



doi: <https://doi.org/10.20546/ijcrar.2020.808.003>

Factors Affecting “1 to 5” Group Work in Writing Skills in EFL Classrooms: Two Selected Secondary Schools in Focus: Wolaita, Ethiopia

Getachew Geno Alala*

Department of English Language and Literature, Wolaita Sodo University, Sodo Ethiopia

**Corresponding author*

Abstract

The main aim of this study was to investigate the Factors Affecting “1 to 5” Group Work in Writing Skills in EFL Classrooms, in two Selected Secondary Schools in Wolaita Zone, SNNPR, Ethiopia. Therefore, Areka and Gesuba secondary schools were selected as a research setting. There were 54 sections in grades 11 and 12 in the two selected schools. For selecting students, simple random sampling technique was employed. Concerning the sample size, 10% of the total population of the students was selected to reflect the trait distribution that exists in the population. Three data gathering instruments namely, observation, questionnaire and interview were used to collect the data. Some classrooms were observed to assess the actual one to five group work problems. A questionnaire consisting of both closed and open-ended types was administered to 360 students. In order to collect additional data and to triangulate the data obtained through the selected tools, interview with teachers was carried out to get the data that may appear difficult to get through questionnaire and observations. To analyze the responses given through each tool, descriptive survey method using frequency and percentages was employed. The main findings of this study indicate that writing in one to five groups generally had a positive impact on the students’ writing and on their motivation to write in English and that group writing therefore has potential in EFL classrooms. All of the students stated that their motivation had increased due to the group writing activities. Therefore, letting learners explore their creativity and use their fantasy in writing is an important classroom activity. Besides, it would be interesting to see what the long-term effects of the research would have been if the students’ writing had been researched over, a longer period of time.

Article Info

Accepted: 08 July 2020

Available Online: 20 August 2020

Keywords

Factors, 1 to 5, EFL Classroom, Group work

Introduction

Group and group work have gained credence since many years. It may take us back to the communal society because during that time human beings used to be in groups so that to sustain as animals to maintain their being. Since then, group and group works have been side by side based on their necessity. In this regard, this study has no intention to focus on discussing what group

is, but to focus on group work. And it is also not to discuss any form of group work, but still a group work that is being carried out in the classroom, among others, the “1 to 5” group work in English classrooms during implementing writing activities. In connection to this, Johnson and Johnson (1999) in “Open Resource Bank for Interactive Teaching” verify that group work is important to acknowledge that there is firm evidence that cooperative group work is effective in improving

attainment compared with pupils working alone. It is further deepened the importance of group work stating that collaborative work in small groups is designed to develop 'higher order' skills. The key elements here are the talking and associated thinking that take place between group members. In this regard, the above statement clarifies that collaborative or group works are much more important to gain high order skills that may vary from talking to associated thinking which are key to understand the theme of something discussed or done together.

On the contrary, Bennett (1976) puts its demerits in that putting pupils in groups is no guarantee that they work as groups; so much deliberate work needs to be done to make group work productive. This shows that unless any kind of group work designed to attain some sort of goal is deliberately coached or supported, it can be taken as chaos and ineffective in itself.

Therefore, the most important thing to be considered is group size. Groups exist in many sizes and forms and are created for a wide variety of purposes. In their research on collaborative learning, Davis (1993), Millis, and Cottell (1998) identified three types of group work based on their goal, activity to be undertaken and time to be spent on it. These are formal learning groups, informal learning groups and study groups.

The instructor establishes formal learning groups 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.

Informal learning groups are temporary and 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 brain storming ideas.

Study groups or learning teams are long-term groups with a stable membership, more like learning communities (Millis and Cottell, 1998). Their main purpose is to provide support and encouragement

and help students feel connected to a community of learners.

As far as this research is concerned with 1 to 5 grouping, formal learning groups were used as the teacher who also decided on their composition and their respective sizes set them up. 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. However, smallness does not always mean the same thing in every teaching and learning context. According to Mellor (2009) concludes that group size may depend on the cohort size, topic to work on and nature of the task designed. 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). Davis (1993), for instance, claims that groups of four or five members generally work best.

