UNIVERSITY ENGLISH MAJORS' PERCEPTIONS OF USING COLLABORATIVE BRAINSTORMING TO FACILITATE THEIR ARGUMENTATIVE ESSAY WRITING

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Abstract - Academic writing necessitates the presence of captivating ideas, which are presented clearly and persuasively through well-organized analysis. Within the context of Dong Nai Technology University, numerous English majors frequently encounter difficulties in generating ideas in their argumentative essays. Although there is no prescribed method for creating ideas, collaborative brainstorming can be a useful pre-writing activity to support the generation and organization of students' ideas. The current study seeks to investigate 80 English major students' perceptions on the use of collaborative brainstorming during the initial stage of their essay-writing process. The data were subjected to both qualitative and quantitative analysis, which was reinforced by the use of closed-ended questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. The majority of students expressed their enthusiasm for this pre-writing activity and highlighted numerous benefits associated with the usage of this method. This study shows the need for group brainstorming as a typical activity in English classes.

Key words - Academic writing; Argumentative essays; Collaborative brainstorming

1. Introduction

1.1. Background

Academic writing is a prevalent means of evaluating university students, who are required to complete several written tasks. However, acquiring proficiency in this skill proves challenging for many students [1]. Students struggle with writing in English due to the complex cognitive and linguistic methods required in the writing process, which they are unsure about [2].

The traditional and familiar product-based approach is typically favored by teachers in academic English writing programs at the Faculty of Foreign Languages, Dong Nai Technology University. The methodology entails students imitating a writing sample, such as paragraphs, emails, or letters that is presented during the pre-writing stage. In addition, the students frequently get writing assignments as isolated exercises, separate from other classroom activities, and with limited or no chances to engage with their peers. This could potentially result in a decrease in students' motivation to write. The absence of motivation may not solely be attributed to unappealing writing assignments, but rather the consequence of recurrent writing encounters.

The significance of academic writing is emphasized even more when senior English majors at the faculty are mandated to possess the ability to compose several genres of essays. Nevertheless, professors frequently encounter students' grievances over the dearth of ideas in writing classes, particularly when students are tasked with composing argumentative essays.

The intricacy of the writing process requires the utilization of a diverse range of strategies, and activities in the classrooms. Writing strategies aid student writers in enhancing and cultivating ideas, while also promoting more structured writing frameworks. Student writers should engage in the process of developing ideas and also analyze, organize, and modify their work. According to research findings [3] and [4], brainstorming can stimulate thinking and motivate learners to begin their writing. Brainstorming has a crucial function in generating ideas during the pre-writing stage, and it is commonly employed by teachers in their classrooms [3]. Also, brainstorming is a pre-writing strategy used in teaching and learning that can inspire new interests, motivate and stimulate learning activities, and even have a psychological impact on students [4]. Brainstorming can be utilised either individually or in a collaborative manner. Group brainstorming is a collaborative strategy in which a team gathers together to collectively develop a large number of ideas, as opposed to solo brainstorming when one person does all the thinking alone. Nevertheless, certain literature has indicated that it is important to assess the impact of collaborative brainstorming on idea productivity since it has the potential to enhance idea output. The explanation states that collaborative brainstormers can derive advantages from the diverse perspectives and abilities of their peers. This is because individuals in a group can intellectually stimulate one another, leading to the generation of ideas. Additionally, group members can provide support to each other, resulting in the production of a greater number of ideas [5]. Implementing cutting-edge instructional techniques at the initial phase of learning will greatly enhance the efficiency of the learning process and the transmission of information and educational materials throughout that period.

However, prior research studies typically concentrate on the impacts of brainstorming on students' written work. The researchers of the current study aimed to investigate the learners' perspectives on the use of brainstorming, particularly collaborative brainstorming, in academic writing classes to enhance and inspire their writing of argumentative essays.

1.2. Research Objectives

This study aimed to gather students' perspectives on the efficacy of collaborative brainstorming in an Academic Writing course.

