



## ORIGINAL RESEARCH REVIEW

### The Effect of Cooperative Learning on EFL Students' Acquisition of the Writing Skill

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Cooperative learning is a relatively recent teaching strategy in the field of foreign language teaching. It is applicable and can be implemented with different measures. The present study, hence, attempts to examine the effect of cooperative learning represented in the learning together model on EFL students' opportunities for acquiring the writing skill. The research methodology used in this study is experimental. It is carried out through an experiment in which a pre-test and a post-test are used. The participants in this study are two groups of third year students at the teachers' training school of Constantine. The groups have been randomly assigned; one served as the experimental group and the other served as the control group. The findings demonstrate that EFL students are able to develop their writing skills through the integration of cooperative learning strategy. The results also demonstrate that the experimental group performs better than the control group in the post-test assignment. Accordingly, the results of this study may serve as a foundation for further research on the effect of cooperative learning on the other language skills – speaking, listening and writing.

**Keywords:** Cooperative Learning Strategy, Writing Skill, EFL Students, Learning Together Model.

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**Introduction**

The field of foreign language teaching has witnessed the emergence of varied teaching methods such as the grammar translation method and the direct method. These methods are purely teacher-centered in that the instructor is the center of the class. The role of the students is marginal in the sense that the students are treated as passive containers of knowledge. Thus, the dissatisfaction with these teaching methods has led to the foundation of new teaching methods and strategies. Cooperative learning is a recent teaching strategy where a shift of focus from teacher centeredness towards student centeredness is now introduced in foreign language class. Thus, as far as EFL students are concerned, writing is said to be a basic skill in the learning of foreign languages. It is a way of communication through which EFL students express themselves and transmit their ideas and thoughts freely. Hence, the present research work attempts to investigate the effect of learning how to write adequately through the use of cooperative learning strategy as opposed to the traditional methods of teaching writing English as a foreign language.

**Literature Review**

Reaching a good language proficiency level is essential in foreign language learning. Hence, different teaching methods are used to achieve this goal. Researchers now call for the use of cooperative language learning as a strategy to teach foreign languages. However, cooperative learning is not being used on a wide scope by language teachers. This is probably due to the fact that it still not that known among teachers of foreign languages. Yet, a number of researchers have carried out some studies to stand on the effects of cooperative learning on foreign language learners.

Liang (2002) carried out a quasi-experimental study concerned with implementing cooperative learning in the domain of teaching English as a foreign language: process and effects. This study aims at investigating the effects of cooperative learning on EFL junior high school learners. The researcher used a pre test- post test group research design. The sample population was from two classes of the first year junior high school in Taiwan. Seventy students were involved in the study. The experimental group was taught by means of the use of cooperative learning, whereas the control group was taught by the use of grammar translation method. The study finds out that cooperative learning helped significantly to enhance the junior high school learners' oral communicative competence and their motivation toward learning English. The researcher also calls for further future research on this specific teaching strategy.

Khan (2008) carried out an experimental study to evaluate the effectiveness of cooperative learning versus traditional learning method. He selected 128 subjects of Governments Comprehensive Boys High School divided into experimental and control groups, 64 students per each group. The control group was taught by the use of traditional method, whereas, the experimental group was taught by the use of cooperative learning strategy. The results showed that cooperative learning method did have a beneficial effect on the overall performance.

### **Objectives of the Study**

The main objective of the present research is to investigate the effect of learning together model of cooperative learning on EFL students writing abilities. To reach the above mentioned objective, the study in hand addresses the following research question:

**Q:** How can EFL students at Constantine 3 University improve their writing skills through the use of learning together model of cooperative learning?

For the sake of answering the above stated research question, it has been hypothesized that: if learning together model of cooperative learning was implemented the right way, EFL students would be able to enhance their writing proficiency level. Thus, this research work aims to dig deeply into the possible effects of cooperative learning.

### **Cooperative Learning**

Cooperative learning is a recent teaching method which is widely researched by scholars in the field of foreign language teaching. Thus, varied definitions of the term are introduced by different linguists. Cooperative learning is said to be a process which is meant for the purpose of facilitating the achievement of a specific final product through people working together in small groups.

