

**EXPLORING THE COLLABORATIVE WRITING CHALLENGES OF STUDENTS  
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**ABSTRACT**

This study investigates the challenges faced by fifth-semester students at Politeknik Tonggak Equator (Polteq) in implementing collaborative writing within their Academic Writing class. Although collaborative writing has been widely acknowledged as a powerful pedagogical strategy that enhances language learning, student engagement, and critical thinking, it often presents significant difficulties in practice. Based on Chisholm's framework, this research categorizes the main challenges into four themes: resistance, inexperience, friction, and fairness. A descriptive qualitative method was employed involving 16 student participants through interviews and questionnaires. The findings revealed that all four challenges were present, but fairness was the most dominant concern, as many students perceived unequal participation and grading in group work. Inexperience and interpersonal friction further complicated the collaborative process, while resistance was typically tied to students' preference for individual work and previous negative experiences. Despite these barriers, students recognized the potential benefits of collaborative writing when properly facilitated. The study concludes that successful collaborative writing in EFL settings requires structured preparation, role clarity, peer assessment, and instructor support. Practical recommendations are offered to help educators design more effective collaborative writing tasks that foster both language development and group accountability. This research contributes to the pedagogical discourse on collaborative writing and offers insights for improving group-based writing activities in tertiary education.

**Keywords:** *collaborative writing, academic writing, student challenges*

**INTRODUCTION**

Writing skills become an integral part of the learning process for English students. The teaching of English in the schools, however, does not offer a sufficient proportion of writing skills. Writing skills are taken less into account than the other skills in the teaching process. For instance, teacher often ask students to read certain texts and answer the question, rather than ask them to create an essay. In term of education, collaborative writing strategy was widely adopted to promote collaborative learning.

In general, collaborative writing involves two or more persons working together to produce a written text. In language teaching, collaborative writing activities have received increased attention in second language (L2) writing research in recent years fueled by their sound theoretical basis and a body of empirical research that supports their effectiveness at promoting writing development (Storch, 2021). From the perspective of sociocultural theory, collaborative writing tasks can assist students perform beyond their individual abilities through the guide of an expert who scaffolds their performance (Vygotsky, 1978).

In spite of these benefits of collaborative writing, instructors may be reluctant to implement collaborative writing tasks due to the fact that pairs require up to twice the amount of time to complete the same writing task compared to individuals (Storch, 2005). In many

writing courses, especially in tertiary educational settings, instructors simply do not have sufficient instructional hours to set aside class time for collaborative writing.

Another major problem with the use of collaborative writing tasks concerns the reliability, validity and fairness of group assessment (Kagan, 1995). In other words, it is difficult for instructors to decide how and how much each individual student contributed to a collaborative writing task (Johnston & Miles, 2004; Strauss & U, 2007). Previous research done by Abrams (2019) suggests that collaboratively oriented groups produced texts with more propositional content and better coherence than less-collaborative groups. Furthermore, another research done by Ikariya et al. (2023) revealed that the EFL teachers skillfully integrated face-to-face collaborative writing into the process approach to text development. Both teachers and students agreed to the substantial benefits of collaborative writing for writing and language skill improvement, enriching the learning process, and enhancing social and affective aspects of education. Besides the positive outcomes, the study also found challenges associated with collaborative writing, including group formation and individual preferences, which occasionally hindered the collaborative process. Out of this plethora of problems there are four problems which become the most troublesome for most collaborative writing groups suggested by Chisholm (1990): resistance, inexperience, friction, and fairness. As a lecturer teaching Academic Writing and EAP class at Politeknik Tonggak Equator, the researcher encountered a similar problem when applying collaborative writing for the class in semester five. In order to investigate the challenges that the students faced in doing the collaborative writing activities, a research on Exploring the Collaborative Writing Challenges of Students at Polteq in the Academic Writing Class will be conducted

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Academic writing is a formal style of writing used in universities and scholarly publications, is arguably the most important skill in academic contexts, and it is also the most difficult skill for most students to master. Academic writing follows the same writing process as other types of texts, but it has specific conventions in terms of content, structure and style. Characteristics of academic writing include a formal tone, use of the third-person rather than first-person perspective, a clear focus on the research problem under investigation, and precise word choice.

Academic writing can be divided into two types: student academic writing, which is used as a form of assessment at university, as well as at schools as preparation for university study; and expert academic writing, which is writing that is intended for publication in an academic journal or book. Both types of academic writing (student and expert) are expected to adhere to the same standards, which can be difficult for students to master.

