Developing Academic Writing Skills through a Task-Based Approach: A Case Study of Students' Collaborative Writing

SUTHATHIP THIRAKUNKOVIT*
Applied Linguistics Program, Faculty of Liberal Arts, Mahidol University, Thailand
KORNSIRI BOONYAPRAKOB
Applied Linguistics Program, Faculty of Liberal Arts, Mahidol University, Thailand
Corresponding author email: suthathip.thi@mahidol.edu

Article information	*Abstract*
	This mixed-methods study explored the students' learning from the task-based collaborative writing process (Ellis, 2003; Willis, 1996) and the effects of its process on their writing improvement in a compulsory academic writing course. Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, this course was conducted completely online. This 15-week course followed the parallel sessions of 1) the instructor lectures for the writing practices and student practices of collaborative writing in class, 2) students collaboratively write their first draft outside classroom, 3) the instructor's oral and written feedback for the first draft of students' work, 4) online group conference among group members to collaboratively reflect their own learning from instructor feedback, and 5) collaborative revision of the first draft before submitting a final draft. These sessions recurred four times during the course when the students worked on each assigned task that made up a group project. These four writing tasks included a research proposal, a literature review, a report of interviews or surveys, and discussion of the findings. At the end of the semester, all groups orally presented their projects. Data were collected from two drafts of all four essays, group conferences with the instructor, and dialogues during group reflection conferences. Overall, the participating students were found to have positive perception of the task-based collaborative writing because it allowed them to have a deeper understanding of the research process and improve the content and organization of their writing. Implications suggest aspects of the process that contribute to the students' positive perceptions and writing improvements.

INTRODUCTION

In the past two decades, collaborative writing has become common in many L2 writing contexts (Li & Zhang, 2021; Shehadeh, 2011). From its definition, collaborative or team writing refers to the process of producing a written work as a team or group, in which all team members have an opportunity to contribute to the content and final writing product (Thomas, 2014). Collaborative writing also requires several stages of writing, revising, and editing. As a result,

in the time of Covid-19 pandemic when teaching and learning are normally in the synchronous online mode, collaborative writing can be challenging for many students because it demands good planning, coordinating, problem-solving skills, and frequent communication among team members (Thomas, 2014).

Several pieces of research evidence, based on extensive studies that are well-documented in the fields of language writing (Dobao, 2012; Shehadeh, 2011; Storch & Aldosari, 2013), show positive results of learners' collaborative efforts over individual efforts in writing (Elola & Oskoz, 2010; Lee, Bernstein, & Georgieva, 2019). With careful classroom planning and communication with students, collaborative writing or group assignments can yield positive results and valuable experiences for both instructors and students.

In this study, students were made to work in groups on real-life academic tasks which relate to their field of study or research interests. Therefore, this study was conducted to formally document the extent to which the task-based approach together with the exposure of collaborative writing could have a significant influence on the development of students' academic writing skills.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The section describes the definitions of collaborative and task-based approaches and their benefits and challenges and reviews some previous studies that are relevant to second language writing.

Collaborative writing as a teaching approach

Collaborative writing is a teaching approach in which students work in a pair or small group to complete a writing project (Storch, 2005). This teaching approach is also known as interactive writing or shared writing (How to Teach Collaborative Writing, 2017). This approach can be a useful way of enhancing the confidence and writing skills of students because collaboration gives students the opportunity to gather ideas and provide each other with feedback (Storch, 2005).

The use of small group and pair work in second language classrooms lies at the root of a sociocultural theory, which is based on the work of Vygotsky (1978). According to Vygotsky, human development occurs through social activities. According to Storch (2005), a novice's cognitive development arises in social interaction with a more able member providing feedback or assistance to the novice to expand the knowledge beyond his/her current level.

In a similar vein, the development of writing skills can be informed by a Vygotskian perspective. In teaching writing, instructional activities are based on a series of social processes. The role of the teacher, peers, and others in the teaching and learning process is of a pivotal point since students' writing development can be driven through the more able member's guidance, assistance, and bond that occur during the process of writing collaboration (Storch, 2005).

Collaborative writing can be an effective method to produce a higher-quality writing product because every member can check each other's work as they progress. Nonetheless, collaboration may affect students' work quality negatively when they do not have good dynamics and communication among themselves. Some members may struggle to manage their workload if sharing seems to be unbalanced (Shehadeh, 2011; Wang, 2022).

Some relevant studies of the collaborative writing

Collaborative writing has been implemented by a number of teachers in L2 writing settings over the past thirty year (Storch, 2011; Zhai, 2021). As part of the shift from teacher-centered to learner-centered teaching, collaborative writing has gained great popularity as a useful pedagogical activity in language teaching and learning (Zhai, 2021). Therefore, collaborative writing has received considerable attention from a number of researchers and a substantial amount of research has been looking at the effect of collaborative writing in the development of L2 writing. The findings of many of these studies are discussed in light of the sociocultural perspective of learning, focusing on the role of peer interaction and feedback received.

A study conducted by Shehadeh (2011) attempts to investigate the effectiveness and students' perceptions of collaborative writing in two writing classes at a large university in the United Arab Emirates. In order to examine the effectiveness of collaborative writing, several writing tasks (e.g., writing quizzes, midterm and final exams, and course assignments) were analyzed. Results of the study showed that collaborative writing had an overall significant effect on several aspects of students' writing, especially on content, organization, and vocabulary. Regarding students' perceptions, most students found the experience enjoyable and felt that it contributed to their learning. Even though the students initially felt that this approach was new to them because they were not accustomed to it in their previous learning experiences, they accepted that their experience could enhance not only their writing ability, but their other skills as well, particularly their communication skills. Moreover, they were not afraid to find new ideas and work on their mistakes because they always gave each other feedback throughout the writing process.