Johnson & Johnson (1999) introduce cooperative learning as being "the instructional use of small groups so that students work together to maximize their own and each other's learning" (p.5). This definition implies that students are responsible for their proper learning as well as the learning of their mates in the cooperative learning groups. Similarly, Slavin (1996) states that cooperative learning is found to be that effective instructional method which relies on the exchange of information between pairs or cooperative group members where every learner is said to be responsible for his/her own learning as well as that of the whole group. In his turn, Williams (2002) sees cooperative learning as being a highly structured teaching method which is based on the idea that children best learn through interaction with their peers.

### **Basic Elements of Cooperative Learning**

Linguists and scholars searched in the field of cooperative learning advanced different essential elements of cooperative learning. Holliday (2005) introduces five basic elements of cooperative learning which are: (a) positive interdependence (b) face-to-face interaction (c) individual accountability (d) interpersonal and small group skills (e) group processing.

- a. **Positive Interdependence:** this element of cooperative learning implies that "students must feel that they need each other in order to complete the group's task, that they sink or swim together" (Holliday 2005, p.5). positive interdependence is said to be the essence of cooperative learning in which each group member is linked to the other members in the cooperative group. Thus, students are ready to sink or swim together.
- b. **Face-to-Face Interaction:** small group interaction is another feature of cooperative learning. "beneficial educational outcomes are due to the interaction patterns and verbal exchanges that take

place among students in carefully structured cooperative learning groups" (Holliday 2005, p.5)

- c. **Individual Accountability:** in cooperative learning, every group member is said to be accountable and responsible for the success of the whole group. Each student in the group need to learn the material and share knowledge with the other group members. "some ways of structuring individual accountability are by giving each group member an individual exam or by randomly selecting one member to give an answer for the entire group" (Holliday 2005, p.5)
- d. **Interpersonal and Small Group Skills:** according to Holliday (2005), students learned cooperative skills in the school. The teacher is responsible for teaching them the cooperative skills such as decision-making and conflict management skill. Thus, it is necessary in the part of the teacher to supply students with motivation in order to use these skills appropriately and though the groups will function effiently.
- e. **Group Processing:** by processing, it is meant providing students with time and procedures for the sake of analysing the extent to which their groups are functioning, besides measuring the extent to which students use the necessary cooperative skills. That is, the group processing is mainly meant for describing whether the member actions were helpful or unhelpful; hence, on this basis students make decisions about what actions to continue or change.

#### **Learning Together**

The learning together strategy is developed by David and Roger Johnson in 1975. It engages students in heterogeneous groups (diverse in term of achievement, gender, race and ethnicity) composed of four to five members. Rewards are based on the group achievement (product), that is to say, students' acceptance of working together as a group and how well they achieve as a team. The Johnson's learning together model of cooperative learning may be the most widely used cooperative strategy (Slavin 1996, Tan et al 2006). For Slavin (1985), the learning together method is the nearest model towards pure cooperation. He argues that "students work in small groups to complete a single worksheet, for which the group receives praise and recognition. This method emphasizes 1, training students to be good group members and 2, continuous evaluation of group functioning by the group members" (p.8).

#### **Writing Skill**

Writing is one of the four language skills which is of core importance in foreign language learning. It is a complicated and a difficult skill to be mastered by EFL students. Writing is a productive skill which requires the integration of a number of sub-skills such as vocabulary and grammar. Writing is defined by Weigle (2002) as being "an act that takes place within a context that accomplishes a particular purpose, and that is appropriately shaped for its intended audience" (p.19). This definition implies that writing is a way of communication. According to Collins

(2003), writing is defined as being a group of letters or symbols written on a surface and which serves as a means of communication. In his turn, Hyland (2003) sees writing as a system of rules which govern a group of signs and symbols and which is used as a means of communication by individuals.

Accordingly, all the aforementioned definitions of writing agree on the fact that writing is considered as a means of communication. Writing is a highly complex mental process which involves the integration of a variety of skills. It is said to be a difficult skill to be mastered by EFL students.

**Method**

**Design of the Study**

In the present study, an experimental research method is used. It consists of pre-test and post-test. In this study cooperative learning is implemented within the experimental group through the Learning Together Model in what is known by the treatment perio; however, the control group was taught using the traditional teaching method.

**Participants**

The study has been carried out at the training school of teachers - Constantine 3 University. The subjects of the study are two third year groups of EFL students. The groups have been randomly assigned into experimental (26 students) and control (25 students). In total, the study involves 51 students.

