

## Exploring EFL Teachers' Perceptions about Problems of Integrating Collaborative Writing Strategy

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### Abstract:

Nowadays, collaborative writing strategy is considered an interesting writing strategy as it has various advantages than traditional approaches such as the teacher-centered approach. However, teachers may face difficulties when implementing it. So, this research identifies problems of collaborative writing strategy encountered by written expression's teachers at department of English, Guelma, Algeria. It seeks to answer the following questions: Do EFL written expression teachers use collaborative writing strategy? What are problems these teachers face when integrating it? Thus, quantitative questionnaire is selected for obtaining participants' viewpoints. Research sample includes 17 teachers of written expression. The main findings conclude that participants' prominent problems of collaborative writing strategy are students' rejection to take part in collaborative writing, students' lack of experience, the lack of fairness, organization of collaborative writing activities and uncertainty and ambiguity about what and how to assess.

**Keywords:** collaborative writing strategy; difficulties; effectiveness; perceptions; problems.



### 1. Introduction

Through time, collaborative learning has become a prominent concept in contemporary EFL learning and teaching fields. The aim behind the big interest for this concept is the attempt to achieve and enhance pedagogical outcomes. However, the implementation of such strategy in EFL classrooms is not without difficulties. EFL written expression teachers have encountered many significant problems when attempting to use this strategy. Hence, the purpose of this article is to shed light on these problems from the perspective of written expression teachers of Guelma University.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. Definition of Collaborative Writing Strategy

Collaborative writing strategy, also known as collaborative writing, has been given many definitions among researchers through time. For example, Rice and Huguley (1994) pointed out that collaborative writing strategy refers to two or more learners learning together to write and finish a piece of writing. During the process of sharing, students follow different steps; collecting ideas, brainstorming, planning, organizing ideas, drafting, revising and editing. It also means an effective give-and-take between pairs or groups of learners in order to reach their aim, i.e. writing a text. Moreover, collaborative writing strategy is also considered as a pedagogical method which helps teachers in their teaching process. In this regard, Montero (2005) has mentioned “collaborative writing presents not only a highly motivating learning experience for EFL/ESL students, but also a creative pedagogical tool for teachers” (p. 38). Thus, collaborative writing strategy is seen as both a learning tool for learners and a teaching strategy for teachers.

Furthermore, Alwasilah (2004) has defined collaborative writing as a method through which students study in a group of readers and writers where they are allowed to discuss meaning, ideas and symbols found in the piece of writing. In a collaborative writing, students should joint their efforts and take part in discussing main ideas for a topic, put and prepare an outline, and participate in writing the text through its components (words, phrases, sentences, paragraphs). Through studying and working collaboratively, students like more the occasion to experience how their group members think, ponder and provide new interesting ideas. In addition, discussion among students within the group decreases anxiety and gives them valuable chances where they feel at ease to attempt and produce new ideas.

### 2.2. The Effectiveness of Collaborative Writing Strategy

Many different theories have revealed that collaborative writing strategy would be effective for EFL/ESL learners as they can experience more interaction with each other and they develop more self-confidence. Similarly, through accomplishing their written works collaboratively, their anxiety will be decreased (Rollinson, 2005).

Storch (2005) has made an investigation of collaboration in the writing skill, where he relates his research to the following main points; learners' experiences when working collaboratively (reflection), processing, and production. In his study, he divides the students into two groups. Then, he asks one group to write a text individually, whereas the members of the other group have to work collaboratively. In other words, his research focuses on

the impact of pairs' and individual's writing on fluency, accuracy, and complexity of learning process, too. As a consequence, the scores of the group whose participants follow the collaborative way are higher than those of the students who write individually.

Moreover, Foster (1998) and Reid (1993) have listed a series of significant benefits of collaborative writing. They are summed up in the following points:

- a) It supports and creates the atmosphere of motivation.
- b) It increases learners' awareness to risk – taking.
- c) It offers and ameliorates students' tolerance and creativity.
- d) It motivates students' interaction and direct thinking in the foreign language.
- e) It enhances the learners' level better than following an independent way.