Dobao (2012) also investigated the benefits of collaborative writing tasks from a sociocultural lens by emphasizing the importance of peer collaboration and feedback. The results of this study confirmed that, to a great extent, peer interaction, both in pairs or in small groups, could offer the opportunities for growth and co-construction of new knowledge. In terms of the quality of the writing assignments, they were linguistically more accurate because the students could help one another to pay more attention to language, thereby becoming more successful at solving language-related problems.

In a more recent study, Zhai (2021) investigated the students' perceptions and attitudes towards collaborative writing. Through a mixed-methods study, the researcher used multiple pieces of data to examine how third-year students at a university in the United States learned how to write and co-constructed the relationship during collaborative activities. Findings from her study revealed the fluctuations of the students' perceptions towards writing collaboration and personal collaborative behaviors. Their students initially felt very positive and motivated to

complete the task, but then they became demotivated as the project progressed due to various factors such as time constraints, group incongruity, and linguistic challenges. However, with support of the instructor, good communication among all members, and a strong sense of achievement throughout the project, the students later became re-motivated and more prepared to participate in future collaborative writing activities.

As can be seen from the relevant literature reviewed, existing research on collaborative L2 writing to date has shown the positive effect on the development of writing skills. Even though most teachers and students had affirmative feelings about collaborative writing tasks, the focus of these earlier works was mostly on the impacts and effectiveness of collaborative writing on its participants; there was much less exploration in using this teaching approach through online learning. Therefore, this study will look at the extent to which collaborative writing tasks delivered through online platforms could help students improve their writing skills.

Task-based approach

In the past 10 years, there has been a growing interest in the task-based approach as a methodology that is widely used in language learning (Ellis, 2003; Willis & Willis, 2007). This approach is based on the use of language tasks as the core unit of planning and instruction in language teaching. There are three main phases proposed by Ellis (2003) and Willis (1996).

Pre-task planning phase

During this phase, instructors introduce the topic and task to the students and, in some cases, provide them with information and language necessary for task completion. Instructors also organize activities to prepare the students not only to recall their existing knowledge of language but also to elicit and stimulate their thoughts relevant to the task to be assigned. These activities allow the students to practice the language as well as to get feedback for the practices.

The task cycle or during-task phase

During the task cycle stage, students are required to complete tasks, plan for the next step to polish their tasks for later reports to others. While students are completing the assigned tasks in pairs or groups, instructors play the role to monitor the students' progress, offer suggestions, and encouragement if needed. Once the tasks are complete, the students have to come up with a plan to increase the quality of the tasks. They can ask for feedback and suggestions from the instructor. After that, the students will revise their work based on the suggestions and get ready to report the results of their learning to the whole class. The task cycle aims to enhance learners' practice in using the English language while increasing opportunities among themselves to be exposed to the spoken or written language.

Focus on forms or the post-task phase

Once the students have finished the task and presented the reports, there could be several

options for the post-task phase. One of them is to encourage attention on language forms (Ellis, 2003). Instructors will set some language tasks for the students to explore further. The aim of this stage is to help students investigate certain features of the language and develop awareness of grammar, vocabulary, and frequently used expressions.

Through the use of the task-based approach, the learners are generally supplied with an authentic environment in which they can practice and use the language in communication, and they can also improve their creative capacity and critical thinking skills when trying to complete the task (Marashi & Dadari, 2012). Even though this approach emphasizes meaning over form, the learners' writing skills can be improved through a deeper understanding of language used in the actual communication. Despite several benefits, it is not without challenges. On the part of the instructor, some tasks take longer to prepare, and students are required to spend a lot of time both inside and outside the classroom to complete the tasks. Some students might feel overwhelmed, thereby feeling unmotivated during activities.

For writing activities, the task-based approach can be framed within the larger framework of task-based language teaching. It also provides the learners with the opportunity to get involved in active writing tasks that are reasonable for them and related to their real-life experience. They can witness their own advancements, reconsider the final draft, and make necessary revisions throughout the writing process (Marashi & Dadari, 2012). There can be different types of tasks to foster the academic writing performance of the learners. In this study, the four writing tasks were chosen: a research proposal, a literature review, a formal report, and a discussion of the findings.

Some relevant studies of the task-based approach

A number of studies have explored the effectiveness of the task-based approach in developing writing skills, and the results of many studies show that this approach could satisfactorily improve students' writing skills in different writing tasks. In a Pakistani context, a task-based approach was significantly effective and successful in teaching narrative essay writing (Manzoor, Azhar, & Malik, 2020). In an Iranian context, Marashi and Dadari (2012) investigated the impact of task-based writing on intermediate Iranian EFL students. The results of the statistical analysis demonstrated that learners benefited significantly from task-based assignments in terms of both their writing skills and creativity despite the fact that the approach was found to be hard to implement. The approach required that the instructors employ a variety of writing tasks and provide different kinds of feedback for the students while strictly following task cycles at the same time. Similarly, a quasi-experimental study conducted by Ahmed and Bidin (2016) has validated the effectiveness of the task-based approach in promoting writing skills of EFL learners enrolled in undergraduate programs at public universities in Malaysia. In the context of big classes in China, Hai-Yan's study (2014) also revealed that the students' essay writing skills could be significantly developed by using a task-based teaching approach.

