

The Effectiveness of Cooperative Learning Strategies in Developing Students' Writing Skills

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Abstract:

Developing students' writing skills and fostering collaboration in cooperative settings are essential for improving both interaction quality and writing proficiency. This study examines the impact of cooperative learning as a pedagogical strategy to enhance students' writing abilities. Specifically, it explores whether structured collaboration among students contributes to skill development, leading to enhanced writing performance, increased motivation, and deeper learner engagement. The research hypothesizes that integrating cooperative learning strategies into writing instruction will significantly enhance students' writing skills. To test this, a descriptive research method was employed, utilizing questionnaires administered to both students (n=50) and teachers (n=5) of written expression. The findings reveal that cooperative learning has a positive impact on students' writing experiences, enhancing their proficiency in key writing aspects such as grammar, vocabulary, idea organization, and coherence. Additionally, it boosts students' motivation and engagement, making the learning process more interactive and meaningful. The study highlights the pedagogical significance of cooperative learning in creating a supportive and collaborative learning environment, reinforcing its role as an effective strategy in EFL writing instruction.

Keywords: Cooperative learning, writing skills, student engagement, EFL writing instruction, descriptive research.

1- Introduction:

In the age of globalization, learning foreign languages has become an essential skill for individuals across the globe. English, as the most widely spoken second language, holds particular significance in various fields such as education, business, and international communication (Graddol, 2006). Teaching English as a Foreign Language (EFL) is, therefore, one of the most critical subjects in modern education systems. The overarching goal of EFL instruction is to develop students' proficiency in the four primary language skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. While each of these skills is important, writing stands out as particularly challenging due to its complexity as a productive skill. This latter is considered "to be —at the heart of teaching and learning in higher education [where] students are assessed largely by what they writel" (Coffin, Curry, Goodman, Hewings, Lillis, and Swann, 2005, p. i).

Writing is a multifaceted skill that requires a combination of vocabulary, grammatical accuracy, and an understanding of the writing process. Unlike receptive skills such as listening and reading, writing involves the active production of language, which demands greater cognitive effort. Byrne (1972, as cited in Maouedj, 2015) asserts that writing is the process of representing spoken language through graphic symbols, such as individual letters or combinations of letters, which correspond to speech sounds. Essentially, writing serves as a mechanical means of converting oral language into a visual form, enabling the expression of speech through written symbols. Effective writing necessitates the ability to generate ideas, organize them logically, and present them coherently. Additionally, writing proficiency is strongly influenced by the writer's awareness of different writing conventions, styles, and the audience. Given its integral role in academic success and professional communication, mastering writing is not merely an educational requirement but a fundamental skill that shapes learners' overall language competence. Consequently, addressing the challenges of writing instruction in the EFL context is crucial to ensuring that students develop the necessary skills to express themselves accurately and effectively in English.

Unfortunately, many EFL learners encounter significant challenges in developing writing proficiency. According to Andrews, “—Writing is a complex activity that draws on the imagination, feelings, state of mind, mood, cognitive state, capability with the medium, context and other factors” (2001, p. 43). These difficulties are not limited to the initial stages of idea generation or organizing thoughts but extend to the actual process of transforming ideas into coherent and readable text. Furthermore, students often struggle with issues such as grammar, vocabulary limitations, sentence structure, and cohesion. As a result, many students face considerable frustration in achieving fluency and accuracy in writing.

In response to these challenges, teachers have sought various pedagogical strategies to help learners improve their writing skills. One such strategy is cooperative learning, which has gained popularity in language classrooms for its effectiveness in promoting student engagement and collaboration (Singer, 2003). Cooperative learning involves students working together in small groups to solve problems, share ideas, and complete tasks (Johnson and Johnson, 2013). This approach not only fosters social interaction but also encourages peer feedback, active participation, and shared responsibility for learning outcomes. Research has shown that cooperative learning can lead to improved writing outcomes by providing students with opportunities to practice writing in a supportive, collaborative environment. It allows them to exchange ideas, review each other’s work, and receive constructive feedback from their peers, all of which contribute to more effective and refined writing.

This study aims to explore how cooperative learning can enhance the writing skills of EFL learners. Specifically, it will investigate the impact of group-based activities on students' writing proficiency, examining how such collaborative approaches facilitate the development of writing skills in the classroom. The research will also assess how cooperative learning helps learners overcome common writing challenges by promoting peer interaction, improving their understanding of the writing process, and enhancing their ability to produce coherent and well-structured texts. By focusing on these aspects, the study seeks to contribute to the broader understanding of how cooperative learning strategies can improve EFL writing outcomes.

