

# The Impact of Collaborative Reflective Journals on Writing Fluency of Iranian EFL Learners

AfsanehAlijani<sup>1</sup>, Hamed Barjesteh<sup>1\*</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Department of English language and Literature, Islamic Azad University, Ayatollah Amoli Branch, Amol, Iran  
Email: knasr558@gmail.com

<sup>1</sup>Department of English language and Literature, Islamic Azad University, Ayatollah Amoli Branch, Amol, Iran

\*Corresponding author's email: ha\_bar77@yahoo.com

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## ABSTRACT

*The current research intended to investigate the effect of writing with collaboration on the fluency of foreign language students in descriptive writing performance. For this purpose, a Nelson Proficiency Test (NPT) was administered to 44 female foreign language students, and 30 homogenous intermediate-level students were selected. Afterward, they were categorized into two groups of treatment (reflective group) of 20 students doing pair works and control group (non-reflective group) of 10 learners, each producing a written text individually. The fluency of their writing tasks was determined through word count, clauses and T-units. The data were then analyzed using paired sample t-test, and it was observed that pair work had an effect on and improved the quality of writing performance of the learners. The findings also revealed that, there was a noticeable difference in the learners' ability to write long and fluent drafts before and after reflective journal writing.*

**KEY WORDS:** Collaborative; Pair work; Reflective Journal; Writing; Writing Fluency

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## INTRODUCTION

Writing is a complex process by which concepts are formed and communicated. It is one of the media of human interaction that symbolizes language via recording or inscription of symbols and signs. As a major ability to communicate, writing is considered a distinctive skill in the stages of learning a foreign language (Chastain, 1988). It is probable that improving writing skill is not considered as one objective of all language programs. However, students' needs at the elementary level have not yet become specialized, and writing is generally involved as one language skill to be taught. In advanced composition programs, the emphasis is primarily on writing as communication of ideas, although improving language system knowledge is one of the secondary products of writing to elaborate on one's concepts. In the current advanced world, the skill to write successfully in English comes to be more and more important. From the time when making interaction through language has turned out to be increasingly important, writing is celebrated as the main skill for different excuses in educational and professional environment. Writing is actually playing an important role in an individual's personal and professional life. As a result, as stated by Raimes (1987), it has become one of the main necessities in the programs for English for Academic purposes (EAP) in addition to English for General Purposes (EGP).

Collaborative action is a working exercise through which individual collaborate to achieve a mutual goal in gaining professional advantage. It empowers learners to collaborate to attain a mutual objective, and it is the activity of doing a task with someone to produce a written product. Collaborative action at the conceptual level comprises becoming aware, motivated, self-synchronized, as well as having willingness to participate, mediate, reflect, and engage in the assigned writing task.

In one other study by Roschelle and Teasley (1995), collaboration is defined as an organized, concurrent action as a result of continuous effort to shape and preserve a common notion of an issue. It is also believed by Johnson and Johnson (1994) that the best learning happens in a more learner-centered, collaborative learning context in comparison with personal and competitive educational environment. Students take part enthusiastically in a cooperative learning setting and build their language knowledge by making interaction with other students. Per se, Boud (2001) has presented the term peer-learning as an operational strategy for sets of learners to learn from and with each other.

As emphasized by Swain (2001), the tasks with collaborative activities are interactive tasks in a way that they engage students in making comprehension, manipulation, production, or interaction in L2 whilst their focus is mainly on meaning instead of form. But in collaborative activities, learners are also required to do pair and group works in order to generate one mutually written draft. The cooperative writing tasks urge students to think over

language, have discussion on the used language, and have collaboration to solve the language problems they come across.

Watanabe and Swain (2007), considering the research of Storch (2002) on collaborative group activity, examined the forms of collaboration that happen among peer learners and the link of these to language education. The results of the study showed that the learners in peer groups made difference in their L2 proficiency. In another study, consistent with the research of Swain (2007), the students were asked to write a composition in peer group form (the pre-test), and were passed a draft with reformulations so as to compare with their own drafts, and finally rewrite their drafts independently (the post-test). This type of feedback resulted in learning since accurate variations occurred in the original drafts of the learners. The findings also showed that the difference in language ability level in peer groups had insignificant effect on the writing performance in post-test but that the amount of involvement of the learners in collaborative activities had significant effect on their writing performance.