When exploring the perceptions of instructors and students towards this approach, some researchers found both positive and negative views. A study conducted by Hadi (2013) revealed some negative views on the implementation of this approach. Even though most teachers and

learners were willing to adapt themselves to this new approach, some teachers seemed to have little knowledge in applying it, and many students did not have enough confidence in actively participating in class. The overall findings of a study conducted by Xiongyong and Moses (2011) revealed that most EFL teachers and students had positive attitudes toward this approach. However, the large class size and lack of students' confidence were the major factors that impede teachers to administer this approach effectively. In Thailand, many studies showed similar results. A case study conducted by McDonough and Chaikitmongkol (2007) investigated teachers' and learners' perceptions towards a task-based course at a Thai university. Data from class observations, course evaluations, field notes, and interviews show participants' concern towards this approach. Even though the assignments gave the students an opportunity to think by themselves, half of the student participants reported that there had not been enough grammar instruction, and some of them even expressed concerns about the course content that might not respond to their needs.

As for the task-based and collaborative writing approaches, it is considered as the most appropriate or most relevant by the researchers for the reason that it not only increases the learners' interaction and creativity but also drives the instructor to create syllabi and produce different classroom activities which give the learners opportunities to use the English language in authentic academic situations. However, there are still factors mentioned by a number of researchers such as learners' characteristics, needs, levels of language proficiency, the availability of classroom resources, and class size that must be taken into consideration before implementing these two approaches (Xiongyong & Moses, 2011). Therefore, this study aims to determine and exemplify these two methodological approaches for teaching academic writing skills at the university level in order to create a motivating environment and stimulating context for the learners to develop their academic writing skills further in the future.

Context of the study

In the university where this study was conducted, a compulsory course in academic writing is offered every other semester for third-year students majoring in English. Prior to the study, the instructor, who is one of the researchers of this study, has been organizing the course within the framework of a task-based collaborative approach. She had observed the positive outcomes of students' writing as a result of task-based collaborative writing. Through the instructor's observation and survey of the course evaluation provided by the university, the researchers have seen the evidence of learners' satisfaction and positive attitudes towards the learning approach, the course structure, and writing assignments. Therefore, the researchers decided to conduct this study with an aim to formally and systematically explore the students' learning from the collaborative writing process and the effectiveness of task-based collaborative writing on their writing improvement.

It is important to note that this study was conducted within the context of synchronous online teaching and learning due to the Covid-19 pandemic starting in March 2020. The classroom where this study was carried out is contextualized within a large public university context in Thailand where the notion of learner-centeredness is applied. Part of the learning outcomes is for the students to have the quality of lifelong learners and leadership. The students are

expected to effectively communicate, to collaboratively work well with others, to be a good citizen, and to know how to construct their own knowledge. By applying the task-based collaborative approach in language teaching, the students are immersed into the situation where instructors only play the role of a facilitator, and the students are required to collaboratively produce high quality work. This process enhances their effective communication among group members, their creativity to produce high quality work, their independence in searching for more knowledge from other sources other than lectures from class, and their management skills, for example. The requirements are believed to enable the students to attain some of the institutional learning outcomes.

Specifically, the term "task-based collaborative writing approach" is, therefore, used in this study to refer to the implementation of task-based approach for the academic writing course where the students were required to collaboratively produce their writing tasks in groups in order to complete a final project. A task-based teaching approach is a learner-centered language teaching methodology (Zhai, 2021), and the instructor plays the role of a facilitator; therefore, it is important to study the feasibility and applicability of using this approach to improve EFL learners' writing competence.

Objectives

With the design of the academic writing course based on the task-based approach, this study specifically aimed to explore the students' learning from the collaborative writing process, which is an important aspect of the task-based approach, and the effects of the process on their writing improvement. Most importantly, this study will investigate the quality of learners' writing in relation to feedback and guided group reflection on their learning from instructor feedback. This study is anticipated to provide insights into a better understanding of how a task-based collaborative writing approach affects students' learning and their writing achievement. Specifically, the study focuses on the following research questions:

1. To what extent can the students collaboratively improve their drafts based on the instructor's feedback?
2. What do the students learn from the collaborative writing process?

METHODOLOGY

Participants

Sixty third-year and two fourth-year university students majoring in English enrolled in an academic writing course during a semester of 2020 at a large public university in Thailand. The participants came from two intact classrooms, each of which consisted of 31 students. The two classrooms were taught by the same instructor and followed the same course syllabus. This course was neither designed as an experimental study nor included any intervention to examine the effectiveness of the task-based collaborative approach. To simply put, the course was not at all interfered by any research process.

The participation was voluntary. All the students were informed about the research project at the beginning of the semester. Their right to participate or not to participate in the study was clearly informed to the students. To ensure the consent of individual students, only data whose all group members consented were used. At the end of the semester, four groups of the students with four members each consented to allow the researchers to use all their writing and video clips for data analysis.

Data of the study

To answer the research questions, both quantitative and qualitative data were collected and later analyzed. Data were collected using video clips of conferences between the course instructor and each group of the students, video clips of the students' guided group reflections, and students' first and final drafts of writing tasks.

Video clips of group conferences

The first set of data were video clips of group conferences between the instructor and each group of the students after they received feedback for their first draft of each writing task. Based on the course syllabus, a 20-minute group conference between the course instructor and each group of the students was carried out four times throughout the semester. The purpose of group conferencing with the instructor was for the students to ask questions or express concerns, and for the instructor to orally elaborate feedback, clarify difficulties, add detailed comments to the first draft, and give suggestions for the first draft revision. This set of data was used for exploring the students' learning during the conferences and the engagement in the learning process. To avoid bias, only the other researcher who was not the course instructor analyzed and observed the clips.

Before the first group conference, the instructor conducted a pre-conference that gave a brief introduction to help set the purpose, the tone of the conference, and the focus of the conversation, and to encourage active participation. The Thai language was used to assist the students to overcome different erroneous linguistic features and to engage the students in discussions, creating an environment of negotiation of meaning. The instructor left time at the end of each conference for the students to summarize any takeaways from the conference as well as align expectations for the final draft.

