



Unveiling Student Perceptions Of Mixed-Proficiency Pairing Method In Asynchronous Writing Classroom Using Google Docs

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Abstract

Existing literature has shown an increased interest in elaborating proficiency pairing methods in L2 writing classrooms. Most of the studies looked at the quality of writing when students write collaboratively with same-ability partners (homogeneous pairing method) or mixed-proficiency partners (heterogeneous pairing method) in a face-to-face classroom setting. Scant research focused on unpacking student perception of working in mixed-proficiency pairing methods in an asynchronous learning context. This study set out to unveil student perception when they worked collaboratively in a mixed-proficiency pairing method (high-low) in an asynchronous writing classroom using Google Docs. Eighty-four participants were required to write three-paragraph writings in pairs and sit on pre-test and post-test independently. An open-ended questionnaire was after the post-test. The questionnaire covered five themes: degree of collaboration, enjoyment, usefulness of mixed-proficiency pairing, beliefs of working with different ability partners, and constraints. The findings pinpointed that most of the students perceived mixed-proficiency pairing positively. They further stated that they experienced great collaboration with their lower or higher-ability partners. Although some low achievers pinpointed some constraints during the collaborative work, most students admitted they enjoyed the collaboration. This study highlighted limitations and recommendations after data discussion.

Introduction

Existing literature has noted a growing interest in elaborating proficiency pairing methods in L2 writing classrooms. Susanti, Widiati, and Cahyono (2020) examined the effects of two pairing methods: homogeneous and heterogeneous pairing methods, on students' writing performance. The findings indicated that students achieved better writing quality after working with homogeneous peers than after working with heterogeneous peers. Meanwhile, Storch and Aldosari (2013) focused on peers' interaction and writing quality of EFL learners who were grouped based on their L2 proficiencies. The results indicated that learners who were paired homogeneously (high-high and low-low) did not only collaborate well but also achieved better writing performance than learners who were paired heterogeneously (high-low). On the other hand, numerous studies (Cady, 2011; Fauziah & Latief, 2015; Kian-Sam, 1999; Kuiken & Vedder, 2002) reported that mixed-proficiency pairing (heterogeneous pairing method) is superior to homogeneous pairing. Fauziah & Latief (2015) utilized a quasi-experimental research design to find out the effects of homogeneous and heterogeneous pairing methods on the student's quality of writing. The result revealed that students from heterogeneous pairing (H-L) acquired higher writing quality in the post-test as opposed to those from homogeneous groups (H-H and L-L). Similarly, Cady (2011) demonstrated that students gained writing improvement after experiencing collaboration with higher-level partners, average-level partners, and lower-level partners. Furthermore, a more recent study (Masuara & Ajam, 2023) unpacked the positive effects of heterogeneous pairing methods on students' writing skills.

Previous studies on proficiency pairing have also documented various perceptions of learners when they worked collaboratively based on proficiency (Elola & Oskoz, 2010; Hanjani, 2015; Kim & McDonough, 2008; Shehadeh, 2011; Storch, 2005; Vorobel & Kim, 2017). Shehadeh (2011) examined collaborative writing practices from the same low-ability peers and he discovered that most of the students enjoyed such pairing methods. Similarly, Storch (2005) indicated positive attitudes of most students when they wrote in pairs.

Furthermore, Vorobel and Kim (2017) tried to compare perceptions of

adolescent ESL immigrants when they performed collaboratively in face-to-face and online contexts. The results indicated the majority of learners viewed the collaboration in both contexts positively, leading to improvement in L2 writing. Meanwhile, Fauziah and Latief (2015) examined students' perceptions based on proficiency pairing methods. The results revealed that students in heterogeneous groups enjoyed working with different-proficiency peers, and conversely, some students in homogeneous groups were not happy writing with similar-proficiency peers which affected their writing quality.

According to the research cited above, collaborative writing based on proficiency levels has focused on comparing the writing quality resulting from homogeneous and heterogeneous pairing (Wang, 2013; Zamani, 2016), and the effects of the heterogeneous pairing method on students' writing performance (Masuara & Ajam,

2023). Meanwhile, other studies concentrated on elaborating students' perception of working homogeneously and heterogeneously in two conditions: face-to-face classroom setting (Maftoon & Ghafoori, 2009; Mahmoud, 2011) and face-to-face and online context (Vorobel & Kim, 2017). There has been very little attention given to unpacking student perception of working in mixed-proficiency pairing methods in an asynchronous learning context.

