

**Peer Learning as a Catalyst for
Engagement: A Study on Diploma in
English Students in a Sri Lankan
University**

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Abstract

Passive participation is a common challenge in English as a second language (ESL) classrooms. Fear of making mistakes, teacher-centered pedagogical approaches, lack of confidence, and cultural influences can be identified as reasons for passive participation in ESL classrooms. Grounded in Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory and Bandura's Self-Efficacy Theory, the present study adapted Kurt Lewin's Spiral Steps for Action Research Model to

investigate how different actions, namely developing an essay individually under the guidance of a supervisor and developing an essay collaboratively in groups where each student offers and receives feedback for their writing, enhanced interactive participation in an ESL classroom. Employing one hundred and sixty-eight (*N*-168) learners who follow a diploma in English course at a university in Sri Lanka, the study adopted a mixed methods approach to collect and analyze data. Two teachers teaching on this course also participated in the study. Each student of this program produces a four-thousand-word extended essay. Traditionally, the students developed the essay independently. As this proved to be less interactive, the students were asked to work in small groups in the class, obtain feedback from peers, and develop the essay. After conducting four such sessions, the learners were asked to share their views regarding the interactive group-based peer-learning experience. A questionnaire was also shared among the participants. Two teachers were interviewed to obtain their views. The reflective

essay and interview data revealed that the majority of learners held positive perceptions regarding the experience, as it helped them to improve the quality of the essay (90.5%) and enhance interaction (88.3%). Qualitative data further suggested that interactive group-based essay writing was enjoyable and useful to develop the students' speaking skills. Teachers claimed that learners displayed increased interaction during the class.

Keywords: ESL classroom, extended essay, group-based peer-learning, interactive participation, perception

Introduction

Teaching learning landscape is changing faster than ever. In today's high tech fast paced world where artificial intelligence (AI) plays a significant role in almost all spheres including classrooms, teachers cannot continue traditional teaching and assessment practices. Also, classroom participation is all alone not enough to enhance the academic performance of the learners today. Innovative teaching as well as

assessment methods are required to counter new challenges and enhance learning and active participation in the process of learning. Previous studies claimed that conventional paper-based assessments seemed to be the norm of the most of the educational programmes (Kulasegaram & Rangachari 2018; Quansah, 2018; Wanner & Palmer, 2018).

Research Problem

Although conventional paper-based assessments dominate most of the educational programmes today, there is a gradual shift from assessment of learning culture to assessment for learning culture as Black and Wiliam (1998), Liu and Carless (2006) and Silva et al. (2017), among others, suggest. Assessment for learning culture began to emerge in the 1990s. For instance, Herman et al. (1992) argue that paper-based end semester assessment where students are expected to produce a written document played a dominant role in educational institutes till the 1990s, and assessment became the central focus of the

educational reformists in the 1990s. Conventional assessment methods mainly include essays or extended response questions, true false questions, short answer questions, fill in the blank, matching and multiple choice questions. These assessments are mostly teacher devised and teacher centred, and they have both advantages and disadvantages. In today's high tech fast paced world where artificial intelligence (AI) plays a significant role in education, innovative assessments where students get timely feedback and see real world relevance need to be introduced. Further, the assessments need to align with the evolving needs of education and focus on the holistic skill development of the students. Therefore, it is important to move from teacher-centred assessments to learner-centred assessments where students construct knowledge in collaboration with their teachers and peers.

Literature Review

Interactive participation and peer-learning

Various techniques are proposed to enhance interactive learning among learners as such interactive learning ensures better learning. For instance, Zinjay (2019) claimed that active learning would take place when there is more interaction. Similarly, McKeachie and Svinicki (2006) pointed out that students pay attention and think more actively during the discussion and thus it facilitates active learning. Interactive group-based peer-learning is a model that increases learner participation and engagement. Accordingly, students are encouraged to collaborate in groups, share knowledge and help each other to learn. Weaver and Qi (2005) pointed out that students who actively participated in the class were able to learn better than those who did not. A similar view was shared by Varonis and Gass (1985) who claimed that interaction among learners ensured improved learning. Also, there is empirical evidence that learners working in groups developed various skills including communication skills, collaborative skills, negotiation skills and active interaction with peers (Topping, 2005). Therefore, it

is important to introduce classroom activities that enhance interaction among learners.

Collaborative learning with peers tends to enhance active participation in lessons. For instance, Topping (2005) and Zhu and Carless (2018) claimed that collaborative peer learning helped students to improve and construct knowledge together through interaction, negotiation and collaboration. Although collaborative peer-learning offers several benefits, some researchers pointed out that teachers perceive peer-learning as an unwanted time- and effort consuming activity (e.g. Cheng & Warren, 2005; Falchikov, 2005; Nasab, 2015). Therefore, it is important to examine if the time spent for learner-centred group-based peer-learning is truly a waste of time, or the time spent for such activities compensates by helping learners produce a quality essay.

Writing in ESL

Writing plays an important role in any ESL classroom. Writing requires the learners to use punctuation, grammar and vocabulary correctly. Further, writers need to consider the stylistic factors such as choice of words, sentence complexity, text cohesion, content, effective paragraphing and organization of the writing task. While various approaches to teaching writing have been introduced, the most common approaches are the product approach and process approach to writing. Peer assessment encompasses the characteristics of a process approach to writing. Accordingly, brainstorming, group discussion, collaboration, drafting, and rewriting are important steps in process approach to writing. Also, feedback plays an important role in this process approach to writing. For instance, Baker (2016), Berg (1999) and Zhang (1995), among others, highlighted the importance of peer-feedback in the process approach to writing. Hence, substantive, supportive, immediate, specific

and timely feedback helps learners produce a better product as Hattie and Timperley (2007) and Topping (1998) argued. Further, as Zamel (1983) elaborated, process approach to writing entails a composing process where learners focus not on a final product but on a nonlinear generative and gradual process whereby writers collaboratively discover and construct meaning jointly. According to Liu and Hansen (2002), writing in the real world is a dynamic, nonlinear and recursive process which engages learners in a range of writing activities such as brainstorming, outlining, drafting, rewriting and editing. In the process, writers focus on meaning, organization, style of the text, and grammatical correctness, and edit and rewrite their initial drafts until they get a final version. For instance, Leki (1990) argued that peer feedback that writers receive during the group-based peer-learning can help learners revise and edit the text appropriately.

