Collaborative Writing:
An Analysis through Student Reaction

RON Mika

ライティングにおける
アクティブ・ラーニングの導入と学生の反応

ロン　美香

概要：

　近年、高等教育機関ではディスカッションやロールプレイなど様々なアクティブ・ラーニングが授業に導入されている。本稿では学生の主体的な学びを促進するためにディスカッションやクリティカルシンキングなどの協調学習要素を加えた共同ライティングを導入した授業の成果と学生の反応について論じる。

1　Introduction

　　　Active learning（AL）was first introduced in Japanese universities in the mid 90s. The mainstream method of learning at that time was to take notes while listening to lectures. Applying this method, students hardly expressed their opinion nor placed emphasis on developing critical thinking skills. This alarming situation lead some Japanese universities to introduce AL by requiring students to submit written reflections after each lecture（Mizokami, 2015）. Over a decade later in 2007, University of Tokyo conducted a nation-wide survey with 127 Japanese universities to investigate how university learning has changed since the mid 90s. The results revealed that 67.9% of the students have almost never expressed opinions in class although 79.1% believed such activity is quite important in learning. Moreover, 60.9% of the students had hardly experienced any interactive activities such as group work and discussion. In 2012, the Japanese government released a new report on education that emphasized the importance of including AL in undergraduate education. Examples of

such education include the administration of debates and discussions（The Central Council for Education）. Only recently, however, AL has become a more common pedagogical method in Japanese universities.

　　　Definitions of AL are somewhat diverse. Some scholars state that students who are proactive and engage in activity beyond listening, note taking, and following instructions in class, inevitably become active learners because they are involved in analysis, synthesis, and evaluation（Chickering & Gamson, 1987; Ryan & Martens, 1989）. Others such as Ono and Matsushita explain that problem-based learning is another type of AL. In this method of learning, students need to acquire knowledge through the process of resolving problem, thus it requires them to apply critical thinking and communication skills（2015）. Yet, the commonly accepted understanding of AL is based on the five characteristics proposed by Bonwell and Eison（1991）:

1) Students are involved in more than listening.
2) There is less emphasis on transmitting information & more on developing students' skills.
3) Students are involved in higher-order thinking: analysis, synthesis, and evaluation.
4) Students are engaged in activities such as reading, discussing, and writing.
5) Greater emphasis is placed on students' exploration of their own attitudes and values.

　　　In short, AL is a student-centered learning, which is often done collaboratively. Scholars believe that discussion is one of the more effective methods to retain information for an extended period of time, to increase student motivation to learn and think critically, and to help them apply learnt information（McKeachie et al., 1986）. Thus, it seems beneficial to include ample time for discussion in class to promote AL among students.

2　Active Learning in Writing Class

　　　Writing is a creative activity that requires extended period of time to

work individually. Isolation in the writing process and teacher's grammar-centered corrective feedback, however, increase students' anxiety and feeling of incompetency, which negatively affect their writing proficiency (Thomas, 1993). To overcome such issues, AL has been introduced to writing classes in the US.

Dartmouth University confirms that employing discussion in writing class can benefit learning although a whole class discussion can be less effective because students often try to meet their professor's expectations rather than follow their own curiosity to learn (2015). The University of North Carolina also reports that AL can maximize students' learning and improve writing skills more effectively than working alone because it is easier to generate ideas if more people are involved (The Writing Center, UNC). These reports suggest that learning is more productive if students teach each other in small groups. Moreover, peer editing may improve students' writing skills if they are given responsibilities to self-teach. Providing such roles may also help students internalize academic writing rules more effectively.

While AL seems an effective solution, there are some concerns for implementing AL in the university writing class. The University of North Carolina pointed out that some factors can negatively influence student learning. These include shifting all the work to one person, or having a non-cooperative group member who prefers to work alone (The Writing Center). To have a successful AL in a writing class, it seemed crucial to control these factors by monitoring the student interaction closely during class.

