

# University Students' Conceptions and Practice of Collaborative Work on Writing

Faustin Mutwarasibo<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Department of Modern Languages, National University of Rwanda, Butare, Rwanda & Department of Behavioural Sciences and Learning, Linköping University, Linköping, Sweden

Correspondence: Faustin Mutwarasibo, Department of Modern Languages, National University of Rwanda, P.O.Box 446Butare, Rwanda. E-mail: mutfaust@yahoo.fr

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## 1. Introduction

Collaborative work is widely regarded as a valuable tool in the development of student-centred learning (Burdett, 2007; Mills, 2003). Its importance can be viewed in two ways: First of all, when students are regularly exposed to collaborative work (i.e. pair work or group work) they are likely to develop or improve a range of communication and interpersonal skills (Bonnano, Jones & English, 1998; Hassanien, 2007; Kapp, 2009). It is also believed that a properly organized and well run collaborative work could lead students to develop higher cognitive skills (Elola & Oskoz, 2010; Mills, 2003; Shehadeh, 2011). Second, it is often argued that by working collaboratively, students can gain experience and understanding of how tasks are carried out in the workplace. Thus, with collaborative work, students can be prepared for the world of work (Bourner, Hughes & Bourner, 2001; Gatfield, 1999; Thorley & Gregory, 1994; Wigglesworth & Storch, 2009).

However beneficial collaborative work can be, there has been limited research on how students understand and carry out self-directed collaborative work on writing, and how the nature of their collaboration affects their learning. It is against this background that this study was undertaken to examine more specifically, how Rwandan undergraduate university students understand and practice self-directed collaborative work on writing, and how their understandings and practices shape the outcome of their learning.

The present study reports on a research conducted in Rwanda and involving a section of undergraduate university students doing an EFL academic writing course. In fact, since 2008, the higher education system of Rwanda has been revamped to embrace a more student-centred approach to teaching and learning. Broadly speaking, this approach consists of encouraging, adopting and displaying attitudes and behaviours geared towards the development of discovery, participation, presentation and application skills in all matters related to teaching, learning and assessment of students (National Council for Higher Education [NCHE], 2007). In the Rwandan context, these strategies are believed to help support students' progressive development of personal and transferable skills, among them, group working skills. In the same context, independent and collaborative works are also highly encouraged in all academic programmes to be offered off-campus (NCHE, 2010). Of particular interest to the present study are student participation skills, understood here as a form of collaboration among students through pair work or group work. More specifically, this study focuses on collaborative work in terms of EFL academic writing.

To the best of my knowledge, there have been few studies on how Rwandan university students across a variety of academic programmes, organize and practice self-directed collaborative work on writing and what they believe they gain from their chosen way of collaborating. A study conducted by Mukama (2008) on Rwandan university students' interaction with web-based literature shows how the combined and flexible use of Kinyarwanda, French and English languages throughout students' group discussions helped them make sense of that literature and appropriately select the elements to use while working on a written task. However, the study essentially focuses on the nature, structure and relevance of students' interactive talks and not on how they organized and conducted writing in their respective groups. Another study conducted by Andersson, Kagwesage and Rusanganwa (2012) investigates what languages Rwandan university students use and how they use them while constructing a group text. The study highlights the learning benefits of switching Kinyarwanda, French and English languages among group members but does not explore the process per se leading to the production of a jointly written text.

Beyond Rwanda, the seminal studies by Reither and Vipond (1989), Saunders (1989) and Storch (2002) were found to squarely focus on students' self-directed group writing and the patterns of collaboration, the perspective also shared by the present study. All three studies seem to confirm that when students organize group writing by themselves, they are likely to resort to a number of collaborative patterns which give way to different forms of learning. This implies that collaborative writing members also benefit differently from their preferred patterns of collaboration. In the ensuing lines, some patterns of collaboration developed by the three researchers are explored in terms of EFL academic writing.

## 2. Patterns of collaboration in EFL academic writing

To understand university students' collaborative work, especially in the area of EFL writing instruction, Reither and Vipond (1989) designed a reflective paper discussing the collaborative nature of producing a research article and how that process could be implemented in an EFL writing classroom. In their paper, the authors outline three forms of collaboration, namely, *coauthoring*, *workshopping* and *knowledge making*.