When coming to this study, as being the term "1 to 5" group is new and recent phenomenon in Ethiopia, it is found to be worth mentioning to see what is going on. Hence, this is why the researcher intended to carry out study on this "1 to 5" students group role in facilitating the overall teaching learning process in general and writing skill particularly.

When the researcher was reviewing some former studies in this topic area, there have been few studies conducted by some scholars. For example, Kefelegn (2003) did a study of students' academic writing in response to instructors' expectations at Addis Ababa University (AAU). The results of his study tended to indicate that the students were actually less successful in meeting or reflecting their instructors' expectations of good academic papers in their writing, but he did not touch the one to five group-writing concepts. Therefore, this study aimed to answer to the following basic research questions:

1. What are the factors that affect "1 to 5" group work?
2. What roles do teachers and other concerned bodies play to make the group works effective?
3. What roles do students play to improve writing skills using 1 to 5 group works?
4. What are the merits and demerits of "1 to 5" group writing?

Materials and Methods

Research design

According to Hakim (2000) research design is primarily concerned with "... aims, uses, purposes, intentions and plans within the practical constraint of location, time, money" and the availability of the researcher. The main purpose of this research was to investigate factors that affect group works (1 to 5) in carrying out writing skills activities in English classrooms in Areka and Gesuba secondary schools. To conduct this study, descriptive survey method was used. In this regard, percent and frequency counting were employed. In supporting this concept Mertler and Charles (2005) state that descriptive research is used to depict people, situations, events, and conditions as they currently exist. Again, Koul (2005) adds that descriptive research studies are designed to obtain pertinent and, whenever possible, to draw valid general conclusions from the facts discovered. Hence, the researcher used this method to reveal the factors affecting group work in one to five grouping in writing skills in EFL/ESL teaching learning process in the study arena.

Study population

In carrying out this research, 3601 grade 11 and 12 students (Areka and Gesuba), English teachers, school principals, Woreda education officers, supervisors, and parents were purposefully selected as representative sample. The reason behind this selection was that students at these levels were taken as appropriate because they were in the beginning and in the end of the implementation of the group work kind - 1 to 5. Due to this, students from these levels and other stockholders were the primary sources of data and the researcher's experience, i.e. well established background knowledge concerning these levels and familiarity with the nature of staff, which could help mitigate the loss of time and other unnecessary costs. The subjects of the study were English teachers, school principals, Woreda education officers, supervisors, parents, and students from grades, 11 and 12.

Sample size

There were 3601 students in the selected grades 11 and 12. From 3601 students, 360 (10%) were used as a representative sample. This was because as Mertler (2005) suggests that for descriptive studies, a common recommendation is to sample approximately 10%-20%

of the population. Hence, 360 make 10%. In addition to this, 20 English teachers who have been teaching English, 4 principals, 2 education officers, and 3 supervisors were used as a representative sample.

Sampling techniques

Both probability and non-probability sampling procedures were used. In this regard, simple random sampling technique was employed for students to give the population equal chance to act up on the information gathering process. This was on the basis of the discussion by Mertler and Charles (2005), i.e., random sampling, sometimes called simple random sampling, is done in such a way that samples represent the population, each individual in the total population has an equal chance of being selected and is the best way to obtain a representative sample. In addition, purposive sampling was used to gather data from English teachers.

Data collection

Based on the study design, that is, descriptive, both quantitative and qualitative methods were used. This was because the nature of the study design being descriptive, and is aimed to investigate the factors that affect students' writing skills in English classrooms using group work. In this regard, Mertler and Charles (2005) state: Research that relies on narrative data (verbal descriptions and opinions) is called qualitative research, while research that relies on numerical data (scores and mean...) is quantitative and, at times, both methods can be used in the same study. So, these methods were found important means of analysing and interpreting data collected using questionnaire, observation and interview.