Extrinsic awards such as marks tend to motivate learners. For instance, Deci et al. (2001) pointed out

that tangible rewards such as marks and certificates have a substantial effect on learner motivation. Although studies have been conducted to examine the reliability and validity of marks offered by peers in peer-learning context (e.g. Liu & Carless, 2006) and peer-tutor grade correlations (Sande & Illorente, 2014), limited studies have been conducted in ESL writing contexts, in particular, in Sri Lanka, to investigate how marks can be reliably awarded in a peer-learning environment to motivate learners.

Peer feedback helps learners revise and edit their writing and produce quality writing, yet learners' potential to offer constructive and useful feedback is often questioned. For instance, Min (2005) pointed out that the usefulness of peer assessment is devalued by some researchers claiming that peers usually offer vague, non-specific feedback and provide no solid explanations (Min, 2005). Similarly, Tsui and Ng (2000) claimed that second language learners from cultures that see the teacher as the only source of authority tend to consider their peers not

knowledgeable enough to make sensible comments. Therefore, learners do not incorporate the comments given by their peers into writing (Tsui & Ng, 2000). Cheng and Warren (2005) and Kuo (2015), among others, pointed out that learners feel neither comfortable nor confident evaluating their peers, and also, they also think that peers are not qualified enough to evaluate students' work. Dochy (2001) also made a similar claim and pointed out that students are uncomfortable and unsure of their capability of assessing each other fairly because they feel incompetent to offer appropriate feedback. As a solution, Pushpakumara (2023) proposed group-based peer learning where learners with different proficiency levels work together and help each other to develop their writing. This enables more proficient members of the group to help the less proficient learners by providing feedback promptly and timely. Accordingly, group dynamism plays a significant role in the success of peer learning. This has not been adequately investigated in particular in the Sri Lankan educational context. Therefore, it is

important to particularly examine whether group-based peer-learning helps learners improve the quality of writing, structure of the essay, find the content that should be included in the essay, or whether group-based peer-learning is useful at all or not.

Friendship is another critical factor that is said to hinder the successful implementation of peer learning. According to Peng (2009), teachers usually expressed their resistance to peer learning due to friendship effects because the students did not want to take a risk of jeopardizing their friendship. Similarly, Sande and Ilorente (2014) reported that students did not like to criticize their peers. However, Planas et al. (2013) examined students' perception of peer learning and found that students have a positive predisposition towards this methodology, both before and after its implementation. Students perceive peer learning as both a motivating and recommended methodology that facilitates the acquisition of learning at different levels (Planas et al., 2013).

Thus, studies that investigate the role of friendship in peer learning have produced mixed, inconclusive results. As a result, teachers and course designers seem hesitant to incorporate peer learning into their courses.

Although experimental studies have been conducted to examine the effect of peer-learning on performance (Double, McGrane & Hopfenbeck, 2019; Grami, 2010), and the reliability and validity of peer-assessment (Falchikov, 2005), limited studies have been conducted to investigate learners' perception regarding how group-based peer-learning can increase interaction among ESL learners and how the quality of writing can be enhanced through that interaction. Kuo (2015) also argued that studies conducted to examine the learners' psychological characteristics, such as the perception of and attitudes towards peer-learning, are relatively low (Kuo, 2015). Therefore, the present study set out to explore "How can students' interactive participation be increased through group-based peer-learning?"

The main objective of this research is to examine how students' active participation in the classroom can be enhanced through group-based peer learning. A specific objective of the present study is to explore how English essay writing skills can be developed through group-based peer learning. The findings of the present study may provide insight into the role of peer learning to enhance interaction and whether that interaction leads to the improvement of the quality of the ESL learners' essays.

Theoretical Frameworks

This study is based on two significant educational theories: Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory and Bandura's Self-Efficacy Theory. These theories provide essential insights into the role of peer evaluation in shaping learner participation and classroom dynamics in ESL settings.

Sociocultural Theory

Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory emphasizes the crucial role of social interaction in cognitive

development and language learning (Vygotsky, 1978). According to this theory, learning occurs in a socially mediated environment where knowledge is constructed through interactions with more knowledgeable peers and teachers. A key concept in this framework is the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), which highlights the gap between what a learner can achieve independently and what they can accomplish collaboratively.

In ESL classrooms, participation within the ZPD is particularly beneficial, allowing learners to develop their language and cognitive skills through collaborative activities. Classroom participation is not solely an individual effort but is influenced by the broader social and cultural environment. Teachers play a pivotal role in fostering participation by providing scaffolding—structured support that gradually leads students toward greater independence in learning. Strategies such as group discussions, role-playing exercises, and peer feedback create an interactive and engaging learning environment that

aligns with Vygotsky's notion of language as a fundamental tool for thought and communication.