In Reither and Vipond's terms, *coauthoring* means working with each other, accomplishing things together that neither could have accomplished alone. In other words, *coauthoring* denotes a highly interactive style of collaborating. As for *workshopping*, it was used by the authors to refer to some form of extended collaboration. In terms of EFL writing, *workshopping* implies handing over the work in progress to classmates or colleagues for comment and feedback (spoken or written). Thanks to this feedback, the writer can then revise his/her writing. When this form of collaboration is initiated among EFL writing groups, it eventually looks like a writing workshop.

The third form of collaboration for Reither and Vipond (1989) is *knowledge making*. This is rather an indirect form of collaboration. *Knowledge making* implies that writing is a process of participating or collaborating in the construction and reconstruction of the already existing knowledge. In other words, when we write, we do not make our meanings alone but rather in relation to the meanings of others who have contributed to the same field of knowledge. *Knowledge making* also applies when students read and use literature from a given field of study in their writing. In this case, they learn values, conventions, forms of argument and evidence of that field, which would enable them to have a place in a specific knowledge community. Applied to an EFL writing context, only *coauthoring* and *workshopping* would readily convey the type of learning to be sought by student writers. In both collaborative forms, students would physically make meaning together, directly learn from one another as well as teach, support and sustain one another.

Other patterns of collaborative writing have been developed by Saunders (1989). In his critical review of research on collaborative writing tasks and peer interaction, he identified five collaborative writing tasks that students could indulge in and the corresponding types of learning outcomes they may help to achieve. These tasks were referred to as *co-writing*, *co-publishing*, *co-responding*, *co-editing* and *writer-helping*.

According to Saunders (1989), *co-writing* happens when a group of peers share ownership of the text and collaborate, interact and contribute together throughout the planning, composing, reviewing and correcting stages of writing. *Co-publishing* occurs when students as a group, divide up the writing task among group members and compose their parts of the text individually. However, group members collaborate at the planning, reviewing and correcting stages of writing to produce a final collective document. In *co-publishing*, there is some division of labour: Group members share ownership and responsibility for their collective document but their specific contributions are maintained.

As for *co-responding*, participants do not share ownership of the final texts. They plan and compose individually, and only interact and help one another at the reviewing stage of writing. At this stage, students share their drafts with their chosen peers, who in turn respond. Thus, collaboration among *co-respondents* is only reflected in the way each trusted student assumes the dual role of being a writer and a critical reader for his/her peers' writing. This form of collaborative writing is exactly similar to that of *co-editors*. The latter are expected to interact and help one another only at the correcting stage of writing, that is, proofreading and editing of individual drafts.

Finally, *the writer-helpers* are so called because they do not have any designated stage of collaboration during the writing processes. In other words, student writers are the sole owners of their texts but may seek help at any point of their writing activity. This help is not necessarily reciprocal, that is why there is no collaboration as such in the writer-helper relationship.

The third and relatively new conceptualization of collaborative writing and the resulting learning outcomes was suggested by Storch (2002). In her study of the nature of pair interactions in an adult ESL classroom in an Australian university, she came up with four distinct patterns of pair interactions, namely *collaborative*, *dominant/dominant*, *dominant/passive*, and *expert/novice* collaborative patterns. These patterns were determined according to the most

evident roles assumed by pair members across nine different collaborative writing tasks accomplished during one semester.

A *collaborative* interaction refers to a pair that worked together on all parts of the writing task by contributing, discussing and accepting each other's ideas. The *dominant/dominant* interaction denotes a pair that equally contributed to the writing task but whose members could not agree with each other's contributions. This pattern of pair interaction may be assimilated to the *co-publishing* situation (Saunders, 1989), in which there is clear division of labour among collaborating participants. In the *dominant/passive* interaction, one participant dominated the whole task while the other one simply remained passive. In this pattern of interaction, there tends to be little negotiation between the participants. In the *expert/novice* encounter, one participant seemed to take control of the task as an expert but also actively encouraged the other participant (the novice) to contribute.

As Storch (2002) indicates, some patterns of peer interaction are more conducive to learning than others. From the data analysis she made of the abovementioned peer interaction patterns, Storch found out that there were tangible instances of co-construction and transfer of knowledge about ESL writing and grammar in the *collaborative* as well as in the *expert/novice* interaction patterns. In the *dominant/dominant* and *dominant/passive* patterns, instances of knowledge development were hardly visible.

