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Teaching practice collaborative learning in English for academic Purposes writing classes at Vietnam National Economics University

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ABSTRACT

The paper is a snapshot of the current practice of collaborative learning in English for Academic Purposes writing classes at National Economics University to show the effectiveness of collaborative learning activities in these classes. This action research shows that teachers in this situation become facilitators who give guides when needed. They take note of how students participate into the activities as well as how students explain, give comments, ask their peers questions, and answer questions raised by their peers. Besides, with collaborative learning activities, learning takes place in a less face-threatening atmosphere with academic assistance from similar-age peers. The learning process is shifted from a passive reception to a more active process when students have chances to be involved more in discussing, negotiating and arguing.

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1 THEORETICAL BACKGROUND TO COLLABORATIVE LEARNING

Collaborative learning is developed from the idea that there is a zone of proximal development where children can do without help (Lee & Smagorinsky, 2000). It shows an idea of joint learning in an environment where all learners actively together involve in the learning process. According to Dillenbourg (1999), in collaboration process, learners share study resources with their peers and develop some skills such as enquiring information, evaluating idea, monitoring work, etc. According to Boud *et al.* (1985), peer is a member in a certain group of people who share the same age, status and ability; therefore, peers include students, classmates, and also experienced people such as teachers when they participate into class activities. Most importantly, peers do not have power over any one in that group because of their position and/ or their responsibilities. In the

scope of this paper, collaborative learning takes place among peers who are students learning in the same English for Academic Purposes (EAP) writing class. Collaborative learning among peers, as McKeachie *et al.* (1986) indicated, is known as a two-way learning from those who are at the same educational process, share some similar characters, and may come from the same faculty, which improves a sense of mutuality. Vietnamese learners have been considered as passive learners who often hesitate and get scared when raising their voice asking questions, or giving their opinions in front of their classmates. This negative situation is partly caused by traditional belief that the teacher is at a very high level and is the only person allowed to talk in the classroom. As a result, teachers in general and English teachers in particular are struggling when motivating students to participate into classroom activities especially to share their ideas in the classroom. Collaborative learning could probably work

in Vietnamese classrooms as Arthur *et al.* (1987) emphasized the importance of collaboration in learning and stated that “learning is enhanced when it is more like a team effort than a solo race” (p.1). When working with others in the learning process, students will soon be more responsible with the role they are assigned in their team, and will soon be aware of their actions to fulfill that role in their team with almost no fear. Besides, in this era where each young student can access to much information everyday, when involving in discussion of their peer group to share their ideas, and respond to others’ reactions with little hesitation, students will also have chances to enrich their knowledge, improve their thinking and deepen their understanding about various fields. Furthermore, Brindley (1984) also mentioned the benefits of collaborative learning in developing students’ skills in organizing and planning learning activities because students have to give and receive feedbacks and give comments to other groups’ work in a less pressure learning environment. For these benefits, peer learning - one among many collaborative learning styles - is becoming an important learning process and should be used in a variety of contexts and disciplines in many countries.

However, although benefits of collaborative learning are obvious, and collaborative learning becomes a trend employed by many teachers in many classrooms, many teachers just use collaborative learning method to fill out an empty time in their teaching time by asking their students to cross-check their friends’ work without training them what they should focus on, and how to give remarks on their friends’ tasks. Therefore, students may miss opportunities to learn together and develop the skills that they have expected to acquire. Because of this problem, this paper is aimed to show how students improve their collaborative learning skills after being taught to do so through various activities of teachers in EAP writing classes and to answer the question if applying collaborative learning into these classes will be a big revolution in the classroom.