Peer evaluation serves as a practical application of Sociocultural Theory in ESL classrooms. Through peer feedback, students engage in meaningful interactions, practicing language skills while simultaneously developing analytical and critical thinking abilities. The process of providing and receiving feedback fosters collaborative learning, where students guide and support one another, reinforcing the principle of scaffolding. Additionally, peer evaluation creates a less intimidating environment compared to teacher-led assessments, boosting confidence and reducing anxiety. This dynamic aligns with Vygotsky's perspective that learning is inherently social, and that cooperative engagement enhances both understanding and motivation.

Self-Efficacy Theory

Bandura's Self-Efficacy Theory offers another perspective on learner participation by highlighting the role of confidence in shaping behavior (Bandura, 1997). Self-efficacy refers to an individual's belief in their ability to succeed in specific tasks. In the context of ESL learning, students with high self-efficacy are more likely to actively participate, take risks, and persist in overcoming challenges. Conversely, students with low self-efficacy often engage in avoidance behaviors, such as remaining silent or withdrawing from classroom activities.

Research supports the strong link between participation and self-efficacy. Gregersen and Horwitz (2002) found that students who fear making mistakes tend to experience heightened anxiety, undermining their confidence and willingness to engage. This issue is particularly pronounced in higher education, where students may feel pressured to demonstrate linguistic proficiency. To address this challenge, educators should foster a supportive

learning environment where mistakes are viewed as part of the learning process. Providing constructive feedback, celebrating small successes, and setting attainable learning goals can significantly enhance students' self-efficacy.

Peer evaluation also plays a vital role in building self-efficacy. Engaging in peer feedback allows students to critically assess their classmates' work, which in turn enhances their ability to evaluate and improve their own performance. This process aligns with mastery experience, one of the primary sources of self-efficacy, by reinforcing students' confidence in their analytical and linguistic skills. Additionally, observing peers succeed in language tasks serves as a vicarious experience, further strengthening self-efficacy beliefs. When students witness their classmates overcoming challenges, they become more motivated to engage actively in learning activities. Positive reinforcement during peer evaluation fosters a sense of achievement, ultimately leading to increased participation in the classroom.

Integrating Theoretical Perspectives

By combining Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory with Bandura's Self-Efficacy Theory, a comprehensive framework was developed to understand how peer evaluation enhances learner participation in ESL settings. While the Sociocultural Theory underscores the importance of interaction and scaffolding, Self-Efficacy Theory highlights the role of confidence and motivation. Together, these perspectives illustrate that classroom engagement is shaped by both social interactions and individual self-beliefs.

From an action research perspective, these theories guide the iterative refinement of peer evaluation strategies. Educators can design activities that not only promote collaborative learning but also incorporate elements that build students' confidence and self-efficacy. By addressing both the social and psychological aspects of participation, this integrated approach ensures sustainable improvements in ESL learning outcomes.

Factors Contributing to Poor Participation

Several factors hinder active participation in ESL classrooms. Addressing these challenges is crucial for fostering an inclusive and engaging learning environment. Key barriers to participation include fear of making mistakes, cultural influences, lack of confidence, and teacher-centered pedagogical approaches.

Fear of Making Mistakes and Language Anxiety

A significant obstacle to participation in ESL classrooms is the fear of making mistakes. Language anxiety, a concept introduced by Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope (1986), refers to the stress associated with learning and using a second language. Students experiencing high levels of language anxiety often exhibit hesitation, avoidance, or complete silence in class discussions. This fear is particularly strong in environments where linguistic proficiency is

perceived as a measure of intelligence or competence (Gregersen & Horwitz, 2002).

Spontaneous speaking activities tend to be most affected by language anxiety. Liu and Jackson (2008) found that students with high anxiety levels are more likely to avoid participation in discussions, limiting their opportunities to develop speaking skills. This issue is exacerbated in higher education, where students feel pressured to perform flawlessly in academic settings.

Cultural Influences on Participation

Cultural backgrounds significantly shape students' attitudes toward classroom engagement. Hofstede's (2001) cultural dimensions theory suggests that students from collectivist societies, such as those in Asia, often prioritize group harmony over individual expression. In such cultural settings, students may be reluctant to challenge ideas or ask questions, as this may be seen as confrontational or disrespectful (Connor & Asenavage, 1994).

Hierarchical teacher-student relationships further contribute to passive learning behaviors. In some cultures, teachers are regarded as ultimate authorities, and questioning their knowledge may be perceived as inappropriate. Cheng (2000) notes that this dynamic discourages active participation, leading students to focus more on absorbing information rather than engaging in meaningful dialogue.

Lack of Confidence and Motivation

Confidence and motivation are critical factors influencing classroom participation. Self-confidence is closely linked to self-efficacy, and students who doubt their language abilities are less likely to engage in discussions or group activities (Bandura, 1997). Negative past experiences with language learning or perceived inferiority compared to peers can further diminish self-efficacy, leading to avoidance behaviors.

Motivation also plays a vital role in engagement. Dornyei (2001) distinguishes between intrinsic motivation (driven by personal satisfaction) and extrinsic motivation (driven by external rewards). A lack of intrinsic motivation can result in disengagement, especially if students fail to see the relevance of language learning to their personal goals. Additionally, repetitive or unengaging teaching methods may further diminish motivation and participation.

Teacher-Centered Pedagogical Approaches

Traditional teacher-centered instruction limits student engagement by positioning the teacher as the primary knowledge provider while students passively absorb information. This approach restricts opportunities for interactive and cooperative learning, which are essential for language development (Lightbown & Spada, 2013).

Classroom atmosphere also plays a crucial role in participation. A highly critical or unsupportive environment can discourage students from speaking

up, whereas a positive and inclusive setting fosters confidence and willingness to participate. Teachers must create a safe and encouraging space where students feel comfortable taking risks, asking questions, and contributing to discussions.