It was also revealed by Swain (1995) and Ohata (1999) that in a collaborative educational setting, learners are empowered to help one another by supporting and providing them with expert tasks further than their present level of linguistic knowledge and ability and further than what they can accomplish without any help. Scaffolding is defined as the procedure through which one learner helps another learner to accomplish a task that they cannot perform individually. It is an interactive activity which assists create a zone of proximal development (ZPD), and eventually, scaffolding is considered with regard to what it is thought to construct the zone of proximal development.

Dobao (2012) claims that pair writing activities provide students with a chance to have collaboration to solve their language issues and problems, jointly construct new language awareness and generate written texts with more linguistic accuracy. It provides evidence of the advantages of collaboration in producing a written work, and through which offering further support for the application of collaborative tasks in second language educational environment. Hence, collaborative activity, in both pair-group and small-group forms led to better syntactic and semantic correctness. Students involved in group works had more focus on language and experienced an efficient learning in which they were able to solve language problems successfully in comparison with the students who were doing pair works.

Fluency is considered as an indispensable element in developing writing skill. Conducting research on writing fluency is crucial to scholars and instructors who are willing to facilitate the production of learners' written texts and the assessment of their writing products. It is also indicated by Casanave (2004) in her book that writing fluency is related to the ability of learners to generate a lot of language (or to read) without too much hesitations, hinders, and disruptions.

Therefore writing, as a method of elaborating on concepts and ideas, reflecting, and understanding subject matters should be considered as a necessary instrument for learning language in addition to interaction (Tynjala, Mason, & Lonka, 2001; Weigle, 2002). It is also stated by Hudelson (1988) that second language students could learn the ways L2 works by generating language output. Based on Hinkle and Fotos (2002), the language output plays role in second language learning equal to language input, since one needs to be comprehended, while being able to comprehend the others whilst interacting.

Hence, as stated by Zeng (2005), it is mainly observed that learning a language cannot be accomplished without considering and working on writing skill as one of the four skill of any language; however, it has long been overlooked and less emphasis has been put on teaching and practicing writing in language learning contexts. Whether learners need to learn how to express themselves in writing actually depends upon the individual students and their goals. Adequate language knowledge is needed for the learners to enable them to generate and make ideas and notions so as to generate a written product. Using peer-group strategies in writing class could be more useful than group-work strategies and works, as two learners could do pair jobs better than individual activities, and it is much easier for them to have consensus on their written task and production. Though the application of peer-group activities is convincingly encouraged in ESL/EFL contexts, they are not observed to be much used in the EFL context of Iran, and despite the numerous studies conducted in ESL/EFL context about teaching writing, dealing with this skill has always been one of the most problematic challenges for EFL teachers and learners. One of the problems lots of EFL students encounter while being required to write a composition is the quantity or amount of their writing and their writing experience. Because of the difficulties that most EFL students encounter when having individual writing experience, it looks to be more useful to involve the students in pair-writing activities. Thus, this study was an attempt to discover if peer-group writing activities and peer support can assist the students to lessen their anxiety and stressful condition and develop their writing abilities. It examined if peer-group practice is helpful to make improvement in students' writing fluency.

Scrutinizing the relevant review of literature, this research wanted to clarify the issues related to some of the controversial parts of the previous studies such as the effect of collaborative writing on writing fluency and also different writing components involving content, organization, language, vocabulary, and mechanics. Involving participants at intermediate level, this investigation studies the effect of collaborative writing in this level of proficiency which is the center of debate in the aforementioned literature. Also for expanding the literature of the effect of collaborative writing on EFL learners, this study was conducted. To comply with the objective of the present study, this paper addresses the following questions:

- Q1. Does collaborative working influence EFL learners' writing fluency in the descriptive writing tasks?  
Q2. Is there any significant difference in the learners' length of writing fluency before and after reflective journal project in terms of working individually and collaboratively?