Research question: What are the students' perceptions of the use of collaborative brainstorming in argumentative writing classes?

1.3. Literature review

1.3.1. Argumentative writing

Prior studies on English as a Foreign Language (EFL) writing classes have indicated that students exhibited inadequate proficiency in composing argumentative essays [6, 7]. EFL learners frequently encounter difficulties in areas such as vocabulary, grammar, organization, and mechanics, all while striving to produce a satisfactory written work. This demonstrates that writing is a challenge for EFL learners, especially when it comes to composing argumentative essays.

The objective of argumentative writing is to persuade the audience. Research indicates that the proficiency of EFL learners in writing argumentative essays is moderate [8]. The respondents' low scores in grammar and their inability to compose organized essays have been corroborated by [7]. Furthermore, a separate study indicates that EFL learners possess a moderate disposition towards writing, but see it as challenging and anxiety-inducing [9].

The need to cultivate argumentation skills in educational settings has been progressively acknowledged as crucial [10]. Over the past decades, there has been an increasing focus on argumentative reading and writing in higher education settings. As a crucial academic competency, students must be able to identify and assess the structure of arguments, as well as construct well-founded arguments themselves. The students' argumentative writing abilities are regularly assessed using internationally recognized language proficiency tests such as TOEFL and IELTS, providing evidence of their skills.

Engaging in thorough discussions and meticulous planning of an academic essay is crucial for students to generate high-quality pieces of academic argumentative writing [11]. Choosing to immediately begin writing an essay without taking the time to contemplate the question at hand is likely to lead to a diminished grade. Therefore, academic writing professors must emphasize the significance of pre-writing procedures while instructing their students on how to create an argumentative essay.

1.3.2. Collaborative Brainstorming

When presented with an essay prompt, students commence by quickly recording on paper all their previously acquired knowledge pertaining to the topic of the essay question. However, generating ideas for an argumentative essay can be more challenging because of the complexity of the writing process. Teachers who address students' complaints about a lack of ideas in writing classes are advised to employ brainstorming, a technique that research has shown to stimulate thinking and motivate learners to begin writing [3].

Brainstorming is a cognitive process aimed at generating creative ideas prior to the creation of a product [12]. This artistic endeavor employs various techniques for generating ideas, including mind-mapping, note-taking, outlining, and numerous more. The objective of a brainstorming session is to generate a multitude of ideas. According to Maghsoudi and Haririan [2], the fundamental teaching of the method has a notable impact on the acquisition of English language abilities, particularly in writing.

Multiple studies have analyzed the concept of brainstorming. Nevertheless, there has been a lack of comprehensive investigation into the topic of collaborative brainstorming. In a higher learning institution, Arumugam conducted a study to examine the patterns of interaction among students during group writing activities. She stated that the students were actively engaged in strategizing their approach to their writing assignments. Learners were given a sufficient amount of time to plan their write-up. The majority of group members actively contributed their ideas and perspectives throughout this phase, frequently assisting their peers in enhancing sentence construction to effectively convey their viewpoints. She saw that the participants engaged in brainstorming before proceeding to the task of writing. Additionally, it was observed that the learners placed greater emphasis on the process of planning, which helped them to effectively structure and arrange their ideas in a systematic manner. The learners' strategic planning enhanced their writing proficiency [11]. Hence, through collaborative brainstorming, the inclusion of other viewpoints frequently results in enhanced answers that an individual may have overlooked. According to Manouchehry et.al, students should possess the ability to effectively generate ideas as a result of their experience working in a group [13].