This study aimed to broaden research on proficiency pairing by unpacking the perceptions of students (low achievers and high achievers) when they collaborated heterogeneously in an asynchronous learning setting using Google Docs. Scrutinizing students' perceptions of mixed-proficiency pairing in such a learning context was helpful, particularly in the pandemic era in which the learning process has mainly shifted to virtual-based learning. Moreover, it has witnessed a growing development of computer-supported collaborative learning (CSCL) in L2 writing, such as Google Docs, that affected students' writing performance and organizational skills (Cho, 2017). Furthermore, as a study (Zhou, Simpson & Domizi, 2012) indicated, students had ample learning opportunities to see and learn how their peers composed the writing, edited, or did the revision when they performed collaboration through Google Docs.

To sum up, this study aimed to deepen understanding and broaden insights into how students perceived mixed-proficiency pairing in asynchronous learning settings using Google Docs. This issue was worthy to be uncovered because studies (Peng, 2011; Storch, 2013) have shown that students' perceptions toward learning could affect learning outcomes. Moreover, previous research mainly focused on comparing students' perceptions of homogeneous and heterogeneous pairing methods in face- to-face classroom settings, leaving the issue of students' perception of heterogeneous pairing in an asynchronous context underexplored. Thus, this study formulates one question: How do students perceive a mixed-proficiency pairing method in an asynchronous writing classroom using Google Docs

METHOD

The study took place in the English Department at a state university in the

Eastern part of Indonesia. This study employed a one-group pretest-posttest design with 42 first- semester students in each of two intact paragraph writing classes throughout the academic year 2020–2021. The course aimed to provide experience and knowledge in structuring ideas in a well-written paragraph based on different genres, including descriptive text.

Eight meetings occurred via the Zoom platform, including pre-test and post-test. A pre-test was completed by the students in week one, in which they had to write a descriptive paragraph about fascinating places in their hometown individually. The pre- test result assisted the researchers in pairing the students heterogeneously (high-low). Students were labeled as high achievers when their writing scores ranged from 75 to 100, while low achievers were those who received scores between 50 and 75 (Fauziah & Latief, 2015).

The students practiced working with their heterogeneous pairs for six meetings. The collaborative works run asynchronously using Google Docs. In the last meeting, the

students sat a post-test and completed it individually via Zoom. After the post-test, students filled out an open-ended questionnaire in 45 minutes. The survey utilized in this study was adopted and adapted from Dobao and Blum's (2013) study. Dobao and Blum employed ten questions to elaborate on how students felt about writing in dyads and groups in the classroom. Meanwhile, the current study used 15 questions to explore how students felt about writing in mixed-proficiency pairing method via Google Docs. The inquiries provided the students opportunities to voice their opinions on several facets of the experience and value of writing collaboratively with mixed-proficiency peers, covering themes on how collaborative the tasks were, whether collaborative writing improves areas of content, vocabulary, and grammar of their writing, preference between individual and pair work, and its constraints.

FINDINGS

This section presents the findings of this study derived from one research question, *'How do students perceive a mixed-proficiency pairing method in an asynchronous writing classroom using Google Docs?'*

Student Perceptions of Mixed-Proficiency Pairing Method in Asynchronous Writing Classroom Using Google Docs

As earlier stated, five themes elaborated to unpack student perceptions of heterogeneous pairing in asynchronous writing classrooms using Google Docs: degree of collaboration, preference, and enjoyment, the usefulness of mixed-proficiency pairing, beliefs of collaborative writing quality, and constraints. The responses on the five themes were calculated against a 5-point Likert-type scale to make their perceptions easier to interpret. The following table (table 1) presents student perceptions of working in a mixed-proficiency pairing method based on the mean scores of each theme.

Table 1. Student Perceptions of Working in Mixed-Proficiency Pairing Method

Themes	M	SD
Degree of Collaboration	4.12	1.105
Preference and Enjoyment	3.91	0.755
Usefulness of Mixed-Proficiency Pairing Method	4.23	0.588
Individual Writing Quality vs Collaborative Writing	2.00	1.034
Challenges	2.35	1.148

- Degree of Collaboration

As Table 1 displays, the mean score of degree of collaboration is 4.12,

and it is the second-highest mean score among the five themes. This result indicates that over three-quarters of the students experienced good collaborative work with their heterogeneous peers. The data on degree of collaboration constituted from questions 2, 3, and 15.

