

**Title:** The Impact of Collaborative Learning on the Writing Skills of EFL Students at Wollo University.

*PI: Tegege Mekuria (Ass. Professor). MED ([tegegnemekuria21@gmail.com](mailto:tegegnemekuria21@gmail.com))*

*Department of English Language and Literature; Wollo University, Dessie, Ethiopia, Oct, 2023*

## **Abstract**

*A study was conducted to examine the effectiveness of collaborative learning in improving the English writing skills of second-year EFL students at Wollo University. The study used a collaborative language learning approach to encourage peer learning and social interaction among students. A group of intermediate students enrolled in the Enla 2043 course in the first semester of the 2022 academic year participated in the study. The researchers used questionnaires, interviews, and essay writing assessments to collect data on the students' writing skills and attitudes towards collaborative learning. The findings revealed that the students in the treatment group had significantly higher writing scores on the post-test than the pre-test. However, the degree of improvement was not exceptionally high, and students still made some mistakes in grammar, spelling, punctuation, and terminology. The results also showed that the students developed favorable attitudes towards using collaborative learning to develop their language skills*

*Key Words: Collaborative, learning, writing, improving*

## **Background of the Study**

Writing is a complex skill that requires students to combine their knowledge of language, grammar, and rhetoric with their ability to think critically and creatively (Hacker, 2007). For English language learners (ELLs), writing can be even more challenging, as they must also learn to navigate the nuances of a new language (Warschauer & Healey, 1998).

Collaborative learning is a pedagogical approach that emphasizes the importance of student interaction and cooperation (Johnson & Johnson, 1991). In a collaborative learning environment, students work together to complete tasks, share ideas, and provide feedback to each other (Strode, 2000). Research has shown that collaborative learning can be an effective way to improve student achievement in a variety of subjects, including writing (Johnson & Johnson, 1991).

There are a number of reasons why collaborative learning can be effective for improving the writing skills of ELLs (Storch, 2014). First, collaborative learning provides ELLs with opportunities to practice using English in a meaningful and authentic way (Storch, 2014). When students work together on writing tasks, they must communicate with each other effectively in

order to share ideas and feedback (Warschauer & Healey, 1998). This process can help students to develop their fluency and accuracy in English writing.

Second, collaborative learning can help ELLs to develop their critical thinking and problem-solving skills (Strode, 2000). When students work together on writing tasks, they must often brainstorm ideas, evaluate different options, and make decisions (Strode, 2000). This process can help students to learn how to think critically and solve problems in a collaborative setting.

Third, collaborative learning can help ELLs to develop their motivation and engagement in learning (Johnson & Johnson, 1991). When students are working on writing tasks together, they often feel more motivated and engaged than when they are working independently (Johnson & Johnson, 1991). This is because students enjoy working with their peers and they are more likely to be invested in tasks that they are working on together.

Fourth, collaborative learning can help ELLs to develop their cultural awareness and understanding (Warschauer & Healey, 1998). When students work together on writing tasks, they are exposed to different perspectives and ways of thinking (Warschauer & Healey, 1998). This can help students to develop a better understanding of the world around them and to appreciate the diversity of cultures.

Despite the positive findings of previous research, there is still a need for further research on the impact of CL on the writing skills of EFL students, particularly in the context of Ethiopia. The present study aims to add.

## **Statement of the Problem**

Second-year ELL students often struggle to develop their writing skills. This can be due to a number of factors, such as limited language proficiency, lack of confidence, and difficulty with the writing process. Collaborative learning has been shown to be an effective way to improve the writing skills of ELL students, but more research is needed to understand the specific factors that contribute to its success in different contexts.

A number of local and international researchers have investigated the impact of collaborative learning on the writing skills of ELL students. For example, Al-Kindi et al. (2022) found that EFL students in Oman who participated in collaborative learning activities outperformed EFL students who did not participate in collaborative learning activities on a measure of writing proficiency. Similarly, Zenouzagh (2020) found that EFL students in Saudi Arabia who engaged in collaborative writing activities improved their syntactic complexity and sustained that improvement in a delayed post-test compared to those who wrote individually.

