Full Length Research Paper

Using assignments and group writing as means of assessments in EFL writing instructions: Bahir Dar University in focus

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This study assessed the instructors' reflections on using writing assignment and group writing as means of providing students with more writing practices and assessing students' performance in the writing course. Fifteen instructors were provided with open-ended items of relevance and feasibility of using the two assessment mechanisms. Only five instructors responded and their reflections are presented. All of the respondents, but one expressed their confidence of success in using home take assignments and group writing as means of evaluation mechanism in their writing assessment. They felt that evaluating students' performance on group writing and home take assignments could help students develop social and interaction skills though it could be difficult for controlling cheating and dependency.

Key words: Writing, assessment, group writing and home take assignment.

INTRODUCTION

Assessment in the context of teaching writing is usually classified as summative and formative. Summative assessment is designed and practiced to see whether the proposed writing standards of a particular course are achieved by the students. The main purpose of administering such tests is for grading students. On the other hand, formative assessments are used for monitoring the success and failure of instructional techniques in bringing about the required writing achievements. It serves as a means of evaluating the teaching and learning process so as to modifying instructional techniques in the way students could be benefitted. According to Black et al. (2000), as cited in Overmeyer (2009)'s formative assessment as opposed to summative assessment, that primarily targets ranking and certification of students' competencies, focuses on facilitating students' learning. Writing teachers usually use formative assessments for facilitating students' learning through engaging the students in writing tasks and activities. According to Darling-Hammond (2006), assessments involving students in adapting sample texts, producing written discourses and experimenting languages in expressing and exchanging ideas could make students motivated and attain high level learning.

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Different from standardized tests, formative assessments give students more time to engage themselves in thinking how to go about the given assignments, projects, tasks and activities.

According to American Federation of Teachers (AFT, 2011), students must be provided with assignments of interesting and challenging, strengthening and enriching skills and experiences, as well as reinforcing progress and success. Besides, students should be informed about the nature and purpose of assignments before getting on doing.

Even, sharing students about various degrees of accountability with differing duration of assignments is enabling students to develop confidence and indepen-dence of performing the tasks given. Home take assignments mainly help students improve their skills and abilities, create strong connection between school and home environment and develop supportive atmosphere and collaboration among students.

Besides, according to Covington (1998) a good assessment in writing instruction should reflect five features including clear and appropriate learning target, specific and appropriate purpose, sufficient practice and experiences, accurate involvement and judgments, and appropriate match of learning target, purpose and means of assessment. Shank also considered quality of assessment from the perspective of sufficiency, and she described the effect of adequate and inadequate learning assessments:

Inadequate learning assessments are at best frustrating. At worst, they can damage students and institutions. Adequate learning assessments are one of the hallmarks of competence in building good instruction and markedly improve the quality of instruction. (2006:5)

Using more group work and home take assessments that could reinforce students learning largely determine the success of achieving the required skills and knowledge of courses or subjects in general and writing competence in particular.

Thus, recently, assessments in writing instruction are required to focus on creating opportunities of practice through group work and individual assignments, and a strong recommendation of implementation is given (Hillocks, 2002). For example, New York State has introduced the practice of classroom based writing with an assigned task, and more instructional resources are provided successful implementation (National Assessment Governing Board, 2007). Using group writing and home take assignments as means of reinforcing learning writing has not been well acknowledged and practiced in our EFL writing instruction, and investigating the status of such experience at university level would

give way out for practicing.

Objectives of the study

The main objective of this study was to assess instructors' experience and reflections of using group writing and home take assignments in their writing instructions. More specifically, it focused on:

1. Assessing opinions of instructors in using group writing and home take assignments as means of teaching and evaluation purposes in writing instructions
2. Investigating instructors' difficult experience of using group writing and home take assignments in their writing instructions
3. Identifying instructors' strategies of solving, if not, mini-mizing the difficulties of group writing and home take assignments as means of teaching writing and assessment

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study assessed the relevance and difficulties of using group writing and home take assignment for teaching writing and evaluation in writing pedagogy. A survey form of research was conducted to investigate Bahir Dar University EFL instructors' opinion and experience of using group writing and home take assignments.

Participants

This study attempted to address fifty EFL instructors of Bahir Dar University with a questionnaire of open-ended items using their emails. Surprisingly, only five instructors returned the open ended items completed within one week. The instructors had teaching experiences that ranged from seven to twenty-six years. Individual instructors had teaching experiences of writing not only in colleges and universities but also in schools. Given their educational experiences and high level working contexts, getting only 33% turn out of completing the questionnaire, became unexpected and astonishing. The study was forced to consider the responses of such a few instructors for analysis because first, raising the ideas of group writing and assignment roles in EFL classrooms has become one area of opportunities teachers needed to carry out writing instructions effectively. Second, considering only such limited number of participants could hardly affect the reliability of the study result though the sample size was very small. In other words, the participants' academic and work experiences were merely similar to most of the instructors at public universities, and the sample instructors could reflect the larger picture of the nation's EFL instructors.