Data collection tools

Data were collected because of the type of research title, research questions, purpose, and design of the study. In this regard, the following tools were used to collect data.

Questionnaire

To carry out this study, first, a questionnaire was prepared in English and translated into Amharic language because it is hoped that some students can better understand in Amharic than in English. When coming to the importance and relevance of questionnaire, as Koul (2005) states it, questionnaire is a popular means of collecting all kinds of data in research. It is widely used in educational research to obtain information about

certain conditions and practices, and to inquire into opinions and attitudes of an individual or a group. Here, both closed-ended and open-ended questions in a Likert scale form were employed to gather information from the participant students.

Interview

Interview is a tool used to obtain deeper information during data gathering process. In this regard, interview was employed to gather information from school principals, student parents, English teachers, wereda education officers and supervisors of the sample grade levels. In relation to this, Mertler and Charles (2005) reveal that the personal interview is organized around a predetermined set of questions but allows the questioner to provide encouragement, as probing questions, and request additional information and can obtain more information than can the questionnaire. In this case, semi-structured questions were employed to elicit the feelings of all interviewees who participated in the process of gathering information. In this regard, items prepared in both mother tongue (Wolaita language) and English language where items in mother tongue were administered to parents and those were in English, to principals, English teachers, Wereda (district) education officers, and supervisors respectively.

Observation

Observations and filed notes were also used during “1 to 5” grouping. Observations consist of detailed notation of behaviour, events and interactions and the contexts surrounding these (Best and Kahn, 2006). Both McMillan and Schumacher (2014) agree that observations reveal characteristics and elicit data that is nearly impossible to gather with other means or approaches. Therefore, data from observation represents a first-hand encounter with the phenomenon under study, which affords the investigator the opportunity to gather ‘live’ data from naturally occurring social situations (Cohen *et al.*, 2011). Leedy and Ormrod (2005) pointed out that, there are two types: participant observation and non-participant observation. In this case, the researcher engaged in various activities of group writing skills as he wished to observe in a natural setting, and became a participant observer.

Data analysis procedures

In this study, quantitative and qualitative research methods were used. This is so because of the research

design being descriptive, the tools that were used being a questionnaire-which was employed quantitatively, and it bases on numerical data. Other data gathering tool that was used in addition was interview, which was employed qualitatively because it bases on verbal descriptions and opinions as verified in Mertler and Charles (2005). Classroom observation was also used which in turn is another important tool that was used for gathering data in the classroom context. As a result, all of the parts that were given focus in the questionnaire and interview were also observed in the classroom based on the checklist. This tool was used as a supplement to other tools.

Concerning the aforementioned information in data gathering tools, all possible means were used to communicate with different bodies in selected weredas and schools and the respective English teachers as mentioned earlier. In this regard, positive and cooperative environment were created in the first round contact with respondents and adjustments were made to achieve the intended goal, i.e., getting actual data from desired participants-English teachers, students, principals, education officers, parents and the supervisors. Next, with the adjusted time interval, questionnaire was distributed to students; interview was held with English teachers, education officers, principals, parents, and supervisors. Finally, the classroom observation was made accordingly.

Results and Discussion

Data analysis and discussion

The data, which were collected from the students, were analysed using frequencies and percentages quantitatively, and qualitative data, which were collected from parents, school principals, parent-student associations, wereda education officers, and teachers were analysed through narration using words. Therefore, the results of the whole data were summarized as follows.

Questionnaire

Regarding the analysis of questionnaire, the activities in the teaching materials encourage individual writing skills than group writing skills. Every student had a specific role to play in one to five group works during the writing lesson. There is a common agreement that supports that writing is the most complex and difficult skill for it requires a lot of training, like all learning problems and difficulties in producing a good piece of writing can be

devastating to the learner's education, self-confidence and motivation to write. Many researches (Harmer, 2007; Nunan, 1989; Richards and Renandya, 2002) agreed that writing is the most complex and difficult skill. This difficulty lies not only in generating and organizing ideas, but also in translating these ideas into readable text. Depending on the above verifications, these all problems came due to lack of using appropriate techniques in teaching writing skill. In other words, those problems that appeared in these selected students indicate that it is not easy to implement one to five group activities.