In a similar way, Li and Zhu (2013) conducted research on the students' patterns of online interaction in small writing groups in one Chinese university. Three distinct patterns of interaction among group members were detected, namely *collectively contributing/mutually supportive*, *authoritative/responsive*, and *dominant/withdrawn*. Just like in Storch's (2002) study, it was noted that these patterns influenced the students' perceived learning experiences. Thus, the *collectively contributing/mutually supportive* group was reported to have experienced most learning opportunities.

The learning benefits of effectively collaborating groups are also reported in the studies carried out by Storch (2005), Wigglesworth and Storch (2009), Shehadeh (2011), and Dobao (2012). In her study on the comparison between the texts produced by students writing in pairs and those writing individually in an Australian university, Storch (2005) found out that pairs produced shorter but better texts considering task fulfilment, grammatical accuracy and sentence complexity. At the same time, the study indicates that most students (11/16) manifested a positive attitude towards the collaborative writing experience even though the remaining ratio (5/16) expressed reservations. In a subsequent study within the same context, Wigglesworth and Storch (2009) noted that the texts produced in pairs showed more grammatical accuracy in comparison with the texts produced individually.

In a different context, Shehadeh (2011) examined the differences in language accuracy, content and organization between texts written in pairs and those written individually among university students in the United Arab Emirates. On the whole, the researcher found that the effect of writing in pairs was significant for content, organization and vocabulary. This led him to conclude that collaborative writing had an overall significant effect on students' second language writing (i.e. English in this case). Like in Storch's (2005) study, most students who worked in pairs admitted having enjoyed the collaborative experience.

Finally, a more extended study was conducted by Dobao (2012) who compared individual, pair and group writing among a section of American university students. The results show that the texts completed in groups were linguistically more accurate than those composed either individually or in pairs. Besides, it was observed that collaborating students were able to solve some problems related to English as a foreign language and thus construct new knowledge. All the above examples serve to show the relevance of investigating students' reflections on their experiences of collaborative work.

### 3. Self-directed groups and their stages of development

Researchers in the area of group dynamics assert that successful self-directed groups tend to go through certain stages of development, which in turn, may influence the way group members collaborate. According to Tyson (1998), there are six stages that self-directed groups may evolve into even though in a non-linear manner. These are pre-group, forming, storming, norming, performing and termination stages. The *pre-group* stage is the period before the first meeting of the group, when members are still discussing who else will be involved, who will be the leader, which resources will be available and what the task will exactly be. The *forming* stage is when group members come together for the first time while the *storming* stage is when personal agendas are revealed and members start to assert or defend their individuality. As they reach the *norming* stage, members begin to be tolerant of each other's differences and accept to work as a group. At this stage, group cohesion increases, norms are established and harmony settles in. With the group structure and identity formed, group members reach the *performing* stage by

fulfilling roles that enable them to achieve productivity. Finally, there is the *termination* stage which includes checking out goal achievement, ending, disbandment and departure, and making plans for the future. As a reminder, not all these stages are observable in any self-directed group, nor do they necessarily occur in a linear fashion. In practice, some stages may be skipped while others may be combined.

In their conceptualization of the stages of development of self-directed groups, Shimazoe and Aldrich (2010) only considered three stages, namely a *design and development* stage, an *operations* stage, and an *output and disbanding* stage. At the first stage, group membership and size are decided, members meet for the first time, define their goal and set up rules and strategies needed for them to work as a group. As the name itself suggests, at the *operations* stage, group members perform group tasks according to the plan they have devised themselves. At this stage, they may decide on the collaborative pattern that works best for them, that is, the one which would help them attain the desired outcome. Finally, the *output and disbanding* stage simply means that group work activities reach an end and that a sense of achievement at the individual and group levels is felt. Looking back at Tyson's (1998), and Shimazoe and Aldrich's (2010) stages of development of self-directed groups, we may conclude that the collaborative patterns preferred by group members can be discussed and decided on at any stage except the final one. This again shows the close connection which exists between the stages of group development and the patterns of collaboration chosen by group members.

In view of the abovementioned perspectives on the patterns of collaboration in writing and their varying impact on student learning, the present study aims to explore how undergraduate university students in a Rwandan context carry out a self-directed group writing task and what they are likely to gain in terms of the collaborative patterns they choose. Three research questions underpin this study, namely: (1) How do groups of students carry out self-directed writing tasks? (2) Which patterns of collaboration do they resort to in their writing? (3) By virtue of the collaborative patterns they choose, what do students say they gain?

