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The Influence of Peer Interaction on Students' Mastery of Writing

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Abstract

Writing is one of the four skills of language which helps in releasing strong emotions, clarifying information, stimulating memory and demonstrating mastery of content. One of the ways through which students do master writing content is peer interaction. Despite the importance of writing, employers still complain that school leavers do not know how to write, implying that either they were not taught writing or that the classroom environment, of which peer interaction is part, was not adequate enough to prepare learners for the kind of writing that they will do after school. In this paper, we explored the influence of peer interaction on writing mastery. Using interviews, focus group discussions and observation, we collected data from three secondary schools in Uganda. Our findings portrayed that peer interaction supports the mastery of different processes of writing; however, there was little interaction in class because some of the teachers and students were against it for various reasons. Therefore, there is a need for teachers and students to be trained on how to maximise the benefits of peer interaction to enable students' mastery of writing.

Keywords: Peer interaction, Students', Writing

1. Introduction

Writing is considered the hardest of all the language skills. Scholars have many definitions of writing. According to Galbraith (2009), writing involves translating preconceived ideas into text, creating content and tailoring the content to the needs of the reader (p.2). McPherson (2010) defined writing as a meaning-making activity (p.16) while Shin looked at writing in terms of the cognitive process model which involves planning, translating, revising and reviewing the written task (Shin 2008). When writing, one must have indirect communication ability, language structure, techniques and the ability to create ideas into text (Hasani 2016). Therefore, writing mastery is based on the reader's judgment of the overall writing taking into account things like: ideation, organisation, vocabulary, sentence structure and tone (Graham and Perin 2007).

People write because of different reasons and audiences for example, writing is good for gathering and preserving information (Tyfeci & Dujaka 2017). It helps one articulate their thoughts, feelings and emotions

(Eedometer 2017). It also helps one communicate with people removed in time and space (Graham and Perin 2007). In school, writing is an integral part of all subjects as students use it to demonstrate knowledge, gather, remember and share what they have learned (Zumbrunn and Krause 2012; Bell-Nolan 2015). Many of the examinations in secondary schools also require students to answer questions in writing implying that the success of the student in the school is determined by how well they express themselves in that mode. After school, employees need good writing skills to prepare a variety of written documents such as minutes of a meeting. Indeed for most people, participation in civic life requires one to repeatedly write (Cutler and Graham 2008; Graham, Bollinger, Booth, D'Aoust, MacArthur and Olinghouse 2012). Mastery of writing skills enables learners to express themselves accurately and confidently. This is the reason why there is a need to study how learners master writing.

This study was conducted in Uganda. The education system of Uganda has 5 levels: pre-primary school (3-6 years), primary level (7-13yrs), O'level secondary school (14-17 years), A'level secondary school (18-19 years) and Tertiary education. English is the medium of instruction from the primary four classes and above. English is also a compulsory subject from Primary four to the end of O'level. In most schools, writing as translating preconceived ideas into text is taught from at O'level.

According to Ssebbunga-Masembe (2001), writing instruction in Uganda began with the missionaries who came to Uganda between 1877 and 1879. As their focus was on teaching literacy in order to train good Christians, the missionaries only taught basic reading and writing. Ojijo (2012) explains that the colonialists who took over education from the missionaries aimed at training low and mid-level manpower for administration. Thus, writing instruction during the colonialists' time focused on training basic skills of spelling, grammar and punctuation which would not require much thought or attention. Most of the commissions that came after independence did not change much in writing instruction. However, according to the Education Sector Strategic Plan (ESSP) 2004-2015 students were taught how to write but they were not equipped with skills needed to write in ways that would enable them write for different audiences. The history of writing and writing instruction, therefore, shows that the reasons, emphasis and content of writing and writing instruction have been evolving according to different societal needs.

Unfortunately, many students cannot carry out writing tasks. Scholars like Kyalikunda (2005) and Karooro Okurut (2000) have noted the deteriorating standards of English in Uganda. This is evident in the poor expressions used by speakers in interviews, directing visitors and writing application letters. Poor writing affects school leavers' chances of competing effectively in the employment world. Students come through years of schooling being taught writing but their being unable to write to suit the employer's needs. This suggests that they either have not been taught effectively or the content and methods of the writing courses are not appropriate. If we do not improve the teaching of writing, we will continue to invest educational resources like teachers without enabling learners to demonstrate mastery writing. Yet, the available literature documents that the physical and emotional state of students and their ability to interact with each other contribute to the mastery of writing.