According to the students' responses, the time given to carry out writing activities in one to five group works is not enough for all students actively to participate in writing sessions. Time assignment plays a great role in one to five group activities, and writing needs thinking, planning, drafting, proofreading, and editing. All these tasks need adequate time allocation. Therefore, teachers should play a facilitation role to manage time during one to five group work in writing skills sessions.

Concerning the classroom environment, as it was indicated in questionnaire item 20, all respondents strongly disagreed and argued that the classroom environment is not encouraging to carry out one to five groups in writing sessions. Besides social environment of a given institution, the location, size, shape and construction of the classroom, the presence and effective management of different instructional facilities like: furniture, resource centre, laboratory and library services have direct bearing in the instructional methods. In order to make one to five group-writing tasks effective, the classroom environment, size of students, width of the classroom, teaching aids, and seating arrangements should be okay. Otherwise, it is not suitable to provide different experiments and group works having many students in overcrowded classroom. Sguazzin and Graan, (1998:54) in their study have also indicated that schools in many parts of Africa are composed of large number of students. Thus, giving students enough attention and meeting the need of every student to engage actively in learning process is difficult.

Interview

The objective of the interview was based on investigating factors contributing to "1 to 5" group works in writing skills in EFL classroom settings. The two preparatory school teachers, ten teachers from Areka secondary School and ten teachers from Gesuba, 20 in

general, were asked about factors contributing to "1 to 5" group works in writing skills in EFL classroom settings, and interview was a tool used to obtain deeper information during data gathering process. In this regard, interview was employed to gather information from English teachers of the sample schools. One teacher was asked the question that reads, "How do you value the application of 1 to 5 group work in EFL writing skills classroom settings?" He answered that he gives great value to the application of group work in EFL writing skills classroom setting. The respondent teacher also replied that students become problem solvers through the application of one to five group-writing activities. Another female teacher from Areka replied that one to five group works enforces member students to become dependent on other students in that they lack idea sharing. The question that was posed to teachers concerning teachers' role was argued that teachers, as facilitators, play an important role in the classroom group writing work by providing students with inputs and guiding them to the right direction. However, the principal demerits of one to five group works was the students' dependency on the leader student who is supposed to be better than other group members are. The other main ones are unsuitable classroom environment, politicized viewpoint to the concept, one to five, large class size, lack of enough time both to teachers and students, overloaded teachers, and these scenarios, in turn, make other students passive learners. Moreover, the role that students must play in one to five group works is participating actively, collecting information to the group work and supporting each other's learning progress on the contents. Another idea reported by teachers is that one to five group is good to develop the students' confidence by bringing team spirit to the classrooms. Many interviewees claimed that students are not successful, though, on the one to five group-writing activities, and interviewees suggested that one to five group writing, sometimes, develops plagiarism also.

Classroom observation

The researcher observed the students during the entire classroom writing activities. The researcher's focus when observing was to see how the students worked together, how they received the various writing tasks, how they wrote the paragraphs for the writing activities in a group, And how the groups were concerned about the content and language of the paragraph. As it was observed, it took some time for them to write the paragraph due to their concern with the quality of the paragraph.