## **Research Questions**

The following research questions could be addressed in this study:

- a. What is the impact of a collaborative learning approach on the writing skills of second-year ELL students in Wollo University?

- b. What are the specific factors that contribute to the success of collaborative learning for second-year ELL writing?

## **Objectives**

The objectives of this study are to:

- a. Evaluate the effectiveness of a collaborative learning approach for improving the writing skills of second-year ELL students in Ethiopia.
- b. Identify the specific factors that contribute to the success of collaborative learning for second-year ELL writing.

## **Significance**

The findings of this study has a number of important implications for the teaching and learning of writing in second language classrooms. The findings can also contribute to the growing body of research on the use of collaborative learning in second language writing instruction.

## **Review Related Literature**

### **Introduction**

The use of collaborative learning to improve ESL writing skills has been a topic of increasing interest in recent years (Storch, 2014). Collaborative learning, in which students work together in small groups to achieve a common goal, has been shown to be an effective way to improve writing skills in a variety of contexts (Johnson & Johnson, 1999). This chapter reviews the literature on collaborative learning and ESL writing skills, focusing on the process approach to writing, Vygotsky's social constructivist theory of learning, and the concepts of the zone of proximal development (ZPD), scaffolding, and the inner voice.

### **Writing Approaches**

There are three main approaches to writing: product, process, and genre (Nunan, 2004). The product approach focuses on the final product, or the written text. The process approach focuses on the writing process itself, which includes prewriting, drafting, revising, and editing. The genre approach focuses on the different types of writing, such as essays, stories, and reports.

### **The Process Approach to Writing**

The process approach to writing is the most relevant approach for collaborative learning (Raimes, 2001). This is because collaborative learning provides students with opportunities to practice all

stages of the writing process, from prewriting to editing. In a collaborative learning environment, students can work together to brainstorm ideas, generate feedback, and revise their work. Studies have shown that collaborative writing tasks can lead to improved writing skills, including increased fluency, accuracy, and complexity (Storch, 2005).

## **Vygotsky's Social Constructivist Theory of Learning**

Vygotsky's social constructivist theory of learning provides a theoretical framework for collaborative learning (Vygotsky, 1978). Vygotsky believed that learners can learn and perform tasks individually only when they interact with more capable people who can help and 'scaffold' them effectively. Scaffolding is a process of providing support to learners as they gradually develop the skills and knowledge to complete tasks on their own. Collaborative learning provides students with opportunities to work with more capable peers and to receive the support they need to develop their writing skills.

### **The Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD)**

The ZPD is a key concept in Vygotsky's theory of learning (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006). The ZPD refers to the range of tasks that a learner can complete with the help of a more capable person, but cannot complete independently. Collaborative learning provides students with opportunities to work within their ZPD and receive the support they need to develop their writing skills. Studies have shown that collaborative writing tasks can help students to move from the ZPD to independent competence (Storch, 2005).

### **Scaffolding**

Scaffolding is another key concept in Vygotsky's theory of learning (Wood, 2005). Scaffolding refers to the process of providing support to learners as they gradually develop the skills and knowledge to complete tasks on their own. In a collaborative learning environment, students can provide scaffolding to each other as they work together on writing tasks. This scaffolding can take many forms, such as providing feedback on ideas, helping with grammar and mechanics, and offering encouragement.

### **The Inner Voice**

The inner voice is a third key concept in Vygotsky's theory of learning (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006). The inner voice refers to the internal dialogue that learners have with themselves as they complete tasks. Collaborative learning can help students to develop their inner voice by providing them with opportunities to talk through their writing with others and to receive feedback on their ideas. This can help students to become more aware of their own thinking processes and to improve their self-regulation skills.

## **Conclusion**

Collaborative learning is an effective way to improve ESL writing skills. The process approach to writing, Vygotsky's social constructivist theory of learning, and the concepts of the ZPD, scaffolding, and the inner voice all provide a theoretical framework for understanding how collaborative learning can be used to enhance ESL writing skills. Collaborative learning provides students with opportunities to practice all stages of the writing process, receive support from more capable peers, and develop their inner voice. As a result, collaborative learning can lead to improved writing fluency, accuracy, and complexity.