Many scholars have studied peer interaction in educational contexts. Some writers defined peer interaction as situations where students work together on all processes of writing to produce a text (Ma Camino and Martinez 2017; Nicole 2017). Zumbrunn and Krause (2012) studied peer interaction during the planning process and defined collaborative planning as situations where students talk through their plans with a supporter who offers thoughtful feedback (p.350). Peer interaction has many advantages. When students are provided with a real audience like another student responding to a text or interacting while producing it, the quality and length of students writing output improve (Dean, Odendahl, Norah, et al 2008). Interactive writing also helps students see how other people prefer to think, translate their ideas and review their written work (Dean 2010; Supiani 2017). In this study, we defined peer interaction as where two or more students jointly produced a written text in order to find out how interaction led to mastery of writing.

To understand the value of peer interaction on mastery of writing, this research was informed by the Cognitive Process Theory of Flower and Hayes (1981) and Vygotsky's 1978 Constructivist theory. According to the

Cognitive Process theory, the act of writing involves four major processes which are: generating ideas, translating them, reviewing the text and the monitoring which supervises the whole process. All these are governed by the task environment which includes the topic produced so far and the rhetorical question as well as the writer's long term memory which stores information on related topics, intended audiences and styles of writing. The writing goals, topic and style are constantly interfering with the writing process and competing for attention especially for novice writers like young adolescents who have no idea of how to align everything to their major goals. As this theory did not cater for the social environment in which writing instruction takes place, there was the need for another theory, the Social Constructivist theory advanced by Vygotsky's (1978). According to Vygotsky, learning is a social process whose origins are in human cognition. Learning is only successful when it occurs within the child's Zone of Proximal Development, which is the distance between what a child can do on their own and what they can achieve with the help of others. Therefore, instruction should occur within a learner's ZPD. The social level, as far as the learning of writing is concerned, involves the learner's interaction with their teacher and fellow students. These two theories were chosen because the first gives details about the writing processes which experts follow on an individual basis which this research is interested in, while the second theory deals with the influence of peers on mastery of those writing processes.

2. Purpose

The purpose of this study is to explore the influence of peer interaction on students' mastery of writing. The following question guided this research: How does peer interaction support students' mastery of writing?

3. Methodology

The research followed a qualitative multiple case study design. According to Creswell (2014 p.14), case study designs involve in-depth analysis of a case or case. Yin (2009 p.18) explains that case studies are used to investigate the contemporary phenomenon in depth and within its real-life context. Yin further explains that there are two types of case studies: single and multiple case studies. Multiple case studies involve studying different units of analysis or different cases. We chose multiple case studies in order to obtain more data on the influence of peer interaction on the mastery of writing in different classroom contexts.

In this paper, the case was the classroom where writing instruction takes place. Three schools in Uganda were chosen to provide a variety of ways in which peer interaction in different classroom environments affects mastery of writing. The schools were chosen basing on the following categories. The first school was a poorly funded private school, with few students of relatively low-income status. This school was chosen because the researchers wanted to find out the influence of peer interaction on mastery of writing in an underfunded school. The second school was a government-aided secondary school meaning that the government of Uganda was catering for most of the schools' expenditures. The third school was an international school that attracted students from all over the world and because learners are free to choose whether to study the Uganda Syllabus or Cambridge one. This school was chosen as the researcher wanted to find out the nature of the influence of peer interaction on mastery of writing in an international school context.

Seven teachers who teach English to students of senior one to senior three classes or their equivalents were purposively selected based on the fact that they teach English in a lower secondary school which we were interested in. Teachers were chosen to provide information on whether they supported peer interaction during the writing processes and how peer interaction supported mastery of writing.

The teachers helped us select a group of six learners in each school, who during the focus group discussions, provided information on how they go about their writing tasks, the nature of interaction with their peers during the writing process that supported their mastery of writing and the challenges they faced when writing. All students in the selected classes were observed as during the process writing instruction.

The methods used were lesson observation, individual interviews and focus group discussion. We observed forty writing lessons from senior one to senior three classes during the period of July to November 2016 using non-

participant observation method. Teachers were interviewed using the flexible interview process. This meant that some of the questions developed as the interviews were conducted. Six students from each school participated in focus group discussions on the nature of their writing, how they interacted with each other during the writing process and how this interaction led to mastery of writing. Interviews were used to gain a better understanding on the nature and role of peer interaction in mastery of writing.

