Constructivism in the ESL Writing Classroom: A Case for Collaborative Essay Writing

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ABSTRACT

This paper reports a case study on how movies and collaborative writing influence ESL writing classroom. The Constructivist theory emphasizes that learning environment can be effective when it emphasizes the use of authentic tasks in a meaningful context (Jonassen, 1999). Instead of learning academic writing from textbook context which students may neither be familiar with nor find them interesting, movies help bring fun into the academic writing classroom. Using movies also helps make learning authentic as students learn from something they are familiar with. Furthermore, learners need to form mental images when they learn in the classroom and movies can help to do that. In addition to that, Mulligan & Garofalo (2011) found that collaborative writing enhances students' writing and lowers anxiety associated with completing the task alone. This study involves students using the contents of a movie to write academic essays using collaborative approach. Findings of this research will reveal interesting implication in the teaching of writing.

Keywords: **ESL writing classroom, Contructivist theory, collaborative writing, movies**

INTRODUCTION

The course English for Academic Purposes for Diploma students introduces the students to different types of academic essays. Writing teachers find it difficult to teach like "thesis statement", "main ideas", "topic sentences", and "controlling ideas." Instead of learning academic writing from textbook context which students may neither be familiar with nor find them interesting, movies help bring fun into the academic writing classroom. After all, ESL writing teachers are often not only teaching but rather providing opportunities to learn (Noor Hanim, 2011).   Collaborative writing helps take the stress from writing as it is done in groups. Vygotsky's three major themes of learning in social contexts further support the use of collaborative writing in the ESL classroom (Driscoll, 1994). Social interaction, the first theme, assumes that social learning precedes development. Vygotsky believes that a child's development takes place at two levels; first, on the social level, and next, on the individual level. Vygotsky's second theme is known as The More Knowledge Other (MKO) and this refers to the other person/persons who has/have better understanding or a higher ability level than the learner. This MKO person is able to influence the others members of the group. The third major theme, the Zone of Proximal Development, is the distance between a student's ability to perform a task under adult guidance and/or with peer collaboration and the students' ability to solve the problem independently. Learning occurs in this zone.

BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

Students see writing as a chore. Many ESL teachers find it hard to teach students writing. Classroom time is either spent talking about writing or students quietly writing alone and submitting the finished product at the end of each lesson. Writing is often seen as a personal activity.

An ideal writing class should allow students to:
(a) brainstorm and plan writing in class
(b) write at least a first draft of a complete essay during class time.

With 2 hours per session, (a) and (b) would seem impossible to achieve. How can a teacher make students complete one whole essay in one class session? The answer is - Collaborative Writing- it enables students to work collaboratively to complete an essay in class.

STATEMENT OF PROBLEM

Among the many complains of students on why they find writing "not fun" and a chore is that they do not have any content to write, and even if they were helped with the brainstorming in class, chances are, they hate the title chosen. It would be very "serious and academic". What is the greatest challenge of an academic writing teacher? What is the greatest challenge of an Academic Writing teacher? To teach academic writing in an "un-academic" (fun) manner. Using movies in writing classroom to teach Academic Writing helps students learn difficult academic writing concepts through "fun" contents. A research by Baril (2011) reveals that using movies in

the classroom improves attendance (100%). Students look forward to writing classes. The classes provide students with compelling and interesting topics to write. His research also found that students have become better writers because they write about the movies and they discuss issues in the movies.

Expecting students to brainstorm, narrow down ideas and then write the first draft within a 2-hour lesson is almost impossible if it is the traditional individual writing. However, collaborative writing allows students to treat writing classes as "writing workshop" where they discuss about what and how to write essays in groups. Elola and Oskoz (2010) found that collaborative writing helps students build on their content for writing. The brainstorming session helps the students use, discard, reuse ideas for their group essays. In addition to that, the condition and environment must be made suitable by the writing teacher for such activity. Furthermore, the materials chosen need to be of interest to the students; to make them want to attend the class, and more so, to want to write an essay. The objective of this action research is to carry out collaborative writing in the ESL classroom. Issues in movies are used as the content to teach academic writing. This study looked at how collaborative writing were carried out in the ESL writing classroom and how learners respond to the activities.