### **PARTICIPANTS**

The sample of the current research was selected from among the Iranian EFL learners taking English course in Nasr Zabangostar Institute of Babol city (Iran). A Nelson Proficiency Test was administered to select the sample comprising 30 female EFL learners in intermediate proficiency level. This research was conducted in summer 2015. The age of the participants was within the range of 16-25. The participants were assigned into two groups; namely, reflective and non-reflective. From the 30 intermediate-level students selected based on the placement test, 10 were randomly assigned into non-reflective group while the other 20 learners were assigned into served a reflective group. Doubling the size of reflective group was because of the pair writing activities of the learners, as a single writing draft was composed by two learners. As a result, the quantity of writing drafts rather than the number of participants was considered as the available sample.

### **INSTRUMENTS**

The first research tool applied in this research was Nelson Proficiency Test. There was a pretest-posttest design in this research. For this purpose, two pieces of writing were required. In the first session of the program the pretest was administrated. In this session students were required to write one paragraph on the topic of "Healthy food and Junk food". The topic was the same for both the reflective and the non-reflective groups. The allotted time for writing of this 150 (at least) word was 30 minutes. In the 12<sup>th</sup> session the posttest was run. The same procedure of the pretest was run in the both groups. At that time, learners were required to write one paragraph with at least 150 words on the topic of "Describe the bad effect of gossiping ". In the posttest time, learners were required to write their composition and reflective journal in 30 minutes. Afterwards, 20 written drafts, 10 of which were produced by 10 individuals and another 10 by 20 learners doing pair works were rated. At the end, the first and the last writings were scanned concerning fluency. The fluency and its sub-measures (words, clauses, and T-units) in both pre-test and post-test compared to each other.

### **PROCEDURE**

This study was accomplished in twelve sessions, two sessions a week. Each session prolonged one and a half hours. Prior to the study, an NPT was administered for homogenizing the learners. It was administrated among Forty-four students out of which thirty participants were selected for the study. They were divided into two groups and assigned into two classes: reflective group and non-reflective group. Non-reflective group comprised 10 students who were required to write a paragraph about "Healthy food and Junk food" independently. But the 20 learners of reflective group were asked to write a reflective journal in pairs about the same topic. Both classes had the chance to enjoy the same syllabus in terms of different elements such as time, duration of each session, the materials, content and the exercise. The only difference lies on the reflective group in which learners went through writing task collaboratively. However the non-reflective group worked on the assigned activities individually. In reflective group, the principles of collaborative writing were in process of the syllabus. Each session, first the instructor taught new points that was related to the topic and discussed the materials. It took 45 minutes. They could write in pairs reflectively. They were correspondingly asked to work on the topics with their group members. They were allotted 45 minutes to work on the topic and wrote about it. During that period, learners had a chance to talk about the topic with their peers. They negotiated on a number of factors such as grammatical points, vocabulary load, and punctuation correction. During the time of doing collaboration tasks among learners, the instructor scaffolded them any necessary points about the writing procedures. Learners should cover the task with 40 minutes. Next they were required to review their writings in five minutes. At the end of the class, the learners were asked to write a topic for homework assignment. Next session, the researcher hand out the papers with some notes provided as direct feedback.

In non-reflective group, the same procedure followed. They worked individually. In the 12<sup>th</sup> session a post-test were administered. It was a composition writing task in which learners were bounded to write papers about a topic "Describe the bad effect of gossiping" with at least 150 words. Learners in the both groups were allotted 30 minutes to compose their writing. The pre-test and post-test papers among both groups were collected and prepared for the scoring phase. In this phase of the study the writing scale were used and different writing components of the students' writing were assessed. For the matter of inter-rater reliability, the writing papers were rated by two assessors according to the rating scale. Then for measuring the fluency of pre-test and post-test writing tasks, researcher counted the amount of words and T-Unit and clauses in all of the writing tasks. At the next stage, the amount of fluency in both groups measured. The independent samples t-test was implemented to find an answer for the research question empirically about fluency.