2- Review of literature

2.1- Definition of Cooperative Learning

Cooperative learning is an instructional approach that emphasizes student collaboration to enhance learning outcomes. Johnson and Johnson (1991, p. 69) describe cooperative learning as “the instructional use of small groups so that students work together to maximize their own and one another’s learning.” Similarly, Slavin (2011) describes it as a teaching strategy in which educators organize students into groups to encourage mutual support and academic engagement.

This approach goes beyond simple group work by incorporating structured collaboration. Olsen and Kagan (1998) highlight its role in facilitating knowledge exchange, fostering both individual and group development. Artz and Newman (1990) further emphasize teamwork, cognitive engagement, and interdependence in achieving shared academic goals.

According to Johnson, Johnson, and Smith (1991), effective cooperative learning involves five key elements:

- Positive Interdependence – Group members rely on each other to achieve common objectives.
- Individual Accountability – Each student's contribution is assessed to ensure responsibility.
- Face-to-Face Interaction – Students engage in discussions, explanations, and peer teaching.
- Interpersonal and Small-Group Skills – Effective collaboration requires communication, leadership, and conflict resolution skills.
- Group Processing – Teams reflect on their progress and refine their strategies.

In essence, cooperative learning is a dynamic, learner-centered approach that fosters engagement, teamwork, and academic success by integrating structured collaboration and essential social skills.

2.2- The Basic Theory of Cooperative Learning

Cooperative learning is grounded in several theoretical perspectives, each highlighting its positive impact on student achievement. Slavin (1996) identifies key theories that help explain the effectiveness of cooperative learning: Social Interdependence Theory, Cognitive Perspective Theory, and Behavioral Learning Theory. Social Interdependence Theory emphasizes the importance of mutual goals and the interdependence among students, fostering collaboration. Cognitive Perspective Theory focuses on how cooperative learning can enhance cognitive development by encouraging active problem-solving and critical thinking. Behavioral Learning Theory highlights the role of reinforcement and rewards in motivating students and shaping their learning behaviours. These theories collectively provide valuable insights into how to structure cooperative learning to maximize its benefits.

2.2.1- Social Interdependence Theory

Also known as Social Interdependence Theory, this approach emphasizes that student achievement is influenced by group cohesion and interaction. According to Johnson and Johnson (2009), social interdependence refers to the interconnectedness of individuals' actions and how they affect each other's outcomes. Deutsch (1949) further classifies this interdependence as either positive, which promotes cooperation and shared goals, or negative, which leads to competition and discouragement.

Jolliffe (2010) highlights several key characteristics of social interdependence that contribute to its effectiveness in cooperative learning:

- Individuals influence one another's perspectives on learning.
- Emotional investment fosters strong bonds, enhancing cooperation.
- Openness to mutual influence leads to more effective joint actions.

- Cognitive Perspective Theory

Cognitive theorists view learning as a process of constructing knowledge through active thinking and interaction. Cohen et al. (2004) describe learning as involving cognitive processes such as reflection, where learners critically think about their experiences, and recognition, where they identify patterns and connections. Tran (2013) emphasizes that cognitive development occurs through mutual interaction, particularly within a social context. This theory is heavily influenced by the works of Piaget, who focused on the stages of cognitive development, and Vygotsky, who highlighted the role of social interaction and cultural tools in cognitive growth. These insights suggest that cooperative learning can support cognitive development by fostering collaborative problem-solving and peer interaction.

- Vygotsky's Perspective

Vygotsky (1987) argues that learning occurs first on a social level before being internalized individually. His concept of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) refers to the gap between what learners can accomplish independently and what they can achieve with guidance from more knowledgeable peers or teachers. Vygotsky asserts that social and cultural interactions play a crucial role in cognitive development, as learners benefit from collaborative activities that challenge their current abilities. This theory underscores the importance of cooperative learning, where students work together, allowing them to extend their understanding through social interaction and guided support.

- Piaget's Perspective

Piaget (1926) posits that cognitive development precedes learning, suggesting that students actively construct knowledge through discovery and exploration. Unlike Vygotsky, who emphasizes learning through collaboration with more capable peers, Piaget argues that learning is an individual process. He explains that new knowledge is integrated into existing cognitive structures through a process of equilibration, where learners strive for balance between their current understanding and new experiences (Piaget, 1971; Tran, 2013). This process of assimilation and accommodation allows learners to adjust their thinking and reach higher levels of cognitive development.