RESEARCH QUESTION

The main research question for this action research is:
In what ways can collaborative writing be used with movies in the ESL classroom? Specifically this study looks at three focused questions:
(a)   In what ways do teacher's role influence collaborative writing activities?
(b)   In what ways do learners' role influence collaborative writing activities?
(c)   How does the choice of materials influence collaborative writing activities?

AIM AND OBJECTIVES

This study reports on how collaborative writing activities are used to teach academic writing. Specifically, the aim of this research is to look at how teacher's role, learners' role influence collaborative writing activities. It also describes how materials influence collaborative writing activities.

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

COLLABORATIVE WRITING-THE LEARNERS' ROLE
The learners in the ESL writing classroom play an active role in the learning process. Their classroom interaction is planned to fit the social constructivist point of view. Writing essays in the class is done collaboratively. Movies are used to enhance the authenticity of learning.

SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIVISM AND WRITING
Constructivism is not new in the classroom; and as such, its influence can be used to benefit the writing lessons. The theory of Constructivism claims that humans are better able to understand the information they have constructed by themselves. According to Ozer (2004), learning is a social advancement that involves language, real world, and interaction and collaboration among learners. In the constructivist classroom, the teacher is the facilitator and a guide. He or she plans, organizes and guides and also provides direction to the learner. The learners are then accountable for their own learning.

Jean Piaget and Lev Vygotsky are two important figures in the theory of constructivism. However, they have different views of the theory. Understanding the two views helps us understand how constructivist environment can be beneficial to the classroom learning.

Piaget is an advocate of Cognitive Constructivism who believes that the learner builds knowledge with the help of learning activities. While performing these activities, the learners are able to make conclusions and discoveries in their minds. Piaget's developmental theory of learning and constructivism are based on discovery. The theory emphasizes that in order for learners to benefit from the activities, they should be allowed to construct knowledge that is meaningful to them.

Vygotsky is known for his theory of social constructivism. He believes that learning and development is a collaborative activity and the learners are cognitively developed in the context of socialization and education. This theory is based on the concept that in order for learning to occur, the learner first makes contact with the social environment on an interpersonal level and then internalizes the experience. Vygotsky is famous for his theory of "zone of proximal development" and this is the "...distance between the actual development of a child as determined by the independent problem solving, and the level of potential development determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more peers" (Vygotsky, 1978). This theory puts importance on the interaction with peers. This interaction is an effective way of developing skills and strategies. Vygotsky suggests that teachers use collaborative learning where less competent learners develop with the help of more skilful peers within the zone of proximal development.

Vygotsky's zone of proximal development (ZPD) is now synonymous in the literature with the term "scaffolding" (Wood,et al, 1976). For example, in a writing class, the teacher provides models of good (and weak) essays to the class. Accompanying the essays models are framework (or graphic organizers) of the mind maps of essays. The graphic organizers act as the scaffolds of the essays and learners will be able to scaffold future learning onto the scaffold taught by the teacher.

Introducing collaborative writing in the classroom has brought many benefits. Mulligan & Garofalo(2011) found that it enhances student interaction in the classroom. Students are actually communicating in a writing class and not merely writing alone. Group writing therefore lowers anxiety associated with completing the assignment alone. It helps to improve students'

confidence. Students were found to use a range of social skills that foster sense of accountability, cooperation, community. Students who participated in group activities will be motivated to learn They will also become more tolerant of their peers. Besides, communication among group members provide opportunities for the learners to use the target language. In addition to that, Elola & Oskoz (2010) found that collaborative activities encourage content development. This is in contrast to individual writing where learners tend to focus on local aspects such as grammar. Collaborative writing activities, on the other hand, allow them to put more focus more on structure and organization.

Collaborative writing has been given many names; group writing, cooperative writing or simply group work. Farkas (1991) defines collaborative writing as two or more people jointly composing the complete text of a document or two or more people contributing components to a document. It can also be one or more persons modifying by editing and/or reviewing the document of one or more persons; and one person working interactively with one or more person and drafting a document based on the ideas of the person or persons. Collaborative writing can be seen as a continuum. On one end, it involves doing the whole writing process from the start as a group, and on the other extreme end, done only by one primary writer, with comments from the peers (Group Writing, 2012). This can be seen by looking at the diagram below.