### ***2.3. Problems of Collaborative Writing***

#### ***2.3.1. Resistance***

Chisholm (1990) mentioned that among the prominent problems of collaborative writing that teachers may encounter is student's resistance. He explains this issue saying that several learners give less priority to collaborative work. In other words, some of these learners don't prefer to take part in group projects. The reasons behind doing so may return to their reluctance, shyness, disdain, or laziness. As a result, whatever is their reason they do not place their energy to full participation.

Furthermore, Taylor (2011) has highlighted that teachers suffer from students' resistance since learners do not often prefer collaborative writing because of group dynamics, mainly accountability on group projects. In other words, within collaboration learners must collaborate, exchange, communicate, delegate, and rely on each other, however; this is challenging for independent learners, dominating personalities, or introverts. As well as, Allan (2016) has stressed that learners are disturbed from collaborative learning mainly when all group participants get the same grade while only a few of them have worked and completed a great portion of the project.

#### ***2.3.2. Inexperience***

The second problem teachers may suffer from when integrating collaborative writing is students' lack of collaborative skills. Among the studies that are interested in this issue is that of Barron (2003) when she investigates children's collaborative interactions in the primary school. The result of her study has shown low-quality coordination between group participants as they take part in problem-solving tasks. Moreover, it also

demonstrates that group members do not take into account others' opinions, interrupt them, and refuse any suggestions without even providing justification.

Moreover, Ross (2008) noticed that the explications' quality of primary and secondary pupils' in group interaction is weak and does not allow them for shared knowledge construction. In addition, he finds that help-seekers do not know how to ask for help efficiently. So, both help-givers and help-seekers do not have the ability to collaborate efficiently. As well as, Chisholm (1990) has reported that the purpose of integrating the teaching of collaborative writing is to make learning environments, where newly-formed groups will be mature, systematic, and habitual collaborative units. However, learners are not experienced enough in collaborative writing. So, they are in need to learn everything about it and to get more occasions to be trained in collaboration since only a small category of them know how to study and write productively in a team form. He also agrees that students know how to play on teams, but they do rarely take part in collaborative works.

For the higher educational level, Popov et al. (2012) has found that students' inexperience which causes communication problems, can prevent first-year learners from participating in team work and taking part in group outcomes. Additionally, Gillies (2006) proposed that lack of collaborative skills can be considered as one of the antecedents of collaborative troubles learners and teachers may encounter in collaborative learning.

### **2.3.3. Fairness**

According to Chisholm (1990), the fairness problem appears intensively mainly when older or more highly motivated learners are put with immature learners. For further explanation, he says that those immature learners are willing to get others finish the work, whereas, the older ones soon get disturbed from this situation. He also added that since the principal concept behind collaborative learning is collaboration; one main aim is to enhance a collaborative team spirit. In addition, the important intention is to create a system where all participants will take part and bear the responsibility, instead of competition and individual rewards.

### **2.3.4. Organization of Collaborative Activities**

Among the other problems that teachers encounter when implementing collaborative learning, in general and collaborative writing, in particular is organization of collaborative activities. Gillies and Boyle (2010) have announced that this problem includes:

- a) Monitoring learners' on-task behaviour,
- b) Managing group-work time,

- c) Providing relevant materials,
- d) Assigning individual roles,
- e) Establishing teamwork beliefs and behaviours.

Moreover, Ruys, Van Keer, and Aelterman (2012) conducted a research to analyze pre-service teachers' preparation of collaborative activities. Their study has shown that teachers' awareness of arranging collaborative work like specifying group norms and simplifying activities is not enough. Finally, Blatchford et al. (2003) has reached a conclusion that a great number of teachers within primary and even secondary school put learners in teams with each other without any attempt to prepare them to accomplish collaborative activities productively.

### ***2.3.5. Assessment of Writing***

Strijbos (2011) reported that most of the time teachers encounter difficulties when assessing learners' performance and work, mainly when integrating collaborative learning in their classes at all education levels. For more illustration and explanation, a number of studies have been conducted for this issue. Firstly, Frykedal and Chiriac (2011) claimed that some primary and secondary school teachers reveal uncertainty and ambiguity about what and how to assess. Secondly, Chiriac and Granström (2012) concluded that assessment's criteria or rules are in need for more transparency and concreteness.