Gillett, A (2021) in his *Features of academic writing* mentioned the characteristics of academic writing which together distinguish it from other forms of writing. They are:

### 1. Structured

Academic writing should have a clear structure. The structure will often derive from the genre of writing. For example, a report will have an introduction (including the aim or aims), a method section, a discussion section and so on, while an essay will have an introduction (including a thesis statement), clear body paragraphs with topic sentences, and a conclusion. The writing should be coherent, with logical progression throughout, and cohesive, with the different parts of the writing clearly connected. Careful planning before writing is essential to ensure that the final product will be well structured, with a clear focus and logical progression of ideas.

## 2. Evidenced

Opinions and arguments in academic writing should be supported by evidence. Often the writing will be based on information from experts in the field, and as such, it will be important to reference the information appropriately, for example via the use of in-text citations and a reference section.

## 3. Critical

Academic writing does more than just describe. As an academic writer, you should not simply accept everything you read as fact. You need to analyse and evaluate the information you are writing about, in other words make judgements about it, before you decide whether and how to integrate it into your own writing. This is known as critical writing. Critical writing requires a great deal of research in order for the writer to develop a deep enough understanding of the topic to be truly critical about it.

## 4. Balanced

Academic writing should be balanced. This means giving consideration to all sides of the issue and avoiding bias. As noted above, all research, evidence and arguments can be challenged, and it is important for the academic writer to show their stance on a particular topic, in other words how strong their claims are. This can be done using *hedges*, for example phrases such as *the evidence suggests...* or *this could be caused by...*, or *boosters*, that is, phrases such as *clearly* or *the research indicates*.

## 5. Precise

Academic writing should use clear and precise language to ensure the reader understands the meaning. This includes the use of technical (i.e. subject-specific) vocabulary, which should be used when it conveys the meaning more precisely than a similar non-technical term. Sometimes such technical vocabulary may need defining, though only if the term is not commonly used by others in the same discipline and will therefore not be readily understood by the reader.

## 6. Objective

Academic writing is objective. In other words, the emphasis is placed on the arguments and information, rather than on the writer. As a result, academic writing tends to use nouns and noun phrases more than verbs and adverbs. It also tends to use more passive structures, rather than active voice, for example *The water was heated* rather than *I heated the water*.

## 7. Formal

Finally, academic writing is more formal than everyday writing. It tends to use longer words and more complex sentences, while avoiding contractions and colloquial or informal words or expressions that might be common in spoken English. There are words and collocations which are used in academic writing more frequently than in non-academic writing, and researchers have developed lists of these words and phrases to help students of academic English, such as the Academic Word List, the Academic Vocabulary List, and the Academic Collocation List.

## Collaborative writing

Activities of collaborative writing involves more than just writing. Collaborative or team writing is the process of producing a written work as a group where all team members

contributed to the content and the decisions about how the group will function. Hunzer (2012) states that collaborative writing is the community for student writers. Not only that, but all the wonderful things related with creating a classroom community are invented into your classroom along with collaborative writing such as students interacting with one another in positive manner, allowing course materials to be examined and penetrate with influence, and students feeling that they are a part of the larger academy of learning.

Collaborative writing offers a real learning environment where students do not only develop their writing skills but also critical thinking and decision-making skills. The collaborative writing method was selected because it was believed to be able to stimulate the students to be more involved in the writing activities and to facilitate the students to comprehend the passages. Collaborative writing is a method to deal with the low linguistics level of exchanges as planning, negotiating meaning and reviewing which makes the task goal-directed and the students more reflective. Moreover, collaborative writing fosters the development of second language writing through increasing engagement, confidence, and responsibility on the parts of the learners.

Collaborative writing can be beneficial in the different language domains (Sajedi, 2014). Collaborative writing strategy is a teaching writing strategy in which students are asked to work together in pair or group in order to produce a good writing. This strategy facilitates students to write a certain text with their peers. In other words, the students will work together to produce a good writing.

Collaborative writing offers opportunities not only to practice literature review, academic reading, and writing, but also to stimulate reflection, knowledge sharing, and critical thinking (Sukirman, 2016). Dale in Utami (2012) also suggests that collaborative writing involves meaningful interaction and shared decision between group members in the writing of a shared document

From definitions above it can be conclude that collaborative writing is a social process that encourages students because it involves students' social interaction when they work together in a group.

#### Four Challenges in Collaborative Writing

Problems with collaboration in group writing is inevitable. However, educators can devise strategies to help students recognize them, accept them as normal and find ways for coping with them. There are four problems that stated in the research article "Coping with the Problems of Collaborative Writing" by Richard M. Chisholm in 1990 that will be the fundamental concepts in this study. The four problems are:

##### Problem 1: Resistance

Many students place a low priority on a collaborative project because they may be unwilling to invest the time and effort that a group project requires. Some of them simply refuse to participate in group work. Their issues may be reluctant, shy, disdainful, or lazy, but for one reason or another they do not commit themselves to full participation. This should not be surprised that collaborative projects do not always attract their immediate commitment.

