

Exploring the Challenges of Small Group Discussions in Eighth-Grade Writing Instruction

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Abstract. English language teaching often incorporates various pedagogical approaches to teach language proficiency. Among these approaches, small group discussions have been one of methods due to their potential for fostering interactive learning environments. However, implementing small group discussions in classroom settings has challenges, particularly for English teacher. This study explores the challenges faced by English teacher when implementing small group discussions especially at SMPN 3 Gunung Bintang Awai, aiming to shed light on the factors influencing the successful integration of this teaching method. The research methodology employed in this study involves a combination of observation and interviews. Observations are conducted during English classes where small group discussions are being implemented. The researcher observes the dynamics of the classroom environment, focusing on the interactions between the teacher and students, as well as identifying any challenges encountered by the teacher in facilitating effective group discussions. Additionally, interviews are conducted with the English teacher to gather insights into their experiences, perceptions, and strategies in implementing small group discussions. After following several steps, including observation, interviews, and data analysis, it was found that there are indeed several challenges faced by English teacher when implementing small group discussions in the eighth grade at SMPN 3 Gunung Bintang Awai. The challenges are; difficulty in forming group, off-topic discussion, classroom management issue, and managing student participation. There are also some suggestions, for the English teachers: should prepare materials for small group discussions in writing classes, create a comfortable, interactive atmosphere, and support students; for students: should cooperate, focus, and participate actively; for future researchers: be able to use this study as a guide for similar research in writing field.

Keywords: Small group discussion, Writing Instructions, English teacher.

1. Introduction

In recent years, there have been major changes in the teaching and learning of English, especially in writing skills. The focus has shifted from the traditional teacher-centered approach to a more student-centered method that fosters active engagement and collaborative learning. This shift emphasizes the importance of critical thinking and creativity, encouraging students to express their ideas more freely.

According to Harmer (2004:87), writing is a thinking process that generates, organizes, and exchanges, one's ideas with the reader. The process approach to writing claims that writing instruction includes "the entire process of writing-invention, drafting, feedback, and revision and not just the product". Therefore how to write a successful paragraph involves the following steps : planning, drafting, revising, and editing a paragraph.

Writing and small group discussions go hand to hand in the process of teaching effective communication skills. While writing enables students to articulate their ideas on paper, small group discussions complement this by fostering collaborative dialogue and collective problem-solving. Through discussions, students refine their writing by exchanging feedback, exploring diverse perspectives, and brainstorming ideas. This integration enhances both the mechanics of writing and critical thinking skills essential for effective communication.

According to Sagala (2007:19), small group discussion is a collaborative communication process in which a small group of people come together to share ideas, opinions, and information about a

specific topic or issue. This includes active participation, open dialogue, and exchange of different perspectives among group members. The purpose of small group discussion is to facilitate joint learning, problem-solving, decision-making, and exploration of different perspectives. Small group discussions often promote the development of critical thinking, effective communication, teamwork, and interpersonal skills. This interactive format allows participants to participate in meaningful discussions, share knowledge, clear doubts, and reach comprehensive conclusions and solutions through mutual agreement.

Small group discussions have the potential to improve students' writing skills; therefore, much attention has been focused on incorporating small group discussions as a teaching method in English classes. Small group discussion has gained a lot of attention as an effective teaching method in English classes as it has the potential to improve students' writing skills. Teachers recognize the value of collaborative learning and engagement and are increasingly using small group discussions to encourage students' writing skills. Small group discussions create a collaborative, interactive environment that gives students the opportunity to express their thoughts, share ideas, receive feedback, and refine their writing through peer interaction. Implementing small group discussions for teaching writing is not without its challenges. These challenges can affect the overall effectiveness of the method and require careful consideration and management by the teacher to ensure that all students benefit from the collaborative learning experience.