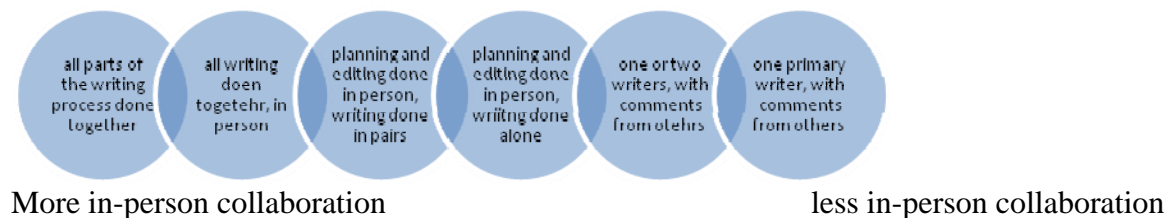More in-person collaboration   less in-person collaboration

Figure 2.1 Continuum of Collaborative Writing.

However, not all classroom environment can be suitable for collaborative writing. Some conditions necessary for effective collaborative writing atmosphere. Besides making sure that no one works alone, and the work is fairy distributed. Teachers to use appropriate materials. The focus of collaborative writing is writing with peers; brainstorming of ideas and putting ideas together in an essay as a team. Kessler (2009) reminds teachers that as long as grammatical errors did not interfere with meaning, learners were not particularly concerned with the accuracy of their writing. The whole focus of the activity is the free flow of ideas and peer interaction.

Furthermore, there are a few ways to do collaborative writing in the classroom. Noel & Robert (2004) suggested collaborative writing may use asynchronous writing strategy. This is where students write a group essay in isolation-possible but not as effective as face-to-face. The group leader decides on who writes what part and they then disperse to write on their own. Heeter & Jeong (2012) looked at individual and collaborative writing actions in group writing and found that while students can work together to discuss ideas and organization, they preferred to work individually when it comes to writing.

Another way to carry out collaborative writing is when the group performs the whole

writing activity from the start till the first draft as a group. Hill (2007) felt that collaborative work only takes place in a synchronous and fully consensual group work.

USING MOVIES IN THE WRITING CLASS-THE MATERIALS ROLE

Movies are NOT meant to take over the class time. In fact, teachers should insist that students watch the movies outside class time. The content of the movies are used to learn the concepts of Academic Writing. As long as teachers use issues and events in the movies and not talk about the movies in class, the content of the lesson is not about the movie, but academic writing. According to Kelly (2013), when used incorrectly, the focus of the lesson may be lost. Louw (2013) suggested cultural and age factors should be considered when deciding on the movie. Teachers are also reminded not to use movies to "escape" teaching. In fact, the preparation is intensive because it involves using the contents of the movie. –it's not teaching the movie but teaching English through movies.

According to Barile (2011), movies can help improve attendance (100%) and provide students with compelling and interesting topics to write. This is like using the concept of introducing the unfamiliar (Academic Writing) through something familiar (movies). In addition to that, Kelly (2013) found some benefits of using movies in the classroom. He felt that movies can extend learning beyond textbook. Movies too can become an interest building towards learning Academic Writing. The activities used in the "movie" writing classroom can provide teachable moments because students had fun while learning something serious. In choosing films for classroom, teachers need to consider how well the film will help students meet the outcomes, quality of the film, appeal and appropriateness for students, community standards, copyrights concerns, cost and availability. According to Owl Teacher (2013), movies are entertaining, more exciting than textbook contents. The visual stimulation adds to the learning experience, especially for students who are visual and auditory learners. Hence, Butler et al (2009) suggested using popular up-to-date movies to enhance learning and retain fun in the classroom.

TEACHING WRITING IN MALAYSIA-THE TEACHERS'S ROLE

"In Malaysia, the ESL writing classes were seen as students attempting to write about ideas and issues students were vaguely aware of or interested in a language they are almost unfamiliar with."

(Noor Hanim, 2011, p15)

According to Larsen-Freeman (2000), based on the theory of principled eclecticism, teachers need to consider the different trends and ideas that have occurred historically and to choose that most fit the needs of particular classroom settings. Teaching ESL writing should go through some transformation.