#### 4. Methods

##### 4.1 Settings, Participants and Ethical Considerations

The study was conducted in one higher learning institution in Rwanda in 2008 and involved 16 second year undergraduate students (13 males and 3 females), divided into groups of four. The class was originally composed of 24 students enrolled in the discipline of Modern Languages. Due to the fact that their participation in research was entirely voluntary, only 16 students accepted to participate. Other ethical issues pertaining to participants' anonymity and confidentiality were also observed by using group numbers (from I to IV) and letters: F for females and M for males. Individual group members were referred to using number 1 up to 13 for males and from 1 to 3 for females. The numbering of individual group members was done sequentially from Group I up to IV while the ordering of the groups followed the one that had been set by the course instructor. Thus, the first male member from Group I is referred to as I: M1 while a female member from the same group is referred to as I: F1.

##### 4.2 Study Design

As part of a main assignment in academic writing, second-year undergraduate students in the discipline of Modern Languages were requested to write a 400-word comparison and contrast essay. The topic was suggested by the course instructor who also guided students on what to include and how to articulate the required essay. Apart from group membership, all other issues regarding planning, organization and schedule of group writing activities had to be managed by the students themselves in their respective groups. No other instruction or guidance was given to students on the methodologies of collaborative work.

All groups were given five weeks in total to complete the writing task as they also had to concentrate on other academic activities beside group writing. To make sure the final version of the essay was their best, the instructor accepted to take in the first drafts, review them and return them to the groups so that they could revise and correct them before the final submission. Only the final versions of the essays were marked based on the assessment criteria announced in advance by the instructor.

##### 4.3 Data Collection Procedures and Analysis

The data used in this research are entirely based on the responses from open-ended interviews carried out separately in English with the four groups after all of them had handed in and obtained marks on their essays. The same interview guide format (Bryman, 2012) was used for all groups and the main questions were exactly the same. But depending on how the group members responded, additional questions could be asked to seek more elaboration or clarifications on their answers. The interview questions focused on three issues: (1) How groups of students planned, organized and carried out group writing, (2) students' preferred way of collaborating and why they chose it, (3) what

students felt they gained from their collaboration. All interview responses were audio-recorded, each lasting 25 minutes on average (see Appendix I for interview guide).

To analyze the data, all audio-recorded interview responses were transcribed and organized thematically according to the three research questions underpinning this study. Thus, all responses related to students' planning and practice of group writing were arranged together and the same was done for all responses related to students' patterns of collaboration as well as the benefits they allegedly drew from their respective ways of collaborating.

The next step was to carefully read and reread students' responses and try to make meaning out of them by writing short marginal notes and comments. The strategies were inspired by Bryman's (2012) and Lichtman's (2012) methods of analyzing qualitative data. Both authors consider qualitative data analysis as an iterative process of moving from data coding to data reduction (i.e. organizing the generated codes into hierarchical categories and gaining a sense of interconnections between them), and landing on a small number of the most central and most meaningful themes and sub-themes vis-à-vis the research topic. According to Bryman and Lichtman, codes, categories and themes can be identified by looking at the repetitions of words and phrases; the use of concepts, expressions, metaphors and analogies; and through the similarities, differences, contradictions and omissions which emerge from the respondents' answers. Logically, all these elements ought to have a direct bearing with the research questions and research focus and provide the researcher with the basis for his/her theoretical understanding of the data.

In the context of the present study, three themes were generated by selecting the text segments which reflected the most adequate responses to the three main questions, namely, students' understanding and practice of group work, their patterns of collaboration and the type of learning that might have resulted from those patterns. Finally, as a supporting evidence to the selected themes, some interview responses were directly quoted.

## 5. Findings

The findings focus on the three main themes that were extracted from the students interview responses, namely, how groups of students approached and practiced group writing, the patterns of their collaboration and the type of learning that might have been brought up by those patterns.

### 5.1 Students' Ways of Planning and Organizing Group Writing

From the students' interview responses, it appears that the four groups of students initiated and organized the group writing assignment quite differently. In Group I, members revealed that from the beginning, it was not easy for them to carry out a writing task together. They indicate that they preferred to work individually at the pre-writing (brainstorming and planning) and composing stages of writing and only met as a group when their individual drafts of the essay were ready. In their responses, one group member admitted that

It is not easy to go somewhere as a group and you start to write with everyone having his own thoughts. But when you turn up after you have already written your thoughts, you put them together with others'. This is what was fair to us given that it helped us work towards the final group draft (I: M1).

