

Understanding Group-based Learning in an Academic Context

Rwandan Students' Reflections on
Collaborative Writing and
Peer Assessment

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Linköping University
EDUCATIONAL SCIENCES

Linköping Studies in Behavioural Science No. 174
Linköping University,
Department of Behavioural Sciences and Learning
Linköping 2013

Linköping Studies in Behavioural Science • No. 174

Distributed by:
Department of Behavioural Sciences and Learning
Linköping University
SE-581 83 Linköping

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Upplaga 1:1
ISBN 978-91-7519-633-6
ISSN 1654-2029

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Department of Behavioural Sciences and Learning, 2013

Printed by: LiU-Tryck, Linköping 2013

Dedication

To my wife, Jeannette

To our sons, Jimmy and Harry,

For your exceptional understanding, courage and patience during my long absence from home.

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Acknowledgements

The completion of this thesis is a result of combined efforts from a number of people whose contribution I wish to acknowledge here.

First of all, I wish to acknowledge an invaluable support I received from Associate Professor Ingrid Andersson and Dr Suzanne Parmenius-Swärd for having kindly accepted to jointly supervise this work. Their insightful remarks and various suggestions have really been appreciated. In the same order, I sincerely thank Professor Sven Andersson for his constructive comments and unfailing support. All of you are the testimony to my ups and downs during my PhD research path and I must thank you for your patience and understanding when the work went beyond its expected course.

I am greatly indebted to all the lecturers I was lucky to meet while taking some courses or attending various seminars at Linköping University for having enlightened my PhD research journey and sharpened my thinking. Once more, I must pay due respects to late Professor Lars Owe Dahlgren. I know that you were eager to see all Rwandan PhD students in IBL Department graduate but then you sadly passed away without having seen this memorable event. You will always remain in our hearts.

I owe much to my classmates at Linköping University for their inspirational company. You have proven that group discussion is indeed an effective and efficient learning tool. Please keep that spirit up.

I sincerely thank Associate Professor Maria Kuteeva for having carefully read and scrutinized my final manuscript. Her critical and constructive comments greatly shaped this work and made it what it is today.

Special gratitude is equally due to NUR-Sida Project and collaborators (Swedish Institute and International Science Programme) for having financially supported my studies in Sweden.

I wish to extend my thanks to my parents, brothers and sisters, relatives, friends, former classmates and acquaintances for their steady encouragement, care and moral support.

My deepest appreciation is also reserved for my colleagues and all students who kindly accepted to participate in this research. Without you, there could not have been any other better way to discern what group-based learning is about within a short period of time. Thank you for having spared your precious time.

Finally, without the unconditional love and moral support from my wife, Jeannette, and our two sons, Jimmy and Harry, I could not have completed this work. I am deeply

grateful to you for cheerfully accepting that family does not always come first. Please find in this thesis the fruit of your immense courage and immeasurable patience.

To all and to everyone, my thanks for everything.

Faustin Mutwarasibo

Linköping, April 11th, 2013

List of original articles

1. Mutwarasibo, F. (2013). University students' conceptions and practice of collaborative work on writing. *International Journal of Higher Education*, 2(2), 13-21.
2. Mutwarasibo, F. (2013). Promoting university students' collaborative learning through instructor-guided writing groups. *International Journal of Higher Education*, 2(3).
3. Mutwarasibo, F. (2013). Supporting the development of students' academic writing through collaborative process writing. *Journal of Instructional Pedagogies*, 11. Retrieved from <http://www.aabri.com/manuscripts/131473.pdf>
4. Mutwarasibo, F. (2013). Students' attitudes towards peer assessment and reactions to peer feedback on group writing (Submitted manuscript).

PART I: OVERVIEW OF THE RESEARCH

1. General introduction

Tell me and I'll listen. Show me and I'll understand.
Involve me and I'll learn (A saying from Teton Lakota
Indians - an American Indian tribe – as cited in Millis &
Cottell, 1998, p.3).

Orientation into the study

As the abovementioned quotation states, the core question discussed in this study is how to promote students' involvement in such a way that they take more ownership and become more accountable for their learning and development. To keep pace with current developments in higher education around the world, the study focuses on what is now commonly called student-centred learning (Di Napoli, 2004). As the concept itself is too broad, only one dimension of it is discussed, namely, group-based learning (Barkley, Cross & Major, 2005).

For some time, group or team work has become a buzzword for numerous policy documents governing higher education and various other professional domains in many parts of the world (Bologna Declaration, 1999; National Council for Higher Education [NCHE], 2007a, 2007b). What group/team work entails, what it exactly means for students and what it takes for them to be acquainted with team work spirit are highlighted in the four papers making up this study. The context of study is Rwanda as a place where the education sector has been in a state of flux since 1994. Only Rwandan higher education has been chosen as a focal point for this study but the issues discussed and the findings obtained have implications for other higher education contexts beyond Rwanda.

Group-based learning can be applied to any educational domain, any discipline and any level. But for the present study, it has been limited to the discipline of English language education, and more precisely, to the area of writing and peer assessment with undergraduate students. The motivation to bring together group-based learning, writing and peer assessment is clarified under the ensuing subtitle while the implications and limitations of the entire study are explored in its concluding part.

Motivation

It took me some time before I could frame my PhD research topic and clearly define my research problem. But at least I knew that I was going to focus on student learning, writing and assessment even though I could not yet see how the three concepts were related. While doing further readings on those concepts, new ideas kept coming in and I landed on team work as a concept now widely used in educational and professional settings. The concept prompted me to consider writing and assessment as forms of learning which could eventually be improved by means of team work. Thus, I deduced that by being initiated and guided to write together and assess each other's writings, students could improve both their writing skills and team-working skills.

My interests in the area of group-based learning, writing and assessment mainly stemmed from my experiences as a university student, and then later on, as a lecturer within the same academic institution. I was also inspired by the context of multiple changes and transformations that have been taking place in Rwanda in the wake of the 1994 genocide in the areas of higher education, employment and many other areas.

When I joined the university as a fresher in October 1991, there was virtually one university in Rwanda. At that time, the student population for the whole university was just close to 2,500 students (National University of Rwanda, 2012). The intake was very restricted (only the best students nationwide were allowed in) and the rate of failure was terribly high. The most challenging year for most students was undergraduate I. As I may recall, the Department of English I was enrolled in used to recruit around 30 students in the first year. However, my class exceptionally had a double intake of 58 students in the first year but in the second year, the number decreased to 30. But still, nearly all our lecturers always complained about our 'exceptionally big' number while entering the classroom!

One of the courses that used to give us hard times was Writing English, and this was spread across four undergraduate years. So there was no escape route for those who had found it difficult to cope with at the very beginning. Add to this that all students were educated in French in secondary and university levels. The exception was only those enrolled in the Department of English at university, who had to switch from their secondary school French to academic English. This in itself was another huge challenge because no placement test was organized to know the exact level of students' proficiency in English while they were enrolled in the Department of English and all classroom-based activities were going to be handled in English. As a result, at the end of Year I, a few students managed to do well while many others fell behind.

I cannot tell what exactly contributed to our class' relative success, but as I may recall, the only difference we brought in was that we used to organize 'secret' study groups in our halls of residence. In those study groups, we would first consult one another's class notes to make sure they were complete. Then, we would revise the course material together and simulate exam questions and answers based on the records of past exams. We would finally make use of the opportunity to proofread each other's drafts of written assignments. If a study group was blessed to have a member who had done well in previous written assignments, he/she automatically became a writing coach to other group members. I believe that this type of group-based learning had some positive effect on our performance even though we were not fully aware of it.

Some reasons could help explain why study group members had to go in 'hiding' in order to carry out their various academic tasks. In fact, during our days at university, there was a common saying among students that 'nta mu-*salaud* usobanuz; umu-*salaud* nyawe agomba kuba *lucide*'. This can loosely be translated as 'no university student worthy that name ought to seek course explanations from their peers; a true university student must be independent and lucid'. In these words, students meant that they were admitted at university on the basis of merit, so they were expected to attend lectures, know how to take class notes by their own and perform well during the exams without having had to rely on any form of peer support. In practice, anyone who dared bypass this social rule was simply treated as a weak student. To avoid this negative badge, every student inherited a feeling that they had to work hard on their own and succeed, to prove that they deserved being at university. In short, apart from a few exceptions, learning at undergraduate level was a highly individualized and competitive activity. Anything related to group-based learning was not explicitly supported by either students or academic staff.

At postgraduate level, the image I had developed of learning at university radically changed. When I attended the first lecture in one classroom in a South African university, the first thing that surprised me was the degree of closeness and relaxed attitude between the academic staff and students. To illustrate this, during classroom sessions, students and their teaching team used to sit around a table. When there was a point to discuss, everybody present had to take turn to speak, and this was somehow spontaneous. During the lectures, we were encouraged to work in groups and the teaching team had to make sure that in every module we always had group oral presentations. These groups were composed of students from various nationalities. At times, we were also requested to evaluate and comment on each other's drafts of written assignments. These assignments were better known as a *two-page*

written response to every module teaching session. Owing to this ‘new’ teaching and learning method, my English speaking and writing skills improved tremendously. Towards the end of my Master’s course, the negative image I had of teaching and learning at university had completely changed. I can prove that when I returned home and continued teaching at university, I implemented many new ideas and best practices I had learnt at Master’s level.

My university teaching experience also sparked my research interest in group-based learning. While teaching and practising how to write a job application letter and a CV, I requested students to respond to a job offer that was advertised in a local newspaper. Among the requirements that the successful candidate had to meet, there was his/her ability to work in team environments. Then students asked me how they were going to prove that they were good team players. To help them understand the meaning and value of team work, I set some assignments which required them to work together. But, frankly speaking, the motivation to extend my knowledge further, understanding and applications of group-based learning and its potential to help develop other forms of learning (e.g. writing and assessment) developed when I started my PhD research.

The social, economic and political changes that my home country, Rwanda, went through after 1994 also affected the way I started to look at the role and relevance of my university teaching career. In the domain of higher education, there has been a change in the medium of instruction, from French and English (1995 - 2008) to English only (2009 to date). There has also been a change in the teaching and learning system, from a highly teacher-controlled system to a relatively student-centred system, largely inspired by the Bologna process (1999). As someone who had been teaching Study Skills as well as Writing and Speaking Skills in English for some time, I felt a strong need to adjust my teaching practices so that I adequately support students who join the university and help them cope with the changing and increasingly demanding world of work. Thus, in a way, this research depicts my personal experience as a university student, academic and researcher.

Background and context of the research

Like any other domain of inquiry, teaching and learning in higher education have for long attracted the attention of researchers and academics alike (e.g. Barkley, Cross & Major, 2005; Barnett, 1997; Biggs & Moore, 1993; Boud, 1995; Brown & Race, 2002; Fry, Ketteridge & Marshall, 2009; Jaques, 2000; Marton & Booth, 1997; Prosser & Trigwell, 1999). The major preoccupation now is to seek how to improve the quality and relevance of student learning as well as the effectiveness of teaching (Barkley et al., 2005; Biggs & Tang, 2011; Di Napoli, 2004). One of the approaches widely believed to cater for that preoccupation is commonly called student-centred learning.

According to Di Napoli (2004), student-centred learning is a set of pedagogical methods, strategies, processes and practices meant to implement a teaching and learning environment that puts the students' experience at the centre. Those practices may include, among others, the recognition that students learn in different ways and have different learning styles, that learning is fostered through dialogue between teacher and students, and between students and their peers. Moreover, student-centred learning posits that students construct their own meaning by talking, listening, writing, reading and reflecting on content, ideas, issues and concerns. Throughout this process of meaning construction, the teacher acts as a facilitator or supervisor by helping students to access and process information (Di Napoli, 2004). This can be accomplished when students act individually or in collaboration with their peers. In my research, I have chosen to focus on one aspect of student-centred learning, namely group-based learning, also interchangeably called group work, group discussion, collaborative/cooperative learning, team-based learning, and peer-assisted learning (Barkley et al., 2005, Johnson, Johnson & Smith, 1991; Tyson, 1998; Scott-Lad & Chan, 2008).