Challenges in Implementing Peer Learning

Peer learning has drawn attention as a way to increase students' active engagement in the classroom. Peer evaluation encourages accountability and teamwork by letting students evaluate one other's work (Topping, 2009). Nevertheless, despite its potential, educators have to address the difficulties associated with implementing peer evaluation. Action research offers a useful framework for overcoming these obstacles, enabling teachers to adapt peer learning techniques to suit the unique requirements of their students. Friendship biases (Sande & Illorente, 2014), time constraints (Falchikov, 2005; Nasab, 2015) and lack of proficiency in the target language (Cheng & Warren, 2005) have been cited as significant challenges in

implementing peer learning. Hence, it is important to carefully plan and monitor peer learning to ensure consistency and fairness, which can increase students' engagement.

Action Research as a Framework

In light of these difficulties, action research provides an adaptive method for dealing with the difficulties of putting peer evaluation into practice. Action research is a cyclical process of planning, acting, observing, and reflecting that is based on the principles of collaboration, reflection, and practical problem-solving (Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988). Kurt Lewin, a pioneer in action research, introduced spiral steps for action research (Smith, 1996).

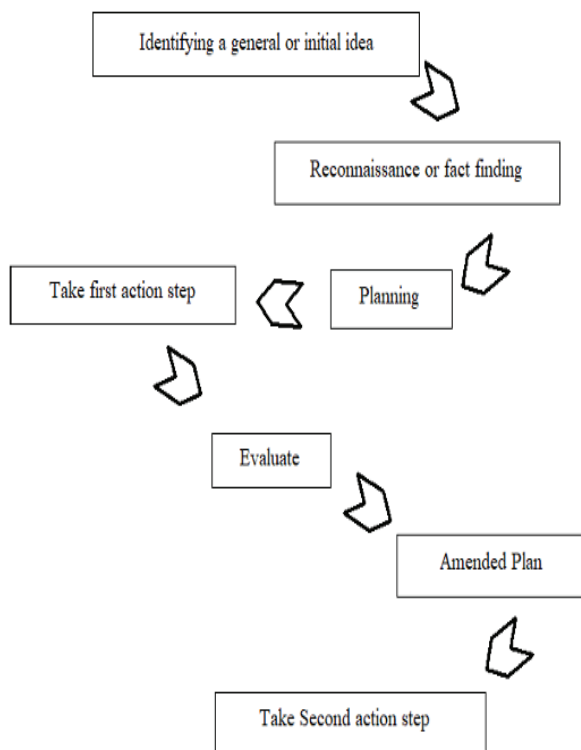


Figure 01. Diagram of Lewin's Spiral Steps for Action Research (Smith, 1996)

Using this approach, teachers can identify the problem, plan appropriate action to resolve the problem, take action, and evaluate the action to amend it before introducing the second action.

Research Gap

Despite the growing body of research on fostering student participation and the benefits of peer evaluation in education, there remain gaps, particularly in the context of ESL classes and higher education in Sri Lanka. While numerous global studies highlight the advantages of peer evaluation in enhancing student engagement, most of this research focuses on Western or developed educational systems (Topping, 2009; Liu & Carless, 2006). These systems often differ significantly from Sri Lanka's resource-limited, exam-driven educational environment, where teacher-led instruction tends to dominate over student-centered learning approaches (Wijeratne & Perera, 2020).

One significant research gap is the limited investigation into how Sri Lanka's cultural dynamics—such as hierarchical teacher-student relationships, collectivist values, and a strong emphasis on avoiding confrontation—affect the implementation of participatory methods like peer

learning. Hofstede's cultural dimensions theory suggests that in high power-distance societies, students may be hesitant to critique their peers or share opposing views (Hofstede, 2001). In Sri Lankan ESL classrooms, these cultural norms could reduce the effectiveness of peer evaluation as a tool for fostering active participation.

Furthermore, while psychological barriers to participation, such as the fear of making mistakes, have been extensively studied (Gregersen & Horwitz, 2002), there is limited research on how these barriers intersect with language proficiency challenges in non-native English-speaking contexts like Sri Lanka. Students with low confidence in their English skills may perceive peer evaluation as intimidating rather than supportive, further discouraging engagement.

Additionally, there is a lack of action research on leveraging peer evaluation to address low participation in Sri Lankan ESL classrooms. This highlights the need for region-specific studies that

consider the unique challenges and opportunities in Sri Lanka's educational landscape. By bridging these gaps, this study aims to provide practical insights into fostering student participation through culturally and contextually relevant strategies.

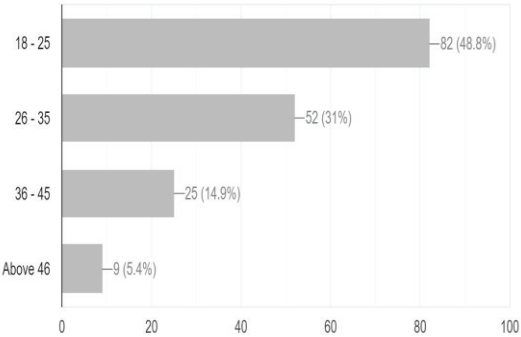
Methodology

Spiral Steps for Action Research Model introduced by Lewin (Smith,1996) was used to conduct the present study. Data were collected using mixed methods approach to examine how interaction can be increased through group-based peer-learning, and how the quality of essay writing skills can be enhanced through such interactive group-based learning. Using non-probability convenience sampling techniques, one hundred and sixty-eight (*N*-168) participants following a diploma in English course at a university in Sri Lanka, and two teachers teaching on the course participated in this study. The purpose of the study was explained to them, and their consent to participate in the study was obtained. The role of the two teachers was diverse. They helped the

researcher identify the problem, suggested different interventions to enhance learner participation and students’ essay writing skills. The role of the researcher was also diverse. While taking a class, he collaborated with the other two teachers to identify the problem, suggest different interventions to enhance learner participation, interaction and improve the quality of the extended essay of the students.