Video clips of the students' guided group reflections

The second set of data came from oral group reflection among the students themselves. As part of the learning process, the students were supposed to take time to reflect on their learning experience. The researchers developed a group reflection guideline to facilitate the process of group reflection. After a group conference with the instructor, the students organized an online conference among themselves to reflect on their learning experience using the guidelines listing specific prompts for the students to probe into the instructor feedback and how to use it, as well as to reflect on their collaborative working process. The records of all these conferences were shared with the instructor. To avoid bias, only the other researcher who was not the

course instructor analyzed and observed the clips to explore the students' learning from the reflection process.

Collaborative writing assignments

The last set of data was from the students' writing assignments. The students worked as a group of four or five members to complete the four collaborative writing assignments to submit in weeks 6, 9, 12, and 15 respectively. All these assignments made up a selected research project. The initial writing drafts and the revised drafts were compared to find out how the students incorporated instructor feedback and comments derived from the conversations during group conferences and discussion among the group members to improve the quality of their writing. The improvement of the writing was explored based on the quality of writing, focusing particularly on content, organization, grammar, vocabulary, and mechanics. To ensure the reliability of marking, both researchers marked and compared the first drafts and second drafts separately before they both compared the scores.

Course content and classroom procedures

The writing course "Writing for Academic Purposes" is instructed as a usual part of the curriculum of the university where the study was conducted. The course instructor served mainly as a facilitator, helping her students achieve course goals while allowing them flexibility in how they selected the topics of their writing tasks. The instructor generally incorporated the seven principles of task-based learning and used it as a framework for designing her lesson, classroom activities, and writing assignments.

> 1. An issue or challenging question that is of the students' interest
> 2. Sustained inquiry
> 3. Authenticity of the writing tasks
> 4. Students' interest and their choice when choosing a topic
> 5. Reflection after learning
> 6. Critique and review
> 7. A written product
> (Larmer, Mergendoller, & Boss, 2015)

This writing course required the students to work in groups for the entire semester (with some additional individual and pair work). The students were required to extend what they had learned in class to a group-selected topic, conduct research, and design a final writing product that they wanted to share and present to their classmates. In total, they needed to write four papers as mentioned. These papers made up a research project, which was orally presented by each group to the whole class at the end of the semester.

Classes were organized based on a task-based approach. The course instructor, however, adjusted details to serve the students' needs as they were new to the approach and to the academic content, which, in this context, focuses on a research study.

Prior to the beginning of the three main phases suggested by Ellis (2003) and Willis (1996) -- the pre-task planning phrase, during-task phase, and post-task phase -- the course instructor began the semester by providing the students with an introductory lecture on the concepts of the task-based approach and collaborative writing. She also introduced the concept of research and academic research paper and gave all details about how each written assignment would be organized to make up the final research project, how each writing task would be evaluated with all necessary grading rubrics, and all process and procedures of each class during the whole 15-week course. In sum, during this stage, the students were provided with all necessary information about the course and what would be expected of them.

Following the first introductory class, other classes were organized applying three main phases proposed by Ellis (2003) and Willis (1996). The three phases recurred four times during the semester because there were four writing assignments that made up a group project. At the end of the semester, after the recursiveness of the three task phases, all groups were required to put all the tasks together and orally presented their projects to the whole class. Here is how teaching and learning was organized within the three task phases.

Pre-task planning phase

During the pre-task stage of the current study, the instructor gave lectures on topics relevant to each writing task. With the lectures, the instructor provided model examples of writing, recalled the students' existing knowledge of language, and elicited and stimulated their thoughts relevant to the task to be assigned. After that, she organized activities to allow the students to practice writing collaboratively. Then, the instructor provided feedback for the writing practices to get the students ready to write their first draft of each of the four writing assignments. After class, the students later planned on what and how to write each assignment.

The task cycle or during-task phase

During the task cycle stage, the students began to collaboratively plan on how to write, wrote the first draft of each assignment, and submitted it to the instructor. During this phase, the students independently managed their collaborative writing process without the instructor's interference. After obtaining the first draft from each group, the instructor, then, marked the first draft to provide written feedback before sending it back to each group's representative.

Focus on forms or the post-task phase

After the first draft of each task was returned to the students, the instructor organized a conference for each group in the consecutive class. The students were informed that they had to study the feedback in advance. In the consecutive class during a group conference, each group had an opportunity to ask questions or express concerns. After the conference, each group organized a meeting among themselves online to reflect on instructor feedback, using group reflection guidelines. Next, they revised the first draft and submitted the second draft, which was regarded as a final draft for each assignment.
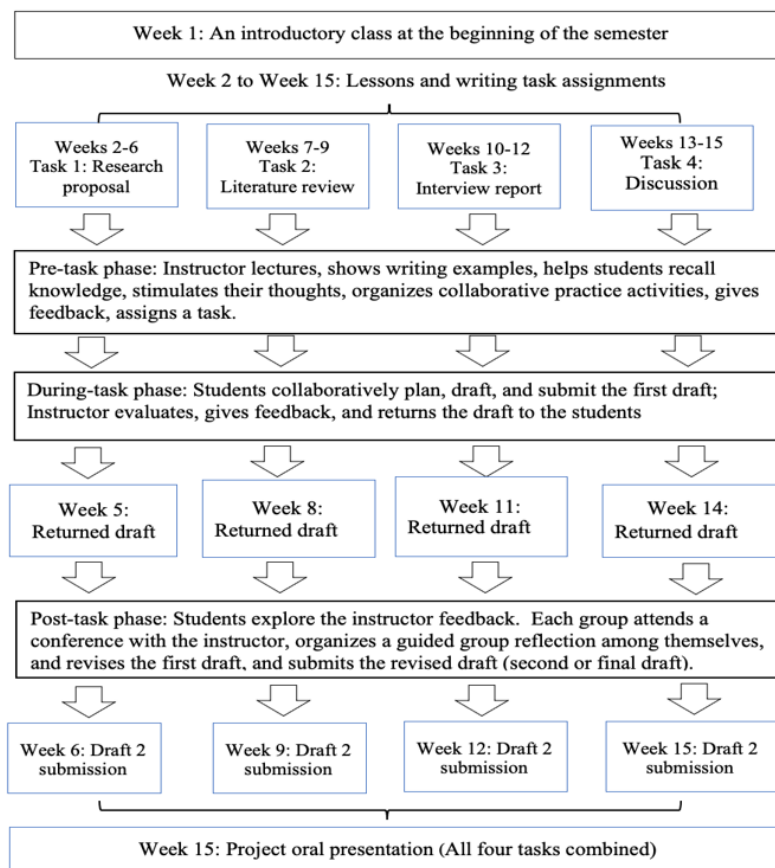
Figure 1 The classroom procedures