There are some valid reasons to consider group-based learning as one of the most relevant teaching and learning strategies. For Griffiths (2009), the merits of group-based learning rest on its power to be “an exciting, challenging and dynamic method open to use in a variety of forms and to serve a range of purposes appropriate to different disciplines” (p.72). Moreover, it is often argued that group-based learning can help address several major concerns in connection with the improvement of student learning. Among those concerns, Barkley et al. (2005) mention active engagement of students, development of teamwork and interpersonal skills, exposure to different perspectives and opportunity to develop as lifelong learners. In other circumstances, group work is thought to “enhance both the personal and professional skills of students and is often employed to inculcate transferable skills” (McAllister & Alexander, 2009, p. 289).

Other researchers have also extolled the benefits of group discussion as having enormous and unique potential to instil team work spirit and promote collaboration and communication (Thorley & Gregory, 1994). According to Griffiths (2009), when students are involved in such discussions they obtain the opportunity “to think and to engage with their own and others’ learning through the articulation of views and understanding” (p.72) and in that manner, they are stimulated to take responsibility for their own learning.

While reflecting on this high credit given to group-based learning, Mellor (2009) argued that the latter has become increasingly important in higher education largely as a result of the greater emphasis on skills, employability and lifelong learning. The context of Rwandan higher education, in which this study took place, can help to illustrate how group-based learning is gaining momentum. Although it has been an issue in academic research literature for decades (Millis & Cottell, 1998), group-based learning was only explicitly introduced in the Rwandan higher education system in 2007 with the advent of the Credit Accumulation and Modular Scheme (National Council for Higher Education [NCHE], 2007b). At the centre of this scheme, there are learning outcomes to be attained by students at the end of a module or programme. The highest level of these learning outcomes provides for the ability of students to work with their peers (NCHE, 2007b). Among other documents developed by the National Council for Higher Education, there is the *National Learning, Teaching and Assessment Policy* (NCHE, 2007a). This policy purposefully advocates a teaching strategy based on participatory approaches such as group work, focus group discussions, debates, panel discussions and peer tutoring, among others.

Probably as a result of emphasis on group-based learning in Rwandan higher education, the job market now seeks university graduates who can demonstrate some important competencies and behaviours including the disposition to act as a team player (Youth Employment Systems Rwanda, 2010; Labour Market Information System Rwanda, 2011). The focus on team work spirit has also been reflected in the academic research as well as the private and public sectors of Rwanda. For instance, a study conducted on the skills gaps between higher education and the world of work (Mutwarasibo, Ruterana & Andersson, 2009) concluded that university graduates wished that team working skills be formally integrated into the academic programmes as a means to facilitate their transition from higher education to the professional life. Altogether, a survey carried out by the Private Sector Federation of Rwanda on capacity needs assessment identified negotiation and interpersonal networking skills as some of the critical areas in which the business community needed to enhance its capacity (Private Sector Federation, 2010). In a similar development, the public

sector in Rwanda elaborated a performance-based appraisal system which requires each civil servant, among other things, to work effectively as part of a team (Office of the Prime Minister, 2010). All these examples seem to show how relevant group-based learning could be in both higher education and employment sectors.

As already mentioned above, group-based learning can be applied to various academic disciplines. For this research, it was applied to writing owing to the latter's central role in teaching, learning and assessment in higher education (Coffin et al., 2003). At university, students are often expected to produce texts that reflect the norms and conventions of their chosen disciplines. In terms of learning, writing helps students to gain disciplinary knowledge and develop more general abilities to reason, think, reflect and critique (Hyland, 2003, 2007; Negretti & Kuteeva, 2011; Wingate, 2012). As regards assessment, students produce written works whose main purpose is to demonstrate their mastery of disciplinary course content. At the same time, the written form could be looked at, that is, the language used, the text structure, the construction of argument, grammar and spelling (Coffin et al., 2003). Thus, students' success in higher education may partly be attributed to their success in writing.

Beyond higher education, writing also plays a crucial role in various workplaces where employees are often diverse in terms of their knowledge, disciplinary background, experience and work styles (Bremner, 2010). Written communication such as letters, e-mails, reports, presentations, action plans and policy documents turns out to be the mediating tool among these diverse employees.

In the context of this research, English as a Foreign Language is considered as another important mediating and learning tool. In fact, the English language in Rwanda acquired an official status in 1996 alongside French and Kinyarwanda (Office of the Prime Minister, 1996) but its use in various official domains was still limited. However, by a government decision in 2008, English was singled out and made the official language of government, with serious implications in the domain of higher education. The way English as a Foreign Language mediates learning in group work, writing and peer assessment is discussed further in the chapter on the theoretical framework.

Aim and research questions

The overarching aim of this study is to gain knowledge about how Rwandan university students understand and practice group-based learning. To attain this aim, four questions were asked:

- (1) How do university students carry out self-directed group work while writing? (Paper I)
- (2) How do instructor-guided writing groups help promote students' collaborative learning? (Paper II)
- (3) In what ways can process writing help develop students' academic writing abilities? (Paper III)
- (4) How do students experience peer assessment and peer feedback on group writing? (Paper IV)

Structure of the thesis

The thesis is divided into two main parts. Part I is an overview of the whole research while Part II is composed of the four separate papers in their entirety. Part I comprises five chapters. Chapter One is the general introduction to the thesis in which the orientation to the study, motivation, background and context of the research, aim and research questions are provided. Chapter Two is about the key theoretical concepts that underpin the study. Chapter Three elaborates on the design of the study and explores its methodology in more details. Chapter Four shows how the four articles connect to the central theme of the research and offers their summaries while Chapter Five rounds off the whole thesis by a concluding discussion.

2. Theoretical framework

Throughout the four papers that make up this thesis, the most recurrent concepts are group-based learning, group/team work, writing activity, processes of writing and peer assessment (of group writing). In the context of this research, these concepts are considered as interrelated because they all converge towards student learning. In other words, learning is likely to take place through the activity of writing and assessing writing when the latter is carried out in groups, using process writing techniques. To understand the relationships between writing, group work, language and learning, I will mostly draw on the social constructivist perspective of learning, originally based on the work of Vygotsky (1978). Under the ensuing subheadings, I will first explore the position of the social constructivist theory on learning and then, I will examine how group work, written language, peer assessment and other concepts mentioned above are amenable to learning.

A social constructivist view of learning

Social constructivism is a theory of learning which posits that knowledge development is inherently a socially situated activity (Vygotsky, 1978). More specifically, the theory emphasizes the role of other actors and the importance of the social context and culture in knowledge development (Doolittle, 1999). In the social constructivist lens, knowledge is constructed, negotiated and shared between individuals through social interaction. In the context of this research, that social interaction is mediated through language, either at immediate, local or broader levels.

According to Vygotsky (1978), language plays two important roles in the child's development, namely, facilitating and reflecting both the cognitive and the linguistic development. In fact, a child's (novice) cognitive and linguistic development arises in social interaction with a more able member of society (expert), who provides the novice with the appropriate level of assistance. Such assistance, commonly referred to as *scaffolding*, enables the novice to stretch their cognitive and linguistic development beyond their current level towards their potential level of development (Dobao, 2012; Shehadeh, 2011; Storch, 2002, 2005).

Even though Vygotsky's theory focused on the cognitive and linguistic development of children, it is applicable to all learning levels, contexts and situations. According to a number of researchers, scaffolding can also occur among people working in pairs or groups (Dobao, 2012; Donato, 1994; Shehadeh, 2011; Storch, 2002, 2005). In this case, the role of the expert and the novice may be exchanged, with all group members taking turns to act as experts and novices. According to Donato (1994), when group members work together

without any clearly identifiable expert, they resort to what he termed *collective scaffolding*. This means that they act together and draw on their different resources to teach and assist one another until they accomplish the task(s) at hand.

Some researchers caution that simply assigning students to work in groups or pairs does not necessarily create conditions conducive to learning (Dobao, 2012; Storch, 2002). For interaction or group work to facilitate learning, there should be effective collaboration, that is, when learners work together, sharing ideas and pooling their knowledge to achieve one common goal (Dobao, 2012). Similar views on what generates effective collaboration among group members were held by Barkley et al. (2005), and Shimazoe and Aldrich (2010). For them, group learners need, first, to have a clear and intended goal. Second, they need to actively work or labour together to reach that goal. Third, at the end of their group endeavour, there ought to be a sense of achievement both as a group and as an individual. In other words, when real collaboration among group members has taken place, all of them ought to attain meaningful learning at the end of their group work. This meaningful learning can be translated in gaining new knowledge and skills or better understanding of the issues at stake (Shimazoe & Aldrich, 2010).

Related to my research, groups of students were used to produce an essay in English. Being aware of the lack of direct relationship between group work and learning, I requested the writing instructor to act as a guide and facilitator by helping students to form groups, and by providing group writing guidelines in terms of a process writing model and criteria for assessment and minor assistance whenever needed. Thus, in Vygotsky's terms, the writing instructor acted as an expert who provided the scaffolding needed while students acted as novices. But in the major part of the group writing task, the groups of students acted by themselves, without any intervention of the instructor. In this case, collective scaffolding was also resorted to within the groups of students.

Group work and learning

According to Smith and McGregor (1992), group work is the broader term encompassing "a variety of educational approaches involving joint intellectual effort by students or students and teachers together" (p.10). In practice, this joint intellectual effort very often entails "students working in pairs or small groups to achieve shared learning goals" (Barkley et al., 2005, p.4). The same view is supported by Tyson (1998) when he argues that the defining characteristics of most of group-based environments are that group members interact with one another, adhere to a set of values, roles and norms which regulate their interaction and stick to a common goal. From the definition of group work, it would make sense to proceed

by trying to understand many other issues about group work and how these shape learning. Some of these issues are related to the confusion that exists between group and team work as well as collaborative work and team work. Other issues concern group types and sizes, and the common problems of working in groups and solution avenues.

Group or team work?

Strictly speaking, it is not so easy to draw a clear-cut line between a group and a team as both virtually serve the same purposes. But some slight differences can be observed at the level of their structure, purpose and duration, and their assumptions about learning. In connection with their structure and design, a group could be assimilated to just a gathering or organization of individuals while a team denotes an established structure and an acknowledged capability to be effective (Tyson, 1998). Besides, when a group has developed to a level characterized by “effective work procedures and high productivity coupled with a sense of cohesion and satisfying relations among members”, it may be said to be a team (Tyson, 1998, p.5). To support the same position, Millis and Cottell (1998) view group and team as lying on a continuum, with group being the least structured and team the most structured. In much clearer terms, Millis and Cottell (1998) describe *cooperative learning* as “a structured, systematic instructional strategy in which small groups work together toward a common goal” (p.10). Based on this consideration, group is often equated with *collaborative learning* while team is equated with *cooperative learning*.

As regards their purpose, a group is meant to develop autonomous, articulate, thinking people whereas the purpose of a team is to work together in harmony and mutual support to find a solution (Barkley et al., 2005). In addition, team-based learning is designed to discourage competition among members and rather encourage positive interdependence as enshrined in the ‘all for one, one for all’ principle that ought to guide them.

Some differences between a group and a team can also be observed in connection with their duration, that is, the length of time students will work together on a given activity. Focusing on the duration and activity, Barkley et al. (2005) came up with three types of groups: The first type comprises groups which rather look like ad hoc in-class arrangements of convenience which last only a few minutes. The second type includes intentionally structured groupings, often organized around specific assignments. In these assignments, students may work together for days or weeks until the assignment is completed. The third type concerns groups which work together on a course-long project. All along that project, group membership can remain the same or change depending on the learning goals. In the same category, we also find long-term learning groups which stay on with stable membership

for a whole semester or academic year. These long-term groups are better regarded as “learning communities” because the long time that group members spend together, joined by a shared goal, enables them to develop a feeling of belonging to a “community” of learners (Barkley et al., 2005, pp.8-9). By virtue of this common bond developed within group members over a long period of time, labouring to support and encourage one another, this final type of group-based learning is quite akin to team-based learning.