The age distribution of the student participants of the study is given below in Graph 1

Age - Choose the correct option
0 / 168 correct responses



Graph 1: Age of the participants

Each student on this program is expected to produce a four-thousand word extended essay on a topic selected by the student and approved by the teacher. Here, the students are encouraged to conduct mini research, collect data from different sources, and develop an extended essay. Traditionally, lectures were conducted to teach the basic principles regarding the essay and data collection, after which one-on-one supervision was carried out to facilitate the extended essay writing. However, this proved to be less interactive. Also, the learners appeared to directly copy from different sources and produce the essay. Following Kurt Lewin model of action research design, first, the problem was thus identified. Next, as the first intervention to overcome the issue of direct copying from sources and enhance learner interaction, the students were asked to develop the first draft of the essay in the classroom under the supervision of the teachers. The teachers facilitated the writing of the essay, yet the teachers found it difficult to pay individual attention to the students as there were more than fifty students per

class. Therefore, it was found that the learners struggled to develop the essay alone. Therefore, the teachers proposed to introduce the second intervention where the students were asked to work in small groups, obtain feedback from peers, and develop the essay. In order to further enhance the interaction through learner motivation, teachers suggested offering a mark for the work done each day, and this was the third intervention that was proposed to increase learner interaction. After conducting eight hour four such sessions to develop the different sections of the essay, the learners were asked to reflect and write the advantages and disadvantages regarding the interactive group-based peer-learning experience because it is only the learners themselves can allow us to glimpse their attitudes, judgments, and perceptions as Chavez (2003) pointed out. However, learners are hardly ever asked in any overt systematic way about their learning experiences (Barkhuizen, 1998). The present study randomly selected twenty-one reflective essays written by students and analyzed

them to investigate the learners' perception regarding group-based peer-learning experience. A closed-ended questionnaire was also shared among the participants to gather their opinion regarding group-based peer learning. Two teachers were interviewed to obtain their views. The reflective essays and interviews are useful to investigate phenomena that are not directly observable, such as learners' self-reported perceptions or attitudes (Mackey & Gass, 2005). The data obtained through the reflective essays and teacher interviews were analyzed using conventional qualitative content analysis where coding categories, as suggested by Hsieh and Shannon (2005), were derived directly and inductively from the raw data without using preconceived theories, categories or themes. This approach is useful to investigate complex phenomena, understand experiences and generate insights grounded in data (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). On the other hand, survey data were quantitatively analyzed using Microsoft Excel in order to produce descriptive statistics. When reporting the results in

this study, pseudonyms were used to maintain the confidentiality of the research participants.

The mixed methods approach was used in this study as it offers several benefits. For instance, Creswell (2003) and Dörnyei (2007), among others, pointed out that mixed methods approach appropriately and effectively combines the use of both quantitative and qualitative methodologies within the same study to address a single research question while ensuring the internal validity of the study by drawing the strengths and minimizing the weaknesses of each method. Ary, Jacobs, Sorensen, and Razavieh (2010) also claimed that the mixed methods approach uses both quantitative and qualitative approaches, and the findings of the mixed methods research are more dependable and provide a more complete explanation of the research problem than either method alone could provide. Therefore, the present study investigated the learners' perception regarding the integration of interactive group-based peer-learning

in an ESL essay writing class using a mixed methods approach in research.

Results and Discussion

The learners' and teachers' perception regarding the integration of interactive group-based peer-learning in an ESL essay writing class was obtained through reflective essays and interviews, respectively. Conventional qualitative content analysis was used to derive categories and themes directly from the data without imposing preconceived theories or frameworks. Accordingly, the following themes emerged;

- Peer collaboration and improvement of the quality of the essay
- Learning as a fun activity
- Increased interaction and active participation
- Development of speaking skills
- Challenges for effective implementation of group-based peer-learning

These results are further supported by the quantitative results obtained through the questionnaire. The following section reports and

discusses the qualitative and quantitative data of the present study.

Peer collaboration and improvement of the quality of the essay

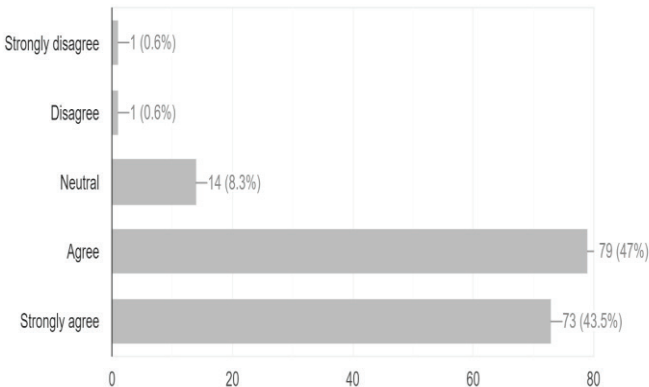
The majority of learners who submitted the reflective essays sharing their views regarding the interactive group-based peer-learning experience held a positive perception of the experience, which enabled them to collaboratively work and get help from the group members to develop a better extended essay. For instance, Samanali, a participant wrote in the reflective essay that “(We) can discuss with friends and collect new ideas.” A similar view was expressed by Yasodha - “Group conversations helped us to develop our essay.” In particular, this kind of group discussion is useful to the learners who have chosen similar topics. For instance, Niroda pointed out that “It is easy to share opinions with other colleagues who are working on similar topics.” This view is further supported by the opinion of Lakmali, who said that “(We) can discuss with others about our topic and get different ideas from them.” Some