A study conducted by University of Tokyo (2007) also showed worrisome results concerning Japanese university students. According to this report, over 70% of students admitted to academic studies were not adapt at logically presenting ideas in writing. In addition, over 60% believed they were weak in critical thinking (See Table 1).

	Agree	Somewhat agree	Somewhat disagree	Disagree
I can write logically.	3.3	23.2	42.2	28.3
I can clearly express orally.	3.8	21.7	43.1	28.5
I can think analytically/ critically.	5.9	31.0	43.6	16.5

Table 1 : Survey on Japanese University Students' Perception (U of Tokyo, 2007)

These data were compiled over ten years ago, which might render them inaccurate or even irrelevant when examining current teaching methods and students' perception about their written and presentation skills. Thus, this paper examines current methods by focusing on collaborative writing as a segment of AL, particularly how collaborative learning influenced students' learning, by focusing on two research questions:

1 Is collaborative writing an effective method to deepen student knowledge of the course theme and improve their writing skills?
2 Can collaborative writing be administered effectively in an academic writing class?

3 Method

3.1 Participants

The participants of this study were 48 second-year university students enrolled in two compulsory English writing classes at a Japanese university. All students received one year of basic instructions on academic paragraph writing prior to enrolling in these classes. Their English proficiency levels ranged between TOEIC 510 to 700, and a little over 50% of students either participated in short-stay study programs or lived abroad before entering the university. For identification purposes, the class with a slightly lower average score in TOEIC will be called Class A, and the class with a higher average score will be called Class B.

3.2 Data Collection

The data were collected through writing reflections and a course-end survey (See Appendices A & B). Reflections contained questions about

the weekly assignments, contribution in group discussions, and balance of task distribution. Students completed each writing reflection assignment at home so they could express their honest feelings about themselves and their group members without being influenced by their peers. The group-work reflections were collected four times during the semester to monitor student contributions in each stage of writing.

At the end of the course, students answered a survey aimed at assessing their motivation and writing skill after participating in collaborative writing. It contained some Likert scale and Yes-No questions followed by two open-ended questions. Analysis was done by totaling responses for each question and comparing the results of the two classes.

3.3 Procedures

Students in class A were instructed to write an argumentative essay about the significance of cram schools in Japan. Class B, on the other hand, had a more challenging topic, to express their opinions on the separation of religion and education in Japan. Students formed groups of three at the beginning of the semester based on their positions in these matters. The reason for making such group size was because three is the most balanced number to effectively collect/share information while maintaining enough participation among all students (Yasunaga, 2015). After students were assigned into fixed groups, they worked for seven weeks to complete a group paper.

Collaborative writing proceeded in two stages (See Figure 1). The first stage, which was completed individually (I) at home, included learning basic rules of academic writing by reading a textbook and answering worksheets, or conducting a library search and writing drafts of a paper. The second stage was done together with other group members (G) in class. Here, students critically reviewed their choice of sources, reviewed academic writing rules, and the quality of each draft written at home. They further generated ideas on how to build stronger arguments, and consolidated the information into a group paper.
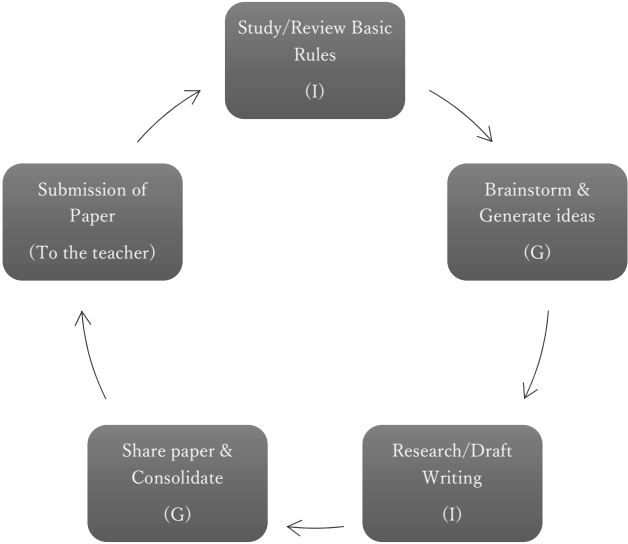
Figure 1 : Procedures of writing (home & in-class)

Combining individual and group activities would give students more time to think about their paper and develop critical thinking, which support the AL definition by Bonwell and Eison (1991) indicated in the Introduction section of this paper.