Concerning their assumptions about learning, team-based learning requires students to work together on a common task, sharing information and supporting one another. In this type of learning, the instructor retains the traditional dual role of subject matter expert and authority in the classroom (Barkley et al., 2005). On the contrary, group-based learning occurs when students work together, negotiate and make meaning together to create knowledge. In other words, knowledge is something people construct by talking together and reaching an agreement and the whole process is believed to enrich and empower them. In group-based learning, the instructor is just looked at as facilitator and not authority or expert in the learning process. Owing to this diverging role of the instructor in team and group-based learning environments, some researchers argue that team-based learning may be appropriate for pre-university education while group-based learning is more appropriate for higher education (Bruffee, 1993, 1995; Matthews, 1996).

Looking back at the above distinctions between group and team, I would argue that my research focused on groups because group membership was decided by the writing instructor. In addition, the instructor set the guidelines to follow and acted as a facilitator but did not have any other form of influence on how group members were doing their writing. The group writing activity was carried out in the classroom, was meant to let students work with unfamiliar group members and lasted five sessions only. This is contrary to team work, where team members usually have well defined roles as a result of long term commitment to one another and to their task.

Types and sizes of groups

Unlike teams, groups exist in many sizes and forms and are created for a wide variety of purposes. In their research on collaborative learning; Johnson et al. (1991) later paraphrased by Davis (1993), Millis and Cottell (1998) and Barkley et al. (2005), identified three types of group work on the basis of their goal, activity to be undertaken and time to be spent on it, namely *formal learning groups*, *informal learning groups* and *study groups*.

Formal learning groups are established by the instructor when students have to undertake and complete a complex task during several class sessions or even weeks. The

criteria to use to decide upon group size and who may be part of a given group remain the responsibility of the instructors and mostly, they will aim at achieving heterogeneity by mixing different abilities and competencies. The purpose of all this is to use groups to accomplish shared goals, to capitalize on different talents and knowledge of the group and to maximize the learning of everyone in the group.

Informal learning groups are temporary, randomly selected groups that last for only one discussion or one class period. Their major purpose is to ensure active learning. These groups are normally made of clusters of students who decide by themselves to work together in class to discuss an issue for better understanding such as responding to a question and brainstorming ideas.

Study groups also known as *base groups* (Johnson et al., 1991; Barkley et al., 2005) or *learning teams* (Millis & Cottell, 1998) are long-term groups with a stable membership, more like learning communities. Their main purpose is to provide support and encouragement and help students feel connected to a community of learners. Study groups may also be initiated by students themselves and their members meet regularly to lend support to one another for better understanding of course materials and better academic achievement. This way of group working is believed to foster deep learning, more motivation to learn and stronger group cohesion (Millis & Cottell, 1998).

As far as this research is concerned, I would argue once more that only formal learning groups were used as they were set up by the instructor who also decided on their composition and their respective sizes. In addition, my research groups were formed to accomplish a specific writing task during a relatively short period of time. This short period of time automatically distances my groups from resembling study groups or learning communities as these are expected to last longer.

One of the questions that is often asked when group works are to be formed is how the criteria for group size are decided and the motive behind those criteria. The commonly held suggestion is that for group work activities to run smoothly and achieve their intended objectives, they ought to be kept relatively small. But smallness does not always mean the same thing in every teaching and learning context. In his compilation of research on group work carried out in the UK, the USA, Australia and New Zealand, Mellor (2009) concludes that group size may depend on the cohort size, topic to work on and nature of task at hand. He adds that an ideal group size would be a balance between neither too large (i.e. not more than 6-7 members), nor too small (i.e. not less than 3-4 members). In an American context, further compilations of research on group work point to a nearly similar situation as regards

group size. Davis (1993), for instance, claims that groups of four or five members generally work best whereas Millis and Cottell (1998), and Shimazoe and Aldrich (2010) recommend that university or college learning groups comprise between three and four members and, if possible, be limited to four. Throughout my research, the idea of using small groups was maintained. The general pattern used was three members per group, but depending on circumstances, pairs and four members were also used.

Common problems of working in groups and solution avenues

Even though group-based learning has a number of merits it also has some drawbacks as various studies conducted in this area seem to conclude. Barkley et al. (2005) report on a survey on students' satisfaction with group work, which was carried out in one American university and taken by 200 students who had previously been involved in some sort of group work. The results showed that the students were happy with the different knowledge and talents that group members brought with them. Besides, they recognized that the group discussions resulted in deeper learning and that they dared to speak and ask questions to peers more than they would in a large class or with the instructor. The drawbacks listed by students include the recognition that some group members need to go at different speeds, that some others dominate the group while others do not participate. Others deplored the fact that discussion sometimes gets off the topic and a lot of time is wasted.

Apparently, the results from the abovementioned survey are not different from those commonly found in the literature on group-based learning. While examining the problems that often appear when students are engaged in group work activities in Australia, Davies (2009) contends that it is not always easy to motivate group members to work together and contribute equally because of differing degrees of individual commitment, different cultural and linguistic backgrounds as well as conflicting demands between self-interest and altruism.

Other group-related problems may result from its size. In a large working group, there is a high likelihood of having members who do not effectively participate in the group work activities but who may at the end expect to reap benefits they have not vied for. These members are interchangeably referred to as 'passengers', 'bystanders', 'free-loaders', 'free riders' (Bourner, Hughes & Bourner, 2001; Davies, 2009; Race, 2010) or 'hitchhikers' (Millis & Cottell, 1998). The presence of such members works against the principle of individual and group accountability which normally characterizes effective and successful group-based learning. In addition to the free riding problem, Davies (2009) mentioned other variables which are likely to impact on the successful running of group works. These are,

among others, the type of task and its complexity, roles of group members, recognition and reward of individual and group efforts, incentives and penalties.

For group works to be effective it is advisable to try to minimize their drawbacks in favour of their benefits. To achieve this, ground rules may be established and strategies to monitor and reward individual and group efforts devised and communicated beforehand to all group members. Specifically for my research, I argue that for group-based learning to be beneficial, the instructor ought to play a big role. This may include among others deciding on the group size, providing adequate preparation for the group work, offering support whenever it may be needed and do the follow up to make sure that students really collaborate.

Writing and learning seen from different but complementary perspectives

Traditionally, writing has been conducted and viewed as a solitary activity focusing primarily on the final product and emphasizing sentence-level correctness (Creme & Lea, 2008). Nowadays, an effective and relevant writing instruction is the one which enables students to see writing as “a complex process composed of many different kinds of activities that eventually result in that product” (Nightingale, 2000, p.135). The same position on writing was articulated by Murray and Moore (2006) who argue that effective academic writing is “a continuous process involving reflection, improvement, development, progress and fulfilment of various types and in varying measures” (p.5).

The recurrent feature in the modern perspective on writing is that it should primarily be seen as a set of processes which entail different stages of activities. These stages bear different names depending on the researchers but the most common ones are pre-writing, planning, drafting, reviewing, revising and editing (Coffin et al., 2003; Murray, 2005; Shulman, 2005; Myhill & Jones, 2007). Although those writing stages apparently stand in a logical sequence, in the actual writing processes, writers do not move through them linearly but rather in a recursive manner (Myhill & Jones, 2007). This implies that at each point of the processes the writer may repeatedly return to earlier stages.

While moving through various stages of writing, writers have to read, consult written sources or just rely on their prior knowledge and experience. This prior knowledge and experience very often link with the socio-cultural context they grew up in which translates into a set of beliefs, values, norms and behaviours. All these elements confer the social nature of writing (Tynjälä et al., 2001; Ivanič, 2004), which brings in the importance of collaborating with others while writing. To justify the relevance of collaboration in writing,

Creame and Lea (2008) contend that “there are many parts of the writing process where it is enormously useful to get ideas and feedback from others” (pp.3-4).

From the abovementioned critical reviews, we can deduce three main perspectives of learning which inform the activity of writing, namely the cognitivist, the social constructivist and the socio-cultural perspectives. The cognitivist perspective emphasizes “teaching students how to think and solve problems through logical reasoning and reflective critique in all subject areas” (National Writing Project & Nagin, 2006, p.24). Applied specifically to writing, this perspective posits that there is interaction between thinking (mental processes) and the practical writing processes. In fact, when people write, they translate their ideas and their plans into a written language, thus linking the information stored in their long-term memory to the writing task environment (Flower & Hayes, 1980). At the same time, the explicit teaching and learning of writing processes (i.e. planning, drafting and revising) may nurture the development of cognitive processes (Ivanič, 2004).

The social constructivists also agree that writing is an important tool which helps develop higher order thinking skills and thus improves learning (Tynjälä, 1998; Boscolo & Mason, 2001). However, they maintain that for this learning to take place, the knowledge stored in long-term memory needs to be actively constructed. For social constructivists, knowledge construction (i.e. writing activity in this case) actually takes place in a social context. This social context is underpinned by a set of beliefs, values, norms and conventions. So while writing, the writer’s mental representations always interact with his/her social context and with the discursive conventions (Tynjälä, Mason & Lonka, 2001), that is, those which govern a specific type of writing, like academic writing.

When students are engaged in the activity of writing, it may naturally happen that they have different prior knowledge of the issue to be discussed. Consequently, they may hold different world views and make meaning differently. This implies that one important way to organize learning through writing would be to encourage learners to work in groups so that they exchange their individual interpretations and understandings. To this effect, group work would lead its members to reflect more on themselves and their own experiences, thus confirming the social constructivist position that “meaningful learning is a continuous process of knowledge construction and re-construction” (Boscolo & Mason, 2001, p.83).

The socio-cultural perspective also acknowledges that writing is a form of social practice. Vygotsky (1978), for example, considers the composition process as a dialogue between the writer and the reader, made possible by socially shared knowledge. He adds that the meaning of a text is a social construct that is negotiated between the reader and the writer

through the medium of the text. To expand on the social nature of writing, Gee (1996) holds that student writing develops within a context of discourse, that is, in a system of values, beliefs, norms and behaviours that is inherently social. In the context of higher education, writing can be understood as a social practice in the way students learn not only to communicate in writing in particular ways but also learn how to be particular members of their respective academic and disciplinary communities.

In connection with my research, writing has been used as a tool that can help improve the quality of students learning. In this regard, the processes involved in writing as well as the social aspects have apparently been privileged. However, it would not make sense to ignore the final text that students generate after having passed through those processes of writing in a collaborative way. As Ivanič (2004) argues, “the point of learning and improving the processes involved in writing is in order to improve the quality of the end result, not for their own sake” (p.231). Even though this research did not seek to analyze the final texts produced by the groups of students, those texts were purposely designed to fit a certain genre of writing (i.e. comparison and contrast as well as argumentative essays) and reflected the students’ socio-cultural context (e.g. gender and equality in Rwanda). Besides, while going through the various stages of writing, groups of students were at the same time exposed to the characteristics of specific types of texts, their purpose and audience, which squarely match real life situations that students are likely to face in the future.

The beneficial learning effect of combining different perspectives of writing were also emphasized by Angelova and Riazantseva (1999) acknowledging that “learning to write a specific genre entails not only knowledge of the language and its rules but also knowledge of the set of social practices that surround the use of that text” (p.493). Once more, such an argument helps to strengthen the role of social context in thinking, writing and meaning making and capture the interrelationships between cognitivist, social constructivist and socio-cultural views of writing and learning.