Most low achievers even stated that their partners were good to work with because they could assist each other during the collaboration.

A student expressed, *"I had a good partner. My partner and I worked well during the collaboration. We assisted each other (S9). The expression was to respond to question 2, 'Did you collaborate well in your pair work?'. The other student wrote: "When I did not know some vocabularies, my partner would inform me of the vocabularies. But when we did not know any vocabulary, we worked together to find the words in the Google translation or look them up in the dictionary. We are a good team (S7)". The expression was to respond to question 3, 'How collaborative was it?'*

Yet, it is interesting to note that three students from high level ability stated that their partners were very passive during the collaboration. An example was from S28 who stated: *"My pair did not contribute at all, but I think it was fine because the task was not so hard, just composed descriptive paragraphs. I could compose it independently actually"*.

- Preference and Enjoyment

Table 1 shows a mean score of the preference and enjoyment of mixed-proficiency pairing is 3.91, implying that many students preferred and enjoyed working collaboratively rather than individually. This finding served as the third-highest mean score among the five themes.

A student (S50) stated, *'It was fun to work collaboratively with a friend, and this was my first experience writing the task together this semester. I enjoyed such a collaboration'*.

Another student said, *'I like writing with my pair because she was helpful during pair collaboration. We enjoyed completing all tasks through Google Docs since it assisted us in editing our writing conveniently' (S68).*

- Usefulness of Mixed-Proficiency Pairing Method

As Table 1 shows, the mean score of the usefulness of mixed-proficiency pairing is 4.23, implying that most students regarded working with heterogeneous peers as beneficial to improving their writing quality. It was the highest mean score among the five themes of perceptions, which it gathered from questions 1, 7, 8, 12, and 14.

As written by S82, *'I learned a lot from my partner. She had a wide range of vocabulary and understood English grammar well. I acquired new knowledge of vocabulary and grammar during the collaboration, leading to an improvement in my writing skills'. The above expression was from a low achiever who admitted that collaborating with a higher- level ability partner developed her writing skills.*

Interestingly, a remarkable number of high achievers (30 out of 42) expressed that working with lower-level partners was also worthwhile because they had opportunities to recall and strengthen their knowledge whenever they shared their ideas with their lower- level partners during the collaboration.

"I love sharing concepts or knowledge about grammar and vocabulary with her, and it was a way for me to reinforce and recall what I knew...When we did not know some English words, we looked them up together (S20). Another student stated, 'I think working collaboratively using Google Docs was helpful because my friend and I had to work together to make our composition well organized. I acquired new knowledge from my partner, for example, about how to put appropriate conjunctions in the paragraph we composed'(S62). The above responses addressed questions 8 and 9, 'How helpful do you

think writing in pairs using Google Docs improves your vocabulary and grammar knowledge?'.

Individual Writing Quality vs Collaborative Writing Quality

The lowest mean score (2.00) among the five themes was in the themes of individual writing quality and collaborative writing quality. It gathered student responses to questions 4, 5, and 6. The findings indicate that forty percent of students believed that their writing quality would be better in terms of content, vocabulary, and grammar if they wrote the tasks independently. Meanwhile, sixty percent of students maintained that their writing quality would improve if they wrote collaboratively.

- **Challenges**

The mean score of student perceptions of the challenges during the collaboration is

2.35. It is the second-least mean score among the five themes, derived from question 13. As Table 1 reports, slightly over 50 percent of the students did not face any constraints during the collaboration. On the other hand, almost fifty percent of students admitted that they encountered challenges as they performed mixed-pairing collaboration. Some high achievers contributed the most, whereas their low-level partners worked less when completing the tasks.

One of the students says, '*It was dissatisfying because my partners did not put enough effort into completing our pair work*' (S27). Meanwhile, a third of students pointed out that the internet connection was one of the challenges in fulfilling the tasks.

A notable point is the perception of two low achievers, who found it hard to negotiate with their higher-level partners during the collaboration. *'It was hard to negotiate with my partners as we wanted to decide which appropriate vocabulary to use in the composition. He did not appreciate my opinions or arguments if I suggested some vocabulary and grammar. I did not enjoy working with such a person like that. It was a problem for me.* (S39). Another student expressed, *'My partner did not appreciate me. She forced me to rely on her ideas only in composing the paragraphs: do not accept my suggestions'.* (S72). This statement revealed a challenge where a learner dominated too much during the collaborative writing activities. The other constraint stated by three students was the media of collaboration. They admitted that it was better to collaborate in face-to-face classrooms. However, the statements were contradicted by two-thirds of students preferring collaboration using Google Docs over a face-to-face classroom

setting because they found it easier to organize ideas, edit, and revise the paragraph through Google Docs.