## RESULTS

### THE ANALYSIS FOR THE FIRST RESEARCH QUESTION

The first research question attempted to see whether collaborative working influences EFL learners' writing fluency in the descriptive writing tasks or not. Table 1 reflects that the mean and standard deviation of three sub-measures of fluency scores for the pair and individual groups do not highly differ.

**Table1.** Descriptive statistics for two group's fluency sub-measure scores on the pre-test of writing

Fluency Sub-measure	Group	N	Mean	SD	Std. Error Mean
Word	Pair	10	137.20	31.905	10.089
	Individual	10	150.70	23.123	7.312
T-unit	Pair	10	18.80	4.315	1.365
	Individual	10	19.80	4.638	1.467
Clause	Pair	10	27.40	5.254	1.661
	Individual	10	28.20	4.917	1.555

**Table2.** Independent samples t-test for fluency sub-measure scores on the pre-test of writing

Sub-measure	Levene's Test for Variances		T-test for Means			
	F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Diff.
Word	.670	.424	-1.083	18	.293	-13.500
T-unit	.118	.735	-.499	18	.624	-1.000
Clause	.015	.905	-.352	18	.729	-.800

According to the table 2, the assumption of equal of variances was met for all three sub-measures (*Sig.* > .05). Independent *t*-test results, revealed that there was not any statistically significant difference in all the three sub-measures of *word* ( $t(18) = 1.08, p > .05$ ), *T-unit* ( $t(18) = .49, p > .05$ ), and *clause* ( $t(18) = .35, p > .05$ ).

**Table3.** Descriptive statistics for fluency scores on the pre-test of writing

	Group	N	Mean	SD	Std. Error Mean
Fluency (pre-test)	Pair	10	7.830	2.991	.945
	Individual	10	8.028	2.208	.698

Based on table3, the mean and standard deviation of fluency scores are not dramatically different for the pair group and individual group on the pre-test of writing.

**Table4.** Independent samples t-test for fluency scores on the pre-test of writing

Levene's Test for Variances	T-test for Means					
	F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Diff.
Fluency (Pre-test)	1.515	.234	-.168	18	.868	-.19800

Table 4 summarizes the results of independent *t*-test that was conducted to make a comparison between the two groups' fluency scores on the pre-test. The assumption of equal of variances was met (*Sig.* > .05). Independent *t*-test (Table 4.6), failed to find any statistically significant difference in fluency scores ( $t(18) = .16, p = .86, p > .05$ ) for the pair group ( $\bar{x} = 7.83$ ) and individual group ( $\bar{x} = 8.02$ ).

**Table5.** Descriptive statistics for two groups' fluency sub-measure scores on the post-test of writing

Fluency Sub-Measure	Group	N	Mean	SD	Std. Error Mean
Word	Pair	10	195.00	29.706	9.394
	Individual	10	191.00	19.442	6.148
T-unit	Pair	10	22.30	5.599	1.770
	Individual	10	21.90	4.383	1.386
Clause	Pair	10	34.40	5.680	1.796
	Individual	10	33.30	5.143	1.627

Table 5 shows that the mean and standard deviation of three sub-measures of fluency scores are not dramatically different for the pair and individual groups. In fact the mean and standard deviation of *word* for pair group ( $\bar{x} = 195.00, SD = 29.70$ ) and (individual group,  $\bar{x} = 191.00, SD = 19.44$ ) are not much different.

**Table6.** Independent samples t-test for fluency sub-measure scores on the post-test of writing

Levene's Test for Variances	T-test for Means					
	F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Diff.
Word	2.861	.108	.356	18	.726	4.000
T-unit	.648	.431	.178	18	.861	.400
Clause	.077	.784	.454	18	.655	1.100

A quick look at Table 6 reveals that we enjoyed the assumption of equal of variances since the significance level associated with Levene's test is greater than .05. T-value and significance level for independent samples *t*-test (Table 4.8) are indicative of no significant difference in all the three sub-measures of fluency for the pair and individual group.