participants tend to believe that group-based peer-learning helps them to become better writers. For instance, Bagya said that “(group-based peer-learning) makes us better writers.” At present, collaborative or group essay writing is popular in some educational contexts as this allows different individuals to bring diverse perspectives and expertise to the topic. Yet, the problem is that all the members in the group do not equally contribute. However, when everyone has to individually produce an essay on his/her own in collaboration with others on a topic selected by him/her and approved by the teacher, everyone has to work on it. Therefore, the context created in the present study encouraged every learner to collaborate and produce a quality essay. Papanikolaou and Gouli (2010) viewed this kind of collaboration as an opportunity for individual or personal development. This kind of collaborative writing is beneficial in the world of work because collaborative writing encourages group members to work together and improve teamwork spirit (Pham, 2021). More importantly, Pham (2021) claimed that

collaborative learning has a great effect on the

I think group based discussions helped me to improve the quality of my extended essay

0 / 168 correct responses



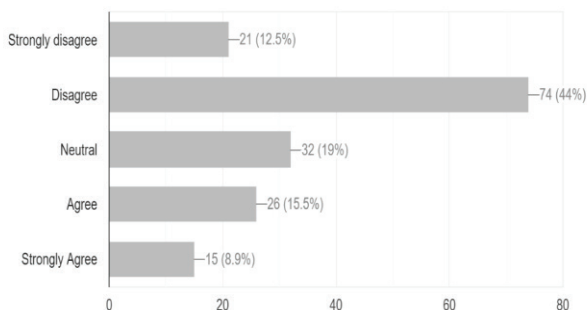
development of essay writing skills in both collaborative writing contexts as well as individual writing contexts. Thus, it is clear that the group-based learning helps learners to collaboratively develop the overall quality of the essay. Quantitative data collected via the Google questionnaire too supported the finding that group-based discussions helped the learners to improve the quality of the extended essay as Graph 2 below illustrates.

Graph 2: Learner views regarding the helpfulness of the group-based discussion to improve the quality of the essay

Accordingly, 90.5% of the participants agree (47% agree, 43.3% strongly agree) with the view that group-based discussions helped them to improve the quality of the extended essay. In order to get this view further confirmed, the statement, “I could have developed a better essay individually if I wrote it outside the classroom” was included in the questionnaire. The majority of learners (44% disagreed and 12.5% strongly disagreed) disagreed with this statement meaning that they were able to produce a better essay because they collaboratively developed it in the classroom.

I think I could have developed a better essay individually if I wrote it outside the classroom (alone at home)

0 / 168 correct responses



Graph 3: Learner views regarding the ability to develop the essay individually

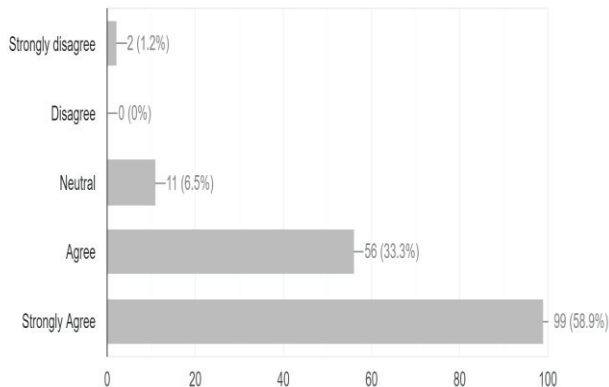
Learning as a fun activity

Another benefit of group-based peer learning is that it provides the learners with an opportunity to enjoy and learn. For instance, one participant wrote in the reflective essay that “We can share our experience and knowledge...We are having fun.” Binuri, another participant of the study said that “This is an interesting session. Class is active and enjoyable.” Also, this kind of group-based peer learning exercise

helps learners to complete the extended essay without any stress. For instance, Manjula stated that “...everyday we can finish chapter by chapter without getting tension.” These learner views support the notion that students working in groups share knowledge with each other and learn in an enjoyable manner. Quantitative data also supported this view that the learners enjoyed working with peers in groups to develop the extended essay. (Graph 4)

I enjoyed working with friends in groups

0 / 168 correct responses



Graph 4: learner views regarding their experience in working with friends in groups

Learning is often viewed at present as challenging and stressful. However, it is important to make learning fun at every level including the tertiary level because Krashen (1982), Rowe and Fitness (2018), and Nair (2022), among others, argue that negative emotions such as stress, anxiety and boredom impede learning. Therefore, group-based peer-learning can be identified as a learner friendly fun learning tool in ESL writing class.

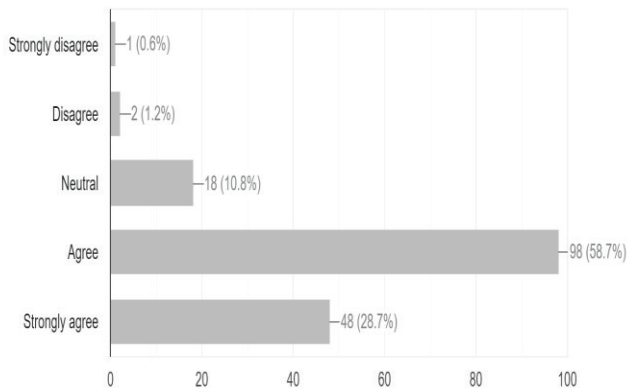
Increased interaction and active participation

Group-based peer-learning enhances interaction among learners and ensures learners' active participation in the classroom. For instance, Samadhi stated that “(We) can develop interaction with others.” Quantitative data obtained through the questionnaire also confirmed this view. Graph 5 below shows that 88.3% of participants stated that group discussions improved interaction and the

learners' active participation in the extended essay writing activity.