DISCUSSION

As has been presented in the findings of the first theme (degree of collaboration), over three-quarters of the students experienced good teamwork even though they worked with different proficiency partners. Most low and high achievers regarded their partners as good partners, so they scaffolded each other during the collaboration. These findings were in line with Johnson & Johnson's (2009) theory stating that the heterogeneous grouping method is effective for collaborative learning since it allows high achievers to reinforce their prior knowledge as they share knowledge with their peers, while the low

achievers gain new knowledge from higher-level partners during collaboration. However, these findings confronted results from Susanti et al. (2020) that students felt comfortable working with same-proficient partners and did not enjoy working with higher-proficiency partners due to hierarchy culture.

In viewing preference and enjoyment, most students preferred to write collaboratively rather than individually. They also indicated their enjoyment of collaborative writing activities. These findings confirmed earlier studies (Dobao & Bloom, 2012; Storch & Aldosari, 2013) that students perceived pair collaboration as fun lowered their writing anxiety, and improved writing self-confidence.

Regarding the usefulness of heterogeneous pairing, most students could see the benefits of working in a mixed-pairing method. They acknowledge that they gained new knowledge of grammar, word choice, and other linguistic aspects during the collaboration. This result strengthened Chen and Yu's (2019) study in which the students believed that pair collaboration increased their knowledge of grammar, organization, vocabulary, and idea cohesiveness.

Other notable findings were students' beliefs about individual and collaborative writing quality. As mentioned earlier, forty percent of students believed their writing quality would be higher if they wrote the tasks individually. Although the percentage of this belief was lower than those who regarded better writing quality resulting from collaborative writing (sixty percent), this finding highlighted that writing independently could also result in better writing quality. The reasons for this might be that some students think that they have more freedom to choose words they want to write and seek appropriate grammar without being distracted by low-level partners. This finding supported Fauziah and Latief (2016) and Susanti et al. (2020).

Regarding the last perception, there was an issue of dominant vs passive learners that became one of the most notable challenges in this pairing method. This result strengthened Chen and Yu (2019), which found that high achievers dominated interaction during pair collaboration. The next challenge faced by some students was related to internet connection. Although few students prefer collaborative writing in face-to-face classroom settings to working collaboratively in an asynchronous context due to the bad internet connection, most of the students prefer working collaboratively through Google Docs rather than working individually. This finding supported Cho's (2017) study that most students preferred writing collaboratively in a web-based collaboration tool rather than in a face-to-face classroom setting.

CONCLUSION AND LIMITATION

This study provides empirical evidence that most students perceived mixed- proficiency pairing positively. They admitted they collaborated well with their lower or higher-ability partners through Google Docs. Also, students obtained new knowledge related to grammar, vocabulary, and organizational skills during the collaboration. Although some low achievers pinpointed some constraints when they completed the task in pairs, most students asserted that they enjoyed the collaboration and gained writing improvement after experiencing pair collaboration with their heterogeneous peers. They believed a mixed-proficiency pairing method could facilitate language learning more optimally for low and high achievers and enhance writing quality.

Although some students raised the issue of dominant and passive partners as the challenge in such a method, most of the students maintained that they gained more benefits as they collaborated with their heterogeneous partners who were supportive during the collaboration. Additionally, students do not only enjoy mixed-pairing in a traditional face-to-face learning setting, but they also have a positive perception toward collaborating through Google Docs.

Despite the strengths resulting from this study, it had several limitations. First, it looked only at the perception of students working in a mixed-proficiency pairing method. It is worthwhile for future researchers to compare students' perceptions of working collaboratively inhomogeneous (H-H and L-L) and heterogeneous pairing methods (H-

L) using Google Docs to broaden the view of the student's perception of asynchronously collaborative writing across different pairing methods. It is also worth investigating how students' perceptions of various pairing methods affect the writing outcome. By doing so, more in-depth explanations can be included in this conclusion. The last suggestion is to explore students' perceptions when they complete different types of essays since this present study focused on descriptive paragraphs, not descriptive essays or other writing genres. It would be beneficial to have a causal-comparative design when students performed the writing task heterogeneously on different types of genres to improve the generalizability of this finding.

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