As the above verbatim quotation reads, students from Group I found it convenient first to work individually and then meet as a group to make the final version to hand in for marking.

As for Group II, the first thing that group members allegedly did when the writing assignment was handed out was to make sense of the task as a group, understand what exactly to do and how to do it, and agree on the schedule of their meetings. Group members also report that they agreed on a number of ground rules, especially in connection with how to handle any member who would be unable to attend a session. For Group III, members allege that they also chose to meet once and debate the writing task at hand. Then, they decided to divide the essay into two parts and split themselves into two pairs, each pair having to work on its own part of the essay. Finally, the two pairs met to put together their respective parts of the essay and produce the final draft.

Group IV seemingly also had its own arrangement. The first thing that group members show that they did was to meet and discuss the topic so that they make sure that every member understood it clearly. The next step for them was to choose a leader to organize all subsequent group writing sessions and a suitable schedule of meetings. Besides, students report that their leader was in charge of setting the assignment for every member so that when they meet again, he/she had already made up his/her mind on something to contribute. According to the students, this way of group writing continued until they produced the final draft of their written work. However, owing to the novel way of working as a group, students admit that some members did not do what they were expected to do while some others did it badly.

### *5.2 Students' Ways of Collaborating*

The way students undertook their group writing tasks determined to some extent the patterns of collaboration that they adopted throughout the rest of their group work. From their responses on how they collaborated, two main patterns could be deduced, namely a highly interactive and collaborative pattern, apparently resorted to by Group II, and a less interactive/less supportive collaboration, mostly preferred by Group I, III and IV. Based on the marks that the groups scored from their essays, there was also a possibility of dividing students into three clusters, namely those scored the lowest mark (65%), those who earned the median mark (72.5%) and those who scored the highest mark (77.5%). Even though some relationship could be established between the grade achieved and the pattern of collaboration chosen, there was not enough evidence to support this. Thus, only two main patterns of collaboration among group members were considered.

Starting from Group I, the participants showed that they found it fair to work separately and only met towards the end of their work in order to put together what they had done individually. When asked whether they found that way of 'collaborating' helpful, one participant said that "had it not been for a group mark, I would have preferred to continue to work alone" (I: M1). The same participant strongly argued for his position saying that "as a group, we could have failed but if you give me the same type of work, I can do it [better] and possibly not come up with the same mistakes as the ones made by our group" (I: M1). It seems the student was assured of his personal writing abilities but did not want to use them to help his peers improve theirs.

Other Group I members did not object to their peer's standpoint vis-à-vis group work as they also confirmed that they reverted to group work towards the final stage simply because all groups had been informed that they would obtain a group mark. In their views, they feigned group work so that they could score a good mark. However, their expectations were not totally achieved because they scored 65% which was the lowest mark obtained among the writing groups involved. Whether the mark was influenced by the group's preferred way of collaborating could not be proven.

As regards Group II, their model of collaboration was to avoid that "one group member ends up producing the whole work for the entire group" (II: M4). By so doing, every time they had agreed to meet "all group members were present" and they all "participated actively in the task" (II: M4). The same participant again emphasizes that they regularly met, participated and discussed together. These statements were exactly echoed by another group member who held that "as a group, we sought to clearly understand what to do before anything else" (II: F2). The strategy used by the group whenever there was a disagreement was that "one of us has to come up with solid ideas and clear examples to convince us, and in this manner, we move on with our work" (II: M5). In my interpretation, all Group II members seem to confirm that this way of collaborating made them score the highest mark (77.5%).

For Group III, the model of collaboration opted for was to divide up the task, work in pairs and finally meet to produce the final work. Even though group members admitted that they had never before worked together, they asserted that they were happy with the collaborative way they devised themselves and their achievement (72.5%) because every member did exactly what he/she was expected to do. To illustrate this, one member explained that "first, we shared and discussed what we had done in pairs and then all of us [four] met to make one essay by examining the extent to which we had met all set requirements" (III: F3).