4　Results and Discussion
4.1 Reflections

Students wrote four reflections after completing the following writing stages: thesis and outline, introduction, body, and conclusion. Table 2 illustrates the percentage of students who completed their homework on time.

	Stage 1	Stage 2	Stage 3	Stage 4
Class A	16%	75%	71%	88%
Class B	41%	83%	79%	95%

Table 2 : Reflection Result: Completion of Homework

It is important to note that only 16% of students in Class A and 41% in Class B completed the first assignment. However, the percentage increased drastically from the second stage and remained stably high. This illustrates well students' attitudinal change. They realized the importance of completing individual tasks before class to effectively engage in collaborative writing.

The reflection also investigated if each group member participated in sharing his opinion. Sometimes, vocal students dominated group discussions and limited others' participation. To monitor such situation, the researcher asked students to comment about their participations in in-class group discussions.

	Stage 1	Stage 2	Stage 3	Stage 4
Class A	75%	91%	95%	91%
Class B	91%	91%	91%	95%

Table 3: Reflection Result: In-class Group Discussion

Table 3 shows that 25% of the students in Class A were hesitant to join the first group discussion. However, they learned to be more active from the second stage. On the other hand, Class B's participation was stably high from the beginning. The result shows that students generally felt comfortable expressing their opinions since the collaborative writing was done in small groups and it was less pressuring.

As mentioned earlier in the results of the study done by the University of North Carolina, collaborative writing may not work if one student is forced to do all the work for the group. Thus, it seemed crucial to monitor the work distribution among students in each group. Table 4 illustrates how students felt about the work distribution within the group.

	Stage 1	Stage 2	Stage 3	Stage 4
Class A	66%	87%	83%	91%
Class B	87%	91%	83%	95%

Table 4: Reflection Result: In-class Task distribution

At the beginning, a fairly large number of students in Class A felt the imbalance in the work distribution. However, they learned to work more evenly and cooperatively as time passed. In Class B, there was a slight fluctuation in the middle but they were generally distributing tasks evenly. From these results, monitoring students' class activity through reflection writing proved to be quite effective.

4.2 Course-End Survey: Individual participation

On the last day of class, students expressed their thoughts on collaborative writing in a survey. A total of 39 out of 48 responses were collected since some students were absent that day.

n （%）	Always	Mostly yes	Sometimes	Mostly No	Never
Q1 Regular attendance of sessions	25 （64）	9 （23）	4 （10）	1 （3）	0 （0）
Q2 Revised the paper carefully	23 （59）	12 （31）	4 （10）	0 （0）	0 （0）
Q3 Exchanged opinions actively	12 （31）	15 （38）	9 （23）	3 （8）	0 （0）
Q4 Lead discussions in group	13 （33）	15 （38）	10 （26）	1 （3）	0 （0）

Table 5 : Course-End Survey Results: Individual Participation

As shown in Table 5, the responses to the first question indicate that most students regularly attended the writing sessions. This is because students knew the attendance is crucial to the progress in collaborative writing. They also did not want to place extra pressure on other group members and make them work too hard.

The second question investigated if students attentively revised their group paper. It is notable that nearly 90% of the students thought they paid close attention to revising their work. Students often overlook writing mistakes if they proofread alone. However, collaborative writing helped them to be more responsible with their work, perhaps, because their efforts can influence the group members' final grades. This was an interesting outcome.