**Table7.Descriptive statistics for fluency scores on the post-test of writing**

Measure	Group	N	Mean	SD	Std. Error Mean
Fluency (post-test)	Pair	10	9.248	2.679	.847
	Individual	10	9.022	1.772	.5604

According to Table7, the mean and standard deviation for the pair group ( $\bar{x} = 9.24$ ,  $SD = 2.67$ ) and individual group ( $\bar{x} = 9.02$ ,  $SD = 1.77$ ) are not dramatically different on the post-test of Writing.

**Table8.Independent samples t-test for fluency scores on the post-test of writing**

Measure	Levene's Test for Variances		T-test for Means			
	F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Diff.
Fluency (Post-test)	2.849	.109	.222	18	.826	.22600

Table 8 indicates that the assumption of equal of variances was not violated (*Sig.* for Levee's test > .05). Independent *t*-test results revealed that there was not any statistically significant difference in *fluency* scores ( $t(18) = .22$ ,  $p = .82$   $p > .05$ ) for the pair group ( $\bar{x} = 9.24$ ) and individual group ( $\bar{x} = 9.02$ ); accordingly the hypothesis of the study that states, "Collaborative working does not influence EFL learners' writing fluency in the descriptive writing tasks." is retained. In other words, it was uncovered that collaborative working does not influence EFL learners' writing fluency in the descriptive writing tasks.

#### ANALYSIS OF THE SECOND RESEARCH QUESTION

The purpose of the second research question was to examine whether there is any significant difference in the learners' length of writing fluency before and after reflective journal project in terms of working individually and collaboratively. An Independent sample *t*-test was run to answer this research question comparing the fluency and its sub-measure scores obtained on the pre-test to post-test in each group. We applied parametric analysis of paired sample *t*-test since all the sets of scores met the assumptions of parametric analysis; the results of which are set forth in Table 9.

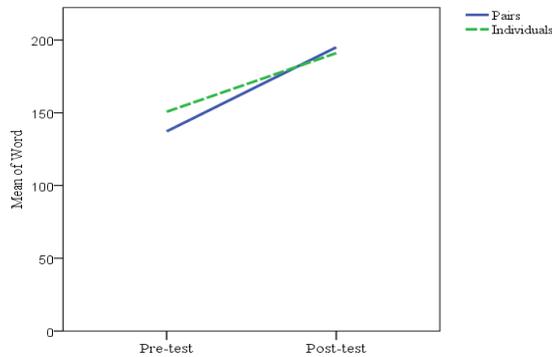
**Table9.Pair samples t-test for pre-test and post-test of two group's fluency and its sub-measure scores**

Measure	Group	Mean	SD	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
Word	Pair	57.800	17.113	10.681	9	.000
	Individual	40.300	20.407	6.245	9	.000
T-unit	Pair	3.500	2.121	5.217	9	.001
	Individual	2.100	1.449	4.583	9	.001
Clause	Pair	7.000	1.155	19.170	9	.000
	Individual	5.100	1.101	14.655	9	.000
Fluency	Pair	1.41800	.78610	5.704	9	.000
	Individual	.99400	.86158	3.648	9	.005

Table 9 indicated that there is a statistically significant difference in fluency scores from the pre-test to the post-test in pair group ( $t(9) = 5.70$ ,  $p < .05$ ) and individual group ( $t(9) = 3.64$ ,  $p < .05$ ). In fact, the mean of fluency have increased noticeably from the pre-test to the post-test in the two groups; Therefore, we can claim that there is a significant difference in the learners' length of writing fluency before and after reflective journal project in terms of working individually and collaboratively.