RESULTS

Findings are reported in two major sections, following the two research questions.

Research question 1

To explore the extent to which the students collaboratively improve their drafts after receiving feedback from the instructor, the quality of all group writing assignments was scored by using analytical rubrics. The rubric was not intended to assess the effectiveness of the task-based approach, since the purpose of the instructions or the writing intervention was not to teach students a particular pedagogical approach, but to assist them in learning how to write academic essays. The first and final drafts were scored independently by the course instructor (Rater 1) and the co-researcher (Rater 2). The researchers worked independently to rate students' assignments. The researchers used the Cronbach Alpha Coefficient to calculate inter-rater reliability. The agreement rate is 0.65%. After the rating process had been completed, the two raters discussed their experience scoring the essays.

Every final draft of every group scores higher than the first draft. Overall, the researchers observed that collaborative writing allowed students to advance their writing skills greatly. The improvement for vocabulary and grammatical accuracy was found to be the highest. For example, a variety of connectors and transitions to unify their writing was observed to be aware of in later drafts of writing, and the use of vocabulary and grammar was observed to be greatly improved. In the final drafts, the students could use vocabulary for expressing their opinions better, and they have learned to use some connectors that they had not used before through collaborative writing and comments from the instructor. Their essays were more logical, making it easier for the readers to understand the structure of the text.

The quality of the students' joint essays was assessed by how well the essay met the specific criteria. By using a paired sample t-test to compare the results of first and final drafts, the mean scores of each group assignment in their second drafts of all assignments were found significantly higher than those of their first drafts at the .05 level. For example, results of the paired t-test of the first assignment indicated that there was a significant medium difference between Before (M = 4.7, SD = 1.4) and After (M = 7.2, SD = 1.1), $t(15)$ = 6.2, p < .001. Based on these findings, the researchers can assume that the students could significantly develop the quality of their writing through collaborative task-based approach.

In spite of the fact that the students mostly improved their vocabulary, organization, and grammar, there are some aspects that students needed more explicit instructions and more practice such as citing every source properly, avoiding misinterpretation of the sources, and paraphrasing. Oftentimes, the students simply copied statements and pasted them in their work. After talking to the students, the instructor found that it happened mostly because of carelessness, haste, or misunderstanding. Even though sometimes the students committed plagiarism on purpose, it was because some of the students still struggled with the paraphrasing process. Another challenge of writing a research paper is that many groups forgot to cite paraphrased information and create a complete reference listing for all in-text citations. Moreover, many students simply read abstracts of the academic articles without reading the whole research paper, and hastily used their findings to make conclusions.

Research question 2

To answer the second research question on what the participating students learn from the collaborative writing process, 32 video clips in total-- 16 clips of the conferences between the instructor and students and 16 clips of guided group reflections of four volunteering groups – were analyzed. The conversations between the instructor and the students and among the students themselves suggest three themes of the students' learning: 1) learning about ways to improve collaboration; 2) learning about the research process, and 3) learning about strengths and weaknesses in their writing. For the evidence of the participants' verbatim, pseudonyms are used.

(1) Learning about ways to improve collaboration

The reflective process was found to make the participants consciously aware of the effectiveness

of their collaborative process, thereby further planning to make it better. Generally, the students appreciated the fact that through intensive discussions, they learned how to revise their work together or asked for suggestions on how to revise their parts.

Evidence to support these findings was observed particularly from guided group reflection meetings among group members when the participants were prompted to talk about their collaborative process. One group, after the first conference with the instructor and their group reflection, realized that collaborative writing could facilitate their writing process. They described that in the beginning they felt unsure on how to write collaboratively, but once they had set up their working process clearly, they could proceed with the plan quite well. The description of the working process reflects their positive attitudes towards collaborative writing.

Followings are evidence from group reflection of this group. Generally, the students show satisfaction towards collaboration from the first meeting to the last one.

Excerpt 1 is taken from the first reflection on the first writing task.

> Excerpt 1
> Kylie: Yeah, we work together.
> Leah: We help one another to check the draft. We divide our work. Hold on… Umm, we assign different parts to different members. Once each part is finished, everyone reads the draft and corrects mistakes. We take turns reading each other's work.
> Kylie: This way, we could finish much faster than working on the revised draft individually.

Excerpt 2 is taken from reflection on the last writing task.

> Excerpt 2
> Kylie: We always collaborate when we revise our drafts.
> Leah: We can always consult each other. We checked our work together several times. We never worked separately. It is a pain to work alone.

Observations from the video clips of this group with the instructor also demonstrate good collaboration of this group. During the conferences, Leah, the group leader, often relied on the inclusive pronouns "we" and "us".