The teachers need to be less authoritative and no longer "know-all" person in the class. Latest movies were used so teachers need to keep abreast with the interest of the age group of the students.

Among some suggestions for teachers' roles in a collaborative writing classroom are;

teachers could:
   (a) scaffold a term used by Vygotsky to introduce new ideas onto familiar concepts (Driscoll, 1994)
   (b) use graphic organizer to teach essay structure
   (c) demonstrate using examples
   (d) provide opportunities for students to participate in gathering of ideas
   (e) use movies with real, social values students can relate to.
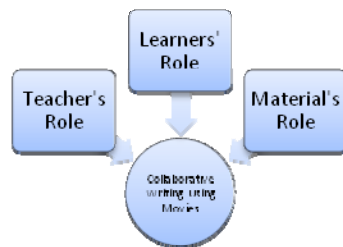
METHODOLOGY

RESEARCH FRAMEWORK

Figure 3.1: Research Framework

This action research is a case study to demonstrate how collaborative writing using movies can be used in the ESL classroom. Throughout the study, students will first watch a movie they have chosen , then go through the collaborative writing process.

Three important variables are used in this research and they are : teacher's role, learners' role and materials' role. 30 students were chosen for this research are Diploma Accountancy students attending English for Academic Purposes class. A questionnaire was used as the instrument in this research. It is 5 likert-scale divided into 3 main sections: Teacher's Role, Learners' Role and Materials' Role. The section on Teacher's Role contains 17 questions pertaining to issues like using scaffold, graphic organizers, teaching techniques and styles. The section on Learners' Role contains 7 questions about how the students feel about the activities carried out. The final section is about how Materials influence collaborative writing activities. This section has 8 questions altogether and looks at the use of movies and accompanying activities. The questionnaire will be analyzed using SPSS and the results reveal descriptive analysis of the research.

ANALYSIS

There were 30 respondents altogether; 3 were male and 27 were female. The three variables in this research are (a) teacher's role, (b) learners role and (c) materials' role. The learners' role is the dependent variable while the teacher's roles and materials' role are the independent variable.

Table 4.1 Correlations among Variables

		Teachers	Learners	Movies	Classroom
Teachers	Pearson Correlation	1	.554**	.381*	.675**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.001	.038	.000
	N	30	30	30	30
Learners	Pearson Correlation	.554**	1	.600**	.631**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.001		.000	.000
	N	30	30	30	30
Movies	Pearson Correlation	.381*	.600**	1	.373*
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.038	.000		.042
	N	30	30	30	30
Classroom	Pearson Correlation	.675**	.631**	.373*	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000	.042	
	N	30	30	30	30

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).
*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

For value less than 0.01 and 0.05, it shows a significant relationship of variables. However, for value which is less than 0.05, it shows larger impact of independent variable to the dependent variable. From table of correlations above, we can conclude that learning materials of movies and classroom activities gives a larger impact to the learners' role compared to the teacher's role. This means in the ESL classroom, the learners are more affected by the materials used than what the teacher did to make the lessons interesting.

Table 4.2 Linear Regression of all Predictors

Model Summary				
Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.751a	.563	.513	.31588

a. Predictors: (Constant), Classroom, Movies, Teachers

By using the linear regression, it shows a significant relationship of teachers roles and learning materials of movies and classroom activities. With R^2 value of 0.563 and 0.513 of adjusted R^2, it strengthens the hypothesis that all the independent variables are significantly relate to the dependent variables.

Table 4.3 Anova of Variables

ANOVAᵃ

Model		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
	Regression	3.349	3	1.116	11.187	.000ᵇ
1	Residual	2.594	26	.100		
	Total	5.943	29			

a. Dependent Variable: Learners
b.   Predictors: (Constant), Classroom, Movies, Teachers

By using F-test, the overall models shows a significant relationship.

Table 4.4 Coefficients of Variables

Coefficientsᵃ

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
	(Constant)	-.351	.983		-.357	.724
1	Teachers	.231	.295	.140	.781	.442
	Movies	.404	.143	.403	2.833	.009
	Classroom	.408	.188	.387	2.170	.039

a.   Dependent Variable: Learners

By using T-test, overall parameters are not significant.