2 AN EAP COURSE AT VIETNAM NATIONAL ECONOMICS UNIVERSITY AND ACTION RESEARCH

2.1 Description of the writing courses and the EAP class at Vietnam National Economics University

Students in EAP writing classes major in Business English. Before an EAP writing course, students have to pass four other courses in academic writing skills as prerequisite conditions. The first course is

designed to provide students with a systematic review of sentence patterns, to enhance students’ awareness of problems when making sentences and ability to correct them and to create a natural and creative environment for students to write. After this first course, students will be able to use basic sentences with the elements such as verbs, subjects, parts of verbs, adjectives, adverbs, direct objects, and predicate nominatives and adjectives, to build sentences including basic and complicated sentence patterns; to use words of transition; to write the advanced sentence structure including using parallelism, avoiding misplaced modifiers and dangling modifiers, using indirect discourse (indirect quotation and indirect questions); and to master mechanics in writing sentences including punctuation (the period, exclamation point, question mark, semicolon, colon, comma, apostrophe, quotation marks, hyphen, dash, parentheses and brackets) and capitalization.

The second course enables students to carry out a number of writing tasks they may need to accomplish in their daily life as well as business life. In this term, students go beyond writing good sentences - the skills which were introduced in the previous term; they now will practise writing complete texts. This course is devoted to describing people, places, objects and graphs. Students are also taught to use techniques needed to write notes and messages, advertisements, summaries, and master skills on how to produce informal and formal letters, and then application letters and curriculum vitae. Classes meet once a week in a session of three periods.

The third course is aimed to equip students with skills of composing different kinds of paragraphs after they have mastered basic understandings of paragraph structure, unity and coherence, and paragraph writing process in the first semester of their second-year in university. After the course, students will be able to know how to write different kinds of paragraph such as illustration, narration, process analysis, classification, definition, cause and effects, comparison and contrast, and argument; quickly implement the writing process as the result of abundant practice in class; quickly brainstorm the ideas and vocabulary needed for a specific writing task; master the use of transition words and typical sentence structures for each kind of paragraph.

The fourth academic writing course provides students with basic knowledge of essay organization, unity and coherence, ways to improve academic writing style. In the next part of the course, students go through different kinds of essay: process analysis, cause and effect, classification, reaction, comparison and contrast, argumentation, and discussion

essays. With various practice tasks, writing in each lesson comes in its natural process: gathering vocabulary and ideas for a topic, brainstorming and outlining, writing, and editing. At the end of the course, students will be able to do the brainstorming of a topic before starting the writing, write an essay outline, write proper introduction and conclusion parts, support and develop the controlling idea in a logical order; improve academic writing style, unity and coherence; edit their own writing confidently; complete an essay in timed situations; and compose different kinds of essay such as process analysis, cause and effect, classification, reaction, comparison and contrast, argument, and discussion essays.

The four courses are necessary conditions for students to learn in EAP writing course. EAP writing course is a tailored course designed for the third year students. Its purpose is to develop students' understandings of how the theoretical aspects of conducting a research and writing a report can be applied to a practical project. Business-related topics are encouraged to help students apply their learnt knowledge in a business project. As an undergraduate module, the breadth and depth of business analysis undertaken is expected to be modest. This course will develop students' research skills, enable students to develop business ideas to project proposal and presentation stage, provide an opportunity for students to integrate their learning from other courses in an applied business project, and enable students to produce the course final product of a complete business project in a written form. By the end of this course, the students will be able to develop their business ideas and practices, present their findings clearly to others, both in writing and orally, employ academic writing skills to write a complete report, manage their time more effectively, and appreciate the benefit of conducting business analysis to support successful business activity.

2.2 Action research

Action research is a progressive problem-solving process. This is a reflective process conducted by educators with an aim to improve a certain teaching situation or to solve a certain teaching problem. In the language teaching environment, action research is a particular type of descriptive research that can be carried out by educators (Slavin, 2006), and it can enhance teachers' capacity through allowing them to reflect language teachers' teaching process. Slavin (2006) also showed that action research emphasizes the involvement of teachers in problems in their own classrooms and has as its primary goal the in-service training and development of the teacher rather than the acquisition of general knowledge in the field of education.