Peer assessment of group writing and learning

One of the papers making up the present research specifically focuses on peer assessment of writing carried out by groups of students. Strictly speaking, peer assessment can apply to any academic discipline, in any context. But, in my paper, it has only been used in the context of essay writing which is one of the most commonly used assessment tasks in higher education (McCune, 2004; Norton, 2009). Besides, the writing task is targeted because it is considered as “the key process to induct students into the culture of university thinking” (Venables & Summit, 2003, p.282). To stimulate extended collaboration among students, peer assessment

was done when each group of students assessed the written essay of another group in a reciprocal way. According to Topping, Smith, Swanson and Elliot (2000), when students are involved in the assessment of their peers, they are likely to better understand the issues at hand through questioning, explaining, clarifying and analyzing. At the same time, Topping (2000) and Topping et al. (2009) believe that the feedback obtained from student assessors and student assesseees can greatly contribute to their meta-cognitive self-awareness and promote reflection, self-assessment and generalization to new situations (cf. Negretti & Kuteeva, 2011).

Considered on its own, peer assessment can possibly support student learning. Based on their different definitions of peer assessment, various researchers attempt to establish the relationship between peer assessment and learning. Topping (2009), for instance, views peer assessment “an arrangement for learners to consider and specify the level, value, or quality of a product or performance of other equal-status learners (p.21). For Van Zundert, Sluijsmans and Van Merriënboer (2010), peer assessment can be described generally as “a process whereby students evaluate or are evaluated by their peers” (p.270). A more extended definition provided by Strijbos and Sluijsmans (2010) states that peer assessment is “an educational arrangement where students judge a peer’s performance quantitatively and/or qualitatively and which stimulates students to reflect, discuss and collaborate” (p.265).

The core element in the three definitions above is that peer assessors value, evaluate and judge each other by providing and receiving feedback. Thus, in my view, the comprehensive definition of peer assessment could be an educational arrangement in which students comment on or evaluate the quality of their fellow students’ work, using a set of agreed criteria, and providing each other with the feedback. According to Norton (2009), this feedback may sometimes be accompanied by grades or marks. To emphasize this point, Cheng and Warren (1999) hold that peer assessment requires learners both to decide, in a class or group, who deserves what marks and why and to reflect on what learning has taken place and how.

Throughout research, there have been two opposed views as regards the learning benefits of peer assessment. On the one hand, the proponents of peer assessment argue that it is an important tool in the implementation of a more participatory and collaborative culture of learning (Kollar & Fischer, 2010). In addition, involving students in the assessment of their peers can be an opportunity to familiarize themselves with and gain better understanding of the issues of criteria elaboration and negotiation, group discussion, task management and decision-making, which are all part of the assessment process (Haines, 2004; Luckett &

Sutherland, 2000, Strijbos & Sluijsmans, 2010). More importantly, all the abovementioned skills that students are likely to acquire from peer assessment are also needed in various professional contexts. Thus, involving students in peer assessment is preparing them for the world of work and helping them to develop lifelong learning skills (Mutwarasibo, Ruterana & Andersson, in press; Prins, Sluijsmans, Kirschner & Strijbos, 2005). Applied to writing, peer assessment may enable the students to improve their writing abilities by critically evaluating the quality, purpose and relevance of their own and their peers' writing in connection with such aspects as organization, argument building, sentence structure and coherence (Birjandi & Tamjid, 2012; Coffin et al., 2003; Min, 2005; Speck, 2000).

On the other hand, opinions against peer assessment suggest that it is neither valid nor reliable. To elaborate on this, Speck (2000) argues that students do not have the necessary skills and adequate level of confidence to evaluate their peers' writing. As a result, they may just peer assess while keeping in mind that the final and firm decision should emanate from the assessment 'expert', that is, the course instructor. Another challenge of peer assessment of group work is lack of fairness in grade allocation: When a collaborative piece of writing has been evaluated and a group grade has been allocated, the grade cannot reflect students' differing contributions to the work done (Coffin et al., 2003).

While comparing the benefits and drawbacks of peer assessment various experimental studies reported in Van Zundert et al.'s (2010) research review seem to demonstrate that its learning benefits outweigh its drawbacks. In connection with the lack of confidence often manifested by student peer assessors, a number of studies (e.g. Liu & Tsai, 2005; Stanier, 1997; Wen & Tsai, 2006; Wen, Tsai & Chang, 2006) also report that with the lecturer's support, training and experience, students can fairly and responsibly assess their peers. A case in point is a study by Matsuno (2009) on the comparison between 91 student peer assessors and four teachers in a Japanese university writing class. The study demonstrated that student peer assessors were more internally consistent and produced fewer bias interactions than teacher raters. Back in time, a research review of 48 quantitative studies compiled by Falchikov and Goldfinch (2000), focusing on student peer assessment in higher education and spanning the period 1959 to 1999, shows that peer assessments were generally found to resemble teacher assessments. Similarly, a study conducted by Topping et al. (2000) on the peer assessment of academic report writing in one British university showed that there was a very similar balance between the positive and negative statements made by student peer assessors and their lecturers. In my view, all these findings serve to confirm the validity and reliability of peer assessment given that adequate training and practice is provided.

Conclusion to the chapter

On the whole, my research mostly uses the social constructivist perspective of learning but without excluding the contributions from the cognitive and the socio-cultural perspectives. In fact, all three perspectives link learning activity with the individual learner's mental processes and meaning making. All of them also emphasize that this meaning making effectively takes place in social interactions. The social constructivists explicitly argue that knowledge is socially constructed while the socio-cultural theorists tend to focus more on what happens in the communities of practice or learning communities. In brief, all socially-oriented theorists consider any form of collaborative practice as amenable to learning. As my research mainly involved groups of students initiated by the instructor to perform a writing task for just a few classroom sessions, I did not treat these groups as learning communities. In this regard, the use of social constructivism to support my theoretical position could be justified.

3. Methodology

Research design

The overarching aim of this study was to gain knowledge about how Rwandan university students understand and practice group-based learning. All the participants were selected from one institution of higher learning, within one discipline of Modern Languages, from two second-year undergraduate classes during the academic years 2008 and 2009. Students' reflections were obtained by means of qualitative interviews (Kvale, 1996). Some reference is also made to the written texts which were produced by the students as part of the requirements for Written English II module (200 student hours). The module has two major components, namely the component on the Critical Reading of English texts (100 student hours) and the Written English component (100 student hours). The research reported in Papers II, III and IV lasted 10 hours out of 100 hours allocated to the writing component of the module. Even though the classroom-based research covered 10 hours, some preliminary steps were taken to effectively intervene in the module and conduct the interviews with the students afterwards. Thus, my research as a whole was carried out in three related phases, namely the preparatory phase, the classroom phase (during student group writing and peer assessment) and the interview phase (see Appendix I for the complete research design).

Choice of the method

As already mentioned above, the common feature of the four articles making up this thesis is that they rely on open-ended interviews as method. Thus, my research as a whole has a qualitative undertone. In Paper I, interviews were used to collect the students' views on how they organize group work when they are on their own. In Paper II, interviews were used to collect the course instructor's and the students' views on their roles in promoting collaborative learning among students. In Paper III, interviews were used to examine how students had experienced the processes of writing initiated by the course instructor. In Paper IV, interviews were again used to ask students how they had experienced assessing and being assessed by their peers.

According to Kvale (1996), an interview is considered as a conversation or a mode of human interaction during which the researcher listens to what people themselves tell about their lived world, hears them express their views and opinions in their own words, and learns about their dreams and hopes. Kvale (1996) goes on to show that the sensitivity of the interview and its closeness to the subjects' lived world can lead to knowledge that can be used to enhance human conditions.

Among the types of knowledge likely to be constructed via interview, Kvale (1996) enumerates five, namely the conversational knowledge, the narrative knowledge, the linguistic knowledge, the contextual knowledge and the interrelational knowledge. The conversational knowledge is gained via conversation, dialogue and negotiation of meaning between the interviewer and the interviewee. The narrative knowledge is gained in open interviews when people tell their stories and narratives about their lives. It is believed that collective stories can contribute to upholding the values of the community.

Knowledge as language is almost self-explanatory as the medium of the interview or the tool of interviewing is language. Language serves to construct reality and can also become an object of textual interpretation when the interviews are translated into texts. The contextual knowledge to be gained from the interview refers to the differences and nuances of meaning of the statements made by the interviewer and the interviewee as dictated by their context. As for the interrelational knowledge, it is rendered by the inter change of views (i.e. inter view) between two persons conversing about a theme of mutual interest.

The benefits of the interview as a method are also echoed by Simons (2009). According to her, the interviewing technique can serve four major purposes. The first purpose is that it helps to document the interviewee's perspective on the topic. Second, it can help identify and analyse issues, thus promoting active engagement and learning for both the interviewer and the interviewee. Third, interviews very often offer the possibility of probing a topic or deepening the response given. Fourth, interviews can help uncover the feelings which cannot be obtained by simply observing a situation.

Research participants

The participants for Paper I were selected from a class originally composed of 24 students whereas for Paper II, III and IV, they were selected from a class composed of 58 students. In the four papers, the participants were second-year undergraduate students, who were enrolled in the discipline of Modern Languages. The choice of the discipline and the class level were motivated by my background in the teaching of writing in English and my specific interests in genre writing, which is only offered to the abovementioned class level and discipline. The participants for papers II, III and IV also included one instructor of the Written English II module.

All students involved in my research and their instructor share the same linguistic and cultural background as they speak Kinyarwanda as a native language and use both French and English as foreign languages. Given that English has been the language of instruction in the

targeted discipline even before the 2009 language policy, the students' level of proficiency in English in the four studies could roughly be thought of as intermediate.

To select the participants, a *generic purposive sampling* technique was used. According to Bryman (2012), generic purposive sampling consists of selecting the research units (i.e. people, organizations, documents, etc.) with direct reference to the research questions being asked. In other words, research questions are determined in advance and they give an indication or provide the guidelines for what categories of participants need to be the focus of attention and therefore sampled. At the same time, the research questions help set the criteria for the selection and identification of the participants.

For Paper I, I had access to students via their instructor of the English Writing course. For Paper II, III and IV, research on English writing groups, process writing and peer assessment was simultaneously introduced in the middle of the Written English II module and was designed to take place in the classroom and last 10 hours in total. As a result, students were free to be involved or not in the research part of the module. Those who chose not to participate could still concentrate on other academic duties. Owing to this laxity in research participation, not many students volunteered to participate. For Paper I, only 16 students out of 24 accepted to participate while for the other papers, the number was 34 out of 58. More details on the data gathering instruments, number of participants and type of data gathered are found in Table 1.

Ethical considerations

Ethical considerations in terms of information on the aims of the study were observed. These were communicated face-to-face to the would-be participants during a meeting organized to make preliminary contacts with the concerned class. On this point, I did not feel that I had to seek the permission from the academic authorities before undertaking my research with the students because I was investigating the community I am part of. Neither did the students have to sign any document agreeing to be involved in the research because I had clearly communicated to them that participation was entirely voluntary. So being present during the classroom-based research sessions and accepting to be interviewed afterwards meant that students were free to participate. Altogether, they were assured that the information they were going to give me would be used for strictly academic purposes.

Other issues regarding confidentiality and anonymity were equally given due consideration. Students were assured of anonymity as they are referred to by using codes: Students' groups bear Roman numerals from I to IV in Paper I, and from I to XII in Paper II, III and IV. As for the respondents, they bear number 1 up to 16 (Paper I) and 1 up to 34

(Paper II, III and IV), and are all referred to as males (M) and females (F). Given that the number of female participants was far lower than that of males in the four papers, I found it imperative to number the male and female participants separately, so that whenever possible, equal treatment is given to both males' and females' opinions. Thus, in the four studies I have used I: F1 and I: M1, to mean female participant number one in group one, and male participant number one in group one.

Data gathering procedures

The interview format used in my research is the *general interview guide*, also called *semi-structured interview* (Bryman, 2012; Kvale, 1996; Turner III, 2010). This means that the questions or main themes to talk about were prepared in advance but that structure and exact wording could change depending on the participants' responses to a preceding question (see Appendices II – V). Despite this change of the structure of questions, the general information sought from the respondents was virtually the same.