FINDINGS FOR TEACHER'S ROLES

Figure 4.5 below shows the findings for Teacher's Role for male respondents. The analysis shows that male students in this study felt strongly about the fact that the teacher provides background knowledge(10%)as well as the teacher becoming the role model (10%) in writing by writing the essay in class.
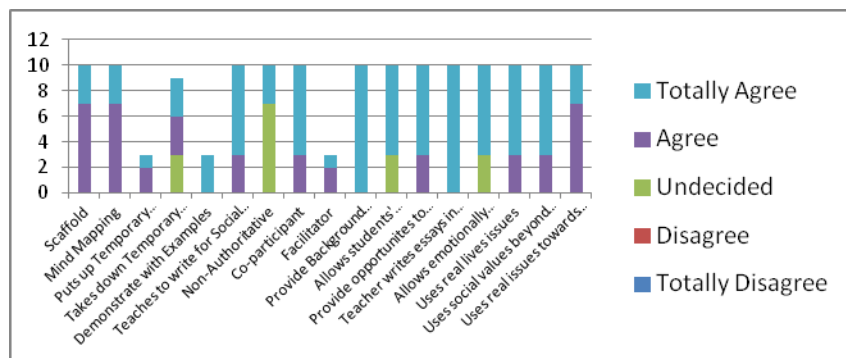

Figure 4.5 Chart showing Teacher's Role (Male)

Figure 4.6 shows findings for Teacher's Role for Female. Just like the male respondents, the female respondents too liked the idea of the teacher role-modelling (70%) the essay write-up for the class. However, female respondents liked the fact that collaborative writing allows for students' participation in class (83%).
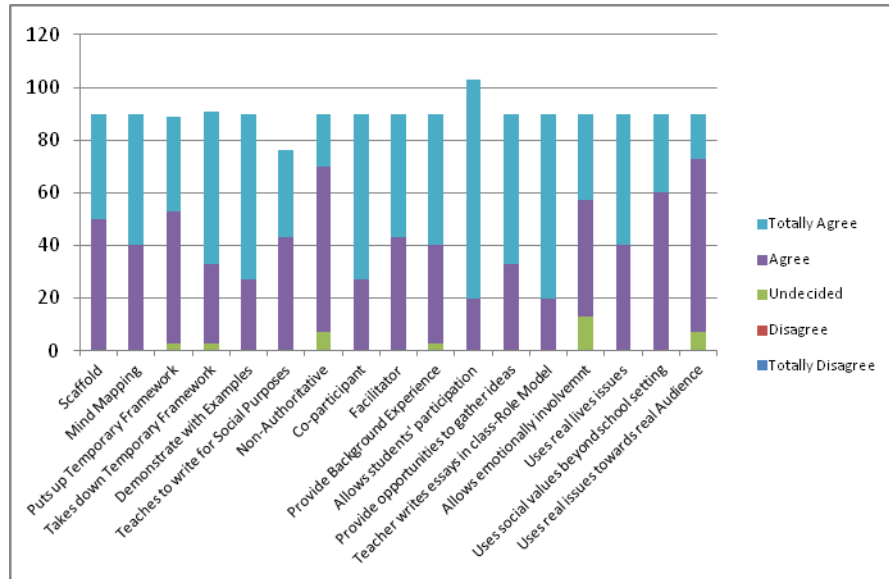

Figure 4.6 Chart showing Teacher's Role (Female)