This paper presents an action research conducted in my EAP writing class. This action research follows steps mentioned in an action research cycle described by Lewin (1946). Lewin's description of the process of change involves three steps: (1) Unfreezing step: Facing with a dilemma or disconfirmation, the teacher becomes aware of a need to change; (2) Changing step: The teacher diagnoses the situation to explore and test new models of behavior; and (3) Refreezing step: The teacher evaluates and applies new model, and if the new model is reinforced, the teacher will adopt that new behavior model. Action research is depicted as a cyclical process of change. The cycle begins with a series of planning actions initiated by the client and the change agent working together. The principal elements of this stage include a preliminary diagnosis, data gathering, feedback of results, and joint action planning. The second stage of action research is the action, or transformation, phase. This stage includes actions relating to learning processes and to planning and executing behavioral changes in the client organization. Included in this stage is action-planning activity carried out jointly by the consultant and members of the client system. Following the workshop or learning sessions, these action steps are carried out on the job as part of the transformation stage. The third stage of action research is the output, or results, phase. This stage includes actual changes in behavior (if any) resulting from corrective action steps taken following the second stage.

3 COLLABORATIVE LEARNING ACTION AND RESULTS AT EAP WRITING COURSE

3.1 Situation diagnosis: Problems come from teaching method

As mentioned, EAP writing course is a tailored course designed for the third year students with an aim to help students apply what they have learnt about academic writing into a practical project. Business-related topics are encouraged to help students apply their learnt knowledge in a business project also. In the course, teacher provided students slides about research skills such as how to choose and narrow a research topic, how to conduct a survey, how to process data, how to develop a report. After each lesson, students submitted to their teacher their products which could be a topic, a set of questionnaire, a set of raw data, a draft of their report. The teacher then gave comments or corrected students' products, which makes the workload of the teacher become heavy day by day, while the students waited for their teacher's feedbacks.

From the course, it is shown that although this course designed to develop students' business ideas and

practices, and students employed learnt academic writing skills to write a complete report, students still made mistakes in basic writing skills taught in previous academic writing semesters. Besides, during the course we realized that the majority of students understand the theory designed with professional power point slides; however, before each lesson, when being asked to remind what they had learnt in the previous lessons, most of students could hardly name out these useful language points, and apply theory into their short writing in the classroom. The teacher also realized that students did not focus on the lesson, and had a lot of private talks during the course or some of them kept silent but they were doing their private things. The percentage of homework fulfillment was very low. At that time, most of students were reluctant to participate into the lessons. Although some students were willing to give comments about their peers' work, their comments were mostly on grammar errors, spelling mistakes.

Besides, the teachers, felt that the slides revising skill instructions did help students a lot in building up academic writing skills, but students had difficulties in transferring these skills to have a better writing paper. Moreover, analyses of good and bad writing papers shown during the course were useful; however, students kept making the same mistakes in their writing, which needs to be remarked more often. From this reality, it is realized that the situation must be improved and changed as soon as possible.

3.2 Amended plan and action of collaborative learning

Being aware of the importance of learner-centered orientation in teaching especially for the third and the fourth year students, especially business students of the Business English Department, who obviously must be able to study independently, and to self-evaluate their own work, the Business English Department has oriented an EAP writing syllabus to communicative approach. One of the most popular techniques fostering this approach is collaborative learning. The designer of the EAP writing course has suggested a wide range of different reciprocal collaborative learning activities to suit the EAP writing course, to boost learning outcomes. Below are activities used in these EAP courses to change the situation.

3.2.1 Activity 1

On the first day of the course, the teacher gives students a chance to choose their group's member, and then name their groups. By doing this, students will have a right to choose their collaborative peers whom they will work with during the course. Before

giving students a chance to discuss among members in their groups, the teacher provides some useful language phrases assisting these dialogues such as phrases in appealing, arguing, persuading, disagreeing, and compromising. The teacher also emphasizes the tone of the dialogue showing the degree of politeness which is useful for students to express their ideas, to debate and win in that debate. Although this is a writing course, discussion orally among peers is important in sharing and collecting information. With these tools and the teacher's guides about how to choose a good topic, students will be able to work in group, list out topics that come to their mind, then negotiate and/or argue with their peers to make the final decision about their topic. The topic has to be business-based and narrow enough to be developed and conducted within 13 weeks.