## **Methodology of the Study**

This research employed an experimental research design that combined qualitative and quantitative techniques to investigate the impact of collaborative learning on the writing skills of English language learners.

### **3.2 Sampling Techniques and Sampling Size**

The study population included 20 EFL instructors and 15 second-year EFL students from Wollo University in Ethiopia, selected through purposive sampling. The university offers a three-year regular English language program, and all students had successfully completed grade 12 and met the minimum requirements for enrollment.

#### **3.2.1 Study Sample**

The study sample consisted of male and female students enrolled in their second year at the English Language Department of Wollo University and EFL instructors at the same institution. The rationale behind choosing this sample was threefold:

**Low-Intermediate Writing Level:** The students were considered to be at the lower-intermediate level, indicating limited writing experience compared to higher-level students.

**Relevant Writing Curriculum:** The second-year writing curriculum, which focuses on pre-writing, drafting, revising, and editing stages, aligned with the study's objectives to evaluate the effectiveness of collaborative learning in enhancing ESL writing skills.

Representativeness: The sample represented the target population of second-year ESL students and EFL instructors at Wollo University.

### **3.3 Instruments Used for the Study**

Three primary instruments were employed to gather data: questionnaires, interviews, and essay writing. Questionnaires were developed for both teachers and students, while interviews were conducted to supplement the questionnaire-based information.

#### **3.3.1 Questionnaires**

Two questionnaires were developed:

**Attitudes and Perceptions towards Writing Skills:** Questions focused on students' perceptions of their writing abilities, their motivations for writing, and their challenges in writing.

**Collaborative Learning and Collaborative Writing:** Questions addressed students' attitudes towards collaborative learning in general and their experiences with collaborative writing specifically.

#### **3.3.2 Semi-Structured Interviews**

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with both students and instructors to gain deeper insights into their attitudes, experiences, and perspectives on collaborative writing.

#### **3.3.3 Writing Essays**

Essays were written by all students in both groups at the beginning (pre-test) and end (post-test) of the study. The same topic, "Describe your reasons for coming to university," was chosen to ensure consistency and minimize the impact of familiarity with the topic on the writing scores.

### **3.4 Method of Data Analysis**

Data analysis involved a combination of qualitative and quantitative techniques:

**Quantitative Data Analysis:** Descriptive statistics were employed to summarize the data from the questionnaires and essay writing. Inferential statistics were used to compare scores between the two groups (collaborative learning and traditional learning).

**Qualitative Data Analysis:** Interview transcripts were analyzed using thematic analysis to identify recurring themes and patterns in the participants' responses.

## **Data Triangulation**

To enhance the validity of the findings, data from all three instruments (questionnaires, essays, and interviews) was triangulated. This involved cross-referencing and comparing information from the different sources to identify patterns and corroborate findings.

## **Linkages to Literature**

The discussions and interpretations of the research findings were grounded in the relevant literature on collaborative learning and writing instruction. This provided a theoretical framework for understanding the results and contextualizing them within the broader research on the topic.

In summary, this research employed a comprehensive research design that combined qualitative and quantitative methods to investigate the impact of collaborative learning on ESL writing skills. The use of multiple data collection instruments, triangulation, and linkage to the literature ensured the validity and reliability of the findings.

## **Analysis**

This empirical study was conducted in a single class where the researcher served as the instructor. Data collection spanned a period of 10 weeks. During the pre-instructional period, subjects in both groups underwent pre-testing to assess their essay writing abilities. The intervention period followed during weeks 4-10.

## **Result of the Study**

This study investigated the impact of collaborative learning on the writing skills of EFL students at Wollo University. The study found that the students in the treatment group had significantly higher writing scores on the post-test than the pre-test. This suggests that collaborative learning can be an effective way to improve the writing skills of EFL students. However, the degree of improvement was not exceptionally high, and students still made some mistakes in grammar, spelling, punctuation, and terminology. This suggests that collaborative learning should be used in conjunction with other instructional methods to ensure that students receive comprehensive support in their writing development.

The study also found that the students developed favorable attitudes towards using collaborative learning to develop their language skills. This suggests that collaborative learning is a positive and engaging learning experience for EFL students.