All interview questions were in open-ended format and were carried out in English, with each group of students, after classroom hours and in separate time periods. According to Simons (2009), the advantage of group interviews is that they can be less threatening to any one respondent. They can also enable the researcher to get a sense of the degree of agreement on issues and allow him/her to cross-check the consistency of perspectives and statements of certain respondents. One disadvantage with group interviews is that some respondents may dominate them and hence prevent diverse responses. As I carried out these interviews myself and was well aware of this shortcoming, I did my best to give room to any willing group member to speak out.

All group interviews were conducted after the students had performed a writing task in groups. For Paper I, groups of students were interviewed after they had produced a comparison and contrast essay and had received feedback and grades from their instructor. For Paper II, III and IV, groups of students were also interviewed after having produced an argumentative essay. For Paper II, there was an additional short interview with the Writing course instructor on how he had seen his role in English writing groups. The main difference between students' groups in Paper I and those in subsequent studies is that in Paper I, groups were self-directed and worked outside the classroom whereas in the remaining studies, all groups were initiated and guided by the instructor and carried out most of their group writing activities in the classroom. In the four papers, all interviews were audio-recorded, each group interview lasting 20 minutes on average.

Data description and analysis procedures

In the four papers, data were analysed thematically (Bryman, 2012; Kvale, 1996; Lichtman, 2012; Simons, 2009, Smagorinsky, 2008). According to Kvale (1996), there are five main approaches to the analysis and interpretation of the meaning from interview-based data. These are meaning condensation, meaning categorization, structuring of meaning through narratives, interpretation of meaning and generating meaning through ad hoc methods. Kvale (1996) explains that meaning condensation consists of reducing the large interview texts into briefer, more succinct formulations while meaning categorization implies that the interview is coded into categories. As for the narrative structuring, it focuses on creating a coherent story out of the many stories told during an interview. Meaning interpretation consists of recontextualizing the interview statements within the broader frames of reference whereas the generation of meaning through ad hoc methods consists of bringing out the meanings of different parts of the interview material through words, numbers, figures and/or tables.

Elsewhere, Kvale (1996) suggests that the analysis of meaning from the interview texts may follow a hermeneutical circle. This implies that the understanding of a text takes place through a process in which the meaning of the separate parts is determined by the global meaning of the text. In addition, the closer determination of the meaning of the separate parts may eventually change the originally anticipated meaning of the totality, which again influences the meaning of the separate parts. This process will end when one has reached a valid, common and unitary meaning.

To translate all the abovementioned analytical perspectives into practice, I followed some steps. As all the data collected were verbal, the first step towards analysis was the transcription and organization of the interview responses according to the structure of the interview guide. Thus, the responses from all groups involved were arranged together under relevant questions. The next step was to read closely the interview transcripts to make sense of them. At this stage, some notes and comments were made on the participants' responses and interconnections between them were established by looking at the similarities and differences, contradictions and omissions in the students' responses as well as their use of specific expressions and concepts (Bryman, 2012; Lichtman, 2012; Simons, 2009). All this was achieved by relating what students said to the aim of research, research questions and the existing theory. From here, a number of categories and sub-categories were generated from the data. Finally, these categories and sub-categories were reduced to only three or four most central and most meaningful themes which were directly in line with the research focus in either of the four papers. These themes gave way to the headings and sub-headings making

up the findings parts in the four papers. Then, they were developed and explained for what they stood for. As a supporting evidence to the selected themes, text segments from the interview responses which illustrated those themes in encompassing ways were quoted verbatim.

Table 1. Synthesis of data gathering instruments, problem area and participants

Studies	Instruments and problem area	Participants	Number of participants		
			Males	Females	Total
I	Interviews on students' conceptions and practice of self-directed group work	Second-year undergraduate students in 2008	13	3	16
II	Interviews on students' experiences of instructor-guided writing groups	Second-year undergraduate students in 2009	31	3	34
III	Interviews on the benefits of process writing instruction technique	Second-year undergraduate students in 2009	31	3	34
IV	Interviews on students' experiences of peer assessment and peer feedback	Second-year undergraduate students in 2009	31	3	34

Quality considerations

For any research using qualitative methods, there are almost always questions of knowing which criteria or factors can guarantee its quality, how relevant and credible its findings are or else how they can be generalized to other contexts. My research also joins the same line and consequently, it faces the same questions. In the ensuing section, I attempt some explanations to show in what ways I believe my research meets some of the criteria of quality and generalizability.

According to Larsson (2005), there are some criteria that could be used to judge the quality of qualitative research, namely the qualities in the presentation and the qualities in the results. Under the qualities in the presentation, Larsson (2005) mentions internal consistency in the study as a whole and ethical values. Under the qualities in the results, he mentions the richness of meanings, structure and contribution to the collective knowledge. The way the abovementioned criteria play out in my research is elaborated further below.

For Larsson (2005), the internal consistency of a qualitative study refers to the harmony which ought to exist between the research question, assumptions about the research and the nature of the phenomenon to be studied, data collection and methods of analysis. In my research, I was interested in gaining knowledge about how Rwandan undergraduate

university students understand and practice group-based learning. To undertake the research, I was assuming that writing and peer assessment are forms of learning which can be better implemented when students work in groups. At the same time, I was assuming that group work could be an effective tool to improve academic writing and peer assessment. Thus, the key components of my work (collaborative writing and peer assessment) are tied to the bigger picture (group-based learning) but the meaning and relevance of this bigger picture are better captured via its components. Based on this relationship, I can argue that there is internal consistency between the parts and the whole of my research.

Furthermore, the methods used to collect the students' reflections on collaborative writing and peer assessment were based on qualitative interviews and the thematic analysis used were, in my view, quite appropriate for interview data analysis. At this level, I can also assert that the internal consistency criterion was met in my research. Another criterion of quality in the presentation of qualitative research has to do with ethical values. In my research, the ethical issues pertaining to the participants' informed consent, voluntary participation and assurance of confidentiality and anonymity were genuinely observed.

Concerning the qualities in the results, I may confirm that the interview data that I gathered were rich as they were entirely based on open-ended questions, which allowed the students to freely air their views on any issue I raised with them. As regards the structure of my study, I may assert that it is possible to follow my reasoning or my main line of thought from Paper I up to Paper IV as discussed in the section on the summaries of the papers. As a reminder, in Paper I, I examine how undergraduate university students carry out self-directed group work while writing. In Paper II, I investigate how instructor-guided writing groups can help promote students' collaborative learning. In Paper III, I explore in what ways process writing as instruction method can help develop students' academic writing abilities. In Paper IV, I focus on how students experience peer assessment and peer feedback on group writing. All the four papers turn around the concept of group-based learning and imply the roles that the students and the instructors play for group-based learning to effectively hold ground and achieve tangible results in a higher education context.

Qualities in the results also highlight the contribution that qualitative research ought to have to expand the existing collective knowledge or generate new one. To achieve this, Larsson (2005) indicates that the qualitative researcher should be able to relate his/her interpretation to the already existing relevant knowledge as this would allow him/her to show how significant his/her study is. Another way to proceed is to choose a problem or focus that contains a potential for further theory building in the current knowledge base within the field

of research. In my research, main focus is on the concept of group-based learning in higher education, which is not a new phenomenon in research. The particularity of my research is to show that despite the multiple benefits that group-based learning is likely to generate, it cannot be assumed that students, however homogeneous they might be, automatically practise collaborative group work simply because they are told to do so, and I demonstrate this with examples. In my research, I argue that some training, guidance, support and continued follow up from the course instructor are always needed by the students. Based on concrete examples from student group writing practices, I show what the course instructor's role could be.

While articulating his stance on the validity and generalizability factors in qualitative research, Bryman (2012) proposes that we consider internal validity and trustworthiness as some of the criteria to assess the quality of qualitative research. Internal validity serves to check whether there is a good match between the researcher's observations and the theoretical ideas they develop. I may assert that my research meets this criterion in the sense that the interview data based on students' reflections on collaborative writing and peer assessment highlight theories of social interaction, theories of meaning negotiation and interpretation through conversation, and theories of meta-cognition, self-awareness and self-reflection, which are all tied to the concept of group-based learning.

As for trustworthiness as a measure of quality in qualitative research, Bryman (2012) indicates that it can be observed, among others, through credibility, transferability and confirmability of the findings. For Bryman, credibility implies that the researcher has allowed multiple accounts of an aspect of social reality, which could lead his findings to be acceptable to other people. In my research, it was not possible to combine multiple sources of data in connection with group-based learning but three out of four papers which I have produced have already been published in international journals. Before publication, my papers were presented in research seminars and conferences, which are other tests of credibility of my findings. One outcome of these tests is that my Paper II is presented in the European Conference on Educational Research held in Freie University, Berlin, in 2011, and afterwards, it was published as a book chapter in 2013. The book is entitled *A discourse on academic teaching competencies: Theory and practice* and was edited by Hofer, Schröttner and Unger-Ullmann. Thus, in a way, my research findings can be judged as credible even though they are limited to student interviews.

Concerning the transferability criterion, Bryman (2012) explains that it depends on thick descriptions or rich accounts of details of a specific research context and the extent to

which they can be transferred to other contexts. As already argued above, the findings from my research do not necessarily depict group-based learning in Rwandan higher education context in a particularly detailed and varied way because data only rely on open-ended interviews carried out with students from one academic discipline. But they could be of significance in other academic contexts where group-based learning is implemented.

Finally, confirmability as a criterion for the trustworthiness of qualitative research is observed through the way the researcher has acted in good faith by not allowing personal values or theoretical inclinations to dominate his/her findings. Even though I am part of the context that I investigated, I did my best to let students speak freely about any issues of concern in connection with group-based learning.

Limitations of the method

Despite some quality aspects that this research arguably displays, it also has some limitations. Among these limitations, there is heavy reliance on interviews as the sole data gathering instrument. Given that the research was about group writing and learning it would have been interesting to include analysis of the argumentative essays produced and assessed by the students. However, to inform the reader, two examples of the essays are enclosed (Appendix VI.1 and 2).

Another limitation concerns the use of interviews with a limited and male-dominated sample, which could imply male-biased findings. As some researchers argue (e.g. Scott-Ladd & Chan, 2008), in order to change students' negative views on group work it is advisable for instructors to look for student diversity by initiating, for instance, mixed-gender groups. However, in the context of the study, it was impossible to respect the principle of gender balance and equity due to the fact that the number of males still surpass that of females across the whole of Rwanda's higher education.

4. Summaries of the papers

Introduction

Before embarking on the summaries of the four papers, it would make sense to illustrate how one logically relates to another and how all of them tie to the main theme of the study, that is, group-based learning. To begin with, Paper I explores how undergraduate university students understand and practice collaborative work when they are writing an essay. From their reflections on how they organized and practised collaborative writing, it was noticed that they had different understandings of what collaborative work is or what it could be. This eventually led collaborative groups to score good marks (between 72.5 and 77.5%) in their essay writing while non-collaborative groups did fairly well (65%). Another observation was that some group members remained with a negative perception of what collaborative work means, that is, its assumed added value in their everyday learning was questioned and they defended sticking to individual work. However, the majority of the respondents appreciated what they were able to achieve through group work.

Given a number of potential learning benefits to obtain from group work (as demonstrated through research by Bourner et al., 2001; Cavanagh, 2011; Dobao, 2012; Hammar Chiriac, 2011; Hammond, Bithell, Jones & Bidgood, 2010; Hillyard, Gillespie & Littig, 2010; Scott-Ladd & Chan, 2008; Shehadeh, 2011; Storch, 2002, 2005) and given that it is currently advocated for in the researched context as a method which can help implement student-centred learning, it was important to see in what ways an instructor can make even reluctant students reconsider their attitudes towards group work. This was the issue elaborated in Paper II where the findings show that a large number of students acknowledged having greatly benefited from collaborative work on writing thanks to the instructor's support and guidance on how group work is conducted. However, a few of students still lamented that they were not able to work smoothly with their group members. Thus, they could not readily assert that their English writing abilities improved as a result of group work.