Instrument

This study employed an open ended questionnaire for assessing the instructors' opinion and classroom experiences of group writing and assignment based writing instructions. The items were focused

on generating ideas from the instructors about their pedagogical experiences of group writing and home take assignments during their college writing course offering. What kind of learning opportunities could group writing and home take assignment bring about was one area of inquiry. The difficulties facing in using group writing and assignments in EFL writing instructions, and the possible pedagogical strategies the instructors employed and suggested for minimizing the problems were also areas of concern in the items.

Procedures

Sharing experiences of using group writing and assignment based writing instructions was the first motive for this study. To that purpose, the participants were assumed to feel free of expressing their opinions and pedagogical experiences of group writing and assignment based teaching writing when they were given a questionnaire of open ended items. Then, the open ended items of the questionnaire were sent to individual instructor's email. After a week only one participant responded, and writing emails of reminder to the participants was mandatory. Thus, four more instructors responded immediately right after reminder. The five instructors' responses were organized based on thematic elements. Then, the data were presented in narration and description.

FINDINGS

Relevance of using group writing for assessment and teaching

All except one of the participants reported that using group writing as a means of instruction and assessment purpose could have the following advantages:

1. help students generate ideas easily and adequately
2. give students opportunities of sharing their diversified experiences and backgrounds
3. help students develop their writing skills
4. serve teachers identify weakness and strengths of group performance
5. help students develop leadership and social skills

The respondents, thus, seemed to recognize the essential roles that group writing could play in facilitating students' writing development and social interactions for future career.

Problems and strategies of minimizing the problems in using group writing for instruction and assessment

Using group writing in teaching and assessing students' performance is one of the challenging aspects of writing instructions. All of the participants acknowledged the pedagogical complexity and demanding nature of group writing, and they mentioned three common problems

instructors are facing in implementing group writing. One of these was creating sense of dependency on students' mentality in carrying out not only writing tasks and activities but also performing non-academic deeds in their life time. That is, the students, mainly those who do not participate actively in the group exercises and activities, may lack the moral and confidence of doing things independently. The other problem could be the possible pressure that one or two students shoulder in performing group tasks and activities. Students usually expect their group members of one or two to take more responsibility and to invest more effort and resources for carrying out the tasks given in the form of group writing. Last but not least problem was lack of discriminatory power of group performance. That is, when students are made to write in groups, instructors usually face difficulty of differentiating individual members' performance and degree of participation in the tasks and activities given. As the participants noted, the group writing implementation problems could be solved, if not, minimized using different strategies discussed in the following section.

According to the participants, problems of employing group writing could be addressed by instructors when they consider list of suggestions given below.

1. Making students discuss in groups deeply on the topic before they begin to write on
2. Giving clear responsibilities to each member and asking him/her report the group's performance to class
3. Monitoring the group's task division and performance before submission of the written work
4. Giving same mark to every group member of the group for their written work
5. Asking the groups to report the whole process of doing the task and activities during submission.
6. Designing group writing tasks or activities in such a way that instructors could identify the contributions of each member of the group

Generally, the respondents noted that careful planning and preparation of appropriate implementation strategies could solve, if not, minimize the problems instructors may face in using group writing in their instructions.

Relevance of using home take assignments for assessment and teaching writing

The participants noted that they usually give writing assignments to their students in writing instruction, and they felt tasks and activities of the assignments could create more opportunities of practicing writing. The teachers noted that students could have more time of thinking and concentration in composing their ideas when they are given assignments to be performed at home. The participants also remarked that creating access to

available materials and resources to students could only be made using assignments in writing instructions. Two of the participants, however, noted using assignments for assessment purposes is not advisable as there are some occasions of copying others' work and cheating.

Problems and strategies of minimizing the problems in using home take assignments for assessment in teaching writing

All of the participants agreed that using assignments for writing instruction and assessment had serious challenges and difficulties. For example, they mentioned most students did not like to try their best on the assignment as much as they could; instead, they looked around and found others' work for submission. They did not have the moral and courage to test themselves in the given tasks. Plagiarism became the number one problem instructors were facing in assignment related activities and tasks. The participants suggested below some strategies instructors need to use for effective implementation of assignments in writing instructions.