Moreover, when there are no exact and transparent assessment tools for collaborative performance measurement of each participant within the team, learners become disappointed about assessment's transparency (Strom and Strom, 2011).

## **3. Objectives of the Study**

The aim of the present research study is to check whether EFL written expression teachers at Guelma University are aware about the usefulness of collaborative writing strategy. As well as, to shed light and uncover the main problems that these teachers encounter when they integrate it in their written expression classes.

## **4. Research Questions**

The present research study aims to answer the following research questions:

1. Do EFL written expression teachers use collaborative writing strategy?
2. What are the problems that EFL written expression teachers face when implementing collaborative writing strategy?

## 5. Research Methodology

In order to reach the aims and answer the research questions, a quantitative descriptive research method had been chosen in the current study. As well as, it attempted to identify teachers' perceptions about the problems that impeded the implementation of collaborative writing strategy. It comprised seventeen questions divided into three main sections. The first included three questions about teachers' background information. The second dealt with collaborative writing strategy, its use and its effectiveness, including four questions. Finally, the third section was about teachers' problems when implementing collaborative writing strategy and it was composed of ten questions.

## 6. Findings and Discussions

The following section is specified for presenting the analyses of the main results and findings of the current research study.

Questions	Answers
Q1. Teaching Experience	-Ranging from 3 to 13 years
Q2. Teaching Experience of Written Expression Module	-Ranging from 1 to 8 years
Q3. Teachers' Qualification	- 15 with Magister degree - 02 with doctorate degree

*Table 1: Teachers' Background Information*

As it is shown in the previous table 1, the questions' answers dealing with teachers' background information reflect that they have been working from three to 13 years teaching at department of English in general and from one to eight years teaching Written Expression module in particular. Hence, the obtained data confirm that these teachers own a rich and diversified teaching experience. As well as, it may also show that written expression module is taught by the same group of teachers due to the profound experience that they acquired through their years of teaching. The results also reveal that for the participants' teaching qualification; fifteen informants have already been post-graduated with an MA degree, while only two teachers have the doctorate degree. That is to say, this staff of teachers has obtained good academic degree which fulfills their level requirements.

Q4. Do you use collaborative writing strategy in your classes?

Options	Participants	Percentage (%)
a) Yes	14	82,35%
b) No	03	17,64%
Total	17	100%

Table 2: Teachers' Use of Collaborative Writing Strategy

Concerning the issue whether teachers use collaborative writing strategy or not, the absolute majority of them (82,35%) affirm that they never hesitate to integrate this strategy in their writing classes. This may be due to the fact that they want to create a dynamic environment of teaching the writing skill, which in its turn inspires their students to be active. Whereas, a small percentage of teachers (17,64%) mentions that they do not give interest to that strategy. The reason behind such avoidance may return to their inexperience to implement new strategies of teaching.

Q5. If yes, do you use it because learners who are offered chances to share their work collaboratively will:

Options	Participants	Percentage (%)
a) Have the ability to learn more rapidly.	06	35,29%
b) Extract content and main information, and get positive vision toward learning.	04	23,52%
c) Others please specify.	04	23,52%
Total	14	82,35%

Table 3: Teachers' Causes behind the Use of Collaborative Writing Strategy

As it appears in the previous table (3), the majority of teachers (35,29%) reports that they prefer to use collaborative writing strategy because when applying it, their students will have the ability to learn more rapidly. However, 23,52% of the teachers explain that they use it since it helps their learners to extract content and main information and get positive vision toward learning. Whereas, the third category of teachers (23,52%) choose to specify their reasons behind the use of collaborative writing strategy. They include:

1. To encourage the collaborative work.

2. To motivate learners to write as collaborative writing helps them to exchange ideas and experiences.
3. It enables the students to learn from others' experiences by extending their own.
4. They may have the tendency to be more aware of their mistakes and learn how to correct them.
5. Teaming-up may help them to reduce anxiety, feel more confident, and lessen the complexity of the written assignment.
6. It gives low-level learners chance to get in touch with their immediate-level colleagues, and when this happens they can make one another understanding more.