Group discussions improved interaction and my active participation in the extended essay writing activity

0 / 167 correct responses



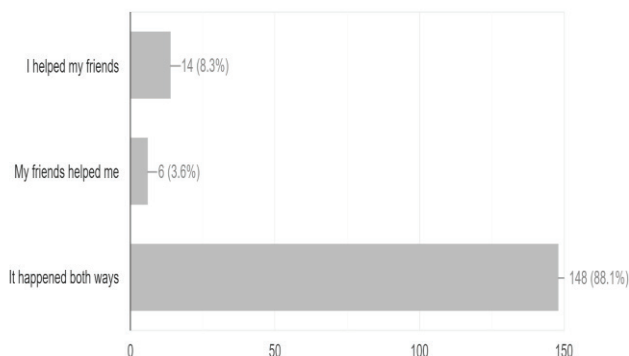
Graph 5: Learner views regarding the potential of group discussions to improve interaction and active participation

When learners show an increased interaction and active participation in the learning process, they tend to acquire better. This is in accordance with the Think–Pair–Share (TPS) active-learning strategy developed by Professor Frank Lyman in 1981 with

the intention of increasing classroom participation (Cooper et al., 2021). The difference of the think-group-share model proposed in the present study is that it tends to produce richer results than think-pair-share model because more than two participants collaborate and develop the essay in group-based peer-learning context. Interaction Theory of Language Development (Rudd & Lambert, 2011) also claims that language acquisition takes place better as a result of the interaction between the learner and the others in the environment. The following graph (Graph 6) further reveals how learners have mutually benefited from the expertise of their peers.

Which of the following mostly happened during the discussions?

0 / 168 correct responses



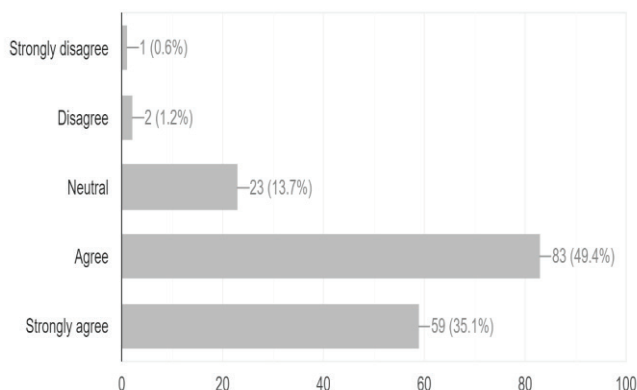
Graph 6: Learner views regarding their experience during the group discussions

Generally, the participants of the present study were satisfied with the feedback they received from their peers to develop the essay. For instance, Sandunika said that “...(I) was able to get the opinion of others on my writing.” Similarly, Nirosha in the reflective essay said that “(I) can get feedback from the friends and identify my errors.” These views imply that the participants willingly accepted the comments and feedback of their peers. Survey data also supported this finding. For instance, 84.5% of the participants

of the present study were satisfied with the support they received from their peers to develop the essay (See graph 7). This finding rejects Min's (2005) claim that the comments given by peers are often vague and non-specific, and therefore, the writers disregard such comments during the writer's revision in ESL writing class. In contrast, the findings of the present study suggest that the learners have benefited from the feedback of their peers.

I am satisfied with the support I received from my friends to develop the extended essay

0 / 168 correct responses

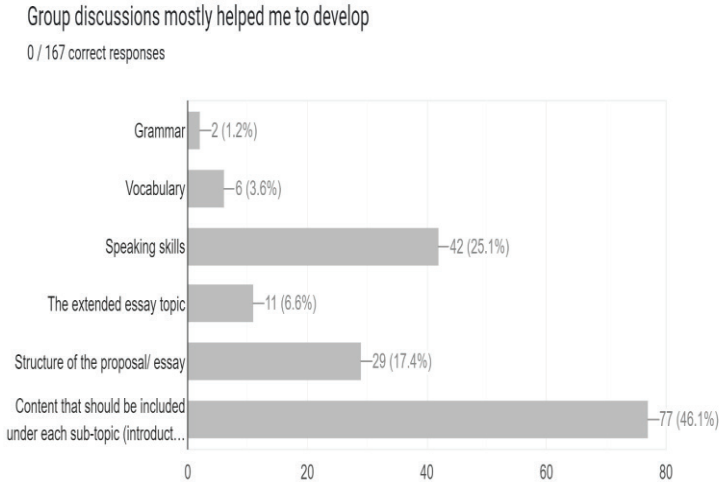


Graph 7: Learner views regarding the support they received from their friends during the essay writing process

Development of speaking skills

The learners who were involved in group-based peer learning have benefited in numerous ways. For instance, the participants in the reflective essays wrote that they were able to interact with their classmates and improve writing skills, speaking skills, and teamwork skills. Max shared in the reflective essay that group-based peer learning “...helps (him) to enhance writing skills as well speaking skills.” The research consistently shows that group discussions are useful to develop speaking skills in the language classroom. For instance, Bohari (2019), among others, pointed out that small group discussion has a positive effect on the development of the speaking skills. These findings are further supported by the quantitative data. Accordingly, interactive peer-learning helped learners develop different elements of the essay and various language skills. Jayantha in his reflective essay wrote that

“(Group-based peer-learning) enhances overall learning.” These views are further supported by survey data. As graph 8 indicates, the group-based discussions have helped the learners to improve the content of the extended essay (46.9%), their speaking skills (25.3%) and the structure of the essay (17.4%).