FINDINGS FOR LEARNERS' ROLE

Figure 4.7 shows the findings for Learners' role for male respondents. The male respondents benefitted from collaborative writing as they learnt the need for audience awareness (10%). They also benefitted from the isolated-paragraph-write up (10%) activities.
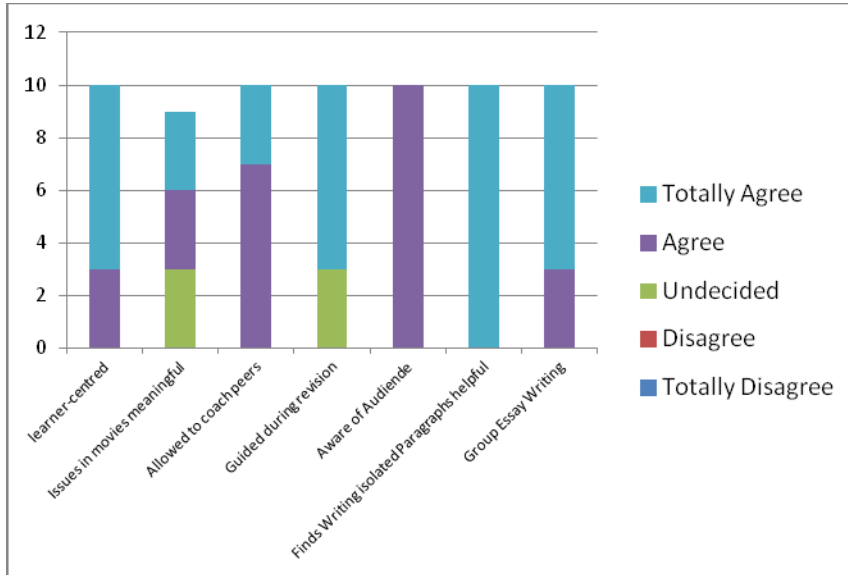
Figure 4.7 Chart showing Learners' Role (Male)

Figure 4.8 reveals findings for Learners' role for female respondents. They enjoyed the isolated-paragraphs activities (43%), the combined group effort (53%) as well the guidance during revision (43.5%).
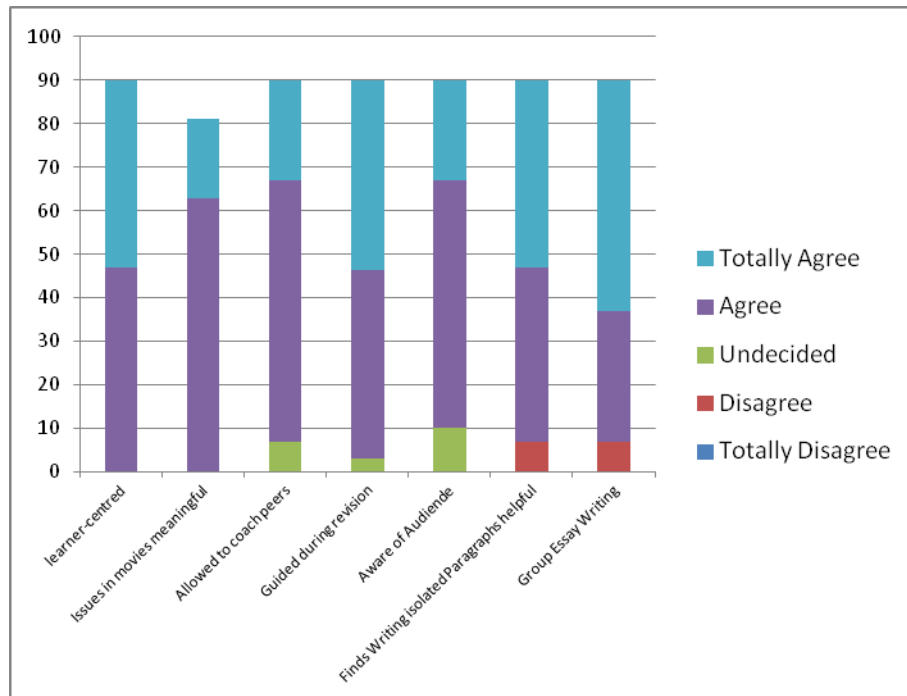

Figure 4.8 Chart showing Learners Role (Female)

FINDINGS FOR MATERIALS' ROLES

Figure 4.9 shows the findings for materials' roles for male respondents. The male respondents favoured the coloured-coded-paragraphs activities (10%) and the group interaction (10%). However, they also liked the use of movies because real issues were brought into the classroom's discussions (10%).
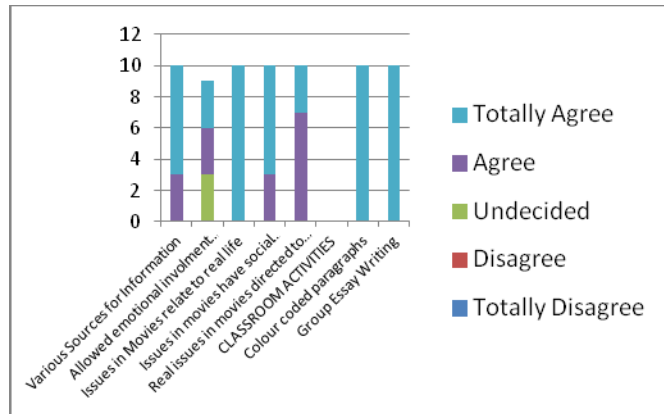