**Q6.** If **no**, what are the reasons behind not implementing collaborative writing strategy?

Options	Participants	Percentage (%)
a) Time constraints.	02	11,76%
b) Unawareness of how to implement it.	00	0%
c) Others please specify.	01	05,88%
Total	03	17,64%

*Table 4: Teachers' Causes behind the non Implementation of Collaborative Writing Strategy*

The results obtained from the precedent table (4) point out that (11,76%) of the participants say that the main reason behind the non implementation of collaborative writing strategy is time constraints. This indicates that even if teachers try to play different roles to facilitate the learning and teaching process, they are most of the time struggling with their enemy which is time. However, no one of the teachers selects unawareness of how to implement it. In addition, only one respondent (05,88%) chooses to add his own reason reporting that students most of the time forget about the objective of the task, and use collaboration to make out context discussions which would damage the classroom order and lower their attention.



Q7. Collaborative writing strategy is effective because it:

Options	Participants	Percentage (%)
a) Supports and creates the atmosphere of motivation.	06	35,29%
b) Increases learners' awareness to risk – taking.	00	0%
c) Offers and ameliorates students' tolerance and creativity.	02	11,76%
d) Motivates students' interaction and direct thinking in the foreign language.	02	11,76%
e) Enhances the learners' level better than following an independent way.	02	11,76%
f) All of them.	05	29,41%
Total	17	100%

*Table 5: Teachers' Attitudes towards the Effectiveness of Collaborative Writing Strategy*

Concerning the frequency of collaborative writing strategy's effectiveness, almost half of the teachers (35,29%) claim that collaborative writing strategy is effective because it supports and creates the atmosphere of motivation. This may reflect the fact that these teachers would see this strategy as a sort of motivation itself. Whereas, no participant (0%) state that it is effective since it increases learners' awareness to risk – taking. Yet, only a very small equal percentage (11,76%) select the following reasons respectively: offers and ameliorates students' tolerance and creativity, motivates students' interaction and direct thinking in the foreign language and enhances the learners' level better than following an independent way. Finally, a remarkable number of them (29,41%) find that all of them are of great importance.

**Q8. Do you think that you suffer from students' resistance (students' rejection to take part in collaborative writing) when integrating collaborative writing strategy?**

Options	Participants	Percentage (%)
a) Yes	08	47,05%
b) No	09	52,94%
Total	17	100%

**Q9. If yes, is students' resistance due to students'?**

a) Reluctance.	01	05,88%
b) Shyness.	04	23,52%
c) Disdain.	00	0%
d) Laziness.	03	17,64%
f) All of them	00	0%
Total	08	47,05%

*Table 6: Teachers' Attitudes towards the Resistance Problem and Its Causes*

Regarding the resistance problem in table 6, nearly half of teachers (47,05%) claim that they suffer from students' resistance when integrating collaborative writing strategy. This implies that these students who reject taking part in collaborative work prefer to study individually. Likewise, 52,94% of the informants declare that they do not find any difficulty concerning students' resistance. This may reflect the fact their students enjoy sharing and exchanging ideas when collaborating with their peers in group works unlike the first category.

Moving to the main causes behind students' resistance problem, only 05,88% of the participants choose the option "reluctance". Similarly, 23,52% of them select the option "shyness" and 17,64% choose laziness. Whereas, none of them have opted for "disdain" or "all of them" options.

**Q 10. Does students' lack of experience hinder the implementation of collaborative writing strategy?**

Options	Participants	Percentage (%)
a) Yes	13	76,47%
b) No	04	23,52%
Total	17	100%

**Q11. If yes, do students lack?**

a) Individual and group accountability (responsibility).	04	23,52%
b) Interpersonal and small group social skills (teamwork skills).	05	29,41%
c) Group Processing.	01	05,88%
d) All of them.	03	17,64%
Total	13	76,47%

*Table 7: Teachers' Attitudes towards Students' Lack of Experience Problem*

Regarding the data gathered in the table (7), the highest percentage (76,47%) of the sample views that students' lack of experience hinders the implementation of collaborative writing strategy. This explains that learners are in great need to be trained before integrating for them new strategies such as collaborative writing. By contrast, only four teachers (23,52%) do not consider students' lack of experience as a barrier for them. They may find ways of how to treat this situation and they do not consider it as a barrier.