**Data Collection and Analysis**

The data of the study have been collected through the use of Learning Together model of cooperative learning with the experimental group during the writing sessions. The researcher set the subjects into groups of three or four students to work on a specific topic. At the end of the session the researcher collects the cooperative groups' productions. In contrast, the control group students have been taught by the use of the traditional method where the subject students worked individually. Both groups' productions (essays) have been analysed and assessed.

**Findings and Discussion**

For the sake of investigating possible effects of cooperative learning method and traditional teaching method on the students' writing performance; a pre-test and post-test experiment has been designed. It has been carried out with both experimental and control groups. The difference between the performance of both groups is now compared.

**Table 1: pre-test results in regard to the students' writing performance.**

Group	N	M	SD	MD	T value
Exp.	26	9.32	1.81	0.13	0.24
Control	25	9.19	1.93		

Table 1 exhibits the results obtained from the analysis of the experimental and control group scores in the pre-test assignment. It has been noticed that the mean score of the experimental group is 9.32, whereas, the mean score of the control group is 9.19, with a mean difference estimated by 0.13. Thus, by the comparison of the results of the two groups, it has been found that the scores are very close to each other. Accordingly, it can be deduced that there exists no significant difference

between the mean scores of both groups. That is the students' level at the beginning was almost equal.

**Table 2: post-test results in regard to the students writing performance**

Group	N	M	SD	MD	T value
Exp.	26	12.40	1.51	1.40	2.88
Control	25	11	1.94		

Table 2 reflects the difference between writing post-test scores of experimental and control groups. The mean score of the experimental group is estimated by 12.40; however, the mean score of the control group is 11 with a mean difference estimated by 1.40. From the obtained results, it has been revealed that there is a significant difference between the mean scores of the experimental and control groups, and, hence, it can be clearly noticed that the learning together model of cooperative learning integrated in the experimental group has positive and higher effect on the students' writing abilities when compared with the effect of the traditional teaching method.

#### **Conclusion**

By considering the results of the study, it can obviously be noticed that cooperative learning method is more efficient in improving, enhancing, and boosting the students' writing abilities when compared with the traditional teaching methods. Thus, in addition to the academic achievement effect of cooperative learning, the subject students improved and developed their communication skills and built a platform of socialization among each other. On the basis of that, EFL teachers are called to implement and integrate the different cooperative learning models and activities in their classes for the sake of better realizing academic outcomes. Thus, the teacher researcher calls for further research in the field covering the different language areas or the different effective factors of cooperative learning as a teaching strategy.

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## تأثیر یادگیری مشارکتی بر کسب مهارت نوشتاری دانشجویان زبان انگلیسی

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یادگیری مشارکتی یک استراتژی آموزشی نسبتاً جدید در زمینه آموزش زبان‌های خارجی است. قابل اجرا بوده و با اقدامات مختلف قابل اجراست. از این رو، پژوهش حاضر سعی دارد تأثیر یادگیری مشارکتی ارائه شده در مدل یادگیری باهم را بر فرصت‌های دانش‌آموزان زبان انگلیسی برای کسب مهارت نوشتاری بررسی کند. روش تحقیق مورد استفاده در این پژوهش تجربی است. از طریق آزمایشی انجام می‌شود که در آن از پیش‌آزمون و پس‌آزمون استفاده می‌شود. شرکت‌کنندگان در این پژوهش دو گروه از دانش‌آموزان سال سوم مدرسه تربیت معلم کنستانتین هستند. گروه‌ها به صورت تصادفی انتخاب شده‌اند. یکی به عنوان گروه آزمایش و دیگری به عنوان گروه کنترل بود. یافته‌ها نشان می‌دهد که دانشجویان زبان انگلیسی می‌توانند مهارت‌های نوشتاری خود را از طریق ادغام استراتژی یادگیری مشارکتی توسعه دهند. همچنین نتایج نشان می‌دهد که گروه آزمایش در تکلیف پس‌آزمون بهتر از گروه کنترل عمل می‌کند. بر این اساس، نتایج این مطالعه می‌تواند به عنوان پایه‌ای برای تحقیقات بیشتر در مورد تأثیر یادگیری مشارکتی بر سایر مهارت‌های زبانی؛ صحبت کردن، شنیدن و نوشتن باشد.

**واژه‌های کلیدی:** استراتژی یادگیری مشارکتی، مهارت نوشتاری، دانشجویان زبان انگلیسی به عنوان زبان خارجی، مدل یادگیری باهم.

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