The last two questions explored how students participated in group discussions. As shown in Table 5, students were genuinely involved in the activity. Nearly 70% said they expressed their opinions enthusiastically,

and over 70% of the students initiated and lead discussions in the process of writing. Since students were clear about the weekly tasks and the goal of collaborative writing, many seemed motivated to discuss and learn autonomously. On the other hand, a small fraction of students answered they did not express their opinions actively. Such students had lower scores in TOEIC so it is possible that lack of confidence in English may have influenced their learning behavior. Yet, in comparison to the study conducted by the University of Tokyo (2007), significantly more students seemed to feel comfortable while orally presenting their opinions.

4.3 Course-End Survey: Motivation and Improvement of skills

The course-end survey also examined if collaborative writing influenced student motivation, deepened their knowledge of the topic, and improved their writing skills. As shown in Table 6, nearly 80% believed such method motivated them to produce a better paper. Also, over 90% felt that peer reading deepened students' knowledge of the topic. It was especially interesting that 90% of the students believed that collaborative work improved the quality of their writing. These results support the study by McKeachie et al. that discussion positively influences student motivation to learn and think critically (1986).

n (%)	Yes	No	Unclear
Collaborative writing motivated me to write better.	31 (79)	6 (15)	2 (5)
Reading members' works deepened my understanding of the topic.	36 (92)	2 (5)	1 (3)
Collaborative writing helped improve the quality of the paper.	35 (90)	2 (5)	2 (5)

Table 6 : Survey Results on AL: Motivation and influence on knowledge and skills

By reviewing students' comments in reflections, they seem to have learned many things through working together in groups. For example, students learned how to cite and write bibliography correctly. Some also reviewed and reconfirmed various rules of academic writing. Students even learned from each other techniques on how to increase or shorten the length

of a paper. To many, paraphrasing sources seemed an especially difficult undertaking, but cooperating with their group members when working on rephrasing supporting sources clearly improved their skills. Students in collaborative writing class seem to have felt more comfortable sharing their concerns and difficulties, because they could work together with the same partners throughout the writing process, which, assumingly, reduced their tension levels.

4.4 Course-End Survey: Positive & Negative aspects of Collaborative Writing
　　　　The last part of the course-end survey contained two open-ended questions asking about the positive and negative aspects of collaborative writing.

	A	B
Stimulating to generate ideas and write better	6	15
Helpful to think holistically	2	7
Effective to share data and analysis in a limited time	4	5
Effective to cooperate in order to complete the paper	2	3
Easy to recognize writing mistakes and improve own writing skills（expressions, idioms, grammar, words）	6	5
Raised motivation to study in class & do homework	0	1

Table 7 : Students' comments: Positive aspects

　　　　Table 7 summarizes the main comments on the positive side of such learning. Many students felt that writing a full paper in a small group was effective because they could search or share data, and generate a wide variety of ideas necessary for writing a good paper. Many students also pointed out that this style of learning helped them improve their writing skills because they were given ample opportunities to proofread and review the contents of the paper. Thus, collaborative writing seemed to have helped students to be time effective in reading sources, analyzing the argument, and writing clearly than producing a paper individually. It was also interesting to observe a student in Class B who felt more motivated when a group member was absent and he felt compelled to prove to others that his group can overcome any obstacle and write convincingly. Perhaps we can view

this as an indication of the overall positive competitive attitude of students in this class.

  Although collaborative writing had positive influence on students, there were also some additional, less positive issues to consider. Table 8 summarizes the downside of collaborative writing. Students in both classes pointed out that it was quite challenging to unify different opinions and produce a single representative view. Students also realized that respecting others and being polite do not necessarily go together with writing better because sometimes they needed to synthesize or eliminate work of others in order to be consistent with their argument and write a stronger paper. Students sometimes felt uneasy to point out an argument that was weaker or less important than others. In Class A, some students also mentioned that it was difficult to remain consistent with the controlling idea and proofread paragraphs because their grammar skills were not advanced enough. Among students in Class B, some stated that unifying the writing style was especially difficult. Depending on their level of English, students confronted different challenges, and handled them according to their individual levels. Nevertheless, the totality of this method of collaborative writing provided students the opportunity to reflect on their weaknesses while improving their writing skills.