Graph 8: Learner views regarding the development of different skills during the discussions with their friends

Teacher participants too held positive views regarding interactive group-based writing. They pointed out that students were able to produce the extended essay without directly copying from other sources and earn a mark too. More importantly, teachers agreed with the view that the students displayed an increased active participation during the group-based peer-learning exercises.

Challenges for effective implementation of group-based peer-learning

There exist several challenges to effectively implement group-based peer learning in ESL essay writing class. First, a major drawback of this kind of activity as reported by the student participants, was that they did not have enough resources in the classroom to gather information necessary for the essay. For instance, Niluka wrote in the reflective essay that “It can be difficult to find information to use for the essay because we mostly use internet to get information.” Similarly, Sudesh who participated in the study said that “ We have to bring every resource we might think will be helpful for us to

write the essay.” Therefore, when organizing this kind of group based interactive writing activity, the teachers need to make sure that the resources such as internet and books are made available in the classroom for the learners to obtain relevant information instantly and produce a good piece of writing collaboratively.

Although previous research found that ESL learners found it difficult to engage in group-based peer-learning due to the limited proficiency of the learners (e.g. Cheng & Warren, 2005; Dochy, 2001; Kuo, 2015), the participants of the present study have not reported such a concern. There seem to be two main reasons for this. First, the adult diploma in English students of the present study possess a satisfactory proficiency of the English language. Therefore, language proficiency may not hinder the effective implementation of group-based peer-learning among diploma in English students. Second, students may use their local languages to offer feedback although the teachers request not to use mother tongue in the

groups to share ideas and offer feedback. However, whether the students use the target language or the local languages to share ideas and offer feedback should be studied separately in future studies. What is evident in this study is that the participants did not find it difficult to offer comments and feedback to the peers in the group.

Previous studies reported that peer-learning is time-consuming (e.g. Falchikov, 2005; Nasab, 2015), yet the participants of the present study did not identify peer-learning to be a time-consuming activity. Instead, the participants of the present study seemed to believe that the time spent for group-based peer-learning compensates for the improved learning. Therefore, no participant in the present study stated that group-based peer-learning is a time-consuming activity.

Although previous studies also reported that friendship biases hinder the effective implementation of peer-learning (e.g. Sande & Illorente, 2014), the participants of the present study did not state that

friendship biases hinder the effective implementation of group-based peer-learning. The reasons could be that adult diploma learners of the present study may be able to offer constructive feedback objectively and impartially. Also, the group members voluntarily accept the feedback and comments given by their friends. The way group-based peer-learning is implemented in this study is also a reason why it works better. For instance, the teacher offers a mark at the end of each peer-learning session. Therefore, the aim of every learner is to produce a quality piece of writing. Hence, the participants integrate the peers' comments and feedback into their writing and make an effort to produce a quality piece of writing.

Previous studies have identified poor language proficiency, excessive time and friendship biases as challenges to implement peer-learning effectively, yet the findings of the present study refute these previous findings. Instead, the results of the present study revealed a new challenge i.e. the unavailability

of adequate resources in the language classroom to successfully implement group-based peer-learning.

The present study is not without limitations. Selection of sample from one study program tend to be a limitation of the present study. Therefore, future studies on group-based peer-learning can be conducted using different study programs. Also, teacher participants can be asked to maintain observational notes which can be used to gain more insights into the phenomenon under study.

Conclusion and recommendations

Previous research consistently suggests that interaction and active learner participation ensure better learning. The present collaborative action research was conducted to examine the potential benefits of group-based peer-learning to enhance interaction and active learner participation in an English essay writing class using a mixed methods approach. The data revealed that the majority of learners held positive perceptions regarding

interactive group-based essay writing because it helped them to improve the quality of the essay and enhance interaction and active participation. Similar findings were reported by Topping (2005) and Zhu and Carless (2018) who claimed that collaborative peer learning helps students to improve and construct knowledge together through interaction, negotiation and collaboration. However, these findings refute the claim made by Min (2005) who argues that peers usually offer vague non-specific feedback and provide no solid explanations, and as such good suggestions of the peers are often ignored by EFL learners (Min, 2005).

A byproduct of this kind of interactive group-based essay writing is that it helps learners to develop speaking skills. This finding is consistent with the previous findings of Bohari (2019) who claimed that small group discussion has a positive effect on the development of speaking skills. Similarly, interactive group-based peer-learning can enhance key skills such as teamwork skills, communication skills and

collaborative skills. The teacher participants of the study too believed that during the group-based essay writing process, learners displayed an increased active participation. This increased active participation leads to the development of language skills. Also, the conducive learner friendly stress-free environment created by group-based peer-learning helps learners develop their language skills because negative emotions such as stress, anxiety and boredom that impede learning as Krashen (1982), Rowe and Fitness (2018), and Nair (2022) argue are not present in such a group-based peer-learning environment. Therefore, group-based peer-learning can be used as an effective educational tool in ESL writing classrooms to enhance the learners' writing and other skills. However, when organizing these kinds of group based interactive writing activities in the class, the resources such as books, internet, etc. should be made available in the classroom for the learners to obtain relevant information instantly and produce a good piece of writing collaboratively.

Limitations and Future Research

Future studies can be conducted in an environment where mixed-ability peers work together and resources are available for the learners to produce a good piece of writing, because such studies may help us avoid potential variability in group dynamism and resource constraints and examine how group-based peer-learning helps learners enhance collaboration and improve their writing. Also, future research can be conducted to investigate if fixed groups are more effective than flexible group arrangements where each day learners work with new peers. The findings of such research will shed further light on the effectiveness of group-based peer learning in ELT and other similar contexts.

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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