The researcher was interested to identify the challenges in implementing small group discussion for learning writing, especially in junior high school, especially in grade eight. Through a brief interview with the English teacher, grade VIII of SMPN 3 Gunung Bintang Awai learned about recount text and narrative text and used small group discussion in several meetings. In fact, teachers faced challenges in implementing small group discussion in teaching writing at SMPN 3 Gunung Bintang Awai. Therefore, this study aims to describe the challenges faced by English teachers in using small group discussions in their instructional practice, especially in writing.

Teacher Challenges in Teaching Writing

According to Moses and Maslawati (2019), there are some challenges faced by English teachers in teaching writing skills. These challenges provide a critical foundation for understanding the obstacles that teachers encounter in the classroom.

- a. Hard to motivate students
Currently, teachers have difficulty in motivating students. It is not because of student misbehavior, but because students are not interested in writing. When students choose to feel uninterested in learning, it is a sign of lack of motivation.
- b. Different levels of students in the classroom
Indeed, the fact that there are different levels of students in the classroom is another challenge for teachers to teach writing. A different level of students will make it challenging for teachers to handle all their levels at the same time. Different levels of writing ability will require teachers to use different approaches. Consequently, teachers find it difficult to plan their lessons and prepare appropriate activities for the students..
- c. Parental indifference
Students who do not get the warmth and affection from their parents will be unsuccessful in their learning process. This is due to the lack of guidance, motivation and support from parents.
- d. Lack of professional
Lack of professional experience is another challenge faced by the teachers. Having a lack of professional experience will lead to stress and tension in teaching.
- e. The multiple roles of the teacher
It depends on the level of previous experience and training. It takes time for teachers to adjust to their students well. Teachers can prepare such as new teaching materials, lesson plans, learning methods, and provide appropriate comments or reflections.
- f. Lack of students' interest

Developing writing skills has always been a challenge. Some students feel bored and uninterested because they need to know many aspects such as punctuation, grammar, vocabulary, spelling and sentence structure to write a good piece.

Research conducted by Almubark (2016) investigated the problems of writing skills that teachers faced in teaching writing skills. Such insights are essential for developing effective strategies to address these challenges: 1). The grammar difficulties faced by the students; 2). Lack of vocabulary among the students; 3). The topics in the textbooks for writing skills are not attractive and persuasive enough; 4). The lack of motivation among the students to improve their writing skill; 5). Strategy among the students in the classroom still does not help the students; 6) Limitation of credit hours; 7) Number of students in each class; 8) Mother tongue interference among student; 9) One of the major obstacles in acquiring a second language is the mother tongue or L1 interference; 10) Lack of regular workshops and training conducted by the school; 11) Teachers' competence in using devices/equipment in learning writing; 12) Intensive writing exercises and teachers' regular assessment; 13) Previous knowledge about the English language writing skills among the students

Small Group Discussion

A small group is a small member of humans, who work together through interaction whose interdependent relationship allows them to achieve a mutual goal. Sagala (2012:20) defines that "group discussion team is more effective if the group consists of 3-4 students, enable student gives their opinions or ideas to other students easily. Moreover, Brown (1988) stated that small group provides opportunities for students' initiation, for face to face, give and take, for practice in negotiation of meaning for extended conversation exchanges. So, the students are more confident to give opinions in each of their small groups. They meet as small gatherings or as breaks out of large meetings and are offered many opportunities for creative, flexible interchange of ideas and lively, meaningful participation. The main point in setting up a discussion is to make sure that each group member participates.

Steps of Implementing Small Group Discussion in Teaching Writing

Implementing small group discussions in a writing class can significantly enhance students' collaborative learning experience and writing skills. According to Malia (2017) here's how you can implement each step mentioned:

- a. Forming Groups and Preparation
 1. Begin by forming small groups of three to four students who work well together.
 2. Allow students to arrange their desks in a small circle to facilitate interaction.
 3. Encourage the groups to plan and make choices about their project independently.
 4. It may be beneficial for each group to elect a chairman to lead the discussion and decision-making process.
- b. Assigning Leaders and Individual Support
 1. Separate individuals from their original groups and assign them as leaders for new groups.
 2. These individuals can provide valuable assistance and guidance to new groups, especially those with less experience.
- c. Setting Well-Defined Tasks
 1. Define clear and achievable tasks for each group to accomplish.
 2. Early reinforcement through successful completion of tasks can enhance student satisfaction and participation.
- d. Working with Each Group
 1. Work with each group individually, systematically exploring the progress of their project.
 2. Sit down with groups to discuss their work, ensuring students feel supported and motivated.
- e. Providing Resource Materials
 1. Offer a variety of resource materials, such as texts, pictures, or realia, to aid in discussions and understanding.
 2. Provide materials for creating visual aids or other presentation tools for group reports.

f. Reporting and Discussion

1. Once groups have completed their tasks, ask them to report and discuss their findings with the class.
2. Encourage brief, lively information-sharing sessions where groups can suggest ideas and insights.

By following these steps, teachers can effectively implement small group discussions as a cooperative learning technique in teaching writing, promoting active participation, collaboration, and meaningful interaction among students.

2. Method

This research used descriptive qualitative research. The researcher analyzes the data to describe the challenges faced by English teacher when implementing small group discussions in teaching writing at the Eighth Grade of SMPN 3 Gunung Bintang Awai. The location of this research is SMPN 3 Gunung Bintang Awai at Jalan Ampah-Muara Teweh, Desa Patas 1, Kec. Gunung Bintang Awai, Kab. Barito Selatan, Prov. Kalimantan Tengah.. The subject of this research is an English Teacher who teach at the Eighth Grade of SMPN 3 Gunung Bintang Awai.

Data Source refers to the origin from which data is collected for research. The researcher used primary data as the main data or the source in this research. Primary data is the data obtained by the researcher as the main data for analysis. In this case, the primary data used by the researcher is observation and interview data

In this case, the researcher observed the Eighth Grade students of SMPN 3 Gunung Bintang Awai to know the activity while joining the class. The observations were conducted three times to ensure thorough and reliable data collection, capturing a comprehensive view of the student activities and behaviors during class.

The other data source that used by the researcher is the interview data. The interviews will be conducted specifically with English teachers at SMPN 3 Gunung Bintang Awai. Research will only be carried out once after observation is made so that the data obtained is more accurate. The interview media used is through the WhatsApp application and will be based on interview guidelines that have been prepared.

3. Result and Discussion

a. The Observation

Based on the results of the observations conducted by the researcher three times, it can be concluded that the English teacher faces challenges in teaching writing using Small Group Discussion. These challenges include:

1. Difficulty in Group Formation
The division of groups by gender makes it difficult for some students to form groups. Additionally, the formation of new groups is more time-consuming due to student absences and the increasing number of students and groups.
2. Off-Topic Discussions
Students discuss with their groups but do not respond to each other and prefer to talk about non-material topics. In their respective groups, they tend to stray from the writing material taught by the teacher. When asked to write the provided material, they become noisy and continue to discuss unrelated topics.
3. Classroom Management Issues
Students become noisy when given writing assignments by the teacher. This increased noise and distraction are exacerbated by the teacher's difficulty in controlling and monitoring the class due to other activities especially in writing with many students in the class.

b. The Interview

Based on the results of the interview conducted by the researcher with English teacher who teach at the Eighth grade of SMPN 3 Gunung Bintang Awai, it can be concluded that the English teacher faces challenges in teaching writing using Small Group Discussion. These challenges include:

1. Difficulty in Group Formation

Noise disruption during group formation, particularly when students move furniture, poses a significant challenge. Additionally, gender-based grouping can lead to unfairness and hinder interaction among students. Consequently, monitoring each group and ensuring balanced participation becomes increasingly difficult amidst these obstacles.

2. Classroom Noise and Off-Topic Discussions

A noisy classroom environment, especially during discussions, significantly distracts from the learning process. Furthermore, off-topic discussions detract from the focus on assigned writing tasks, disrupting the flow of the lesson and hindering students' ability to stay on track with their assignments.