As presented in the same table 7, the respondents are also requested to choose what students lack exactly. The proposed choices mentioned for them are four. 23,52% of the informants claim that their learners lack individual and group accountability (responsibility). Similarly, less than half of them (29,41%) mentions that their students need more interpersonal and small group social skills (teamwork skills). A very low percentage of students (05,88%) misses group processing according to their teachers. While, 17,64% of the participants opt for all provided suggestions in the list. This implies that the last category of teachers should teach their students the elements of collaborative writing strategy as a solution to overcome their difficulties.

**Q 12.** Does the lack of fairness (when more highly motivated students are put with immature ones and the latter are willing to get others finish the work, the more highly motivated students get disturbed) impede collaborative writing strategy?

Options	Participants	Percentage (%)
a) Yes	14	82,35%
b) No	03	17,64%
Total	17	100%

**Q13.** If yes, do you think that these immature students want to get more highly motivated students finish the work since:

a) They refuse to bear the responsibility.	09	52,94%
b) They reject competition.	01	05,88%
c) They prefer individual rewards.	01	05,88%
d) All of them.	03	17,64%
Total	14	82,35%

*Table 8: Teachers' Attitudes towards Fairness Problem and Its Causes*

From the previous-obtained results concerning the fairness problem, it is concluded that the overall majority of teachers (82,35%) assert that the lack of fairness impedes collaborative writing strategy. That is to say, because of this great percentage for the lack of fairness issue, teachers should pay attention to those more highly motivated students when they are put with immature ones and the latter are willing to get others finish the work. Whereas only (17,64%) of them claim that it does not hinder them.

When discussing the causes of fairness problem, the results demonstrate that 52.94% of teachers declare that their learners refuse to bear the responsibility. It may reflect the category of careless students who are passive and do not like to do any efforts for their learning process. Yet, an equal percentage of teachers (05,88%) agree upon two important reasons behind lack of fairness which are students' competition rejection and individual rewards preference. Additionally, 17,64% of the sample perceive the option "all of them" as the best answer.

Q14. Does the organization of collaborative writing activities represent a difficulty for you?		
Options	Participants	Percentage (%)
a) Yes	12	70,58%
b) No	05	29,41%
Total	17	100%
Q15. If yes, it is difficult because of:		
a) Monitoring learners' on-task behavior.	01	05,88%
b) Managing group-work time.	03	17,64%
c) Providing relevant materials.	00	0%
e) Assigning individual roles.	01	05,88%
f) Establishing teamwork beliefs and behaviors.	02	11,76%
g) All of them.	05	29,41%
Total	12	70,58%

*Table 9: Teachers' Attitudes towards the Organization of Collaborative Writing Activities' Problem and its Causes*

Table 9 demonstrates that the majority of the teachers (70,58%) affirm that the organization of collaborative writing activities does not represent a difficulty for them. This percentage implies that these are very careful when it comes to activities' preparation. However, 29,41% insist that it matters for them when they organize collaborative writing activities.

When being asked about the causes of difficulty when organizing collaborative writing activities, only one participant (05,88%) states that monitoring learners' on-task behavior shapes a difficulty for him. Whereas, 17,64% of teachers insist that managing group-work time hinder them. Surprisingly, no teacher has opted for the third option. Again only one teacher (05,88%) indicates that assigning individual roles is his major problem. The Other teachers (11,76%) claim that establishing teamwork beliefs and behaviors is considered as their main obstacle. Yet, the majority (29,41%) of them choose the option "all of them".

Q16. According to you, is it difficult to assess students' performance in collaborative writing?

Options	Participants	Percentage (%)
a) Yes	15	88,23%
b) No	02	11,76%
Total	17	100%

Q17. If yes, it is difficult because of uncertainty and ambiguity about:

a) What to assess.	02	11,76%
b) How to assess.	04	23,52%
c) Both	09	52,94%
Total	15	88,23%

Table 10: *Teachers' Attitudes towards Assessment Problem and its Causes*

Starting by teachers' attitudes towards assessment problem as it is displayed in the table (10), mostly the entire sample (88,23%) declare that it is difficult for them to assess students' performance in collaborative writing. Strangely, few of them (11,76%) indicate that they can assess their performance without any difficulty. This may suggest that this very few percentage of teachers follow certain specific rubrics and rules for students' performance assessment.