> Excerpt 3
> Leah   We talked about your feedback, and we had questions about ….

This can illustrate that she tried to emphasize the shared experiences of her particular group to which she belonged.

In contrast to Leah's group, students in some groups rarely got together to revise the drafts. For example, three groups commonly started the first writing task by simply dividing work

among members. Each member wrote separately, then one member would put all the writing pieces together before submission. One group's reflection shows how the members agreed to change their working process.

Excerpt 4
Nicole: Dividing up work is okay, but we need an editor. We still work separately; each of us separately revised each piece of writing. No one reread the final version of the draft. We have Victor check for grammar but not content and organization. However, after we've got comments from the instructor, we realized that next time we need to …
Diana: Proofread the draft carefully before submission.
Nicole: After the first assignment, we realize that we should help one another to check the essay again to see if all agree with the revisions.
Vivian: Right. I agree.

The following conversation also shows how students changed their working process.

Excerpt 5
Odette: Our writing often lacks flow and is difficult and boring to read. Our essays seem to have a bunch of seemingly unrelated phrases thrown together with little or no sense of logical sequence and continuity.
Ursula: That's because we didn't talk.
Everyone: No. Not at all … Our paragraphs are barely related to each other.
Ursula: We wrote the proposal separately.
Maya: When we put them together, we did not take time to go over it …
Lydia: We didn't talk …
Maya: No. I notice that in many paragraphs, transitions are missing, so the flow of the paragraphs is off.
Lydia: I think we haven't set up a good plan on how to work together. Let's change it. … Next time, everyone needs to work together; or else, our work will still be like … going in different directions.

In addition to the positive outcomes of the adjustment of collaborative process, students also commented on its drawback. Two groups discussed the difficulty of dealing with individual differences, different writing styles, different opinions, and different levels of language proficiency. All these factors made it difficult when each piece of writing was put together to make up a piece of a task.

Excerpt 6
Oliver: Not only does having different ideas slow the work down, but it also causes   conflicts between team members.
Tony: Agreed. I think everyone had great ideas, but we just had too many ideas. We didn't know which one was the best. Everyone thought their ideas were the best. This was SO frustrating. The discussion process was hard, especially when we had to reach a consensus.

Excerpt 7

Kimberly: We actually had a lot of limitations. Writing together was new for us. It's totally different from what we had done before. When four people wrote together, it was just hard because our language was not equally good. That's why some of us were required to work harder than others.

From Excerpts 4, 5, 6, and 7, the researchers can see that group work could be difficult for students, especially when it comes to communication during collaboration. They simply wanted to get their parts done, but they later found out that this strategy did not seem to work. The researchers see that the challenge of having healthy collaboration is rooted in good relationship and communication skills (Storch, 2011). In collaboration, there is always a power imbalance when writing is based on ability. As seen from some students who were opponents of collaborative writing, they revealed that it was hard to complete their work, there was pressure from their peers, and they were embarrassed by their supposedly poor English skills. When it comes to interprofessional collaboration, the researchers believe that several issues stemmed from miscommunication. In differing backgrounds of knowledge, one person in the team always has a level of expertise and understanding that is foreign to another. As the students always need to face this problem, they need to practice communication and collaborative skills. They may struggle a bit along the way before they are willing to make sacrifices required.

(2) Learning about the research process

"I have to confess that I've often dreaded teaching how to write research papers in my English writing classes," a confession from the course instructor.

Teaching students how to do research is never easy. There are a number of writing skills that are considered essential. After the students turned in their assignments, the instructor found that there are several composition issues that should be addressed, and so many problems that have to be fixed -- APA formatting mistakes, instances of plagiarism, and the use of unreliable information. However, through the task-based collaborative writing approach, teaching students how to conduct research can be easier.

Embedded in this academic writing course is not only the concept of how to conduct research, but also opportunities to write collaboratively; therefore, the students were found to have a better understanding of the research process and improve their writing skills at the same time. The lectures that the instructor gave in each session in accordance with the four writing tasks provided students with ideas on how to conduct academic research. The course assignments were found to deepen the understanding of the students.

The points of learning about the research process include a better understanding of what information needed to be included in a research proposal, a literature review, and data methodology descriptions and strategies to make strong arguments in research discussion. Evidence of these claims were found from the conversations during the instructor-student conferences and in guided group reflection meetings among the students themselves.

Lydia's group learned how to write a research proposal when they followed the guidelines and feedback from the instructor for their first draft. During the group reflection, Lydia and her group discussed how to revise the draft, and Lydia concluded the meeting by saying:

> Excerpt 8
> Lydia: We agreed to simply follow the research proposal guidelines the instructor gave us to write our proposal. The guidelines were actually helpful. But after the first submission, we had to revise the way we talked about study limitations. We used to perceive it as something negative, but after the feedback, we could recognize the potential of a frank and unbiased discussion of the research limitations.

As for the literature review, the consultation during the instructor-student conferences suggest that the students also learn about the process of searching for information and organizing the content. Evidence from Victor's group demonstrates how they learn to search for relevant information from the instructor.

> Excerpt 9
> Victor: We really had difficulties in finding relevant information from previous studies. We tried different websites and resources, but it seems that research on our topic is limited. So we asked her for some advice.

After Victor told the instructor about his struggle, she suggested some possible keywords that he could use, and she walked Victor's group through the process of searching for relevant literature. This group finally found some more relevant information for the project.
Another piece of evidence comes from Leah's guided group conference.

> Excerpt 10
> Leah: The instructor told us that our group did a good job in summarizing the information because we didn't simply copy and paste the information. But we still want to learn more about how to add in the reference list the in-text citations. We actually made lots of mistakes, yet we learned from our instructor's comments.