3. Managing Student Participation

Encouraging active participation from standout students while addressing passive ones is a delicate balance that requires careful consideration. Additionally, providing direct assistance to groups based on individual abilities necessitates to ensure that each student's learn effectively.

4. Classroom Management

Difficulty arises in monitoring every group at once, especially during in-class assignments, as the teacher must ensure that each group receives sufficient support and guidance. Balancing the monitoring of multiple groups with attending to other matters becomes demanding, necessitating efficient time management and prioritization of responsibilities.

Based on both the observations and the interview conducted by the researcher, there are evidences that the English teacher at SMPN 3 Gunung Bintang Awai faces significant challenges in teaching writing using Small Group Discussions. These challenges underscore the complexity of the challenges that faced by English teacher when implementing small group discussion.

1. First, the difficulty in group formation arises from various factors such as the division of groups by gender, student absences, and noise disruption during the formation process. This impedes the formation of cohesive groups and hampers the effectiveness of discussions especially in writing that take long time to learn.
2. Second, off-topic discussions present a significant challenge as students tend to stray from the assigned material and engage in unrelated topics during writing activity. This lack of focus detracts from the learning objectives and disrupts the flow of the lesson especially in writing.
3. Third, classroom management issues, including noise disruption and difficulty in controlling the class in forming group until teaching and learning process, further exacerbate the challenges faced by the teacher. Students become noisy during writing assignments or activity, hindering the learning environment, and the teacher's ability to effectively monitor and manage the class is compromised due to other responsibilities.
4. Fourth, managing student participation requires a delicate balance between encouraging active engagement and addressing passive behavior in writing activity such as students does not contributing anything in discussion. Providing individualized support to students based on their abilities adds another layer of complexity to the teaching process.

Discussion

Based on the observations and interviews conducted by the researcher, there are four challenges faced by English teacher when implementing small group discussions to teach writing in the eighth grade at SMPN 3 Gunung Bintang Awai. These challenges highlight the practical difficulties encountered in fostering effective writing skills through group activities.

The first challenge is the difficulty in forming effective groups. This challenge arises because, in small group writing activities, the balance between one group and another significantly impacts the overall success of the exercise. Teachers often face difficulties in forming group due to the uncooperative behavior of some students. For instance, students tend to prefer joining groups with their close friends or with peers of the same gender, rather than mixing with others. Additionally, organizing these groups can be time-consuming as it requires balancing various factors such as skill levels, personalities, and learning styles. The extended time spent on group formation can detract from the actual time available for writing instruction and activities, thereby diminishing the effectiveness of group-based learning in writing. Furthermore, Ayabei, Omulando, and Barasa (2019), states that ingroup work, there is a large discrepancy in participation among different group members. It is

common to find one or two students taking on most of the workload, while other members essentially freeload. This imbalance not only affects the group's productivity but also the learning outcomes for individual students, as freeloaders miss out on the collaborative learning experience. This can lead to conflict and resentment among group members, potentially creating a negative classroom atmosphere. Moreover, students can be very selective when forming groups, leading to an unequal distribution of group members. This selectivity often results in the formation of cliques, which can exclude less popular or less confident students, thereby exacerbating social divisions within the classroom.

The second challenge is managing students who frequently engage in off-topic discussions during writing activities. This issue consistently presents problems for teachers, as unrelated conversations can disrupt the writing process and hinder students' ability to focus on their tasks. Off-topic discussions often lead to increased noise levels, which can create a chaotic classroom environment, making it difficult for students to concentrate on their writing. This challenge is particularly pronounced in small group writing sessions, where students feel more comfortable speaking freely. For teachers, the difficulty lies in balancing natural social interactions with keeping students focused on their writing objectives. Effective management strategies are essential to ensure that discussions remain productive and aligned with the goals of the writing lesson. Similarly, Lehman and Cade (2010) states that off-topic discussions are a common challenge, especially in groups where students are already familiar with each other. This familiarity can make the lesson topic seem less engaging as students may prefer to talk about personal interests instead. To mitigate this, teachers must prepare their materials thoroughly and present them in an engaging manner. Strategies such as setting clear expectations, using interactive activities, and regularly monitoring group discussions can help keep students on track. Additionally, incorporating elements that interest the students within the lesson plan can make the content more relevant and captivating, thereby reducing the tendency for off-topic conversations.