The collaborative pattern chosen by Group IV was almost similar to the one adopted by Group III because they both involved some form of division of labour. But instead of working in pairs as in Group III, three of the members of Group IV were given a section of the essay to work on while the fourth member had to oversee all activities and finally bring together all sections to make up one essay. As a common agreement, any member who was able to complete his part of the work was obliged to help the peers. Even though some members allegedly "waited for the very last minute to carry out their duties" (IV: M11) and hence did not perform as expected, all members were satisfied with the mark they obtained (72.5%). According to them, the model of collaboration that they adopted enabled everybody to play a specific role and thus weigh his writing abilities.

### *5.3 Students' Perspectives on the Relevance of Self-directed Writing Groups*

In the course of the interviews with the groups of students, they were asked to articulate their views on what they thought they had learned from writing together, without their instructor's involvement in their respective group working arrangements. The overall picture shows students' mixed reactions towards the relevance of self-directed group works. Members of Group I, for instance, did not readily appreciate working together as they insisted on "it would have been better for the lecturer to set individual writing tasks, assess them and provide individual marks" (I: M1). However, in a slightly nuanced manner, another group member argued that it is better to be assigned both

individual and group writing tasks because “when you work in groups and you are not as bright as your fellows, you can gain support from them and score good marks even when your personal contribution to group work is not that great” (I: F1). While the first participant categorically opposes group work, the second participant acknowledges that it always makes sense to assess students by the abilities to work alone and in groups. Surprisingly, she tends to look at group work as a means to obtain good marks only.

For Group II, the attitude towards group work was generally positive as members confidently explained what they had gained: “We don’t have the same knowledge and same understanding [of issues]. So when one of us was stuck, we were always here to support him [or her]. We learned from one another; it was a very good and enriching experience for us” (II: F2). The positive attitude towards group work was also shared by the members of Group III. On the whole, they indicated that working in groups was “a good and helpful method because everything was relatively well organized and there was no particular problem” (III: F3). However helpful group works could be, students lamented the fact that the former were not frequently organized in other courses and that there was still heavy reliance on individual works. For Group IV, working as a group was not easy at the early stages but to some extent, it turned out to be beneficial. For this, one participant argued that “it is good because it helps students to learn much from one another” (IV: M11). Another participant added that “it has helped us to learn more and master this type of writing” (IV: M13).

Despite the overall positive attitude manifested by the students towards group work, all of them complained about the large amount of time it takes. Some of the challenges they allegedly faced were related to understanding the relevance of group work and knowing how to organize themselves, especially when it comes to writing together. In their opinion, some students argued that they had different writing abilities, so they would prefer to handle all writing-related tasks individually. Owing to this feeling of different writing abilities, some disagreements and tensions among the group members were unavoidable: “The [writing] task itself may be easy but getting all group members to grasp it in the same manner is a real headache. A lot of time was wasted here while trying to agree on the exact path to follow” (II: M4). In these circumstances, the challenge was not just to agree on what to write about but also how to plan, organize and work as a group.

Other challenges include students’ observation that despite the long hours that they had spent on group writing and the feedback they had obtained and worked on, their essays still presented some shortcomings. Among these shortcomings, there were those related to cohesion and coherence, essay structure and organization, sentence construction, word choice as well as the use of tenses. However, all students mentioned that they were happy with the feedback they had obtained from their instructor and the final result. In their responses, they acknowledged that they were not yet familiar with writing together and were requesting more group-based assignments. In brief, their opinions suggest that more support and follow up from the instructor were still needed to improve their group-based writing.

## 6. Discussion

This study has focused on how undergraduate university students in Rwanda carry out self-directed group writing and what they are likely to gain from their way of working together. The findings show that students resorted to different patterns of collaboration, which were the result of the way they understood, planned, organized and valued group work and collaboration. There are also some reasons to believe that the way students collaborated had some influence on what they felt they gained from group work.

Looking back at the way students’ groups started and developed, we may argue that all but one stages of group development out of six proposed by Tyson (1998) were observed by the four groups involved in the present study. Only the *pre-group* stage, which normally consists of deciding on group membership and participants’ roles, was omitted. In fact, given that group membership had been decided by the writing instructor, students had to proceed to the *forming* stage (i.e. meeting for the first time and planning what to do). As for Shimazoe and Aldrich’s (2010) conceptualization of stages of group development, we may assert that all stages they proposed were observed by the four groups of students.