This study ensured validity through collecting data from various sources that are: lesson observation, through interviews and focus group discussions. Reliability was ensured through a clear demonstration of all the steps in data collection and analysis. Ethical issues were maintained through seeking permission from relevant authorities where data was collected; assuring participants of the confidentiality of information given and using pseudo names instead of their real names. After the data collection process, we assembled transcribed, coded, analysed and presented data according to the emerging themes.

4. Results

In this section, we present the analysis and interpretation of data on the influence of peer interaction on students' mastery of writing. Students' mastery of writing was interpreted as; being clear and concise coherent and logical in their writing, making little or no errors when presenting their final written work and tailoring their writing to different purposes, styles and audiences. As we analyzed data using the interpretive approach, the following themes emerged: the influence of pair work on mastery of writing and how group work supported mastery of writing.

4.1 The influence of pair work

By pair work, one student would interact with another student during the writing process. Students supported each other in encouraging them to write, getting ideas on a given topic, drafting the work or revising it. When asked how their peers supported them in tasks, some students said they gave them support as friends. For example:

Jane: You might be having an idea and then you go to a friend. Like you are not confident enough, and then you go to another person to expose it to him or her, then you share ideas and get what to write.

(Focus Group Discussion 4, S.2)

Jane got emotional support from her friend for her ideas when she says 'like you are not confident enough'. Jane implies that when she did not trust the appropriateness of her ideas, she went to a trusted friend. Jane's use of the word 'might' as a tentative expression further shows that she did not believe she had useful ideas. Thus, implying that discussion with her friends boosted herself belief that she has valid ideas and they are ready to present her ideas on paper. Jane used the word 'friend' to imply emotional closeness such that there is no fear of judgment, ridicule or exposure. Ideas in the writing process, are very sensitive things in that when one is not sure they are on the right track; if they meet with discouragement, they can easily abandon the ideas thus lose a good learning opportunity. This required Jane to work with someone understanding when generating ideas for translation. Therefore it is evident that working with an understanding friend supports students writing efforts. Another student said the following:

Davis: But we, at this age, consulting your friends is easier than consulting a teacher because you may be fearing a teacher yet your friend is near you and it is easy to consult the friends than the teacher.

(Focus Group Discussion 1, S.2)

For Davis, the emotional support is seen when he compares asking a classmate for help on a writing project with asking a teacher. The physical and emotional closeness of friends supports interaction when students' have a writing challenge and this leads to mastery of writing by boosting each student's confidence in their writing ability and through guiding each other in generating ideas. Thus pair work through consulting each other in case of a writing problem leads to mastery of writing.

Data obtained from discussions with students in focus groups showed that pair work also enabled them plan their writing, which is key to mastery of writing since planning is a critical stage in the writing process. For example, some students said:

James: Me as a student in a boarding school, I find difficulties like if they have told us to write a biography about someone, I cannot get access to the internet, so I get maybe a day scholar, he goes, searches about that person and then I get something to write.

(Focus Group Discussion 4, S.2)

James was in the boarding section of a school where they did not have ready access to internet. He, therefore, asked a friend to obtain information, one of the first stages of planning, which he used to plan his work. James' answer portrays his perception of the Internet as his source of information especially for writing biographies. This suggests that students recognize the Internet as a main source of information. The interaction described by James portrays students leaning on their more knowledgeable friends to help them search for content for writing tasks. The fact that James told his friend to research for him showed that he trusted the information that the friend brought, a prerequisite for any successful interaction much more so, in a learning atmosphere. Unlike Jane whose friend validated the ideas she had already thought of, James used a peer to search for the raw information he would later own to edit and then translate in his work. Another student said the following:

Dinah: Like they tell me to write about something which I have never seen, I first consult my friend about the situation.

(Focus Group Discussion 1, S.2)

Dinah relied on friends to obtain ideas on topics she was unfamiliar with as is seen when Dinah said that when given a writing topic she was unfamiliar with, she consulted a friend. This is evidence that peers support each other's writing by helping in the search for ideas using different sources which is a form of planning.