Group brainstorming is the generation of ideas without any restrictions, allowing all participants to contribute any relevant thoughts or concepts to the collective conversation. The discussion will be rich in ideas as it will involve multiple students contributing their thoughts [14]. The benefits of brainstorming sessions are twofold. Firstly, for the group, they facilitate the organization and selection of ideas, enabling them to choose the most suitable topic. Secondly, for each individual member, the comments exchanged during these sessions serve as a catalyst for expanding their thinking and generating a greater number of ideas for their papers. Teachers must emphasize that in a brainstorming session, all ideas should be recorded without regard to structure or significance. Put simply, students engage in the exploration of ideas without imposing any limitations on their thoughts or interrupting the process to critically analyze or filter what they have written.

Multiple prior researches have been conducted on the impact of the brainstorming technique in the context of teaching writing. In a study conducted by Mahdian Mehr et al. [15], it was found that brainstorming had a beneficial impact on students' writing accomplishments. The participants' work was greatly influenced by the use of brainstorming technique, as it provided them with the necessary guidance to produce more successful work. Abedianpour and Omidvari [4] found that there is a notable correlation between the use of brainstorming approach and the writing proficiency of the specific group being studied. Furthermore, it was discovered that a significant majority of the learners felt brainstorming to be an effective approach for improving their writing skills.

In addition, Fawzi and Hussein [16] did a study comparing several methods of improving students' motivation to write essays, specifically focusing on the use

of brainstorming. The study included a total of twelve female students who were enrolled at Qatar University. The study utilized two types of instruments: a free brainstorming sheet instruction and a guided journalistic brainstorming sheet instruction. Once the students were organized into groups, they were instructed to choose a subject and fill out the brainstorming sheets. The study demonstrated that the participants were highly motivated and showed a clear preference for guided brainstorming. Besides, the method enables them to present facts engagingly and reliably, facilitates interpretation, and allows for the condensation of information.

While academic writing projects are typically completed individually, a group brainstorming session might be beneficial for students seeking inspiration to select the most suitable ideas for their projects. As previously said, collaborative brainstorming enhances students' ability to stimulate their creative thinking by encouraging the expression of numerous ideas from each group member. In [17], Osborn asserted that group brainstorming sessions are efficacious as a complement to individual efforts.

The writers were motivated to conduct a study on how students see collaborative brainstorming as a means to enhance their writing of academic essays, based on the description provided above and the data collected through observations, questionnaires and interviews described later in this study.

2. Methodology

2.1. Participants

A total of eighty senior English majors, who were enrolled in the researchers' as the teachers' classes, were involved in the research. The researchers aggregated all of the subjects without employing a control or experimental group.

Two writing classes are convened every week for a total of 15 sessions. The duration of the classes was 90 minutes. At the commencement of each session, the students were organised into groups consisting of four or five individuals. Subsequently, the teachers presented the topic of the day and instructed the learners to contemplate it separately. They were given a ten-minute timeframe to conduct individual brainstorming by checking the Internet or any other sources for ideas. The instructor additionally inscribed many crucial terms on the whiteboard and instructed the students to articulate their viewpoints. Subsequently, inside each study group, the participants articulated their thoughts and disseminated them among their fellow group members (group brainstorming). The participants were instructed to take notes, seek clarification, and exchange ideas with their peers during conversations. Each session of Group Brainstorming lasted approximately 30 minutes.

2.2. Research Design

To acquire a comprehensive knowledge of participants' responses to collaborative brainstorming, we utilized an online survey questionnaire and obtained 80 comprehensive replies via Google Forms. For the subsequent interviews, 25 students agreed to participate.

2.2.1. Questionnaire

The survey is divided into two sections. The 6 items in section 1 are evaluated using three-point Likert scales including Disagree, Unsure & Agree. Section 2 of the survey includes an interview consent form where participants are requested to submit a contact number and an email address if they agree to participate in a follow-up interview.