Regarding research methodology, the students learned that conducting the research is not just about collecting data. The research arguments need to be proposed, and the data-gathering plan must be made prior to the actual process. One group asked about data collection with the limitation of social-distancing schemes during the Covid-19 pandemic, and the instructor tried to encourage the students to think about advantages and disadvantages of conducting oral interviews online as opposed to sending emails to the interviewees and getting the written responses to the questions because the students would not have chances to ask for clarification of the responses.

Excerpt 11

Tony: I asked her if we can simply send email to the interviewees. She told us in class that their schedule and their convenience is primary, but it's very difficult for us to schedule a meeting when everyone has to be available. But now I learn that even though sending emails is easier and less formal, we can't clarify information about the questions. This is even more frustrating. So we decided to choose an interview time that fits best into their schedules, and we tried our best to make ourselves available. We actually had a good time talking to our interviewees, learning about their lives and career paths.

Finally, concerning the process of making arguments to highlight the significance of the findings, all groups also asked questions about how to write a report of the findings. Through the process of writing and consultations with the instructor, all groups learn how to build strong arguments and how to summarize the information they have gathered to support their arguments.

Excerpt 12

Oliver: We learned about the concepts of logos, pathos, and ethos in class and put what you learned into practice. But, you know, it's not always easy to find statistical data to show how our claim has some merit. But during the consultation, we learned that we could also use findings from previous research or any factual facts that we already know to support our arguments.

(3) Learning about strengths and weaknesses in writing

Another important aspect of task-based collaborative writing is for the instructor to give feedback to the writing assignments. During the During-Task phase, the students received both written and oral feedback from the instructor. From all kinds of feedback given to the students, the results from the students' group reflections revealed that the students could see their own strengths and weaknesses in writing.

All groups of the participants were found to have similar problems at different degrees of seriousness. These problems include run-on sentences, wrong word use, wrong punctuations, especially commas, and use of too many sentence or paragraph connectors, content organization, and APA styles of citations and references.

Among the problems listed, APA style of citations and references were found to be difficult for many groups because the participants were unfamiliar with them. Some just got to know about APA formatting from the course, so they were learning how to write in APA for the first time. For grammatical errors, the instructor mostly focused on the explanation of the grammar errors during the group conference with students. She normally worked one-to-one with each group of students in which each of them had a chance to ask and clarify the mistakes or errors produced in the errors.

Word choice was also mentioned by all groups. As maintained by the participants, the problems occurred because they lacked knowledge of a variety of word choices and contexts where different words can be used appropriately. After they were recommended by the instructor to use some resources such as available corpora and online dictionaries, the participants could use a variety of new words in their writing. A statement from Giselle supports this finding.

> Excerpt 13
> Giselle: We, many times, used words incorrectly, and oftentimes our sentences contained lots of redundant words and phrases. Still, I searched for help from the recommended sources and tried different words, and I could see that we made fewer mistakes in later tasks.

Another problem about word choice was concerned with formality of the language. For some participants, they just learned how to write academic papers, so they were unaware of this register. This finding is reflected in a statement made by Victor.

> Excerpt 14
> Victor: I agreed with her comments that our writing was full of colloquial expressions. I was unaware of the formality of the words or phrases I used. But now I'm learning to make my writing more formal.

Mismatch between topic sentences and details in the paragraph was another problem. Evidence was found from two groups. Members in one group remarked that when they focused on content, they tried putting in all the information in one paragraph. When it comes to an essay, they were unaware of the sequence of content in supporting paragraphs in relation to the introductory paragraph. The content was therefore neither logically sequenced nor related to one another. Some pieces of information even digressed from the point. An example of conversation from this group illustrates the point.

> Excerpt 15
> Instructor: The first paragraph begins with the definition of intermittent fasting, but then it goes on describing sugar intake.
> Leah: Right, I got that, so we need to describe IF in this paragraph. However, if we want to talk about sugar consumption, we should talk about it in a new paragraph, right?

Evidence on the problems of logic and relevance of information is also reflected in Lydia' group.

> Excerpt 16
> Lydia: Yesterday we talked about your comments about what we wrote in the second paragraph. After you pointed it out, we agreed that it was irrelevant and should not be in that paragraph at all.

Using too many connectors was another organizational problem. Evidence from Nicole's group illustrates this finding.

Excerpt 17

Instructor: This specific paragraph contains a lot of connecting words: therefore, moreover, in addition, etc. Can you see them? You can take time to go over the paragraph and highlight all connectors you used in that one single paragraph.

Nicole: Yes, once you point that out, I can see that there are too many of them.

Instructor: When you use too many of them, they obstruct the flow. There are various ways to achieve coherence in writing. Let me show you some alternative strategies to make the content in that paragraph cohere.

Amount and balance of information is another issue that many students mentioned during the conference with the instructor.

Excerpt 18

Instructor: In your essay, you didn't seem to provide all necessary information about the disadvantages of outdoor running. This can indicate the writers' bias. You should have a balance between positive and negative pieces of information. So your readers can see both sides of the argument. Then you can explain further how your argument is better than the other side!

Vivian: Ah, now I see. And this is called a rebuttal, right?

From all the strengths and weaknesses that the students learned from their writing process and feedback from the instructor, the students revealed that they learned how to revise their draft to improve the quality of their writing. This is due to the evidence of their comments on both written and oral feedback from the instructor. All the groups agreed that the feedback was appropriate and helpful in guiding them on how to revise their work. Here is some more evidence to support this finding.

Excerpt 19

Leah: We got suggestions for all mistakes and those suggestions well guided us on how to revise. Her feedback is helpful and constructive.