Just like their students, data obtained from lesson observation with teachers' carries evidence that some teachers' consciously exploited on peer interaction during writing tasks based on their knowledge of the value of this interaction. For example, on one occasion, after teaching her senior three-class how to write a dialogue, ST01 told them to write dialogues during their free time and present the dialogues in the following lesson. In order to motivate them to do the work, she promised to mark the books of the first six students who presented their dialogues in class. Writing of the dialogues did not take place in class though I witnessed their presentation. Students' presentation of dialogues portrayed their efforts for planning together and agreeing the role each student was to play in the presentation. The interaction evidently boosted the students' confidence and it is also evident that the confidence partly resulted from the fact that the students' had learned the format of writing dialogues. This was seen by the fact that their teacher praised the dialogues they presented. Thus interacting in pairs supports mastery of writing by giving them confidence as they wrote and presented together. Confidence is an important ingredient for the author's immersion in the topic thus producing their best-written work.

When the senior three class was learning how to write reports, we observed Kristine to sit next to John and work together. During the writing phase of the lesson, Kristine looked at John's book and copied down whatever he was writing. For example, during the drafting phase of writing, Kristine could copy John's translation and organisation of the report. The act of copying a more knowledgeable learner's writing process enabled the Kristine to learn how John draft the generated ideas, organized them and edited his work. According to KT02, the teacher who was teaching this particular lesson and who encouraged Kristine to work with John, this activity, Christine, the weaker learner would in future be able to write a report on her own. However, copying does not facilitate the whole writing process as it requires only the ability to transfer content from one place to another. Copying leaves out the writing processes which occur in the writer's head like interpreting the question and choosing the ideas that suit the question and cannot be seen by the person copying the work. Secondly, in the event that the more knowledgeable student edits his or her work, the one copying will end up with wrong information. Therefore, the data suggests that the act of copying the writing processes of a gifted writer enables the weaker learner master drafting ideas as well as observation of form as is presented in spelling and

punctuation. It is not bound to support the higher demands of generating ideas or developing coherence through revising the ideas and their organisation.

Fourthly, one's peer could also help in editing or proofreading the written work. After writing, some students would ask one of their friends to proofread their work. For example, one learner in the third school said he worked with a friend when it came to editing and polishing their written work. In the focus group discussion they explained:

Ronald: We exchange work with our friends. If we have written compositions, we exchange work so we can read through this composition and when you find a mistake somewhere, you tell him like the correct thing.

(Focus Group Discussion 3, S.3)

The focus group data here shows that classmates helped each other in editing their work. In this case, after writing, Ronald said they would exchange work with their neighbor and the neighbor would read the work while pointing out any errors noticed. They would then show the writer how to correct the given error. The nature of writing is such that the writers first visualize ideas clearly in their heads. Thus, in the first draft of the writing process, it is easy to think that the idea one has in their head is what one has put down on paper. Therefore, one of the ways in which peers support each other in writing from Ronald's comment was in enabling them to confirm that they had written error-free work. This showed that learners in the third school recognized value in working with others especially when editing each others' work. Thus, peer interaction evidently supports mastery of writing by having one's peers identify the writer's errors which subsequently teach the writer how to revise their work in future writing tasks.

Another form of pair work was also evident when learners wrote individually but periodically asked other learners for help. This was the most commonly cited form of peer interaction. From the data obtained for example, when some learners were not sure of a spelling, meaning or use of a word, they consulted their peers. During focus group interviews at the first school, Kate said:

Friends help us like in some difficult words. You can go and tell him or her you don't know this word. He brings a dictionary, explains and then you get it.

(Focus Group Discussion 4, S.2)

In Kate's case, the learner consulted would act as the more knowledgeable other capable of helping the one in need of writing support. The one consulted would simplify the dictionary definition so that weaker learners like Kate would understand the words and use them in their writing. Consulting other peers enabled learners to edit their work by the peer giving the writer the meaning of words. However, some learners were not sure of how to add the meaning of words to their mental vocabulary. These are the words they would later use in their writing tasks.

Lesson observation data yielded only a basic form of peer interaction during the writing process in the sense that learners would support each other's writing in only the lower-order aspects of writing. For example; learners would ask other learners for meanings of words, for a pen or a dictionary. When learners tell each other about the meanings of words there is mastery of writing as writers are able to use the word which best captures their intended meaning during the drafting process. Helping each other with writing tools like a pen supports mastery of writing as learners got the necessary tools to transcribe their own writing. A dictionary supports mastery of writing through providing learners with correct spelling and usage of words. However, this proves to be a basic form of interaction and mastery of writing as learners only work together for short periods of time and does not support the harder writing skills like generation of ideas, organisation of the ideas and revising them. Therefore, peer interaction was limited to peers helping each other with writing tools and meanings of words.