The third challenge is the issue of classroom management, which becomes particularly difficult when students are uncooperative during writing lessons. Effective classroom management in writing instruction involves not only organizing how the class operates but also managing time to ensure each student receives adequate attention. Teachers must balance instructional time, administrative tasks, and individualized support while maintaining a positive and productive environment for writing. With the shift towards student-centered learning models, students have more flexibility and control over their learning. In this context, teachers must be adept at guiding self-directed writing activities, fostering collaboration, and managing potential conflicts or distractions that may arise. Consequently, the complexity of classroom management in teaching writing increases, demanding a higher level of skill and adaptability from teachers to ensure a successful and engaging writing experience for all students. Hasibuan (2019), from this research previous study also find that this difficulty in managing the class come especially from the condition and time . It is proven some students are noisy and walked towards another friend, duration of students permission to go to the toilet too often. There are some reasons why the teacher feels difficulty in managing the class because, some students who don't like English immediately given up and condition of the students not appropriate with time that given in teaching and learning English because each student had different capability in receiving the materials. There are some students participate actively in writing class, but the other didn't. So the teacher repeat explained the materials for the students understand until the students got the point of the lesson.

The fourth and final challenge is managing student participation, a crucial aspect of implementing small group writing activities. The primary goal of using small groups is to foster active student engagement and effective participation in the writing process. However, teachers often find it difficult to manage student participation during these sessions. Some students may not participate effectively due to various reasons, such as being inherently passive in class, relying too much on their group members, or being disruptive. Additionally, the teacher's ability to monitor and support multiple writing groups simultaneously is often limited, making it challenging to ensure that all students are equally involved and benefiting from the activity. Effective strategies and close monitoring are essential to encourage balanced participation and ensure that each student contributes to and learns from the group writing activities. This is also supported by the statement of Aslan and Sahin (2020), who noted that several factors influence student participation in the classroom. Among these are the selection of uninteresting topics by the teacher, the repetitive sequence of activities from the beginning to the end of the lesson, which can lead to student boredom, and the large class size that makes classroom management challenging. Additionally, lengthy class periods can result in student fatigue and decreased

participation. The teacher's teaching methods and strategies also significantly impact student participation, particularly in motivating and encouraging a desire to learn.

From the results of this study, several weaknesses were identified such as the English teacher at SMPN 3 Gunung Bintang Awai experienced difficulties in teaching writing using small group discussions, managing students with diverse backgrounds or characteristics, adjusting teaching techniques, and aligning with the implemented curriculum, among other factors. These weaknesses were specific to the school where the research was conducted. If other studies on the same topic do not find similar weaknesses or findings, it may be due to different research environments or other external factors. This research can also be expanded by further researchers to develop or investigate strategies for addressing the challenges faced by English teachers in implementing small group discussions in teaching writing.

4. Conclusion

On the basis of the research problem, it can be concluded that English teachers at SMPN 3 Gunung Bintang Awai indeed face challenges in implementing small group discussions to teach writing. These challenges consist of four main issues, which are: difficulties in forming groups, discussions that do not fit the topic, classroom management issues, and managing learners. The conclusion is also based on the thorough data analysis conducted by the researcher.

After summarizing the results of the study some of these suggestions are aimed at English teachers who may face similar challenges.

Teachers are recommended to prepare adequate materials for teaching when using small group discussion method in writing class, create a cooperative and interactive classroom atmosphere, pay more attention to the lesson content when teaching attentively for effective learning, and always be the best support for students in class especially in teaching writing.

Then, students are suggested to be more cooperative in learning, both in class and in small groups. They should be able to read the situation to know when is the right time to discuss topics outside the lesson and when to focus more seriously in learning especially in writing class. In addition, students should always be active participants in the classroom to ensure that the learning process is effective.

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