Excerpt 20

Olivia: We got a detailed explanation on the mistakes and how to revise them from the instructor.

Excerpt 21

Diana: The instructor always uses plain and clear language in giving feedback, and we love that.

Excerpt 22

Odette: Suggestions are useful, making us know how to revise our work. … The instructor also recommended many useful resources such as an online dictionary, so I can better choose words that fit the contexts. Overall, the conferences gave us opportunities to ask questions and learn how to become better writers.

The researchers believe that by being aware of their own strengths and weaknesses in their writing, the students can become their own teacher and improve their writing skills. After the students were given opportunities to explore all kinds of feedback and discuss, they can celebrate their own writing strengths and at the same time know how to fix their weaknesses.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR WRITING INSTRUCTORS

In summary, the students' comments from the guided group reflection, instructor-student conversations during online conferences, and the quality of collaborative writing assignments tell us that the application of the task-based collaborative writing approach can help students to enhance their academic writing skills. Our findings can support most earlier findings that students who participated in the task-based and collaborative writing approaches were generally positive of the experience (Hadi, 2013; McDonough & Chaikitmongkol, 2007; Shehadeh, 2011; Storch, 2005; Storch, 2011; Xiongyong and Moses, 2011; Zhai, 2021).

The researchers could see how different phases of task-based approach can improve the students' writing skills (Ellis 2003; Willis, 1996), and how the collaborative process can improve students' communication and teamwork skills. From the sociocultural perspective of learning, collaborative writing requires students not only to have proficient writing skills but also to take teamwork skills to collaborate efficiently and effectively. Once the students are trained to embrace the power of the team, a collaborative writing project can be a great success because it not only encourages students to take responsibility for setting their group's learning goals but also to evaluate their own progress in reaching those goals (Marashi & Dadari, 2012).

However, some challenges have to be overcome. The first challenge is the resistance to collaboration from the students, especially at the beginning of the semester. The instructors should find ways to establish the students' mindset that group work is normal and inevitable. When the instructor told the students that they were required to collaborate to complete some assignments and be graded as a group, many students would think "Uh-oh. I will have to do someone else's work again," "No way. I hate it because it will never be fair. I always work more than everyone else." Even though this is a reality that will happen no matter what, the instructors can devise some strategies to help students recognize it and find tactics for coping with it. The instructors can emphasize the positive values of collaboration.

Another challenge is the inexperience of the students in collaborative writing (Zhai, 2021). When the instructors think about collaboration, what they usually have in mind is a class project in which every student works collectively to produce a final product and are graded on it as a group. Students meet often, devise a plan to finish the project, and review each other's work before submission. However, the reality is that many students work separately to finish their parts, then everything is simply put together in a hurry without double-checking. This process can oftentimes become inefficient and ineffective, and the students might be discouraged later. As for this study, guided group reflection was added as part of the instructional process and the reflective process was found to enhance the students' awareness of the effectiveness of their collaborative process. With such reflection, they learned to agree that their group

collaboration needs improvement. Therefore, the researchers believe that the most effective remedy for inexperienced students is some training and guided practice. The instructors should teach students collaborative skills and monitor students' use of those skills. For example, the instructors can use a self-report for individual students and a point deduction system to ensure the equal contributions of individuals in the group. The instructors can help students learn to distinguish unproductive chit chatting from productive meetings. The instructors can try to emphasize the fact that teamwork could be difficult at the beginning, but things would get easier after the first try. Give them more time to learn to work productively in groups. The instructors may provide class time for students to plan their work, help them outline the project, assign responsibilities to individuals, and review each other's contributions. In some cases, the instructors may have to tell the students that they are expected to meet out of class. Even though their schedules can be tight, especially during online learning, the instructors have to tell them that it is something they have to do.

Last, but not least, what the researchers encounter is the fact that the students mainly coordinate through texting, and it can increase the complexity of the writing process when compared with collaborative writing in a face-to-face situation (Storch, 2011). For example, students may lack immediate feedback, which is usually available when writing together face to face. When the writers are not physically present, they cannot read some nonverbal signals such as facial expressions, which may prevent effective collaboration in an online environment. This, therefore, presents challenges for combining the contributions of several individuals. Under this circumstance, students should be told that group writing will require several episodes of information exchange, and they should use multiple resources and opportunities to collaborate, for example, using any online comment tool (Storch, 2011) such as Google Drive to share and receive immediate feedback, assigning and rotating different roles -- writer, consultant, reviewer, and editor (Posner & Baecker, 1992) -- to ensure equal labor and participation.

Unlike face-to-face mode of the classes, the video records of online classes can be used by both the instructor and the students as a resource for such purposes as group reflection and self-study of the lessons. Taking time to view and review the video can help instructors develop their teaching professionally. For example, instructors can observe their own instructions in various aspects for further improvement and research on collaborative processes of the students to find ways to support them to better collaborate and minimize the problems during the process.

Finally, the researchers would like to suggest writing instructors take a less dominant role during the online class. Particularly, during the discussion among students, the researchers believe that students should be given more opportunities to voice their needs and express their concerns. By doing so, the students could truly feel that they could share ideas and create meanings collaboratively and their voices are of value.

THE AUTHORS

Suthathip Thirakunkovit is an assistant professor in the program of Applied Linguistics, Faculty of Liberal Arts, Mahidol University, Thailand. Her current research interests cover language test development, test validation, assessment literacy, corpus linguistics, and second language writing.
suthathip.thi@mahidol.edu

Kornsiri Boonyaprakob is a lecturer in the program of Applied Linguistics at the Faculty of Liberal Arts, Mahidol University, Thailand. Her research interests cover student development, autonomous learning, and factors concerning English language teaching and learning.
kornsiri.sar@mahidol.ac.th

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