Computer-Supported Collaborative Learning among Students of Different English Proficiency, Cognitive Styles, and Genders

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ABSTRACT--- Research have often suggested that language learners benefited greatly by the collaborative learning. However, it is still unclear whether learners with different English proficiency, cognitive styles and genders profit equally from working in an online collaborative learning environment. Therefore, the aim of this study attempts to explore the effectiveness of an inter-school online collaborative learning on students with heterogeneous English proficiency, cognitive styles and genders. Two intact classes of 78 first-year English and non-English majors from two universities participated in the study. During the one-year online collaborative learning, students were divided into 17 groups, and each group was requested to create an e-book. Instruments of the study included the Group Embedded Figure Test and student individual pre/post essays. Two English professors were requested to evaluate student pre/post essays. The results showed that English majors had significant improvement in the post-essay writing, especially in the scores of the content. Non-English majors also improved in their post-essays, but the improvement was not significant. Moreover, field dependent students wrote better in their post essay, while field independent students did not improve and their post-essay scores even declined. Furthermore, female students progressed more than male students. Some research implications were provided to conclude this study.

Keywords: collaborative learning, English proficiency, cognitive styles, genders

1. INTRODUCTION

Task-Based Language Teaching has been one of the dominant approaches to language learning and teaching (Ellis, 2003; Nunan, 2004; Samuda & Bygate, 2008). Researchers of second language learning have often suggested that the use of technology in task-based collaboration activities could benefit students’ foreign language learning (O’Dowd, 2007; Wilden, 2007). However, studies about inter-school online collaboration and what happens during the actual implementation of the tasks are scant. Moreover, whether the factors such as student English proficiency, cognitive styles, and genders might influence the effectiveness of the inter-school online collaboration have received little attention and thus remain under-explored.

The purpose of this study was to determine if the factors of student English proficiency, cognitive styles, and
be a familiar learning environment for younger generation.

According to Krashen (1982), when the learning tasks are familiar to students, students’ affective filters are lower and they will become less anxious. As a result, they are able to learn better. In our study, we found that English majors, field-dependent students, and females had better learning achievements, which might be explained by the fact that these students, with either higher English proficiency or better social skills, were more accustomed to the collaborative writing tasks. First of all, English majors had more English writing training and practices than non-English majors in school. Writing to peers in English might be rather easy to English majors, but threatening or awkward to non-English majors. Next, since field-dependent and female students tend to have sophisticated social skills, they are more capable of coping with the challenge of interacting with strangers. As a result, they would perceive such a learning experience in a more positive way.

Table 3: Students’ writing achievement difference among two genders (independent t-test)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Score</th>
<th>KUAS (N=44)</th>
<th>NKMU (N=34)</th>
<th>ALL (N=78)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>N</td>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>S.D.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Post-Pre)</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>1.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>essay</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>1.01</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

5. CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, an online collaborative project might be an effective approach to assist college students in their English writing skills, especially for students with intermediate or above English proficiency level, FD cognitive styles students, and female students.

The conclusion needs to be treated with caution, however, since there were some inconsistent or mixed findings in this study. For example, it is still unclear why the positive correlation between individual student essay gain scores and FD students existed among KUAS students only. More research which explores the task-based e-learning in a variety of settings and other factors (e.g., free writing tasks, instructor’s attitude) contributing to the learning outcomes will be needed.

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7. REFERENCES