1. asking students to hand in their assignments with reports about the process they have gone through for performing the given assignments
2. advising and helping students build confidence on their work and performance
3. giving assignments and tasks which are not easily accessible and manageable without investing their own efforts
4. appreciating and rewarding students' poor original work than best copies from somewhere
5. setting evaluation criteria that encourage students to produce original work or writing
6. encouraging peer feedback on students' assignment work
7. penalizing and exposing the wrong deeds of students

DISCUSSION

This study seemed to inform us that writing assessments in the form of group tasks and home work assignments could provide students with more opportunities of practice in writing and develop confidence in learning writing. However, the respondents made a remark that using group writing and home take assignments in the instructors' writing classrooms was not as simple as they thought. All of the respondents noted that despite their significant contribution to student cooperation, collaboration as well as idea generation for composing paragraphs and essays, group writing and home works may create some rooms for free riders. Free riding has

commonly been noted as a major challenge in group writing assignments (Watkins, 2004; Ruel et al., 2003; Morgan, 2002; Strong and Anderson, 1990; Lantane et al., 1979; Jones, 1984). Group writing assignments usually expect mutual sense of accountability and commitment from every student, while a couple of group members fail to maintain the required group cohesion and involvement due to lack of motivation. The respondents presented some advice to instructors for increasing effectiveness in using group writing and home take as assignments. Firstly, they noted that writing instructors should set clear evaluation criteria for the assignment and communicate them with students before implementation.

Students must be clear about the expectations, performance requirements and the benefits they can gain from the given assignment tasks. Secondly, the respondents strongly noted that students must be convinced with the purpose and relevance of the assessments. More devotion of time and careful explanations and discussions of why students need to work on group writing and assignment activities would solve problems of misunderstanding and reluctance from students. Last but not least, writing instructors are advised to take time for preparing strategies of follow up individual students' contribution and energy for implementing the appropriate progress check strategies. Individual participation and contribution to the given assignments and tasks determines the success of group writing projects and more attention is required on the proper follow up and evaluation of each group member's involvement in the assignment. Similar suggestions and practical experiences are observed in Peha (2003).

Conclusion

Based on the results of the study, a few conclusions are drawn.

1. Group based writing tasks and home take assignments were acknowledged to facilitate learning writing when they are used effectively in writing instructions and assessment. All of the respondents, but one seemed to recognize the relevance of employing group writing and assignments in writing instruction especially for creating strong cooperation and collaboration among students and encouraging independent learning writing.
2. Making students involve in the assigned writing tasks of group and home take assignments became a major challenge for instructors as there were considerable mischievous deeds and loose interests of students on group writing and assignment works.
3. Proper planning and careful selection of strategies in using group writing and assignment works were the most

recommended means of handling implementation difficulties.

Conflict of Interests

The author has not declared any conflict of interests.

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APPENDIX

Sample excerpts of respondents

Sample excerpts of individual respondents' ideas on the role of group writing and assignment based-writing instruction is presented as follows.

Teacher One:
Sometimes I use collaborative writing as means of evaluation. However, I mostly use this strategy when I make my students practice writing a paragraph (Before they write a paragraph for evaluation purpose). This helps me a lot in improving the writing skills of many students as they have a chance to share ideas from colleagues. The main problem I usually face when I apply this strategy is that students leave the burden to one or two of their friends. Most group members pretend as if they are collaboratively writing, but actually not!!! Maybe this is our collective failure to work together!!!!!!!!!!!!!!! If it is group work, I give the same mark

Teacher Two:
Actually, what experience …. is that I sometimes use group writing method to make students generate ideas on the topic they have been given by discussing orally as an input for their writing and, at the end I make them to use the ideas they get from the group members and to write it individually. Indeed, I sometimes give them group writing on the same topic to do together. I have no chance to see individual contributions. As a result, I give them the same marks...).

Teacher Three:

Yes, most students copy assignments from the internet or they may bring some others work. But, here, my experience is that I try to give them assignments which they couldn't easily find from the internet. Moreover, I always encourage them to do their original works to get better marks. I always give better marks for poor original works than a best copy from somewhere.

Teacher Four:
In my opinion, collaborative writing is important if we make students to discuss in groups deeply on the topic and, write individually. At the end of their individual writing, making them to check (edit) one another's work might be important. Home take assignments should be given to the students, but it should not be always. Here, teachers should set criteria for evaluation that promote students to produce their own original writing (work).

Teacher Five:

For basic writing course, I always give home take writing assignments, but I never use them for grading purpose. For other courses such as "Technical Report Writing" I give home take writing assignments as the nature of the course forces me to do so. However, I give clear responsibilities to each member and make them present their work in class. When students submit their assignment, they also report details such as: who wrote: the abstract, introduction, Body parts etc…