##### Problem 2: Inexperience

In teaching collaborative writing, educators are trying to create learning environments in which newly-formed groups can move as quickly as possible to become mature, systematic, and habitual collaborative units. But most students have very little experience with collaborative writing. The group process must be taught because individuals can be configured into a circle does not mean that they will automatically become good communicators.

Our society affords students so little opportunity to practice collaboration that few of them know how to work productively in a group. Students might play on teams and they mix and mingle at parties and such, but rarely do they contribute to genuinely collaborative projects. They are uneasy and apprehensive. They work inefficiently and ineffectively and become discouraged.

Other students fear group work as an intrusion on privacy. Being inexperienced, they are not used to dealing with the intense intimacy that collaborative work demands. Before they build personal relationships with people in a collaborative group, they are unwilling to disclose private thoughts and feelings. Disclosure-even of their ideas makes them feel vulnerable, and until they develop trust, they hesitate to participate. When the power of restraint outpulls the power of candor, we need to help them conceal less and reveal more. The low level of skill at writing, analyzing writing, and talking about writing is another difficulty to deal with. Students with limited skills are afraid of critique. Yet students do learn from each other and thrive on companionship and improve their skills in "group critique."

#### Problem 3: Friction

Some friction in human interaction is unavoidable. Sometimes ordinary rivalries and clashes burst into quarrels. Especially when students are thrown together to produce a piece of work that is important to them, there are bound to be conflicts. Friction which brings about bad feelings is probably the stickiest problem that the groups need to deal with. The general strategy for coping with interpersonal friction is to encourage students to find solutions themselves. Instructor can help them take charge of problem situations, take responsibility for coping with them, choose their own procedures, work out the problems themselves, analyze them, and exercise control and choice.

#### Problem 4: Fairness

In many groups, some students will work hard and someone else will not which everyone know that is unfair. The biggest complaint lecturers used to get from students about group work was about the "hitchhiker," who *goes* along for the ride but doesn't contribute. Some students prefer to work alone and to receive individual credit for individual work because they do not want to be dragged down by a sluggard. Such attitudes are well founded.

Since grades are seen as rewards, it is impossible to reward the workers equally. The fairness problem becomes most acute when older or more highly motivated students are thrown together with immature students. The immature students are willing to have the go-getter do the work, but the older student soon learns to resent the load.

Grades are a primary motivation for students, so it is not surprising that a change in grading system-indeed of the whole basis of grading-should cause discomfort. Yet the main idea of collaborative learning is cooperation; one purpose is to develop a cooperative team spirit. The ideas are to replace competition and individual rewards with a system in which all will pitch in and share the load. In trying to convert competition into contribution, instructor must not forget the students rightly value their own individual work and expect to be credited for it.

## METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative research design to explore the challenges experienced by students in collaborative writing. Qualitative research, as defined by John W. Creswell (2017), encompasses various approaches such as narrative, phenomenology, grounded theory, and case studies, and is particularly suitable for understanding participants' perspectives and experiences. In this study, a descriptive qualitative method was applied to collect, analyze, and present data in order to provide a comprehensive account of the research problem.

The research was conducted at Politeknik Tonggak Equator during the 2022/2023 academic year. The participants consisted of 16 selected students out of a total of 24 fifth-semester students enrolled in the Business English and Professional Communication program. The sample included seven male and nine female students. Data were collected through observation and interviews. Initial observation was conducted to identify existing problems in collaborative writing activities. Subsequently, interviews were carried out using a set of guided questions designed by the researcher to obtain in-depth information related to the objectives of the study. Both individual and group interviews were conducted to capture diverse perspectives and experiences.

The data were analyzed using the interactive model proposed by Matthew B. Miles and A. Michael Huberman (1994), which consists of three interconnected processes: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification. Data reduction involved selecting, simplifying, and transforming raw data into a more manageable form. Data display was carried out by organizing the data into tables and diagrams to facilitate pattern identification and interpretation. Finally, conclusion drawing and verification were conducted by interpreting the data and continuously reviewing the findings to ensure their validity and consistency.

## **FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

The findings are categorized according to the four key collaborative writing challenges as framed by Chisholm (1990): resistance, inexperience, friction, and fairness. The discussion part is intended to answer the research questions

1. *Why are the resistance, inexperience, friction and fairness pose as challenges in collaborative writing among the semester five students at Polteq?*

### **1. Resistance**

Seven of students displayed initial hesitation or lack of motivation toward collaborative tasks. 10 participants admitted that they were more comfortable working individually due to preferences for autonomy, fear of dependence, or past negative experiences with group work. Problems identified are:

1. Reluctance to engage due to previous unproductive group work.
2. Lack of ownership of group tasks.
3. Passive participation from group members.