Negative aspects of collaborative writing.	A	B
Difficult to unify if members' opinions are different	7	7
Difficult to work & unify because of different writing styles	0	4
Could not work effectively & write well if a group member is missing	3	2
Nothing because collaborative writing was interesting	2	2
Difficult to remain consistent with our controlling idea	2	1
Unable to continue active learning outside the class	0	2
Difficult to proofread if everyone is weak in grammar	2	0

Table 8: Students' comments: Negative aspects

4.5 Course-End Survey: Overall Reaction on Collaborative Writing

  None of the participants in this study had previous experience in collaborative writing, which made it difficult to predict how they would

respond to such method of learning. The overall students' reaction to collaborative writing is summarized in Table 9.

n（%）	Yes	No	UC
I enjoyed collaborative writing.	34（87）	5（13）	0（0）
I was satisfied with my group members.	35（90）	3（8）	1（3）
I wish to do collaborative writing in the future	34（87）	5（13）	0（0）

Table 9 : Students' perception on Collaborative writing

The survey reveals that 87% of the students enjoyed collaborative writing. Similarly, 90% who were satisfied with their group members. A correlation appears between most of the students who did not enjoy collaborative writing and those did not like their group members. This suggests that a key to successful implementation of such learning method is to arrange students into groups they feel comfortable with, perhaps by allowing them to form the groups independently.

Although collaborative writing was more intensive and time consuming than writing papers individually, surprisingly 87% stated that they wish to do more collaborative writing in the future. This suggests that Japanese students in the writing classes also appreciated the higher-order thinking and the exploration of knowledge, the two fundamental characteristics, proposed by Bonwell and Eison (1991).

5　Conclusion

Collaborative writing was beneficial to students' production and the improvement of their academic writing skills. It helped students to not only effectively search for the appropriate sources to support their arguments, but also to deepen their understanding of the theme and the academic writing rules through group discussions and critical analysis. Since students were assigned into small groups, they felt more responsible for their own actions and the learning of others. The effective cooperative learning continued because students received continuous encouragement from each other.

Although students pointed out the difficulty of synthesizing different ideas and unifying writing styles, collaborative writing still motivated many students. Producing an academic paper can be a strenuous work but cooperating with group members seemed to have reduced students' uncertainly about writing.

Collaborative writing proves to be an effective AL that can be implemented in a university writing curriculum. Future research should further investigate the impact of collaborative writing on students within a wider range of English proficiency levels.

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Appendices

Appendix A

Collaborative Writing Reflection

Your name: _____ Your group members: _____

Write a short reflection about yourself and your group members.

Homework（How much was completed?, How was the quality?）

You:

Group members:

Group discussion（Did each talk equally?, What was the degree of contribution?）

You:

Group members:

Task distribution（Did everyone work?, Did some do more work than others?）

You:

Group members:

Other comments

Appendix B

A Course-End Survey

I Please circle the answer that best fits <u>yourself</u>.　　　Always ↔ Never

１． Regularly attended collaborative writing sessions	1	2	3	4	5
２． Revised the paper carefully	1	2	3	4	5
３． Exchanged opinions in group discussion	1	2	3	4	5
４． Lead group discussions	1	2	3	4	5

II Please circle the choice that fits your opinion.

１． Collaborative writing motivated me to write better.	Yes	No	?
２． Reading group members' writing helped me understand more about the topic	Yes	No	?
３． The group writing helped improve the quality of the paper.	Yes	No	?
４． I was happy with the members of my group. If no, then why?	Yes	No	?
５． I enjoyed the collaborative writing.	Yes	No	?

III Please express your opinion on questions below.

What was positive about the collaborative writing?

What was negative about the collaborative writing?