Analysis of Students' Questionnaire at Areka and Gesuba (Grade 11 and 12) Schools

Table.1 To identify factors that affect students' writing skill in using 1 to 5 group works

No	Items										
		SD		D		SA		A		Total	Mean
		F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%		
1	I like to write in 1 to 5 group work because writing in two minds is better than one	50	13.9	50	13.9	60	16.7	200	55.5	360	100
2	In writing sessions, in 1 to 5 group work, there is a work division among the members of the group.	360	100	-	-	-	-	-	-	360	100
3	In working together in 1-to-5 group work, I build my confidence.	99	27.5	50	13.9	154	42.8	57	15.9	360	100
4	Rather than working in 1-to-5 group writing sessions, I prefer to work individually because some students wait only from me.	50	13.9	50	13.9	250	69.4	10	2.8	360	100
5	Writing in 1-to-5 group work helps me to use effective note making.	-	-	-	-	360	100	-	-	360	100
6	Our instructor checks the role of each of one to five group members in writing sessions in every one to five group work session in the given time.	300	83.3	50	13.9	10	2.8	-	-	360	100
7	The activities in the teaching materials encourage individual work than group work in writing sessions.	360	100	-	-	-	-	-	-	360	100
8	The time given to carry out writing activities in one to five group works is enough for all students actively to participate in writing sessions.	360	100	-	-	-	-	-	-	360	100
9	My teacher plays a facilitation role during one to five group work in writing skills sessions.	-	-	-	-	360	100	-	-	360	100
10	The classroom environment is encouraging to carry out one to five group works in writing sessions.	360	100	-	-	-	-	-	-	360	100

Note: SA=strongly agree; A=agree; D=disagree; SD= strongly disagree

They were more anxious about how to write a good paragraph using the pictures than writing a long text. Even though the students were allowed to use dictionaries during the writing of the paragraph, they still asked questions to the researcher/teacher.

The questions were mainly about translating Amharic words into English. The researcher helped the students

with finding words and translating them when asked. The students were otherwise left alone to figure out them how and what to write for (Table 1).

Although each group had spent the same amount of time on writing their paragraph, there was variety in the length of the texts. The first group had written one and half a pages, the second group two pages, whereas the

third group had written half a page. There were also some differences in the structure and content of the paragraph. Group one and two had chosen to divide their texts into paragraphs, which created a better-organized text. Group three, on the other hand, had decided to write their paragraph as one paragraph. It is worth mentioning that their text was also shorter than those of the other groups were. These students have committed mistakes such as spelling errors, grammatical errors, and some other sentence errors, but their paragraph could be taken as fair.

In general, when it is argued from the side of enough size with regard to the number of students, the nature of chairs, tables, boards, and desks, and the overall nature of the classroom (old, new...), everything went against the writing activities.

Conclusions and Recommendations are as follows:

This study was carried out on factors affecting “1 to 5” group work in writing skills in EFL Classrooms at two selected secondary schools. Four specific research objectives were designed. These are: (1) To identify factors that affect students’ writing skill in using “1 to 5” group work. (2) To distinguish roles that are played by teachers and other concerned bodies in using 1 to 5 groups to improve students’ writing skills. (3) To identify roles that are played by students in developing writing skills in using 1 to 5 group work; and (4) To distinguish merits and demerits of 1 to 5 group work in teaching writing skills. Results of the data showed that both teachers and students have positive attitudes toward the use of one to five group writing except a few subjects, both from Areka and Gesuba secondary schools, which reject it. The main findings of this study were also that writing in one to five groups generally had a positive impact on the students’ writing and on their motivation to write in English and that group writing therefore has potential in EFL classrooms. Some of the students were interviewed to find out if and how they were motivated after writing in groups. All of the students stated that their motivation had increased due to the group writing activities. The students explained that they had enjoyed writing paragraphs in groups, had enjoyed working with their peers, and they expressed that they had learnt more words, and how to improve their grammar. Nevertheless, few subjects opposed the idea reflected from most respondents, and they claim that member students become passive when leaders perform the tasks given. However, as majority reported, writing in groups was a positive experience and had a positive

effect on the students’ writing and motivation to write. This supports Brown’s (2007) and Harmer’s (2001) research on motivation in a group work. As a result, in a regular teaching situation, it might be best to use these kinds of writing tasks on different occasions, instead of one after the other in an intensive period, which was what happened here for the purpose of the research. Group writing activities, for example, could be distributed according to topics the class is learning in accordance. The intensity of several group writing activities following each other may make some students fed up with writing, which did not seem to be the case with the present group, but could be with others. Letting learners explore their creativity and use their fantasy in writing is an important classroom activity. Writing, according to scholars, is one of the basic skills and group activities such as the ones used in this project are one way of letting learners explore their creativity and use their imagination.