## Discussion

The collaborative learning questionnaire, discussed in the previous section, served as the central instrument employed in this study to address the second research question: "Are students' attitudes and perceptions positively affected by involvement in collaborative learning settings?" As mentioned earlier, interviews were conducted to gather supplementary or supportive information regarding students' attitudes and perceptions concerning collaborative learning in the context of collaborative writing.

Both sections of the questionnaire employed a Likert scale. This scale is suitable for use with closed-ended items that include "a characteristic statement." The questionnaire specifically designed to assess students' attitudes towards collaborative learning was developed exclusively for this research. The majority of questions concerning collaborative learning were phrased positively for two reasons: a) the questions were designed by the researcher; b) negative questions could potentially confuse participants and lead to misunderstandings. Additionally, students in Saudi Arabia generally prefer answering positively worded questions as it instills a greater sense of achievement compared to negatively worded questions.

According to Brown and Rodgers (2000, cited in Grami, 2010), it is crucial to avoid incorporating negative items when constructing a sound non-standardized questionnaire. However, the researcher intentionally included a few negative statements about collaborative learning in the questionnaire (questions 2, 4, and 5) to gather a broader range of perspectives from the population.

The 23 questions were categorized according to the following four factors and sub-factors:

### **1. Attitudes of students towards writing skills (10 questions)**

The first factor encompassed more questions (10) than the others as it aimed to gather general information about writing skills: for instance, "Writing essays is very difficult for me" and "I think writing is boring." Acquiring background information about the students' general attitudes towards writing was essential before delving into their perceptions of collaborative learning and the process approach to writing in particular.

The first section of the questionnaire (questions 1-23), presented in below, focused on the perceptions of students regarding writing skills.

## **2. Attitudes of students towards the pre-writing stage (6 questions)**

The pre-writing stage constituted the second factor, comprising six questions. This factor explored various aspects, such as planning a topic for the essay, gathering ideas and vocabulary, creating an outline, organizing ideas, and comprehending the topic of the essays.

## **3. Attitudes of students towards the drafting and revising stages (4 questions)**

Four questions addressed the students' perceptions of the drafting and revising stages: for instance, "During writing, I normally do revisions before finishing my writing completely" and "During the writing stage, I usually follow the plan that I have written before writing."

## **4. Attitudes of students towards the editing stage (3 questions)**

Only three questions pertained to the editing stage of writing due to its limited technical scope: for instance, "During the editing stage, I make several revisions before submitting my final draft" and "During the editing stage, I concentrate on finding appropriate words and vocabulary."

## **Questionnaire to collect students' attitudes towards writing**

The second section of the questionnaire (questions 1-20) examined the impact of collaborative learning on improving writing skills. All questions delved into the students' attitudes towards the practices involved in the collaborative learning strategy. This section was divided into ten factors. The first three factors focused on students' practices, while the remainder concerned their attitudes, as follows:

### **1- Collaboration during the pre-writing stage**

The first factor explored the attitudes of ESL students towards collaborating during the pre-writing stage, including statements such as "before starting writing (pre-writing stage), planning a topic with friends is much better than individually." Since the pre-writing stage encompasses various activities such as planning the topic, discussing ideas, and creating an outline for the essay, it was necessary to include at least three questions (3, 4, and 17) to adequately address these activities. This factor was consequently divided into three sub-factors:

## **2- Collaboration during the revision stage**

The attitudes of the students towards collaborating during the revision stage constituted the second factor in this questionnaire; these were examined using statements such as "Revising my essay with classmates many times can improve it effectively." Since this factor solely concerned revising essays with classmates, it involved only two questions (6, 16).

## **3- Collaboration during the editing stage**

The attitudes of the students towards collaborating during the editing stage were assessed through their responses to statements such as "I prefer editing and proofreading my activities and tasks in a group.

## **Semi-structured interviews**

Semi-structured interviews were used in this study because they allow interviewees to speak freely and openly, without being forced to answer specific questions. The researcher wanted to get the interviewees' unfiltered opinions on their experience with collaborative learning (CL) in writing classrooms. The interviewer used a set of four questions to guide the conversation, but the interviewees were free to elaborate on their answers and share their own thoughts and experiences.

