



Learners' Reflections on Team-based Learning in English Academic Writing Course

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Abstract

The purpose of this classroom research was to shed light on the learners' reflections on the impact and benefits of team-based learning (TBL) strategies in an Upper Intermediate English for Academic Writing course offered to multinational students from graduate programs in an international university in Thailand. The respondents of the study included 18 students of five nationalities from three different graduate programs who were enrolled in a non-credit English course as a part of their admission requirement as well as for the improvement of their academic English skills for successful completion of their study programs. The mixed methods were employed; included were the use of a survey questionnaire and focus group interview. The findings from both quantitative and qualitative data confirmed the positive impact of team-based learning on the learners' learning experiences, academic English skills as well as interpersonal and thinking skills.

Keywords: team-based learning (TBL), 21st century skills, multinational students, academic writing course

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Introduction

In response to the heightened awareness and fast-changing needs of 21st century skills and career readiness in the higher education arena, educators and researchers have recently been searching for ways and means to integrate the five skills: critical thinking, creativity, collaboration, metacognition and motivation (Hidi & Harackiewicz, 2000; Lai & Viering, 2012) in the curriculum and instruction at all levels of education. Among the prominent teaching and learning strategies which garner much attention and interest are active learning strategies such as problem-based learning, collaborative and cooperative learning and team-based learning. Team-based learning (TBL) refers to an approach in active learning strategy with a structured form of small-group learning – usually permanently throughout the course of learning with the emphasis on student preparation before or out of class, application of knowledge in class, and evaluation on individual and team performance with meaningful feedback (Michaelsen & Sweet, 2008; Khogali, 2013; Ahn, Rotgans, Rajalingam, Lee, Koh, & Low-Beer, 2017; Schmidt, Rotgans, Rajalingam, & Low-Beer, 2019). In general practice, students are organized and grouped strategically into teams of 5-7 students that work together throughout the course. Diversity among the team members is considered a beneficial factor which enhances learning opportunities. Before each unit or module of the course, students are to prepare themselves with reading assignments or exercises prior to class. Initial tests are given to check on individual's comprehension on the topics or tasks before the teams are assigned to work together on similar but more complex tasks. Assessment on the team performance, peer evaluation and feedback play crucial roles in the successful implementation of TBL.

Since its introduction in 1979 by Larry Michaelsen who originally developed this active learning strategy to solve his class size problems, team-based learning has been gaining much attention beyond its original objectives. Initially, Michaelsen aimed to create an effective



teaching method to make possible active student participation and effective learning in his large classes at the University of Central Missouri (Schmidt et al, 2019). However, many studies have asserted that team-based learning can not only consolidate learners' conceptual and procedural knowledge but also help develop various necessary skills for their academic and career success, namely: critical thinking, problem-solving and interpersonal skills (Ahn et al, 2017). The advantages of TBL are well appraised and affirmed (Michaelson & Sweet, 2008; Khogali, 2013) as TBL can bring about the opportunities for active and collaborative learning, even in large classes. Students are more engaged with the lessons and activities and encouraged to take charge of their own learning and become accountable and autonomous. Furthermore, TBL promote higher thinking skills including problem-solving and critical thinking. When working as a team and developing their team-working skills, students will become aware of their own strengths and weaknesses and thus be able to improve their own performance as an individual and a team member. Most importantly, working as a team is beneficial when the assignments or lesson contents are beyond their comprehension as an individual so TBL can help bridge the gap and help the weak students to keep up with their peers. Recent studies focusing on the use of TBL in classroom teaching in higher education reported many benefits of TBL in various disciplines. Arifani (2016) and Salari & Hosseini (2019) conceded that in their EFL contexts TBL-related learning activities were beneficial in enhancing students' performance and that systematic implementation of teamwork was of great significance for language learning.

In the context of the Academic English Writing course with multinational graduate students, this study aimed to investigate the students' reflections on the team-based learning strategies as employed in the course and their impact on their learning experiences. As a classroom research (Nunan & Bailey, 2009), this study primarily focused on the systematic process of investigating the target questions and issues related to the teaching and learning process and



performance as it was conducted by the class teacher with the aim to better understand her learners, better cater to their needs and thus improve her teaching practice.