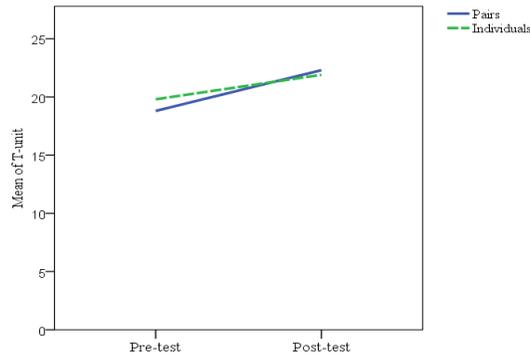
In addition, this table indicates that there is a statistically significant increase in all three sub-measure scores of writing fluency in terms of word, T-unit, and clause from the pre-test to the post-test in pair group ( $p < .05$ ) and individual group ( $p < .05$ ).

Figure 1 below illustrates that there was an increasing order in the average number of words per text for both groups. Individuals used more words on the pre-test, but pairs applied more words on the post-test. Overall, the variance between the two groups for improvement rate in the application of words was not evident.



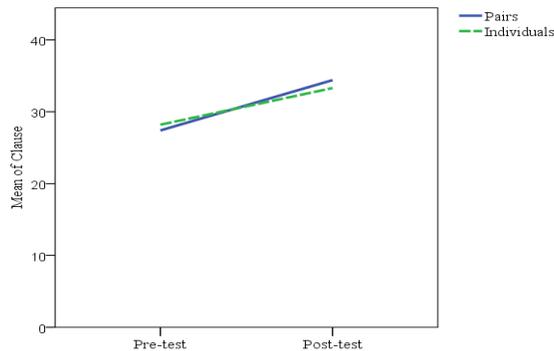
*Figure 1.* Improvement in word use in both pre-test and post-test

Figure 2 below is the demonstration of employing T-units on the pre-test and post-test writings generated by pairs and individuals and. The average number of T-units was more on the post-test, which reveals a rising movement in the chart. Taking into account the amount of improvement, the pair group had made better improvement than the individual group concerning the use of T-unit.



*Figure 2.* Improvement in T-unit use in both pre-test and post-test

As is shown in Figure 3, the average number of clauses per text on the pre-test of writing by pair groups and individual writers was nearly the same. While progress could be observed in both groups, the rate of improvement in the application of clauses was greater for pairs than individual learners, but this difference was not significant.



*Figures 3.* Improvement in clause use in both pre-test and post-test

As it is obvious in Figure 4, there was a rising trend in the mean of fluency in writing per text for both groups. The individual group was a bit more fluent on the pre-test; nonetheless, pairs were a bit more fluent on the

post-test. Generally, the improvement rate differed insignificantly between the two groups concerning their writing fluency.

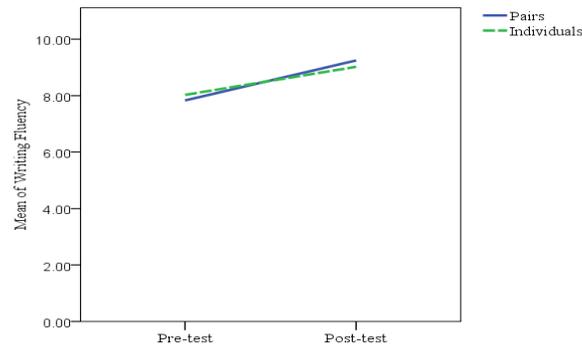


Figure 4. Improvement in writing fluency in both pre-test and post-test

### DISCUSSION

The main objective of this research was to examine the impact of collaborative working on the writing fluency. The result of the data analysis showed that the mean and standard deviation of three sub-measures of fluency scores for the pair and individual groups do not highly differ. Independent *t*-test results showed that there was not any statistically significant difference in all the three sub-measures of fluency.