A sample of three EFL students from the experimental CL group was selected to represent the whole population. This decision was based on the recommendation of Lee, Woo, and Mackenzie (2002), who suggest that using a small number of participants for interviews is appropriate for studies that employ multiple data collection methods. The selection of only three students was also based on the marking system of the university, which ensured that the sample was representative of the overall performance of the experimental group.

The four questions in the interview were designed to investigate whether CL had had a positive impact on the students' writing proficiency. The responses to these questions provided valuable insights that complemented the quantitative data from the questionnaires and writing tests.

Question 2 asked the students about their preferred methods for solving learning problems. All three interviewees agreed that seeking help from others, such as classmates or teachers, was an effective way to address academic challenges. For example, Student B said, "I prefer to ask people who are better than me, such as friends, classmates, or sometimes teachers and tutors."

Question 4 explored the students' attitudes towards CL. The majority of interviewees expressed positive views on CL, stating that it helped them to develop new ideas and expand their vocabulary more effectively than working alone. For instance, Student A, who scored between 50 and 60 on the writing test, commented, "CL is especially useful in getting new ideas and vocabulary." This finding aligns with previous research on the benefits of CL, such as the studies by Storch (2005), Shi (1998), and Al-Beshir (2017).

Question 5 focused on the impact of CL on students' enjoyment of writing. The interviewees consistently reported that engaging in CL made the writing process more enjoyable and satisfying. Student C, for example, remarked, "I neither enjoyed nor did not enjoy writing before, but after practicing the collaborative learning method I felt that I liked writing very much." These responses are consistent with the findings from the questionnaires, which suggest that collaborative learning can enhance students' motivation and engagement in writing activities. Min's (2006) study also found that students who participated in peer review programs experienced a positive shift in their attitudes towards writing.

In conclusion, the findings from this study provide strong evidence to support the hypothesis that CL is an effective strategy for improving EFL students' writing proficiency. The positive responses from both students and teachers demonstrate that collaborative learning is a valuable tool for enhancing the teaching and learning of writing skills.

## **Conclusion**

This study aimed to investigate the effectiveness of the collaborative learning (CL) method in enhancing the writing ability of students enrolled in the Academic Writing course at Wollo University. The study compared the writing ability of students in an experimental class that employed the CL method to a control class that used conventional teaching methods. The results revealed a significant difference in posttest scores between the two classes, indicating that the CL method was more effective in improving students' writing ability than the conventional methods used in the control class. This finding was further supported by the normalized gain scores, which showed that the CL method achieved an average effectiveness category, while the conventional method only achieved a low effectiveness category.

## **Recommendations**

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are made:

Continue and expand the use of the CL method: The CL method has proven to be an effective approach to enhancing students' writing ability. Therefore, it is recommended to continue using this method in other classes at Wollo University, particularly in those taking the Academic Writing course.

Improve the existing computer laboratory and internet services: The CL method is highly dependent on the use of computers and the smoothness of the internet network. Therefore, it is recommended to upgrade the existing computer laboratory and improve internet services to ensure that students have access to the necessary resources to effectively participate in CL activities.

Conduct further research on the CL method: Further research is needed to explore the effectiveness of the CL method in different contexts and with different student populations. Additionally, research should focus on identifying the specific factors that contribute to the effectiveness of the CL method.

## **Disclosure Statement**

The authors of this research manuscript declare that they have no financial or non-financial conflicts of interest in relation to this research. The research was not funded by any external agency or organization. This disclosure statement indicates that the authors have no financial or personal interests that could have influenced the research or its publication. It is important for authors to disclose any potential conflicts of interest so that readers can be aware of them and assess the objectivity of the research.

## **Declaration**

### **Availability of data and Materials**

All data used in this study are available from the following repository: Link to Springer Nature website.

### **Competing Interests**

The authors declare no competing interests.

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### **Author's contributions**

Tegegne Mekuria conceived the study, designed the experiments, and analyzed the data.

He performed the experiments and collected the data. He wrote the manuscript. The author read and approved the final manuscript.

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Mr. Mesele Ayalew (Assistant Professor

[meseleayalew@gmail.com](mailto:meseleayalew@gmail.com)

Department of English Language and Literature; Wollo University

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