This activity involves mutual benefits among members in a group. While discussing, students can sharpen their knowledge, ideas and experience with other members in the group. Sharing experience among peers with whom students have chosen by themselves to work, students might feel free to speak out their own ideas and their feeling about any business-based topic they are interested in, which is difficult to gain in the student- teacher setting classroom. The frequency of using English in discussion is also increased when students work in small groups. Besides, the discussion with their peers could also strengthen relationship between students and their classmates, which moves beyond independent to interdependent learning. This is because collaborative learning encourages them to rely on each other to achieve their sharing target. The idea of interdependence is important because collaborative learning does not shape any form of hierarchy which may cause the loss of mutuality. Furthermore, it is obvious that the focus of collaborative learning is on the learning process for students' own benefits; therefore, discussions among students will partly support students emotionally, which helps them push their learning process to go forward. This activity also helps students consider the topic thoroughly together and the number of students asking to change their topic during research process are reduced dramatically within first 5 weeks.

3.2.2 Activity 2

After the business-based topic of each group is identified, the teacher asks students to work with another group who will look at their topics and give some comments relating to the chosen topic basing on the suggested questions given by the teacher. The comments can be about either contents or scope of the

topic. These comments will help the topic owner figure out the missing information and avoid failure when conducting the topic in the coming 13 weeks. Collaborative learning process in this activity goes outside the group. Students appreciate these comments easily because these comments come from those who are sharing similar study conditions, study setting and also psychological factors with them.

At activity 2, the interaction goes beyond students' own group, which helps the learning process become objectively extended, but it still limits the teacher-pupil or whole class interaction which may discourage students' learning process. Furthermore, this activity benefits both the help-receiving students and the help-giving students because: (i) for the help-receiving students, the assistance from their peers enabled them to get away from mistakes and shame, and hesitation might be replaced by enjoyment during learning process because these feedbacks come from their constructive classmates; and (ii) for the help-giving students, responsibility in giving comments helps them improve their ability to evaluate other work, and also promotes the development of students' higher-level thinking skills.

3.2.3 Activity 3

Authentic materials are used more often during collaborative learning process. Most of the authentic materials are collected and selected by students under the examination of the teacher. When conducting the project, students have to work in groups, read case studies, background documents about companies that they are studying about, then share with their group peers. Authentic journals, articles relating to business are also read by students when they find out theoretical framework for their group study. At this stage, before asking students to choose authentic materials to read, the teachers have to provide them with some criteria as macro guides to consider for choosing materials such as background knowledge, genre, language usage, text organization, etc. Then, students bring documents to their class, and share information from texts that they have read with their group peers. This activity brings about a large number of benefits. Firstly, because members in each group read different documents relating to the same chosen topic project, they will probably master the information when preparing texts and share with group members, which enriches their knowledge about the topic that they are focusing on. Secondly, language in the authentic materials is reliable and lively which will sharpen students' language competence.

3.2.4 Activity 4

Besides having benefits from reading and getting information from authentic materials, students also gain advantages from doing research outside their classroom. In study groups without teacher's facilitation, students get outside class to interview and deliver questionnaire to get primary data. Questionnaire and interview questions are prepared with their group peers basing on the objectives of each study. Students can use administrative survey by posting questionnaire to staff of the company, or go directly to the company to deliver the questionnaire or/ and interview some employees. This is a great chance for students to gain their confidence and widen their networking as well. Although it might be difficult to access to employers, and to get a high rate of answered questionnaire as scheduled, students have chances to learn a lot about how to communicate with real company employees through interviews with experts who provide information of the company which students are studying about, they can also get first-hand experience from these experts. Besides, this activity also helps students feel more confident when going together to contact with experts to ask for an interview. Obviously, this collaborative learning activity changes character of learning process from a formal setting to a more informal setting which can benefit students much.