As it appears in students’ responses, the *forming* stage (Tyson, 1998) or *design and development* stage (Shimazoe & Aldrich, 2010) was the most crucial for all groups, as it determined the nature of group collaboration that was going to follow. Despite the slight differences in the way they carried out their group work, it seems that Group I, III and IV resorted to the *co-publishing* form of collaboration (Saunders, 1989). This can be seen by the fact that all members from those groups mentioned that they accepted to meet and plan their writing together. Due to some kind of resistance to group work (Group I) or the form of collaboration that was found more convenient (Group III and IV), group members agreed to divide up the writing task and only meet to work on, put together, critically review and proofread the final text before handing it in. In other words, members from three groups endorsed the

responsibility for the group work produced. The critical reviews made by group members among themselves also suggest the *workshopping* form of collaboration advanced by Reither and Vipond (1989).

In terms of Storch's (2002) models of collaborative writing, Group I, III and IV would be assimilated either to the *dominant/dominant* or *expert/novice* patterns of collaboration. The same groups can also fit in the *authoritative/responsive* and *dominant/withdrawn* ways of collaborating propounded by Li and Zhu (2013). In Group I, for instance, one participant argued that he could have handled the writing task alone, had it not been an obligation from the writing instructor to only consider group essays. As we did not observe the group's writing sessions, we can imagine that his group members manifested the same dominant behaviour (which might have prompted the group to score the lowest mark of all) by only accepting to share the group's final product. We can also imagine that other group members recognized one participant's writing abilities and simply acted when they were encouraged to so.

Still in connection with the collaborative patterns chosen by the concerned groups, we may argue that only Group II adopted an effective and fully collaborative behaviour, which possibly prompted them to score the highest mark. In their responses, members of Group II indicated that they planned, worked together on all parts of their writing, contributed more or less equally and amply discussed their ideas until they reached the final version of their essay. In Reither and Vipond's (1989) terms, this form of collaboration would be regarded as *co-authoring*, which is equivalent to Saunders's (1989) *co-writing*, Storch's (2002) *collaborative interaction* or Li and Zhu's (2013) *collective contribution/mutual support*.

The findings from this study also show that students' ways of organizing group writing and collaborating still present some challenges. Some of these challenges are linked with the way some students still consider writing as an activity to be carried out individually and thus shy away from anything related to collaboration. In terms of writing in a second or foreign language, this negative attitude towards group work could be justified by the lack of confidence in that language (Storch, 2005), which may prompt some members to feel isolated and just remain as observers. It may also originate from group incompatibility, which could lead some members to dominate all group sessions. Other students who oppose group work mainly complain about the huge amount of time that could be spent on it, hence depicting an unlikely situation outside school. Still others who are supportive of group work clearly mention that they need more group-based academic assignments in various disciplines so that they really become acquainted with what group work is all about and its tangible benefits.

As a means to overcome all those group-related challenges, Storch (2005), Burdett (2007), Hassanien (2007), and Shimazoe and Aldrich's (2010) remind us that effective collaboration among student groups is not produced simply by requesting students to work in groups. In other words, the effectiveness of working in groups is something that develops gradually with continued support, guidance and training from a more knowledgeable person. In the context of the present study, this person would be the course instructor. Thus, it is the responsibility of the course instructor to make sure that students clearly understand the value of collaborative work before they embark on it.

## 7. Conclusion

This study investigates the relevance of group-based learning, team work and collaboration in higher education by examining what university students in a specific context know about them, how they go about them and what they say they gain from them. Their responses shed some light on what students not very familiar with group work are likely to achieve when they are left to work on their own. The study also shows the concerned instructors in what ways and where to intervene in order to improve the outcome for all student writing groups, especially those using English as a foreign language. Thus, the study contributes to existing research on the value of collaborative work in education, its specific application to the domain of EFL academic writing and how students in a specific context experience it.

However, the data used in this study were limited to a small sample of student groups performing an English writing task and involving only one class and one academic discipline. Thus, further research including larger samples from various disciplines is needed to provide a wider scope to the findings. Given the crucial role to be played by the course instructors in making group work a learning opportunity for students, it is advisable that they incorporate it in their courses. For this to happen, course instructors themselves need to understand the importance of group work, how it is organized and how it is likely to support teaching and learning.

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### Appendix I: Interview guide

1. After you were handed a group writing task, what did you do on the very first day you met and how did you proceed?
2. How were your group writing sessions organized?
3. Based on the way you organized yourselves to write together, what do you think you have gained? Anything else you would like to add?