Despite the benefits of pair work during writing learning and the actual writing process, some learners prefer to write alone. Data shows that there were learners who do not interact with other learners for various reasons.

These come from some of their peers being rude, unwilling to help, lack of better knowledge by their peers or even the fact that some teachers discouraged peer interaction. For example, some learners in the second school said:

Megan: For me what I think is that, going for consultation, I think you should just ignore an uneasy word that you can't spell for yourself. Sometimes, there are some hard words that you can't even speak out. Now if you go and consult someone, instead of... If you are to consult, I think you should consult the teacher because he/she can't give you wrong things. Even if she is to, she will know that this child consulted me because he/she does not know. So the teacher will never give you wrong things.
(Focus Group Discussion 1, S.2)

Megan answer showed a learner who sees no value in working with their peers when writing as she does not see what their peers could add to them. Margaret and Megan and answers show that for pair interaction to have any influence on learners' mastery of writing. There is need for learners to be taught its value as well as how to interact with their peers during the writing process. Furthermore, there is need for rewards to be attached to any classroom writing done collaboratively. Megan's answer also points to need to promote interaction as opposed to competition during writing as it is possible that the reason her peers gave her wrong answers was that students see each other as a threat to their position in class. Thus they see no need to give each other positive criticism. Indeed, many of them revealed fear of being given wrong answers and prevented them from interacting with their peers during the writing process. This hindered their mastery of writing.

However, the lack of interaction among learners during the writing process was partly caused by some of their teachers who did not encourage them to work collaboratively with one another when writing as seen below:

ET03: I don't encourage my learners to interact. Now our school is a government school and you realize that if you just let your learners to do what they want, some don't learn. One time, I used to encourage them to ask their friends to help them. And you find a student has copied all their friends' work from top to bottom so I discourage that.
(Teacher's Interview 4, School Two)

ET03 said she did not encourage learners' interaction when writing as this would make them produce identical work. This fear of 'copying' is related to the fact that in the final examinations, learners have to produce individual work so some teachers believe that the earlier they learnt how to write individually, the easier learners would find the final examinations. ET03's focus was on the final written work and not the mastery of writing process. ET03 evidently does not realize that the process of scaffolding involves learners working with a more knowledgeable other in the earlier stages of writing and gradually letting the learner write alone which would prepare learners for situations where they have to write individually. ET03 had a point in that when students got used to interacting with each other during the writing tasks, they would find difficulty producing individual work during the exams.

4.2 The influence of group work

In this study, we defined group work as those situations where more than two students sat together to generate ideas, draft them or revise a given topic assigned to them by their teacher. Data in this section were obtained from focus group discussions, interviews with teachers and lesson observation.

In all schools, the groups were made of learners sitting together at a table of three to four learners of mixed gender. Group interaction influences learners' conceptualization, transcribing and editing of ideas to the extent shown in this section.

Data from students' focus group discussions shows that group work enables learners generate ideas on a given topic. For example, some students said friends help them obtain ideas on a given topic although when it came to

translation and explanation of ideas on paper, each learner wrote their different points. Janet emphasized this when she said:

You get something, like maybe an exercise. Then you tell friends to come and talk about it. You give each one a day to research, then you bring together what you have got, you combine and then you get what you write.

(Focus Group Discussion 4 S.2)

According to Janet, learners obtain ideas through either researching from different sources or brainstorming. Janet's point was that each learner researched individually, and then they put together their ideas in order to get what to write. Janet implies that many times the question they are given to answer seems so abstract that the presence of peers enables them to combine the ideas obtained from different sources and get the content to write suited the given question. When given a complex writing topic, it is easy to think there are no answers to it. In Janet's case, group work supports writing in two ways: by discussing with other group mates the question in the exercise and later, by discussing the content each learner had obtained from their individual research. Where learners have different approaches to a question, working as a group means that each learner brings their view on how the question should be approached and thus resulting into a consolidated and appropriate view. Hence, it is evident that discussing with a group of friends supports learner's writing by enabling them interpret of the question, confirm the ideas she had obtained from different sources as suitable in answering the question and in obtaining more ideas on the writing topic. In Janet's case, each learner is seen as an equal member of the team thus enabling all learners work together during translation. Therefore, when learners interact in the writing process with other learners as a group, they all master how to interpret a given question and obtain writing content.