Based on the students' complaints noted in Paper II, another analysis was made in Paper III to see if students could perceive any improvement in their writing after they were given thorough instructions about process writing techniques and the assumed benefits of this way of working. After writing, classroom debriefing sessions between groups were organized. Based on students' reflections, the strategy again yielded mixed results but they claimed that they were able to detect their current writing difficulties and devise strategies to address them in the future.

Finally, Paper IV reexamined what peer assessment of group writing (i.e. groups assessing groups in a reciprocal way) could bring in terms of student learning. Like many other studies on peer assessment, students' attitudes towards peer assessment were varied. Some saw it as an important learning tool that they can use even after they graduate while others still saw it as a preserve of the course instructor. In general terms, students showed that they were happy to be introduced and involved in the process of assessing their peers but did not appreciate being peer assessed.

Looking back at the four studies, I can conclude that all of them entail an element of group-based learning as it played out in collaborative writing and peer assessment tasks. Of course, not every method and concept introduced to students was depicted positively, but at least they acknowledged that they obtained an opportunity to experience student-centred learning and some of the ways in which it can be implemented.

Summaries of the papers

Paper I: University students' conceptions and practice of collaborative work on writing

Aim

The aim of the study was 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 collaborative patterns they choose. The study was inspired by global trends in higher education teaching and learning where greater emphasis is put on the learners, quality of teaching and learning, skills and employability. One of the skills that is often reported in research literature is related to students' ability to collaborate, to work in groups or in teams. However, despite a number benefits that can arguably derive from group work, not much research has been conducted to examine how students describe the way they understand and carry out self-directed group work on writing and how the nature of their collaboration seems to affect the outcome of their learning.

Methods

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. The study focused on the activity of essay writing that

students were requested to do as part of mandatory assignments in their course. It had to be carried out in groups and beyond classroom hours. 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 the marks from their essays. 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 group interview lasting 25 minutes on average.

Findings

Three main themes were generated from the 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. On the students' ways of planning and organizing group writing, it was noted that the four groups initiated and organized the group writing assignment quite differently. With the exception of Group II members who allegedly collaborated from the very beginning of their writing up to the end, all remaining groups indicated that they preferred to divide up the writing task and only met to put individual parts together to make the final essay.

On the students' ways of collaborating or their patterns of collaboration, it appeared that the different groups resorted to different collaborative arrangements, largely dictated by the way they had undertaken the group writing task. Thus, for Group I, there was virtually no collaboration as all members unequivocally conceived writing as an activity to be performed individually. In Group II, there was almost 'real' collaboration as all members allegedly participated in discussions and contributed to every stage of their writing. The model of collaboration that members opted for in Group III was to divide up the task into two parts and work in pairs. But they made sure that they met at the final stages to make up one essay that met all set requirements. The collaborative arrangement opted for in Group IV was to choose a leader to oversee and coordinate all group writing activities while each of the remaining members had his own piece to work on.

Concerning what students thought they learned from self-directed group writing, the overall picture showed students' mixed reactions towards the relevance of group work. Hence, members of Group I did not readily appreciate working together. However, students from the remaining groups generally manifested a positive attitude towards group work as they saw it as a good and enriching experience or a helpful learning method. Another finding is that nearly all students complained about the large amount of time that group work is likely

to take, due to internal disagreements and tensions between group members on how to organize the group task and how to organize themselves as a group. Other students' complaints were related to the fact that despite having worked together, they felt that their writing abilities did not drastically improve.

Discussion

The findings from the study 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. The findings may also show that the way students collaborated had some influence on what they felt they gained from group work. Judging from the students' interview responses and looking back at the conceptualizations of the stages of group development constructed by Tyson (1998), and Shimazoe and Aldrich (2010), we may say that the forming stage (Tyson, 1998) or the design and development stage (Shimazoe & Aldrich, 2010) were the most crucial for all student groups as it determined the nature of collaboration that was going to follow. As for students' ways of collaborating, it appeared that they could fit into two main patterns, namely fully collaborating groups and partially collaborating groups. The first pattern could be linked to the co-authoring (Reither & Vipond, 1989), co-writing (Saunders, 1989), collaborative interaction (Storch, 2002) or collective contribution/mutual support (Li & Zhu, 2013) forms of collaboration. The second pattern could be linked to co-publishing (Saunders, 1989), workshopping (Reither & Vipond, 1989), dominant/dominant (Storch, 2002) or dominant/withdrawn (Li & Zhu, 2013) forms of collaboration. All those patterns generated different ways that students looked at the relevance of group-based learning. In conclusion, for students to become acquainted with what group work is and what to gain from it, more training, guidance, support and follow up from the course instructor is needed.

Paper II: Promoting university students' collaborative learning through instructor-guided writing groups

Aim

The aim of the paper was to examine how to promote collaborative learning among university students via instructor-guided writing groups. This paper is built on the assumption that however beneficial group work or collaboration can be in terms of improving student learning, it is not an in-born ability but rather something that gradually develops among students when they receive proper and continuous training, guidance, support and follow up

from a course instructor. In the context of this paper, emphasis was put on how the course instructor viewed his role in training students to become proficient writers and on how his role was viewed by the would-be writers when reflecting on the group writing process.

Methods

The study was conducted in one higher learning institution in Rwanda in 2009 and involved 35 participants, that is, 34 students and one course instructor. The students were selected from a class originally composed of 58 second-year undergraduate students, who were enrolled in the discipline of Modern Languages. The data were collected by means of open-ended interviews carried out in English with 12 groups of students, two days after they had completed writing a 400-word argumentative essay. The essay was written in groups in the classroom under the guidance of the course instructor and in the presence of the researcher. After interviewing the groups of students, another interview was held with the course instructor. In agreement between the researcher and the instructor, no student was allowed to team with the classmate they usually work with in the classroom. The purpose of this reshuffle was to make all groups establish themselves afresh and avoid that students who are used to work together take on their 'usual' roles.

After group writing, two days were spent to interview the students, group per group, on what they had gained from instructor-guided group writing and what additional support they would have wished to obtain from him. On a separate occasion, a ten-minute interview was also held with the instructor on how he had seen his role in the writing sessions. The interviews with the groups of students were audio-recorded, each lasting 20 minutes on average.

Findings

Four main themes emerged from the interview responses, namely students' reported gains from the instructor-guided writing groups and their reported dilemmas with writing in groups, the instructor's role in student writing groups and additional support requested by the students. On the first theme, 76% of students indicated that they benefited in many ways from writing together. This was noted in the way students asserted that group writing enabled them to dare to talk, share and defend their various views but also challenge, listen to and value their peers' opinions. All this can be described as promoting students' interpersonal and social skills. In addition, the students claimed that in groups where interpersonal relationships were smooth, group cohesion and the quality of contributions were also good, and this increased the group members' confidence in speaking in English.

Concerning students' reported problems with writing in groups (theme two), 24% of the students mentioned that they were not happy with working in groups. Some of the reasons advanced were linked to the incompatibility between group members which translated into continued internal disagreements and drawn out discussions. As a result, some students rejected group work as it was prone to their group's low achievement and inefficient time management. The instructor, on the other hand, viewed his role to train students to be good collaborators (theme three). He insisted that he had been there for them, assisting in whichever way he could but that students' language-related problems were almost insurmountable due to the fact that they were writing in a foreign language. The additional support requested by the students (theme four) was more guidance and more practice of group writing, feedback on their written essays and classroom debriefing sessions.

Discussion

From the students' responses, it appeared that instructor-guided writing groups could help improve the way the students collaborated, and thus become an opportunity for their learning. This could be observed from the way students acknowledged having understood what effective collaboration meant for themselves and among themselves and how relevant it was for their writing. More importantly, students mentioned that they managed to express themselves but also question, value and accept adverse opinions. However, the students did not say much about how group writing helped them to be aware of and address their persistent language mistakes. If anything, these were only pointed out by the instructor. The findings also highlighted the role that the instructor played in following up all writing groups in action and how relevant that could be. However, the study could not establish whether the students who failed to collaborate also were the ones who produced low quality written work. Neither was the study able to prove that students who collaborated well, produced a well organized, coherent and more accurate work. Finally, the findings from this study show that despite the highly acclaimed learning potential of group work or team work, it did not appear to be adopted effectively for a small section of students. The study suggests various tangible measures geared towards improving group-based learning and these mostly point towards explicit teaching.

Paper III: Supporting the development of students' academic writing through collaborative process writing

Aim

The study aimed to examine how undergraduate university students in Rwanda experienced collaborative process writing as an instruction method capable of helping them to improve their academic writing abilities in English. As it looks, the study was initiated to find out which strategy could work best to help students overcome the challenge of writing academically. The ideas used and the way they were implemented in the classroom were mostly inspired and drawn from the process writing instruction model as explained in various books and research documents.

Methods

The study was conducted in one higher learning institution in Rwanda in 2009 and involved 34 second-year undergraduate students (31 males and 3 females) and one instructor of a Written English II module. All students were enrolled in the discipline of Modern Languages. The study was originally designed as a short academic writing intervention as it only lasted 10 hours of academic writing carried out in groups. The intervention ran in various stages according to the process writing model. Thus, after selecting and agreeing on the topic, groups of students were introduced to the various stages of writing and were then instructed to produce a 400-word argumentative essay. In agreement between the module instructor and the researcher, all groups were guided to follow the planning, drafting, reviewing, revising and editing stages of writing. To make sure that these stages were adhered to, all writing sessions were carried out in one classroom in the presence of the usual module instructor. However, his role was not to impose the order in which to write but rather to guide and assist students whenever it was needed. The researcher also attended the classroom writing sessions to make sure the academic writing intervention was conducted as designed. After completing the essay, the groups of students were requested by the researcher to reflect on the writing stages they had gone through and report to the class what they thought they had accomplished in terms of academic writing, the difficulties they had experienced, specific writing challenges and how to overcome them.

Beyond the classroom writing and debriefing sessions, in-depth, open-ended interviews were conducted in English with each participating group of students. The interview questions focused on the ideas that students had of academic writing before they started to write in groups, how they had experienced the various stages of writing, what they had gained by

writing together, and what they saw as persistent difficulties with their academic writing. Given the variety of responses that were expected from 12 groups of students, qualitative interviewing was judged the most appropriate data collection strategy to use. All interviews were audio-recorded, each lasting 20 minutes on average.

Findings

Three main themes emerged from the interview data, namely students' assumptions about the academic writing activity before the intervention, students' experiences of the writing processes and their perspectives on academic writing after the intervention. On the first theme, it appeared that students viewed writing as a thought-provoking and organized activity, writing as an iterative activity and writing as a means to position oneself in a discourse community. On the second theme, it was noted that planning and organization stages of writing turned out to be the most difficult parts for nearly all groups of students. Another difficult stage was drafting, that is, how to arrange opposite arguments within the body of an argumentative essay. Students also considered planning and organization as the most essential stages in argumentative essay writing. Concerning theme three, students showed that they collaborative process writing enabled them to sharpen their thinking, activate their tacit knowledge and to become aware of their writing abilities. However, during the debriefing sessions students maintained that they were not yet sure of how to structure, organize and refine an argumentative text. To overcome these problems, students requested more writing exercises and the instructor's written feedback on their essays.

Discussion

Students' assumptions about academic writing serve to confirm its complex and multifunctional character as shaped by the individual, the social and the institutional discourses. A process writing technique was used to see if it could help improve students' academic writing skills. The technique allegedly helped students to become aware of and spot their academic writing difficulties, and reflect on the strategies to address them. However, students lamented that the most important problems pertaining to the content and organization of an argumentative text were not yet solved. To overcome them, a combination of various strategies is suggested, namely organizing writing along reading, classroom talks, group discussions, classroom reporting and any other forms of reflective exercises, depending on which option fits best a specific context.

Paper IV: University students' attitudes towards peer assessment and reactions to peer feedback on group writing

Aim

Drawing on Papers II and III, the present paper examined how undergraduate university students experienced peer assessment of group writing as one way to improve the quality of their learning. To achieve this aim, four questions were investigated: (1) How did students experience assessing their fellow students? (2) How did they experience being assessed by fellow students? (3) What differences did students perceive between peer assessment and assessment by the lecturer? (4) How did students see the nature and weighting of the criteria used in peer assessment?