In schools in Wolaita (and other areas and levels), these kinds of writing tasks might be useful for many students who are in need for activities that can encourage and motivate them to write. In a connected way, the students still managed to develop their writing and increased their motivation to write. In a short amount of time, the learners’ writing and attitudes towards the subject changed to a certain extent. It would be interesting to see what the long-term effects of the research would have been if the students’ writing had been researched over, a longer period of time and their writing had shown more long-term gains from the group-writing project. Moreover, it would have been interesting further to investigate “1 to 5” grouping in mixed and single sex groups in improving writing skills in EFL classroom settings.

References

- Bennett, N. (1976). Teaching styles and pupil progress. Open Books. ISBN: 0674870956.
- Best, J.W. and Kahn, J.V. 2006. Research in Education (10th ed.). Boston: Pearson Education.
- Brown, H. D. 2007. Teaching by Principles. An interactive Approach to Language Pedagogy. New York: Longman.
- Cohen, L., Manion, L. and Morrison, K. 2011. *Research Methods in Education* (7th ed.). Abingdon: Rutledge.
- Davis, B.G. (1993). Collaborative learning: Group work and study teams. Retrieved March 12, 2011, from <http://teaching.berkeley.edu/bgd/collaborative.html>

- Hakim, C. (2000). *Research Design: Successful designs in social and economic research*. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Harmer, J. (2001). *The Practice of English Language Teaching*. Harlow: Longman.
- Harmer, J. 2007. *The Practice of English Language Teaching* (4thed.). Harlow: Pearson Education.
- Johnson, D. W. and Johnson, R. T. (1999). *Learning together and alone: cooperative, competitive, and individualistic learning*. Allyn and Bacon. ISBN: 0205287719.
- Kefelegn Tefera (2003). *A Study of Students' Academic Writing in Response to Instructors' Expectations at AAU: Four Departments in Focus*. AAU (Unpublished).
- Koul, L. 2005. *Methodology of Educational Research* (3rd ed.). Vikas Publishing House PVT LTD
- Leedy, P.D. and Ormrod, J.E. 2013. *Practical research: Planning and design*. 10th ed. Boston: Pearson.
- McMillan, J. and Schumacher, S. 2014. *Research in Education: Evidence-Based Inquiry*. Harlow, Essex: Pearson.
- Mellor, A. (2009). *Group work assessment: Benefits, problems and implications for good practice* [Red Guide Paper 53]. Retrieved November 9, 2010, from <http://www.northumbria.ac.uk/static/5007/arpdf/academy/redguide53.pdf>
- Mertler, Craig A. and C., M. Charles. (2005). *Introduction to Educational Research*. Pearson Education, Inc., Boston.
- Millis, B.J., and Cottell, P.G. (1998). *Cooperative learning for higher education faculty*. Phoenix: Oryx Press.
- Nunan, D. 1989. *Designing Tasks for the Communicative Classroom*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Richards, J.C. and Renandya, W.A. 2002. *Methodology in language teaching: an anthology of current practice*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Sguazzin, T., and van Graan, M. (Eds.). (1999). *Education Reform and Innovation in Namibia: How Best Can Changes in Classroom Practice be Implemented and Supported?: Proceedings from the 1998 NIED Educational Conference, National Institute for Educational Development (NIED), Okahandja, 13-16 October 1998*. Longman Namibia.

How to cite this article:

Getachew Geno Alala. 2020. Factors Affecting “1 to 5” Group Work in Writing Skills in EFL Classrooms: Two Selected Secondary Schools in Focus: Wolaita, Ethiopia. *Int.J.Curr.Res.Aca.Rev.* 8(8), 17-24.
doi: <https://doi.org/10.20546/ijcrar.2020.808.003>