2.2.2. Interview

The collection of qualitative data includes the use of interviews with students who were actively engaged in the teaching-learning process. The researchers simultaneously fulfilled the role of instructors in the classroom while carrying out the research. The qualitative data were collected via interviews with 25 volunteers to clarify ambiguous findings from questionnaires. A casual interview style was employed to mitigate the stress of the interview process and foster a greater sense of freedom and openness among participants. Field notes were used to document the participants' significant comments and quotes. The inquiries centered on the advantages, efficacy, and indispensability of employing collaborative brainstorming. Each interview had a duration of ten to fifteen minutes. The collected data were transcribed, categorized, and analyzed to address the study queries. Interview questions are in Appendix A

3. Findings and Discussions

The participants' feedback on the effectiveness of group brainstorming in the pre-writing stage was categorized into two groups: benefits and drawbacks of group brainstorming, see Tables 1 & 2 below. The participants' comments revealed a combination of perspectives, with a predominant inclination towards positive ones. The participants perceived group brainstorming as more beneficial than solitary brainstorming. This discovery aligns with a parallel investigation conducted by Abedianpour and Omidvari [4] where there was a proclivity for collaborative brainstorming.

3.1. Students' perceptions to benefits of collaborative brainstorming

A majority of the students' responses (81.25%) indicated that they understood the writing topics better through discussing with their group members. The students taking part in the interview admitted they did not seem to struggle with the proceeding though the prompts in writing questions were often very tricky and confusing. This is because the teacher first explained questions in an explicit way and then the students gained help from their peers again. However, there were nearly 20 % of the students who were still confused about the writing topics mainly because of their low proficiency. They also reported some reasons for that:

"Brainstorming in a group helps me to better understand the requirements of the writing tasks. When talking about the tasks with my friends, we learn better of something in the writing topics that we have missed or misunderstood. My friends helped explain the writing tasks to me again, which is such a relief. The teacher grouped us

so I could ask my classmates for help. For some topics, it was very difficult for me".

More than 80% of the participants acknowledged the role of group brainstorming in encouraging the development of critical thinking. Engaging in a conversation actively enhances the likelihood that participants will critically examine their own views and evaluate the strengths of alternative perspectives. The participants indicated that engaging in peer discussions, and exchanging ideas were beneficial because varied viewpoints can result in more intricate ideas for content. This indicated that the group members helped each other overcome difficulties in generating valuable ideas. However, nearly 20 % of the answers were unsure and disagreed with this idea for the fact that certain students may dominate the conversation, while others might feel embarrassed or ill-equipped to contribute due to their lack of confidence. As a result, the discussion might not accurately reflect the opinions of everyone in the group, which could produce an incomplete result. Some of the attendees stated:

"For some topics, I was totally having nothing to talk about and my group members really pushed me forward. We have different viewpoints which is good because it can result in more valuable ideas for the writing content. My group discussion helped me organize my thousands of ideas. What my friends said totally convinced me but when it came to my talking, it did not, which was quite disappointing. I have usually composed papers that are coherent to me but lack clarity or persuasiveness for my teachers, so my friends assisted me in recognizing that. I did not like group brainstorming because my group members disagreed with my ideas. I had to change my mind and write like others in the group".

Approximately most of the students (93.75 %) agreed with the idea that collaborative brainstorming improves their skills. As students share and discuss their ideas, they learn the art of communication. Students acquire the skill of active listening in a group discussion by diligently focusing on the words and ideas expressed by others, and asking relevant questions (23/25 students). Besides, the approach enhances students' negotiation skills (20/25 students), as well as boosts their ability to solve problems together (20/25 students). However, 10 out of 80 students reported their hesitation to take part in discussion when they thought they had different ideas from other students. Some of the attendees stated:

"I still remember the time our group members argued a lot about the topic "Should Yoga be made a required subject in schools? More than half of the group said no but later were convinced by my argument toward the benefits of doing yoga. One time we were given the topic about how not to be distracted from social media while studying, my friends and I generated the best advice compared to other groups and it was so good! It was much better if we had to think independently, you know, we don't like conflicts so most of the time I kept silent".