3.2.5 Activity 5

Seminar presenting in small groups to complete the shared project during the whole course is also a good example of collaborative learning. During 13 weeks, students are provided brief theory about how to develop a research through lectures of the teacher. After 30-minute-lecture of the teacher, students are asked to have two 5-mini-presentations about their project proposals, detail plans to develop their projects, and finally they have to present a 15-minute-presentation of their research main findings. These presentations in fact are work-in-progress oral project reports followed by questions and discussion with the whole class. Seminar presentations not only help students gain confidence when talking in front of their class, also help students learn some presentation skills, and strengthen their ability to evaluate other work and presentations. After these presentations, students are asked to give some feedbacks about presentations of their groups. The teacher provides students some criteria used to evaluate oral presentations such as focus, language, voice, manner and attitude, quality of visual, time management, and coordination. These criteria are also good for them to base on and guide them what is good to achieve during their own presentations. With guided criteria, students discuss within their groups and

provide peer feedbacks which are essential to help other groups adjust the study, coming presentations as needed. During the presentations, students are required to give written comments/ suggestions for other groups in a form including above mentioned criteria and is given by the teacher. That name of evaluators are not given enables students to speak their comments frankly. Besides, the presentation group would then also look at these comments and evaluations of other groups to improve their ability in the coming presentations. This collaborative learning activity certainly benefits both presenters and evaluators. For the presenters, this activity assists students to gain first-hand experience in conducting a research; strengthens students' presentation skills, confidence and independence in studying. For evaluators, this activity sharpens students' evaluation skills, and increases students' responsibility in assessing other students; raises students' responsibility in giving comments on their peers.

4 CONCLUSION AND LESSONS TO LEARN

It becomes clear from this action research that collaborative learning certainly has a lot of benefits. Firstly, the teacher becomes an organizer and facilitator of learning process rather than an informant, which enables the teacher to observe and give assistance to all students at the same time when needed. Secondly, teachers' guidance and established criteria enable learners gain academic assistance from a similar-age peer, which is often less threatening to the learner's self-esteem than seeking help from their teachers in a traditional classroom. The learning process is shifted from lecturing and passively accepting to discussing, negotiating and arguing with fewer face-threatening activities. It is important to monitor collaborative learning activities to avoid negative effects if the process seems to be faltering. At the first sight, students should be given chances to involve into communicative activities ranging from controlled (with teacher's lecturing) to guided practice (students react with other groups' comments) to freer activities such as critical thinking and problem-solving activities with their group peers. Clear initial instructions from the teacher to direct students' activities will help students go on the right track and be familiar with what they are supposed to do in the teachers' training process. Then ongoing support and encouragement are necessary for the success of the learning process. Some form of final closure is also essential to reflect on learning from the experience to guide future peer work for students. When students are familiar with collaborative learning, they will be empowered to their learning process easily later.

Like group work activities, collaborative learning approach must be applied well to be used appropriately. The teacher should take into account some issues such as gender, knowledge, experience differences; dominant group members; group dynamics; students' expectation; levels of formality and informality; individual's learning goals and group targets; etc. when allowing students to join peer groups. Other issues needed to be addressed in collaborative learning are (i) how to control peer group in using English to discuss with their peers in the process of learning from each others; (ii) how to build up experiences and share their experiences with others to move the group forwards; (iii) how to convince students about equality of ideas; therefore, they shouldn't hesitate to make mistakes and speak out their ideas; and (iv) how to encourage sharing in a constructive manner.

Benefits of collaboration in learning process as Milk (1981) stated "the small-group setting seemed to provide and reflect a variety of different speech functions and a higher frequency of speech acts than in teacher-centered settings" (p.187) were observed at a collaborative writing EAP course at NEU.

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