Figure 4.9 Chart showing Materials' Role (Male)

Figure 4.10 reveals findings for Materials' roles for female respondents. Although just like their male classmates who enjoyed the colour-coded paragraphs activities (63%), they also enjoyed the group writing activities (60%).
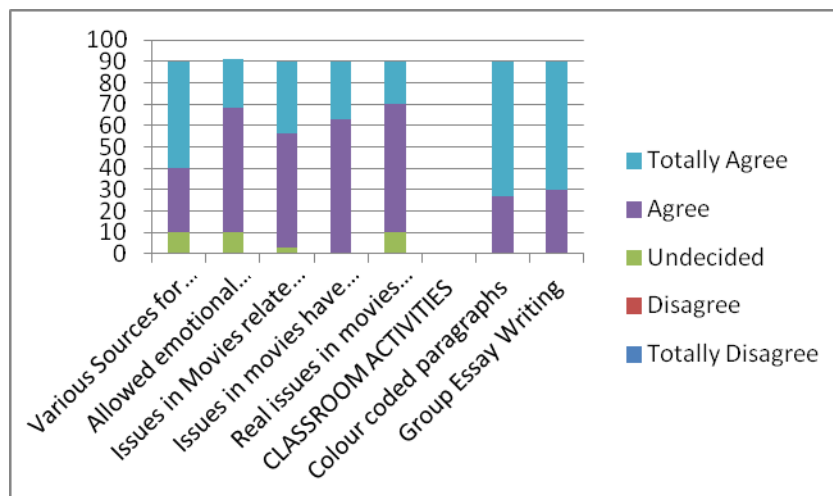

Figure 4.10 Chart showing Materials Role (Female)

CONCLUSION

Figure 5.1 shows the overall impression of the findings. On the whole, when it comes to collaborative writing using movies in the ESL writing classroom, the learners were more influenced by the materials chosen than by the role the teachers play in the lessons.
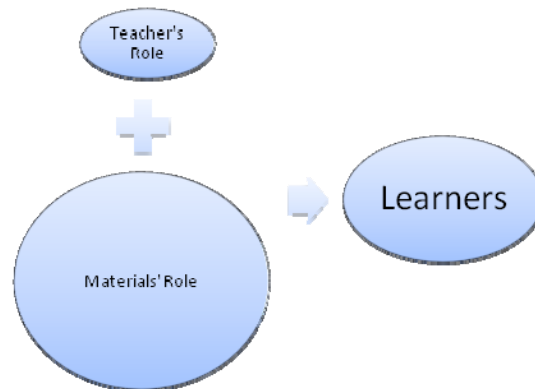

Figure 5.1 Bird's Eye View of the Study

Specifically, the teacher's role in the collaborative writing class is to ensure there are many opportunities for students' interaction to take place. This gives the image of a rather noisy classroom atmosphere rather than the quiet-writing-mode essay classroom scenario. Students also expect the teacher to provide background knowledge to prepare students for the lesson. It is not surprising that students appreciate the role-modelling by the teacher of writing an essay in classroom as part of the lesson's activity.

In addition to that, learners enjoyed the flow of isolated paragraph writing to combined essay effort. The activities done as a group like group editing too becomes fun in a group. Finally, materials like colour coded paragraphs written not on ordinary paper but large mah-jong papers adds excitement to the collaborated essay writing.

PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

Since students focus more on the materials chosen rather than the teacher's roles, writing teachers should constantly think of active writing activities to replace the traditional passive quiet writing exercises in classrooms.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Given the opportunity, it would be interesting to conduct this research in (a) secondary school setting and see whether Malaysian secondary school students too enjoy collaborative movie essay writing activities done in this action research. In addition to that, I would also like replicate this research to teach essay writing in Malay (L1) in Malaysian school setting.

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