Group brainstorming, as supported by 65 out of 80 students, fosters motivation among students by enabling everyone to have a sense of contribution towards the final answer. Students are more inclined to actively participate in generating ideas and problem-solving when there is a shared responsibility for failure, rather than placing the blame solely on one individual. Additionally, to guarantee the efficacy of brainstorming sessions, the teachers prioritized the establishment of a classroom atmosphere that fosters both comfort and enthusiasm among the students. This entails arranging the classroom in a manner that fosters interaction and collaboration among the students. Individuals who typically experience fear or apprehension while engaging in conversations or social interactions are more likely to engage and take part when there is a collaborative element involved. Some of the attendees stated:

"Group discussion gets all of us involved. I love how the desks were set up in circles or small groups—it made us feel like a community and encouraged teamwork".

Table 1. Benefits of collaborative brainstorming

Items	Perceived problems		Disagree	Unsure	Agree	Total
1	Collaborative Brainstorming provides better comprehension of the writing topics.	F	10	5	65	80
		%	12.5	6.25	81.25	100
2	Collaborative Brainstorming generates better ideas when writing argumentative essay.	F	8	5	67	80
		%	10	6.25	83.75	100
3	Collaborative Brainstorming promotes students' skills.	F	5	5	75	80
		%	6.25	6.25	93.75	100
4	Collaborative Brainstorming motivates students' learning.	F	3	12	65	80
		%	3.75	15	81.25	100

3.2. Students' perceptions to drawbacks of collaborative brainstorming

Though previous findings in the study indicated that the students who were engaged in collaborative brainstorming could comprehend and generate better ideas, their overall writing performance were not much enhanced. The students needed to fulfill various aspects of a good essay, not just ideas and organization. Some students reported that their vocabulary and grammar accuracy were not improved due to the fact that a lot of students spoke Vietnamese during the discussions (responses from 20/25 interviewees). As a result, the students had no chance to accumulate new vocabulary, which they could have gained if they had brainstormed alone. Therefore, only 15/80 agreed and 30/80 students were unsure that their writing performance could be improved.

18 per 25 interviewees confirmed that they preferred individual brainstorming because it seemed more effective. "*Collaborative discussion was really time-consuming so it was much better if we do it independently. We want high scores, too. When I already had ideas to write but the other group members were trying to change my mind so I ended up writing according to people's ideas which was not satisfying".*

This finding did not correspond to Dobao and Blum [18], as they claimed that most of their students preferred collaborative writing activities. However, these findings were in line with those of Ajmi and Ali [19] who found that their students did not collaborate positively in writing, and they used to have conflicts when they worked together in writing activities.

Table 2. Drawbacks of collaborative brainstorming

Items	Perceived problems		Disagree	Unsure	Agree	Total
5	Group Brainstorming is less effective than individual brainstorming	F	50	8	22	80
		%	62.5	10	27.5	100
6	Collaborative Brainstorming does not help improve writing performance.	F	35	30	15	80
		%	43.75	37.5	18.75	100

4. Conclusion

The study investigated English majors' perceptions regarding the application of collaborative brainstorming in writing classes. The collected data revealed both advantages and disadvantages of the approach. While the students acknowledged group brainstorming helped them in comprehending and generating better ideas, their writing performance were not enhanced much because of Vietnamese use during discussion. Also, the students' ability to communicate, negotiate, and solve problems was positively improved. As a result, students became more motivated in their learning. Since group brainstorming is a beneficial pre-writing activity, the researchers suggest additional surveys on its application in listening, speaking, and writing classes too.

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APPENDIX A

Interview questions

1. Does Brainstorming together help you understand writing topics more effectively? Why would you say so?

2. Does Brainstorming together lead to more effective ideas for your argumentative essay? In what ways?

3. Does Brainstorming together help you develop your skills? What are those skills?

4. Does Brainstorming together help you stay engaged and motivated in your learning? Why would you say so?

5. Is Group Brainstorming is less effective than individual brainstorming? Why would you say so?

6. Does Brainstorming together help improve your writing performance? In what ways?