Literature Review

Based on the discussion on the theoretical basis of Team-based learning provided by Hrynychak & Batty (2012) and Kaufman (2003), TBL is closely connected to constructivist learning as it shared certain similar elements, in particular: the main focus on the mental representation of information by learners and the roles of teachers as facilitators of the learning process. In addition, they pointed out the significance of learners in coping with the inconsistencies and differences between their prior conceptions and new learning experiences and the importance of reflection in the learning process. Michaelsen & Sweet (2008) in their discussion of the four essential elements of TBL addressed the importance of role shifting of both teachers and students to ensure the effectiveness of this active learning strategy. Drastic changes are needed for the teachers to ensure that the instructional process is appropriately designed and carried out and their students are taking the active roles as engaged and responsible learners. For the changes to successfully occur and the learning objectives achieved with the implementation of TBL, Michaelsen & Sweet (2008) suggested the following four elements: group formation and management, student accountability, useful feedback, and meaningful assignments. They proposed that the teachers must ensure that the students are grouped together with adequate resources and opportunities to develop group synergy and to learn as a team. Special attention must be paid in group management to avoid the potential of a cohesive subgroup which may hinder the students from actually establishing and fostering the desired group dynamics. With the adoption of TBL, students are expected to be accountable not just to the teacher but to their teammates for both the completion and quality of their individual work and performance. Peer evaluation as well as



the assessment of team performance are strongly recommended to confirm that each team member makes the required and quality contributions for the team success. For effective implementation of TBL, the element of feedback is of considerable importance. This notion is confirmed by Hattie & Timperley (2007) whose metanalysis study proposed that feedback, if and when timely and positively provided, is one of the most influential factors in learners' performance and achievements. The last essential element is the design and management of meaningful assignments. The teachers must take into consideration the opportunities and possibilities for the students to interact with one another with shared goals and practical solution plans and presentation of results. The tasks given may involve complex concepts and information; however, they should require the students to discuss, consult and negotiate among themselves and to present their solutions or decisions in simple and practical plans or reports (Michaelsen & Sweet, 2008).

In regard to the proper and effective design of lesson plans and class activities, many suggest that the design should be divided into several stages: pre-class, in-class and after-class (Khogali, 2013; Sibley & Ostafichuk, 2014). The pre-class preparation is necessary as the teachers are to provide the students with sufficient information and necessary resources such as timetable with specific topics for each session, reading materials or other self-study resources. For effective implementation of in-class activities, the readiness assurance process (RAP) is accentuated as a requirement (Gopalan, Fox, & Gaebelein, 2013). The RAP can begin with a teacher-made test or tasks on key concepts from the earlier provided reading materials. It can also be taken in steps, starting with checking the individual's readiness, and then the team's readiness as they work on the same test or task. Students will be given opportunities and time allotted to appeal for any unclear concepts or mistakes they make after getting further explanation or clarification from the teacher before they complete the team assignments. For the



after-class application, after the team presentation, the teachers are to provide useful feedback on the team project, team performance and peer evaluation is strongly recommended as a part of the assessment criteria (Khogali, 2013; Sibley & Ostafichuk, 2014).

Methodology

The study was conducted as a mixed methods research (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018) which combines at least one quantitative method of data collection (the survey questionnaire) and one qualitative method of data collection (the focus group interview). The survey questionnaire consisted of 4 parts as follows:

Part 1: Respondents' profile (program of study, nationality, age and gender)

Part 2: Course design evaluation (contents, instruction performance, class activities, course assessment)

Part 3: Learning experiences (knowledge and comprehension, English language skills, academic skills, critical thinking, problem-solving and collaborative skills)

Part 4: Additional comments and suggestions

There were dichotomous and multiple-choice questions in Part 1. In Part 2 and Part 3, respondents were asked to indicate their responses to the items from strongly agree, agree, disagree and strongly disagree. The respondents were asked to provide any comments or suggestions they might have in Part 4. To ensure the validity and reliability of the instrument (Lodico, Spaulding, & Voegtle, 2006), it was submitted for expert opinions and a few items were added and modified. The survey was administered in the last 30-minute session on the second last class and the respondents were asked with informed consent to answer all items honestly in confidentiality. The quantitative data analysis was descriptive in nature, yielding the findings on the respondents' profile and reflections on their learning experiences. The findings were later



used to guide some the construction of the semi-structured questions for the focus group interview with the focus on how the TBL impact their learning experiences as an individual and a team member.