Methods

The study was carried out in one university in Rwanda in 2009 and involved 34 second-year undergraduate students (31 males and 3 females). All students were enrolled in the discipline of Modern Languages. The peer assessment of group essay writing was organized as a research component introduced in the middle of the Written English II module. Of the 200 hours that the module comprises as student time, only 10 were devoted to research. The 10 hours were divided into five non-consecutive classroom research sessions, each comprising two hours.

To obtain the desired outcome, it was agreed that students had to work in groups of three on a 400-word argumentative essay and that at the end, groups would exchange their scripts and assess each other, based on pre-established assessment criteria. To make sure that the essay writing and peer assessment tasks were implemented as planned, all writing and peer assessment sessions were carried out in one classroom in the presence of the usual course instructor. The researcher also attended the sessions to make sure that the design of the research was properly respected. After completing the essay writing, the researcher requested the groups to exchange their scripts, assess them, provide feedback and grades and stand ready to explain the outcome of their assessment considerations in class. This oral reporting led the groups of student assessors and student assesseees to briefly comment on how they had arrived at a certain grade and experienced the feedback remarks respectively. All essays were graded in percent out of 100 which is common in the context. The assessment criteria and the weighting discussed and agreed upon between the course instructor and the students before the task was set were:

- Essay development (convincing arguments and evidence): 40%
- Essay structure/organization, cohesion and coherence: 25%
- Language and style (spelling and grammar): 20%
- Focus (the collectively agreed focus of the essay was on gender and equality in Rwanda): 15%

Findings

Four main themes were generated from the data, namely students' attitudes towards assessing and being assessed by their fellow classmates, their views on the nature and weighting of the assessment criteria, and perceived differences between students' and lecturer' assessment practices. On students' attitudes towards assessing their peers (theme one), it was found that the majority of students (26/34) claimed being confident and competent to carry out that task while another section mentioned that they were hesitant. On students' attitudes towards being assessed (theme two), half of the students mentioned that they trusted their peers' abilities to assess them fairly while another half showed that they underestimated their peers' abilities to do so. Concerning students' views on the nature and weighting given to the assessment criteria (theme three), students positions were divided: In total, 27 students out of 34 considered the assessment criteria to be clear and relevant, 5 out of 34 mentioned that they could not grasp the clear meaning of essay organization and development while the rest (2/34) stumbled on the question of point of view in argumentative essay writing. Concerning the weighting given to the assessment criteria, only 6 students out of 34 suggested that essay development carry 50% of the total mark while the rest did not object to the weighting. Finally, on the perceived differences between the students' and the lecturer's assessment practices (theme four), 31 students out of 34 believed that the lecturer would stick to the assessment criteria in a much fairer and more rigorous way than students.

Discussion

From the findings, it was noted that students considered peer assessment as an opportunity to learn the assessment skills for use in the academic context but also in the world of work. However, for a small section of students, peer assessment is prone to some levels of bias, also known as friendship marking or overmarking (Prins, Sluijsmans, Kirschner & Strijbos, 2005). Another key finding was that students admitted being happy while assessing their peers but unhappy while being assessed. Given that the focus of this study is on student-centred learning, only reciprocal peer assessment could be more beneficial to students.

Students were also led to compare their assessment practices and their possible outcomes with those of their lecturer. Most students seemed to give more credit to the

lecturer-based assessment. However, by being allowed to reflect on the meaning of their assessments in comparison with the lecturer's, students were also presumably being trained to develop their marking skills, which could eventually help improve their self-assessment, and hence their quality of learning. Based on the attitudes that students have generally manifested towards peer assessment, the study concludes that peer assessment can indeed support student-centred learning but under certain conditions. Those conditions include more awareness, continued support, guidance and training to students.

5. Concluding discussion

Throughout this research my main preoccupation has been to gain knowledge about how Rwandan second-year undergraduate university students understand and practice group-based learning. My interest in group-based learning was stimulated by my role as academic who was curious to know what group-based learning is, how it applies and what academics and students can expect to gain from it. My assumption was that if group-based learning is really useful it can help improve teaching and learning practices. My interest in group-based learning was also motivated by the current emphasis in various higher education contexts and the world of work on team work skills (Biggs & Tang, 2011; Mellor, 2009). In the domain of higher education, more specifically, group work or team work is considered as one of the pedagogical tools which can contribute to students' active engagement in their own learning and development (Barkley et al., 2005; Cavanagh, 2011; Griffiths, 2009). It is also believed that students' active engagement can help make learning more relevant and teaching more effective (Biggs & Tang, 2011). However, all attributes given to group-based learning cannot be taken for granted. In the context of this research, it has been shown that group-based learning is very often talked about, students in academic contexts are often asked to work in groups, academics and researchers commonly conduct collaborative work but the way the concerned parties understand group work and the nature of their collaboration are constructed differently. This means that even the outcome from group work may be different for different people. This was another motivating factor for this research.

Group work can apply to different academic disciplines at any level of instruction. But in this research, particular attention has been given to academic writing and peer assessment as examples of academic tasks which may require group work. The discipline of Modern Languages has been the focus of this research as it is the area I have been teaching in for more than 10 years. Thus, I felt motivated to investigate the community I have been part of for some time. The involvement of undergraduate students as virtually the sole participants in my research is inscribed in the wider context of student-centred learning (Di Napoli, 2004). Thus, investigating students' understanding of group-based learning was a way to put them at the centre of their learning experience.

A retrospective look at the four papers that make up this research brings up three central issues, namely the nature of collaboration that students engage in when they perform group work, the contribution of group work to the development of students' writing abilities and the development of students' collaborative learning through peer assessment. In the

ensuing lines, I critically revisit these issues before I make the final reflections on the research process, articulate its limitations and demonstrate the areas of further investigation.

Group-based learning and nature of students' collaboration

My Papers I and II particularly focus on group work, with emphasis on students' self-directed groups in Paper I as opposed to instructor-guided student groups in Paper II. Even though the two papers take two different perspectives, that is, focus on students' support to their peers and focus on the instructor's support to students, both yield almost similar results as regards the way students understand and practice group work and what they think they gain from working together. In Paper I, some students view group work as a tool for learning or an instrument that can stimulate collaboration while others still see it as something forced on them especially when they are writing.

Based on students' reflections on group work and linking them with various conceptualizations of collaboration, I have deduced that students were more prone to adopting a co-publishing pattern of collaboration (Saunders, 1989). This implies that most students involved in group work preferred to divide up the task, work on different pieces and only meet to put together the final work. Even though co-publishing is recognized as a form of collaboration, there is a risk that if it is extensively used among students it may end up looking like ordinary individual work, thus hampering what is purported as student-centred learning. Thus, genuine rather than pseudo collaboration has to be encouraged and supported if students are to benefit from group-based learning.

In Paper II, a number of examples are given of what students claimed they gained via group work. However, despite the guidance and follow up they received from their instructor, a few students reported problems of internal disagreements and lack of cohesion between group members. Some went further to mention that group work resulted into a waste of time. As various researchers concur (e.g. Dobao, 2012; Hammar Chiriac, 2011; Shimazoe & Aldrich, 2010), team work spirit does not just spring up simply because people sit together. Rather, it has to be nurtured and explored continuously. Several research-based proposals have been formulated on how group work can be more effective such as mixing students' different abilities and competencies (Barkley et al., 2005), using small groups (Mellor, 2009; Millis & Cottell, 1998; Shimazoe & Aldrich, 2010) and adopting mixed-gender groups (Scott-Ladd & Chan, 2008) but all these proposals have to be tailored to the specific teaching and learning needs in different academic contexts. Also, with the growing trends in student

diversity across various higher education contexts (Biggs & Tang, 2011; Gosling, 2009), the proposal which may work in one context may not necessarily work in any other.

Group-based learning and the development of students' writing abilities

In my Paper III, I have explored how collaborative process writing could help improve students' academic writing abilities. The idea to use process writing as instruction technique was influenced by the usual practice in the context of the study where most documentation on academic writing also refer to process writing or writers' workshop. In addition, some researchers still refer to process writing as a popular and effective writing instruction method (Graham & Sandmel, 2011) even though they admit that it works better when it is combined with peer collaboration and instructor support, especially for 'struggling' writers (McCarthy & Ro, 2011).

The findings obtained and the conclusions reached in my research were entirely based on students' reflections after having practised process writing in groups with the support from their course instructor. The findings show what students allegedly achieved or could not achieve with this technique. As they stand, those results have to be treated as tentative given that they are entirely descriptive. Admittedly, more analyses are still needed to justify in tangible terms to what extent the students' writing abilities improved through the collaborative process writing. Another strategy could have been to examine which writing approach was needed to adequately address the students' writing difficulties based on the specific context of the study (cf. Hyland, 2003, 2007; Negretti & Kuteeva, 2011). As one researcher argues, team writing or collaborative writing is a cyclical experience. Once it is completed, it helps to know what to keep for the next time and what to improve (Gastel, 2013).

Developing students' collaborative learning through peer assessment

As argued in my Paper IV, peer assessment is considered as one form of collaborative or group-based learning because it very often entails reciprocal responsibility between assessors and assesseees (Lundstrom & Baker, 2009; Topping, 2009; Van den Berg, Admiraal & Pilot, 2006; Van Zundert et al., 2010). Through peer assessment, students may gain better understanding of how the criteria for assessment are elaborated and negotiated, thus helping them to learn such skills as group discussion, task management and decision-making (Strijbos & Sluijsmans, 2010). In terms of academic writing, peer assessment may enable students to critically evaluate the quality, purpose and relevance of their own and their peers' writing (Coffin et al., 2003; Speck, 2000).

However, peer assessment also has a negative side as it is considered as neither fair, nor reliable due to the fact that students implementing it are treated by their peers as not having the necessary skills and adequate level of confidence to carry it out (Speck, 2000). In my research, the two opposed opinions about the potential of peer assessment have also been expressed by the students. More specifically, students showed that they rather preferred to assess than to be assessed by their peers. This again confirms that the collaborative learning expected from peer assessment may not necessarily happen among students. Just like any other group-based activity, peer assessment does not automatically become effective simply because students are introduced to it and are told to stick to a set of assessment criteria. They need to understand that taking what traditionally has been seen as a teacher perspective on their texts, they can develop a metacognitive awareness about what is expected in academic writing, particularly so when they do this in groups as this suggests that they continuously have to argue for their standpoint.

Reflections on the research process and the findings

My research entirely relies on qualitative interviews as research method. For any research designed qualitatively, there are always issues of concern as regards the validity and generalizability of the findings. According to Larsson (2009), one way to achieve generalizability in qualitative research is through context similarity. This means that interpretation in a qualitative study should be generalizable to other cases where the context is the same. In my research, I discuss group-based learning in the context of Rwandan higher education but group-based learning is a global higher education phenomenon (Biggs & Tang, 2011; Di Napoli, 2004). Even though group-based learning may mean different things to different students in different contexts (Gosling, 2009), I am of the opinion that this diversity can be turned into a resource for learning as long as the students are trained to value the different perspectives that their peers bring to group work (Barkley et al., 2005). Student diversity exists everywhere and in different forms. Thus, the different conceptions that Rwandan university students have of group-based learning, the awareness raised and the specific problems highlighted can be generalized to other academic contexts where group-based learning is an issue.

Conclusion and further research

Positive effects of group work should not be taken for granted. Based on the findings of the present study, I argue that more awareness, continued support in establishing shared goals, mutual responsibilities and constructive interaction characterized by trust and openness to

others' perspectives will be needed. Also, it needs to be done in a purposeful and organized structure if students are to discover the learning benefits of group work and peer assessment.