The results showed that there was not any statistically significant difference in fluency of pair group and individual group; accordingly the hypothesis of the study, that states, “Collaborative working has no significant impact on the amount of improvement in the fluency of descriptive writing tasks” is retained. In other words it was covered that pair work does not influence the level of improvement in the fluency of writing tasks. This finding is consistent with the findings of the study of Wigglesworth and Storch (2009) in terms of writing assessment of the learners. They found that the two groups had mainly similar writing performance regarding all measures of fluency. Storch (2007) has also examined the advantages of writing in pair by making a comparison between the texts written by pairs contrasted with those written by individual writers. The research was performed in four ESL classes. The learners in class A accomplished their writing task with their peers while the learners in class B accomplished their tasks in individual format. Group C and Group D, on the other hand, were required to make an option from among the two conditions of doing tasks individually or in pairs in collaboration with one other learner. The collected data had been audio-recorded and transcribed for additional examination. An accurate analysis of the edited texts revealed that there was not any significant difference regarding the accuracy of the accomplished tasks either in individual or collaborative forms. The investigation of the transcribed data in the group with collaborative activities showed that the majority of pair workers were actively involved in their choice of appropriate words or vocabulary. Hence the results revealed that group work did not influence the fluency of learners in performing their writing tasks. However, it offered the second language students the chance to learn and use the second language. In another consistent study, Wigglesworth and Storch (2009) investigated the benefits of writing in pair in ESL contexts among 48 peer-groups of writing applying several procedures. They made comparison and contrast between the writing drafts written by students doing pair works and the ones doing their writing tasks individually through some measures such as examining the fluency, complexity, and accuracy of the written drafts. The sample learners were also required to write an argumentative essay where they were supposed to discuss the pros and cons of exam-based writing evaluation.

Thus, 48 pairs of learners in addition to 48 individual learners performed the writing assignments. The findings of the study showed that collaborative writing activities had constructive impact on accuracy, but not any effect on complexity or fluency. Therefore, working collaboratively has not influenced the fluency of the writing drafts.

With regard to the second research question which was “Is there any significant difference in the learners’ length of writing fluency before and after reflective journal project in terms of working individually and collaboratively?” when administrating pre-test and post-test; each of those scores obtained with the help of writing fluency scale, the mean of fluency have increased noticeably from the pre-test to the post-test in the two groups; hence, the second null hypothesis that says, “There is no significant difference in the learners’ length of writing fluency before and after reflective journal project in terms of working individually and collaboratively” is rejected. Therefore, we can claim

that there is a significant difference in the learners' length of writing fluency before and after reflective journal project in terms of working individually and collaboratively. This finding supported the idea that, as stated by Holmes and Moulton (1997), ESL learners use journal writing to make development in their writing fluency. Furthermore, the learners were observed to admit that their journal writing tasks in class environment assisted them experience a better learning of the course content. The learners were also documented to find time to examine their major beliefs and expectations about writing that could act as hindrance stopping their writing activities. One other study conducted by Holmes and Moulton (1997), explored the attitudes of L2 university learners regarding applying dialogue journal writing as a language learning strategy. 21 learners in a southwestern U.S. university participated in the research. The collection of data was performed through the learners' dialogue journal entries and performed interviews. The learners kept dialogue journals for 15 weeks, then stated that their motivation to write and writing fluency were both raised.

To conclude, this research was an attempt to examine the influence of collaborative working on the fluency of writing drafts composed by Iranian intermediate-level students. The results implied that though an increasing development was observed in the application of clauses and T-units by pair-group members, the fluency of the written drafts in pair was not significantly improved as compared with the writing fluency of individual writers. However, the length of fluency increased before and after reflective journal project in terms of working individually and collaboratively.

### CONCLUSION

On the whole, based on the findings, it was concluded that while asking the EFL students to write in pair might not create any effect on their writing fluency all together, it may create significant effect on the length of writing fluency. Since writing fluency is one very important writing trait which is required for learner to produce English essays in EFL academic setting, and as in EFL contexts, there are a large number of learners in the class environment, the application of peer scaffolding strategies could be a useful and precious advantage for EFL instructors. This research could also provide some suggestions for those scholars who are willing to develop an inclusive model for the process of second language writing. In almost every writing class setting, instructors take on the responsibility of incorporating a reflective journal project so as to improve second language learners' writing confidence and decrease their writing anxiety. It is crucial for EFL instructors to provide a situation for students to represent and reflect their abilities. Learners take advantage of the findings of this research, as well, since being involved in collaborative writing activities results in a sense of responsibility for the writing improvement of their peer-group members.

### CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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