The focus group interview was conducted on the last class of the course with the aims to collect data from all participants and to record any observable interactions and group dynamics among participants. As suggested by Lodico et al (2006), the focus group can capture the participants' reflections and views on their experiences in relation to the research questions. The researcher acted as the moderator and recorder to facilitate and keep the discussion on track. Later the qualitative data were processed, analyzed based on content and frequency of data and used to confirm the findings from the survey. Some excerpts from the participants were also included in the presentation of findings. The session took approximately 90 minutes and all 18 survey respondents participated.

Findings

The survey respondents (n=18) were aged between 23 to 45 with 7 male and 11 female graduate students from English Language Teaching, Education (Curriculum and Instruction) and Information Technology Management programs. Their profile data is presented below.

Nationality	Female		Male	
	23-35	36-45	23-35	36-45
Thai	1	2	2	
Chinese	4	2	2	
Burmese	1		2	
Vietnamese				1
Korean	1			



Reflections on the course: contents, instruction performance, class activities, course assessment

All respondents agreed (with 61 % strongly agreed) that the course was well designed as the contents and topics were relevant to the learning objectives as stated in the course outline and well reflected in the assessment activities and tasks as stated in the course timetable. All respondents stated their agreement with 39% said that they strongly agreed that the instruction performance was satisfactory as the teacher was resourceful, approachable and delivered all lessons clearly and comprehensively. All respondents agreed and more than half strongly agreed that class activities were well organized with sufficient time and relevancy. For each 3-hour session, the lecture on the topics would take approximately 60 minutes. After the short break of 10-15 minutes, the teacher gave a brief explanation of the assessment task, checked and confirmed clear understanding of all students and then assigned team tasks with specific requirements and time limit. Each team would give a 5-minute presentation of their work and feedback from both the teacher and peers would follow. All respondents agreed that the course assessment was consistent and reflected the learning objectives, with 39 % stated their strong agreement. At the beginning of the course, they were provided with the course outline with detailed information of the mark allocation and assessment criteria and tasks. They were evaluated based on their team performance in class presentations and written assignments submitted later.

Reflections on learning experiences: knowledge and comprehension, English language skills, academic skills, critical thinking, problem-solving and collaborative skills

All respondents expressed their agreement that they gained knowledge and understanding of all topics covered in the course: English grammar and vocabulary for academic writing, analytical reading skills, class presentation skills, academic writing skills (summarizing, paraphrasing, referencing and in-text citation), with 39% of them expressed their strong



agreement. For their experiences on the development of critical thinking, problem-solving and collaborative skills, with 78% of the respondents strongly agreed -all respondents agreed that they had the opportunities to participate, engage and develop both the cognitive and interpersonal skills as they worked with the team on various assignments and tasks.

In conclusion, there was no significant differences in the responses between male and female respondents or those of different age groups. Respondents from the ELT and Education (Curriculum and Instruction) mostly expressed strong agreement in relation to their satisfaction and achievements in content knowledge and understanding, while most Chinese respondents expressed strong agreement to the development of critical thinking and collaborative skills.

Based on the additional comments provided in Part 4 of the survey questionnaire and the data obtained from the focus group interview, it can be concluded that the qualitative data of the findings confirmed those of the quantitative from the survey. The additional findings can be concluded as follows:

1. All participants confirmed that the TBL approach enabled them to be aware of their roles and responsibilities as a team member and encouraged them to put in more efforts to their contributions. In the process, they also believed that they gained more confidence and control of their own learning and developed better time management skills as they had to work on the same team schedule for meetings and task completion. Most became confident and were satisfied with the improvement in their learning performance.

Student A: *This course provided me great help for my academic writing and learning performance. It gave me a clear direction and effective work habits when I had to work with other people, and I think this will be helpful later when I start my teaching career after graduation. I think I learned a lot what it means to work as a team and how to become successful together.*



2. Most participants (89%) felt that they had developed positive and meaningful relationships with classmates through the team activities. They felt that they had broadened their perspectives and learned to better appreciate the cultural diversity among their peers.

Student B: Taking this course, I know the happiness of studying again. I made a lot of new friends and we worked together smoothly even though we sometimes had trouble understanding each other because we had to communicate in English which was not our first language. I think I have managed to get rid of some of my preconceptions and stereotypes after working with my teammates from different cultural and language backgrounds.