Given that the research was about group writing and learning it would have been interesting to further investigate the outcome of the actual collaboration in the groups, to see whether you could call them pseudo groups or genuine collaborative groups. Moreover, it would be interesting to analyse the argumentative essays produced and assessed by the students concerning different quality aspects of the texts and arguments. Another pertinent issue is whether there is any difference between mixed and single sex groups. Thus, the way the group work impacted on the quality of the students' writing remains to be investigated.

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Appendices

Appendix I. Complete research design

Phase I: Preliminary activities (outside classroom hours)		
Week	Day and duration	Activity
1	1 (1 hour)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Consult the timetable to see when 2nd Year students have lectures and when they are free - Meet the course instructor and introduce my research to him - Meet the class representative and make an appointment to meet students when they are free
	2 (2 hours)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - First contact with all 2nd Year students (58) beyond class time - Introduction of my research (Aims and other ethical issues) - Interactive session: Questions and answers - Hand out the texts to read: Academic Writing, Argumentative Writing, two samples of argumentative essays: <i>Should government spend money on arts?</i> and <i>Does foreign aid work?</i>
	3 (2 hours)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Registration of the students present (only 37 turned up) - Student group formation in collaboration with the course instructor - Discussion of the argumentative texts handed out: Purpose, structure and content - Questions and answers - Suggest the topics to write an argumentative text on: Two topics proposed, one agreed
Phase II: Classroom-based group writing		
2	1 (2 hours)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Argumentative essay writing: Criteria for assessment and weighting written on the chalkboard, discussed and agreed upon - Introduction to the processes of writing: Pre-writing (brainstorming, planning and organization), composing/drafting, proofreading/editing - Start pre-writing activities in groups (only 34 students turned up)
	2 (2 hours)	- Continuation of writing in groups: Composing/drafting
	3 (2 hours)	- Continuation of writing in groups: Composing, proofreading/editing
Phase II: Classroom-based group writing and peer assessment		
3	1 (2 hours)	- Proofreading, peer assessment and grading
	2 (2 hours)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Peer assessment, grading and debriefing/reporting - Collect student graded argumentative texts
Phase III: Group interviews (outside classroom hours)		
4	1	Interviews with six groups (separately) on collaborative learning, process writing and peer assessment
	2	Interviews with six groups (separately) on collaborative learning, process writing and peer assessment

Appendix II. Interview guide for students in Paper I

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?

Appendix III. Interview guide for students and course instructor in Paper II

Interview with the students

1. What can you say you have learned from classroom-based group writing? Did writing in groups help you in any way? Any difficulties experienced? What kind of support did you get from your instructor?
2. What additional support would you have wished to obtain from your instructor?

Interview with the instructor

1. What kind of role(s) did you play in students' writing groups? Do you feel that your presence in the classroom made any difference for students' writing groups? If yes, how?
2. What can you say are persistent writing difficulties for students?

Appendix IV. Interview guide for students in Paper III

1. When you hear of academic writing what kind of thoughts come to your mind?
2. As a group, how did you experience the stages of writing you have gone through together?
 - Which stage did you find as the most difficult?
 - Which stage was the easiest?
 - Which stage did you see as the most essential in your writing?
3. In light of what you have experienced in various stages of your group writing, what can you say you have gained? And what do you see as persistent challenges in academic writing for you and your fellows?

Appendix V. Interview guide for students in Paper IV

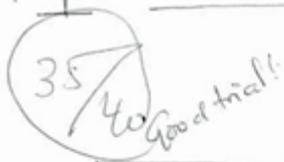
1. How did you feel while marking your classmates?
2. What can you say about the remarks you received from your classmates?
3. How did you see the assessment criteria used?
 - Did they help you in any way?
 - In addition to the criteria agreed on in class, was there anything else to look at?
 - How do you judge the weighting given to those criteria?
4. Let's assume you were marked by a lecturer, could there be any difference between his/her marking and your marking? – If yes, to what extent?

Appendix VI. Examples of student essays

1. Mixed gender group essay
2. Male group essay

Topic: Gender and equality: Can women be equal to men in the Rwandan context.

(1-1)



Normally the term gender means the issue which underlines two sexes namely masculine and feminine. These sexes are generally opposed since the man's creation until now. In all things there is a certain opposition between men (masculine) and women (feminine) but not in morality and performance. By the way of the concept of equality this means how different people in general or these sexes in a particular way of our today's mission are treated the same in a society by designed laws. These two concepts gender and equality while going together they highlight a particular meaning of equality that must be determined between woman and man and this, for different reasons because of inequality which has been developed by traditional societies. Coming up next, is the way the Rwandan society understands the issue of gender and equality, the common feature of that gender and equality and their problems generated by the misunderstanding of gender and equality. In the following line these concepts of an important reality will be discussed in an extended way.

In fact, gender and equality are today's unified concepts due to a bad treatment of a woman in the society, that is to say that the concepts have been unified and developed in order to make sure that the rights of woman are the same as ones of men. The rights that must be shared by both men and woman include the access to the same education to say that men as well as woman can all access to the same intellectual level. About the job issue and social performance women can have the same duties as men and even woman can perform better than men, this is to explain that there is no reason of excluding woman on some duties. Here is to say that there is no specific field of performance for woman or man. As illustrations it is quickly known that in the military context, administration, academic affairs, business or Commerce and so many other fields of performance; woman and men can all have access to them and can do equally or perform the same.

In addition to this, to help Rwandan society to implement the issue of gender and equality Rwandan government has put all its efforts to avoid the misunderstanding about the concept of gender and equality. Some of the achievements on this issue are to establish different laws which help to promote the woman in order to be at the same level with men. These laws defend their rights and help them to know how to fight for their rights. Rwandan government has also encouraged women to create their own associations in charge of help women recognize their rights in the society. These associations allow women to work together for their implementation and promotion, different interests in business, academic affairs, social work and so many other duties to be included in things to help women be emancipated. As illustrations there are Associations as FAWU, SURINDERE, HARUKWA, and many others which help promote woman and encourage them to know their rights as well as to help them in the process.

of studies, works/jobs and so on.

Nevertheless, women can not be equal to men looking at the physical environment. (-2-)
It is to say that there are some works which can not be done by women due to their physical weakness; here it is necessary to illustrate works like treatment of minerals, road works, carrying up strong things and so on. There are even some works that can not be done by women or men due to the respect of Culture. The illustration which comes here is that women at one hand can not accomplish some responsibilities related to the cow. This problem is the one generated by the take in respect of the Culture. At the other hand, men can not clean the house because Rwandan Culture does not allow this to them. This context of Culture is the one to be an obstacle to the made in possibility of gender and equality.

In another view, there is also a context which constitutes barriers to the gender and equality and prevents them to appear in the view of the society. This is the religious context which also does not agree with the equality between men and women and this still influence the issue that women can not be equal to men in Rwandan context. A recourse for illustration is done on the creation myth in the bible (Genesis) where they say that woman will always be under responsibility of men and will be lead by them. Still now in the religious context (Catholic) women can not be equal to men because up to now it is not found anywhere a woman priest/bishop and woman can not reach any step leading to the priesthood. The woman is barred to the sisterhood and in other churches, many of them do not accept women pastors.

In brief, some women have a misunderstanding about gender and equality and they think that gender and equality mean a real equality between them and men, that is to say equality in all things either in mind/thinking or activities exercising. For that it resorts a certain kind of contrast/opposition between men and woman which is not really good. By the end of discussions on this topic, it is relevant to notice that if women and men in Rwanda should understand well the concept of gender and equality in terms of Rwandan government's goal, it might be possible for women to be equal to men in terms of complementarity and helping each other for the welfare of the society. It is thus noticed that women also show capacities of working in the same areas and fields as men and that they manifest results which determine their ability to help stipulate that either longer or no longer women will be equal to men in the Rwandan society.

focus 5/6

removes: try to underline the topics please!

organization 4/4 very good

development 14/16

cohesion & coherence 5/6

writing mechanics 7/8

total 35/40

Spacient! problem??

paragraphing
(indentation??)

COLLABORATIVE ACADEMIC WRITING.

Group 11

Type: Argumentative essay.Topic: Gender and equality: Can women be equal to men in the Rwandan context? Discuss.

33

40

~~Good keep it~~
Marking GroupGroup 10

Gender identity is socially determined and biologically determined. Socially, gender refers to different roles, responsibilities, attitudes and expected behaviours attributed to men and women by the society. Where as, biologically gender refers to sex to mean male and female. Equality refers to fair distribution of resources between men and women. Then, gender equality doesn't imply that men and women become biologically identical but that they have equal possibilities and chances in life as human beings. In the past, Rwandans were used to give less importance to women. But now, the Rwandan government is making the policy of changing that mentality. Thus, can women be equal to men in the Rwandan context? This question will be answered in the following lines.

In the ancient time, men were considered as chiefs. All either familial or national responsibilities were under their power. They were there to make decisions and rules to be implemented by women. Besides that, women played the role of taking care of children, dealing with domestic works and also taking care of their husbands. Then, women were excluded in every kind of administration, the management of loose properties, despite their great role in their production. That is the reason why the Rwandan government is instating the policy of gender equality to recognize the role of women in the society.

When the white men arrived, they introduced education in which women were excluded saying that they are not able to learn in modern schools. Rwandan believed that there is no purpose to bring girls to school because they will not produce anything to their native family but to the mother family. Nowadays, girls are at school and are performing well and after their education they come back to help their families. So, their importance is remarkable to be equal to men.

As a developing country which economy is based on its people, as basic resources; women should be considered in the production because they present the majority of the population in Rwanda. As a country which is facing 1994 genocide against Tutsi consequences where women are family leaders as widows, and good managers of their families, they should be taken into consideration in all domains in order to increase the production of the country.

However, the way roles and responsibilities were distributed between men and women in the past and the manner of giving everyone his contribution was the symbol of the harmony in the family in particular and in Rwandan society in general. In addition, the weaknesses of women are still remarkable in education where girls are not performing well as boys are from primary to higher education. This is clarified by the fact that girls and boys are not promoted under the same conditions where girls are given some privileges saying that they have some biological problems. So, the government is strengthening the weaknesses of women confirming that they cannot obtain the required note or mark as men. And this implies that women cannot be equal to men.

Even if women are given some responsibilities in the administration of the country, they do not really take any decisions. They are there as symbols of gender equality but strong decisions are made by their assistants which are always men. Then, the government itself is aware of their weakness in decision making.

Women also are still recognizing their weakness in comparison to men. The example here is that when it happens in the family to take some decisions, the wife gives up and decisions are made by the husband. It will now, the culture forbids women to represent their families for example in weddings, if there is a man and even if a single boy. If the father dies, his son replaces him and becomes the chief of the family. Thus, to equalize women and men will be difficult and even impossible because it will ask to destroy the culture which is dangerous.

A good number of Rwandans are christians, they refer to the Bible. And if you read carefully the Bible, you will find that women are given less importance. The example here is the myth of creation where the Bible tells that a woman came from only one cost of man. And this belief will complicate those who will try to give the same power to both men and women in Rwandan context.

To sum up, this policy of gender equality will fail in Rwandan context because it requires the whole destruction of the Rwandan society. It is also impossible in Rwandan context because even those who teach this policy do not believe in it. Thus, it is easy to say, but difficult to implement the policy saying that women can be equal to men.

Comments

- Conclusion: Reasonable Conclusion
it leaves to the reader a clear understanding of the writer's point of view.
4. Cohesion and Coherence: 5/6
Sentences are linked up coherently from the beginning to the end.
5. Writing Mechanics: 6⁵/8
- Few of grammatical errors.
 - The word choice is okay
 - The paper is generally free of spelling.
- Average
33/40
- 3 -
1. Focus: 5⁵/6 → The problem chosen is almost focused enough.
2. Organization: 2/4 → The paper's structure does not provide immediately different parts of the essay, all paragraphs start at the same index.
3. Development: 14/16 → Introduction of the topic
= D V. Good.
→ Development of thesis
= D V. Good
→ Examples: Convincing, but they are few comparing to the ideas included in the essay. I think it would be better to provide an example after each idea either for or against.

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