Data from focus group discussions on the value of group interaction in mastery was supported by data from teacher's interviews. When interviewing their teacher writing instructor ST01, she confirmed that encouraged learner interaction when during the interviews she said:

When you leave the student to do it individually, they find it difficult. But I always encourage group work. When they have someone to do the exercise with or the writing assignment with, they will surely do it because they have a partner to work with. So if you share knowledge, it's wonderful. They do it easily.

(Teacher's Interview 1 School One.)

In the interview extract above, ST01 acknowledges difficulty learners face when beginning a writing task and that learners tend to avoid difficult tasks. When learners' work in a group, the writing task becomes easier thus motivating them to write. According to ST01, group work influences writing instruction by encouraging them to write thus making the task easier. Students value the validation acceptance from their peers. This means that working as a team influences learners' mastery of writing in two ways: it made the writing task seem easier and as all learners were writing, it made individual learners feel they had company during the writing process. Thus data from the interviews show that group work supports mastery of writing by making the writing task appear easier and providing learners with writing peers. ET02 also said:

We do encourage group discussions. Assignments are given to specific groups. Presentations made. There is a benefit. When you are in class, not everybody can be on par with what you say. But a student can teach a fellow student. So there is a benefit.

(Teacher's Interview 2, school Two)

ET02 said group work enabled students to learn from each other as there are some students who learn better from a peer than from a teacher. After a writing concept had been taught, some learners would not be able to understand what the teacher had taught so they needed extra scaffolding from their peers. In this case, other students simplify the content taught by the teacher in such a way that the rest of their peers would understand. In this way group work supports mastery of writing in the sense that it enables the students who understood the writing content as portrayed by the teacher to explain it to other students. This implies that better writers benefit

as the more they explain the writing content, the clearer they understand it while the weaker ones benefit from having the writing content explained twice. Thus, both groups gain a better understanding of how to write. However, the data portray that in such cases, learners master how to write documents which have a specific content and not other aspects of writing generating or revising their content.

Working as a group also enabled students translate their ideas that are, in putting on paper the different parts of the same writing task. For example, during the interview when asked if she encouraged peer interaction during writing learning and how, KT03 said:

Sometimes I ask them to work in pairs or groups. I ask them to share. One student gives the first line, another the second line and so on to the extent that all students in the group have the same work. It helps these other weak ones pick up from the others. That is just for practice. Someone is just trying to learn from the other. So, finally, I will ask them to write their own work.

(Teacher's Interview 5; school Three)

KT03 said she encourages the kind of group work where each learner contributes a line to the final written work. This means that group interaction, in this case, enables the weak ones to improve their writing skills in the sense that the stronger learners draft better sentences. The ideas obtained from the group writing tasks guide weaker writers such that when doing a final exercise, they can be able to write grammatically correct sentences of their own. This leads to mastery of writing as the stronger writers guide the weaker ones in drafting good sentences while both groups practice the writing process of translation.

The nature of group interaction we observed was when they could organize the sitting arrangement of their learners into four groups of tables and allow each learner to sit where they wanted. When it came to writing, they discouraged any interaction as seen in their telling learners to write quietly because both teachers and learners looked at writing as only translating their ideas on paper. This was due to the fact that both teachers focused on the evaluating individual learner's progress of what teachers wanted to do and which couldn't be possible with teamwork. Hence, there was no influence of group interaction on writing learning.

5. Discussion

This study explored how peer interaction supports students' mastery of writing. Mastery of writing was seen in the reader's judgment of the overall quality of composition taking into account things like: ideation, organisation, vocabulary, sentence structure and tone (Graham and Perin 2007, p. 447). We found two forms of peer interaction that supported mastery of writing: pair work and group work.

Our findings from the interviews and focus group discussions showed that peer interaction supported all stages of the writing process. That is, peers, supported each other in providing them with more ideas on a given topic, in translating the ideas and in reviewing their written work. This is in line with Vygotsky's concept of a more knowledgeable other helping a child perform tasks they cannot perform on their own such that at the end of the day, learners were able to undertake the whole writing tasks on their own.

Our findings are also collaborated by Kurihara (2016)'s study which used a pre-test post test experiment to study the effects of peer review on students' writing abilities. Her findings portrayed that peer review contributed to the improvement of students writing abilities even after the study ended. Kurihara also revealed that students' incorporation of their peers' findings in their writing largely depended on if they considered their peers as more knowledgeable. This is consistent with our study where students kept on referring to the peer they wrote with as a friend, a sign that they trusted this peer to give them the right information.