3. Almost all students (94%) believed that they developed better problem-solving skills and they could avoid many difficulties during their teamwork sessions because each member had clear understanding about their roles and responsibilities, expectations, objectives of the tasks and shared goals of the team. The introduction of the course with the extensive explanation on the concepts and process of TBL at the beginning of the course was deemed an integral part to the satisfactory completion of all class assignments. The pre-class discussions and warnings, in particular, about what could go wrong in terms of team work process and outcomes proved to be very beneficial as they were mentally prepared and technically ready to deal with various counterproductive issues such as differences of opinion, low performance, personality clashes and goal differences.

Student C: Besides the patience and consistent advice and guidance from the teacher, we felt that we could overcome the problems we faced during the team sessions without much headache and heartache because we were constantly reminded about the task objectives and our shared goals. We always started the work process for each task by first identifying and allocating the roles and responsibilities for each member. Knowing that some problems could happen somehow helped us manage to avoid them or stop them once spotted.



4. Some participants (28%) reasoned that TBL helped them to overcome their lack of confidence in English speaking skills and become more motivated learners. As they could prepare well before class according the topics as stated in the course timetable with the provided texts and reading materials, they gained more confidence to voice their opinions and negotiate with their teammates on options for the selection of task process or design.

Student D: *I felt all the preparation before class was truly helpful. I always felt timid in class and frustrated about my lack of confidence to talk about my ideas. I hated myself being so quiet and not joining the discussion with my classmates. But when I could prepare for class, especially getting familiarized with all the vocabulary related to the topics, I became more confident in my English and wanted to share more of my ideas with my teammates.*

5. All participants supported the view that feedback- when given timely and effectively with positive attitudes and in friendly atmosphere - was most consequential in cultivating the higher thinking skills and fostering the abilities and habits of self-evaluation and reflecting on one's learning process.

Student E: *The teacher provided us feedback on our individual and team performance with advice and suggestions on how to improve the way we worked on the assignments. She provided many learning tools to encourage our learning and skills. Other friends also gave some useful ideas and comments. My thinking became clearer when I evaluated my classmates and when I listened to their evaluation of my performance. I think I have become more rational and systematic in the way I think about myself and others when we work together.*



Discussion

Though the findings from both the survey questionnaire and focus group interview confirmed what has been proposed by previous studies (Michaelsen & Sweet, 2008; Khogali, 2013; Ahn et al, 2017; Schmidt et al, 2019), in particular those conducted with EFL learners (Arifani, 2016; Salari & Hosseini, 2019), there are other aspects and issues recommended for further investigation. Some suggestions for future studies include the impact of the pre-class preparation on the learners' perceptions toward the benefits of TBL and the exploration of the impact of the multicultural factors of the learners which are not delved into in this study due to the time constraint. The study has other limitations that should be highlighted. First, this classroom research yielded the findings which may be relevant only to the contexts of the class under investigation and might not be generalizable for practice in other environments due to the specific characteristics of the course and students. Second, the threat of subjectivity and bias in the data analysis does exist as the researcher was the sole recorder and processor of all data as well as the course teacher. However, all precautions and efforts were taken to ensure the reliability of the data processing and analysis based on the guidelines suggested by Lodico et al, (2006). For instruction implications, teachers who may be interested and would like to modify their class practice with similar TBL strategies should pay special attention to the following:

1. Extensive explanation and comprehensive discussions - if possible some time allotted for a simple simulation, of the practical and effective team work process, specific expectations of the individual performance and team contributions and assessment criteria are of utmost importance for the success of TBL in the classroom. No matter how faithfully the teacher may implement TBL strategies in their teaching process, it does not guarantee that the students will truly benefit from the activities when they are not fully aware of the benefits, specific processes involved, desired outcomes or possible difficulties. Students will become more engaged and motivated in their learning as they are well equipped with necessary knowledge and know-how.



2. Teachers must be willing and determined to invest their time and resources to ensure a learner-centered climate for the class, prepare well in advance all necessary materials and resources as required for various teaching and learning activities, respond timely and positively to students' needs (which may vary greatly even in a small class), manage well all alternative assessment activities and tasks with practicality and positive washback, and offer useful and meaningful feedback. This is going to be time-consuming and requires a high degree of academic and professional competence on the part of the teachers.

3. If not properly managed and monitored, TBL may mislead some students to be under the impression that they are simply teaching themselves and one another as they discuss the concepts and work on the solutions and completion of the tasks with their teammates and even perform part of the evaluation themselves. Thus, the implementation of pre-class preparation and tests for readiness assurance process (RAP) must be accompanied by the practical lesson lecture with all key concepts explained and adequate examples provided.

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