This resistance aligns with Chisholm's assertion that not all students are willing to participate fully in group projects. Cultural factors, personality traits (e.g., introversion), and previous negative experiences may influence students' unwillingness to participate. Lecturers need to foster a classroom culture that highlights the long-term value of collaboration and provides support structures to encourage full engagement.

### **2. Inexperience**

The majority of students (12) reported limited prior exposure to structured collaborative writing. While they had some experience with group discussions or peer review, many had never jointly produced a single academic text.

Problems identified are:

1. Lack of understanding about task delegation and workflow management.
2. Difficulty articulating constructive feedback.
3. Fear of expressing ideas or being judged.

Inexperience in collaborative writing created obstacles in group dynamics. As Chisholm (1990) emphasized, collaboration does not occur naturally and must be explicitly taught.

Students lacked confidence in sharing drafts or critiquing peers' work due to underdeveloped academic writing and communication skills. These findings suggest the need for preliminary training in group dynamics and collaborative strategies before assigning joint writing projects.

### 3. Friction

Eight students encountered interpersonal tension, often resulting from differences in communication styles, work pace, and commitment levels.

Problems identified:

1. Disagreements on writing style or idea prioritization.
2. Uneven workload contributions.
3. Clashes in leadership or decision-making roles.

Friction is a natural aspect of any collaborative endeavor. The findings reflect how interpersonal conflict and lack of conflict-resolution mechanisms hindered productivity and group cohesion. Although friction can be productive if managed constructively, unaddressed conflict discouraged active participation and created resentment among members. Instructors should facilitate team-building and offer mediation when needed.

### 4. Fairness

Issues of fairness emerged as the most dominant (14 Students) and frequently cited challenge among all participants. The concern that some group members contributed less while receiving the same grade was strongly emphasized.

Problems identified:

1. "Hitchhiking" or free-riding group members.
2. Frustration among high-performing students.
3. Perception of unequal assessment.

Fairness is a persistent challenge in collaborative work, particularly in graded settings. The data support Chisholm's claim that collaborative grading can be perceived as unjust when contributions are imbalanced. This challenge could potentially discourage collaboration if not addressed with appropriate assessment tools, such as peer evaluations or individual reflection components.

#### 2. *What are the most dominant challenges among the four aspects and why*

Among the four categories, Fairness was identified as the most dominant challenge, followed by Inexperience, Friction, and Resistance. Students were particularly concerned about how grades were allocated in group settings and expressed strong preferences for assessment systems that recognize individual input. The predominance of fairness-related concerns suggests a need to rethink evaluation in collaborative writing. Strategies such as peer evaluation rubrics, group contracts, and individual writing logs may help mitigate this concern. Instructors must ensure transparency in expectations and integrate fairness into the grading structure to foster trust in collaborative methods. While collaborative writing offers significant pedagogical benefits including improved language use, critical thinking, and peer learning the challenges highlighted in this study must be addressed through thoughtful instructional design. Key recommendations include:

1. Providing structured training on collaborative writing processes.
2. Establishing clear group roles and norms.

3. Incorporating peer and self-assessment into grading.
4. Offering instructor-mediated conflict resolution strategies.

The insights gained from this study underscore the importance of strategic planning in implementing collaborative writing. Teachers should not assume that students naturally know how to collaborate; instead, they must scaffold the process and assess both group and individual contributions. Proper intervention can transform collaborative writing from a frustrating exercise into a meaningful learning experience.

## CONCLUSION

This study examined the challenges encountered by fifth-semester students at Politeknik Tonggak Equator (Polteq) in collaborative writing guided by Chisholm's framework. The findings revealed that resistance, inexperience, friction, and fairness significantly influenced students' experiences, with fairness identified as the most dominant issue, particularly in relation to unequal workload distribution and perceived inequity in assessment. Friction arose from differences in personality and communication styles, while resistance and inexperience reflected students' limited preparedness for collaborative learning. Regardless of these challenges, collaborative writing was perceived positively for its contribution to improving students' writing skills, confidence, and engagement. This indicates that collaborative writing remains a valuable instructional strategy when appropriately implemented. It is recommended that instructors provide explicit training on collaborative writing practices, assign structured and rotating roles within groups, and implement a balanced assessment system that integrates individual and group performance. Continuous instructor monitoring is also necessary to support group dynamics and minimize conflict. Future research should consider broader educational contexts and employ mixed-method approaches to gain more comprehensive insights into collaborative writing practices.

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