Our findings also show that pair work motivated students to write. This is collaborated by Nicole (2017) who studied how long term partnerships supported the writing of 2nd grade students. In her study, Nicole found out that when students worked with partners they had chosen for themselves, they demonstrated increased writing

proficiency and engagement. This is due to the fact that students chose a writing partner basing on the closeness of their relationship, trust and honesty which our study also found.

On the influence of group work on mastery of writing, data from interviews and focus group discussions portrayed that group work gave learners' confidence in their ideas, helped them generate more ideas for writing and motivated them to write further. These findings are collaborated by MaCamino and Martinez (2017) research which studied the benefits of collaborative writing in an EFL setting. Their findings suggest that collaboratively written texts were more accurate, were slightly longer and had more details than those written by individuals or pairs.

On the issue of the influence of group work on mastery of writing, our findings portrayed that much as many teachers and students said that they saw the value of group work in mastery of writing, observation data revealed little group interaction. In fact, the only group interaction we noted was where students sat in groups of four but each wrote their individual work. The discrepancy in the data from interviews and that from observation could be explained by the fact that students were being trained for answering examination questions which required individual work thus very few of them worked in teams. The effect of teaching for the test affecting classroom interaction is collaborated by Berridge (2009) who investigated the role of peer review in building content knowledge. Berridge found that though teachers saw the value of peer review in building content knowledge, the fact that teachers were training learners to pass examinations made them scarcely involve their learners in the writing review process.

Some of our findings revealed that some respondents were against the use of peer interaction during the actual writing process for a variety of reasons like fear of being given a wrong answer and the fact that interaction leads to noisy classes. Some students echoed their fear of being given wrong answers implying/meant that they did not collaborate with fellow learners. This finding showed that learners did not understand the value of working with another peer. This mistrust of fellow peers is collaborated by Yi Ting Hsu's (2017) research. Yi Ting Hsu studied the instructional input and uptake of high school English as Foreign Language (EFL) 10th grade students. Yi Ting Hsu also found that though students benefited from peer to peer discussions about their writing, they rarely incorporated the findings from the discussions because they doubted the validity of the feedback. Students' reticence towards interacting during the writing process was also echoed by Cakmak (2017). Cakmak's study revealed that learners given some tasks that required their interaction with peers, many of them learners actually preferred to work alone as it helped them avoid arguments and enabled them to concentrate better.

Furthermore, some teachers discouraged peer interaction as it resulted in a noisy class. Where the teacher had negative assumptions towards the value of classroom interaction in the mastery of writing, they discouraged the it which explains why we saw little interaction in the classroom. The impact of teacher beliefs on students' activity in the classroom is echoed by McElroy (2017) who found out that where teachers supported classroom interaction, they ensured that students collaborated with each other during the writing process which resulted into greater mastery of writing. The fear of noisy classrooms as learners collaborate on a writing task is valid. When given a task, because there are many learners in a classroom talking, the classroom will naturally be noisy. This fear is echoed by other teachers and researchers. For example, the first time Nicole (2017) started implemented the activity of writing with a partner among her 2nd grade students her first worry was the noise they were making until she listened to them and realized that her learners were actually talking about writing.

The fact that some teachers and learners were against peer interaction during writing points to the need to train both teachers and learners about the values of peer interaction on mastery of writing and how to ensure that interaction is done in the right way. For instance, before giving her learners any writing tasks which required interaction, Nicole (2017) spent a week discussing with her learners what writing partners looked like and how to write with a partner. This ensured that by the time her learners chose their writing partners, they were sure about how to work with another peer and its value. When Harper (2018) examined how teachers ensured Chinese students participation in classroom tasks, Harper found out that some of the ways teachers ensured warm and interactive environment included changing the sitting arrangements of students regularly such that students got used to other classmates as well as beginning lessons with warm up activities which made the class relaxed and through the use of humor.

6. Conclusion and Recommendations

In this study, we explored the influence of peer interaction on their mastery of writing. Our findings portrayed that when peers interacted with each other, they mastered how to generate writing content, how to transcribe it and how to review their writing. Students were also motivated to write when working with a peer. However, despite its advantages, we observed little interaction in the classrooms as some of the students and teachers had various reasons against it. Therefore, there is a need for teachers and students to be trained in the advantages of peer interaction on students' mastery of writing and how to ensure that students collaborate on a writing task.

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