors. (3) *Teacher - correction* is the most popular type of correction which involves the teacher identifying mistakes and giving accurate corrections. According to Doff (1988, p.190), "a good teacher will use different strategies according to the kind of error, the ability and personality of the student, and the general atmosphere of the class". In Sheils' study (1993), he mentions that most methodologists suggest errors should be corrected at reasonable degree so that learners are not hesitant or inhibited to do their best to communicate even they are uncertain about the correct language form. Clearly, the error correction is an art which not only requires the teacher's gentleness but also requires the teacher's sensitiveness in order to deal with students' errors reasonably and effectively.

6. Findings and analysis

Based on the students' answers on three main opened questions in the questionnaire and the teacher self-observation, the findings are presented as follows:

For the opened question on students' ideas about the difficulties in writing skill, 33% of respondents had problems with vocabulary and grammar. These respondents found it hard to choose the appropriate words and tenses to use, resulting in awkward sentences in their writing. Also, students said that there were a large number of English grammatical rules which were quite different from Vietnamese ones and that the teacher sometimes didn't help them point out the differences so they had to figure out the differences themselves and outlined some rules to convert from Vietnamese to the target language.

Moreover, they said they could only use basic vocabulary which were repetitive in the essay. Another worrying issue is the idea generation, with 29%. These students responded that ideas didn't appear in their mind so they often failed to figure out what they were going to write. They also added that idea generation was the hardest part because writing required a lot of understanding and social knowledge. Another 22% had difficulties in idea organization. They said they were in desperate to put the ideas in linear form to make the most sense or they failed to arrange ideas chronologically. The result to the question also shows that 16% of participants had problems in writing introductory paragraph. Specifically, they didn't know how to explain the topic with general ideas or to present the thesis statement in an appropriate way.

Regarding to the opened question on the students' opinion about the practice of individual writing, 58% of the students admitted that they didn't like to write independently. They responded that they sometimes did not know where to start, how to write an introductory paragraph, a body and a concluding paragraph, although they answered they were taught to follow the stages of writing: brainstorming, creating an outline, drafting and editing. Many students responded that because of being influenced by the mother tongue, they often started writing what they wanted in Vietnamese first and translated them word by word into English. As a result, their writing was not qualified and often got bad marks. These respondents also stated that independent writing were uninspiring and ineffective. Consider the following students' responses: *I think it is difficult to come up with opinions when I practice writing individually; I think if we use individual writing we will never know our mistakes and then we can't write better; If I have to practice to write on my own, I don't know where to start and how to expand the essay; Individual writing is not the best way to improve my writing skills because the content of the essay is limited to only my knowledge; I often construct my writing in Vietnamese then translate it into English so I think my writing is not like the model essays or those written by native speakers.* The result also shows that 26% of the participants expressed their choice for the individual writing. Specifically, some of them said that they could be free in arranging their own time and not being disturbed by anyone else or they liked to have a private space for brainstorming. Some others said they could think independently without being influenced by others. The small percentage of 13% didn't have a clear support for the practice of individual writing. Some of them responded that the practice of individual writing gave them opportunity to put their own ideas into writing. However, if they practiced alone, it would be hard for them to know what to improve or some of them were not sure whether their own method of writing was qualified or not. There remain 3% of participants had no answer.

For the opened question on students' ideas about their practice of group writing, the result shows that 62% of students asserted collective writing had more advantages than individual writing. To be specific, students believed that they could learn various styles of expressing the meanings presented by members in the group and as a result they could expand their specialized knowledge, lexical and grammatical items from their peers. They also said that they were pushed by peers to make joint efforts to complete the task on time. Moreover, students said they were just at intermediate level and didn't have much experience in writing so it would be better for them to cross-check the punctuation, capitalization, sentence formulation, organizational structure, coherence and cohesion. While 23% didn't wish to practice writing in group, 11% asserted that they supported the combination of individual and group writing. The rest of 4% had no answer. In brief, most respondents took greater side on group writing as they thought group writing was an activity of joining efforts to achieve the requirements of writing skills.

With respect to the teacher's self - observation, the findings reveal that when students practiced writing independently, they often wrote the assigned topic on their own style (some of the essays were written without basic structure, some were written with inappropriate linguistic context, some were in lacked of ideas or some were compiled in the mother tongue style). To be specific, when students were asked to practice writing independently an essay with the title "Your English Vocabulary Learning", most of the students did not write the introductory paragraph in a satisfied way. They failed to write the general statements about their English vocabulary learning to attract the readers' attention or they didn't