When shifting the context to the reasons of assessment difficulty, only a minority (11,76%) of the sample believes that it is difficult because of uncertainty and ambiguity about what to assess. A small percentage (23,52%) finds a problem in how to assess. Whereas, more than half respondents (52,94%) suffer from both difficulties.

## 7. Conclusion

Through the obtained findings, this article concludes that almost all EFL written expression teachers are familiar with collaborative writing strategy, and they use it in their written expression classes. They are also aware about its effectiveness. But, they do face some problems when trying to implement this strategy with their students in classrooms. The ones that disturb more our sample are: students' rejection to take part in collaborative writing, students' lack of experience, the lack of fairness, the organization of collaborative writing activities and uncertainty and ambiguity about what and how to assess. As a result, this situation requires pedagogical implications.

In order to overcome the previous problems that EFL written expression teachers encounter when implementing collaborative writing strategy, the following are some implications to follow:

1. Finding ways of how to make students motivated to take part in writing and working collaboratively.
2. Training students who lack experience about the main elements of collaborative writing strategy.
3. Paying attention to those immature students who take the opportunity of collaboration to profit from highly motivated students get them finish the work.
4. Taking into account time management to avoid complaining from time.

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### Appendix: Teachers' Questionnaire

#### Section One: General Information

Q1. For how long have you been teaching at the University?

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Q2. For how long have you been teaching Written Expression?

.....

Q3. Degree:

a) Magister

b) Doctorate

#### Section Two: Collaborative Writing Strategy

Q4. Do you use collaborative writing strategy in your classes?

Yes  No

Q5. If yes  you use  because learners who are offered chances to share their work collaboratively will:

- Have the ability to learn more rapidly.
  - Extract content and main information, and get positive vision toward learning.
  - Others please specify.
- .....



Q6. If **no**, what are the reasons behind not implementing collaborative writing strategy?

- a) Time constraint.
- b) Unawareness of how to implement it.
- c) Others please specify.

Q7. Collaborative Writing strategy is effective because it:

- a) Supports and creates the atmosphere of motivation.
- b) Increases learners' awareness to risk – taking.
- c) Offers and ameliorates students' tolerance and creativity.
- d) Motivates students' interaction and direct thinking in the foreign language.
- e) Enhances the learners' level better than following an independent way.
- f) All of them.

### Section Three: Teachers' Difficulties when Implementing Collaborative Writing Strategy

Q8. Do you think that you suffer from **students' resistance (students' rejection to take part in collaborative writing)** when integrating collaborative writing strategy?

Yes  No

Q9. If **yes**, is students' resistance due to students'?

- a) Reluctance.
- b) Shyness.
- c) Disdain.
- d) Laziness.

Q10. Does **students' lack of experience** hinder the implementation of collaborative writing strategy?

Yes  No

Q11. If **yes**, do students lack?

- a) Individual and group accountability (responsibility).
- b) Interpersonal and small group social skills (teamwork skills).
- c) Group Processing.
- d) All of them.

Q12. Does **the lack of fairness (when more highly motivated students are put with immature ones and the latter are willing to get others finish the work, the more highly motivated students get disturbed)** impede collaborative writing strategy?

Yes  No

**Q13.** If **yes**, do you think that these immature students want to get more highly motivated students finish the work since they:

- a) Refuse to bear the responsibility.
- b) Reject competition.
- c) Prefer individual rewards.
- d) All of them.

**Q14.** Does the organization of collaborative writing activities represent a difficulty for you?

Yes  No

**Q15.** If **yes**, it is difficult because of:

- f) Monitoring learners' on-task behavior.
- g) Managing group-work time.
- h) Providing relevant materials.
- i) Assigning individual roles.
- j) Establishing teamwork beliefs and behaviors.
- k) All of them.

**Q16.** According to you, is it difficult to assess students' performance in collaborative writing?

Yes  No

**Q17.** If **yes**, it is difficult because of uncertainty and ambiguity about:

- a) What to assess.
- b) How to assess.
- c) Both.