tell the readers what to expect but often “beat around the bush”. Consider of the following introductions quoted from the students’ assignment: (1) *Studying English can help you to progress in life. You can start to meet people around the world. So you need to learn English;* (2) *I have noticed that students’ score in reading, writing and listening are low. This shows that our vocabulary knowledge is very limited;* (3) *Many companies have meetings in English, universities teach English and around the world, tourists and travelers use English and English vocabulary is used frequently;* It can be shown that many students write the introduction in a rambling way that makes it difficult for readers to find the main idea of what the topic is about. Regarding to the body, some students do not know how to expand the ideas so the body of the essay often consists of only some sentences or a very short paragraph instead of a long or more than one paragraph. In other words, their ideas in the body paragraph are not often developed into subdivision. Consider the assigned topic with the title “What are the advantages of working online from home?”. For this body paragraph, many students presented only a list of undeveloped ideas as follows: *There are many advantages to working online from home. **Firstly**, you don’t have to travel to work and back home. **Secondly**, you can choose the time you like to work. **Thirdly**, it is very convenient because you don’t have to leave home. **Fourthly**, it saves costs. **Lastly**, you can spend more time with your family.* In this situation, students might think that they already posed a list of ideas and that was enough for the body paragraph. However, to make the writing better, students should give three original ideas instead of five and expand them in more detail. In this way, the body of the essay will be deepened, informative and helpful to readers. Clearly, a “paragraph” which is made up of a series of listed sentences without illustration, evidence, analysis and interpretation will not be persuasive and leave bad impression on readers. In other words, abrupt sentences without reinforcing the writer’s point of view are like the action of “riding a horse to view flowers”. For the conclusion, it is quite common for students to forget to write the conclusion. The reason for this phenomenon is likely that students put much emphasis on the ideas in the body paragraph and as a result, they have no time to write or they might not practice writing much so they are not aware of the importance of the conclusion or they were very confused. Some of the students asserted that they did include the conclusion in the paper but they were clumsy in summarizing the main points of the essay. It can be said that an essay without a conclusion is something like “a meeting without a sense of completeness” or “a journey without a destination”. Moreover, a conclusion without wrapping the main point of the essay up can make readers confusing and fail to leave readers with impression. Clearly, the conclusion is an important part of the essay and is considered one of the key criteria for evaluating the essay. That is why, students should write the conclusion in an effective way.

7. Conclusion

The study employs data collected from the questionnaire of the three chosen writing classes of 100 students at the intermediate level at Hanoi University of Culture and the teacher’s self - observation of these three chosen classes with an aim to identify the students’ difficulties in writing and to evaluate the effectiveness of group writing in improving writing skill of students at Hanoi University of Culture. Based on the findings, the goal and objectives of the study have been identified. To be specific, the application of group writing activity for students at the intermediate level at Hanoi university of Culture is clearly better than the non - group writing activity as students have more opportunities to share with peers about their knowledge and skills in writing. Moreover, students can overcome the reluctance and break down the tension as they are well - prepared and assisted by peers. In other words, when students run out of things to say, their classmates will ask questions or give hints to help them continue. In this way, students will be confident and when they have confidence, they are more interested in the task. Working in group writing, students’ dynamism and creativity are encouraged and promoted as a result, they can produce effective writing or bring value to readers. Also, group writing makes the class room more exciting, motivated and it has an air of mutual concern. With those above mentioned, no one can deny the advantages of the group writing activity. It is hoped that the study results will provide suggestions for teaching and learning writing skill through group writing activity.

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**Sử dụng nhóm để nâng cao kỹ năng viết cho sinh viên có trình độ trung cấp
tại Trường Đại học Văn hóa Hà Nội**

Tóm tắt: Bài báo tập trung nghiên cứu tính hiệu quả của việc sử dụng hoạt động viết theo nhóm của sinh viên có trình độ trung cấp tại Trường Đại học Văn hóa Hà Nội. Mục đích của nghiên cứu là thảo luận về lợi ích của hoạt động viết theo nhóm và tính hiệu quả của chúng đối với sinh viên có trình độ trung cấp tại Trường Đại học Văn hóa Hà Nội. Dữ liệu được thu thập từ bảng hỏi phát cho 100 sinh viên và việc quan sát của giáo viên với cùng số lượng là 100 sinh viên. Kết quả nghiên cứu cho thấy, hoạt động viết theo nhóm hiệu quả hơn so với hoạt động viết độc lập. Cụ thể, tỉ lệ sinh viên quan tâm tới hoạt động viết theo nhóm tăng lên đáng kể so với hoạt động viết độc lập. Lý do là, khi làm việc theo nhóm sinh viên có cơ hội chia sẻ ý tưởng, hỗ trợ nhau hoàn thành nhiệm vụ, tiếp thu nhận xét từ các thành viên trong nhóm và nhận sự đánh giá từ giáo viên. Nói cách khác, sinh viên có thể trau dồi kỹ năng viết thông qua việc tương tác với bạn bè và việc tương tác giữa sinh viên và giáo viên.

Từ khóa: làm việc nhóm; hoạt động viết theo nhóm; kỹ năng viết; hoạt động viết phối hợp; hoạt động nhóm.