2.2.2- Behavioral Learning Theory

Behavioral theorists focus on the role of motivation and reinforcement in cooperative learning. Slavin (1995) describes this as a motivational theory, arguing that group rewards and social reinforcement (e.g. praise and encouragement) enhance learning outcomes. According to this perspective, students are more likely to collaborate and succeed when they are motivated by shared goals and group incentives.

In summary, cooperative learning is supported by multiple theories that emphasize structured interaction, cognitive engagement, and motivation. Social interdependence highlight collaboration, cognitive perspectives focus on knowledge construction, and behavioural theory underscores the role of motivation in group success. These frameworks collectively contribute to understanding and optimizing cooperative learning in educational settings

2.3- Cooperative Learning Strategies in the Classroom

Cooperative learning encompasses various strategies that encourage students of different proficiency levels to work together and support one another in learning academic material. Johnson et al. (1991) describe cooperative learning as a broad instructional approach adaptable to various teaching philosophies and classroom practices. Below are some widely used cooperative learning strategies:

2.3.1- Jigsaw

Jigsaw is a cooperative learning technique introduced by Aronson (1978) to promote student accountability in group tasks. As Arends (2004) explains, students are divided into small groups, each assigned a different section of academic material. After studying their individual sections, students join “expert groups” with peers who have studied the same material. In these expert groups, they discuss their findings and then return to teach their original group members. Later, Slavin (1995) modified this technique into Jigsaw II, where students first work on common material before specializing in a specific topic, which they then teach to their peers. This modification further emphasizes peer teaching and collaboration, enhancing the effectiveness of the Jigsaw approach.

2.3.2- Learning Together

Developed by Johnson and Johnson (1994), this cooperative learning strategy involves students working together in groups to produce a shared product while supporting each other’s understanding. Knight and Bohlmeier (1990) describe its key elements as collaboration, mutual assistance, and group accountability. Johnson, Johnson, and Smith (1998) further outline five essential components of this method:

- **Positive interdependence** – Group success depends on individual contributions.
- **Face-to-face interaction** – Students engage in meaningful discussions.
- **Individual and group accountability** – Each student is responsible for learning.
- **Interpersonal and small-group skills** – Cooperation enhances communication and leadership.
- **Group processing** – Teams reflect on and improve their performance.

2.3.3- Student Teams Achievement Division (STAD)

STAD, developed by Slavin (1994), is a cooperative learning method where students are placed in heterogeneous teams based on academic ability, gender, and ethnicity. The teacher delivers a lesson, and students collaborate to ensure all team members grasp the material. They then take individual quizzes without assistance, and their scores contribute to a team score. Teams are rewarded based on collective performance, encouraging motivation and peer support (Arends, 2004).

2.3.4- Think-Pair-Share

Lyman (1981, Cited in Raba, 2017) introduced Think-Pair-Share as a structured strategy fostering cognitive development. It consists of three steps:

1. **Think** – Students reflect on a question individually.
2. **Pair** – They discuss their thoughts with a partner.
3. **Share** – They present their ideas to a larger group or the whole class (Kagan, 1994).

2.3.5- Round Table

In Round Table, students collaborate to generate and share information. Kagan (1994) explains that the teacher poses a question with multiple answers, and each student writes a response before passing the paper to the next person. This strategy encourages brainstorming, reviewing,

Cooperative learning strategies like Jigsaw, Learning Together, STAD, Think-Pair-Share, and Round Table enhance student engagement, peer interaction, and academic achievement. By fostering collaboration and active participation, these methods create a dynamic and inclusive learning environment.

2.3- Teaching writing in EFL context

Writing is an essential skill in language acquisition, enabling individuals to convey meaningful messages and communicate their thoughts in various contexts. Its importance in FLL is undeniable, and as a result, scholars have provided numerous definitions to capture its complexity. In the context of EFL, mastering writing skills plays a critical role. Writing not only helps teachers record essential data, such as grades and names, but it also serves as a tool for effective lesson delivery (Andrews, 2001; Grabe, 2000; Harmer, 2004). For students, writing reinforces the knowledge they have gained, whether it involves a new grammatical structure or expanded vocabulary (Nation, 2009). It offers an opportunity to practice and internalize content more deeply, allowing learners to move beyond basic language use and incorporate new techniques and structures into their communication. This process of articulating thoughts and ideas fosters innovative ways of expressing language. Proficiency in writing enables individuals to engage their readers, capture attention, and express themselves with clarity and confidence, reducing the risk of miscommunication.

Teaching writing in the EFL context requires a multifaceted approach that develops both technical skills and creative expression. It is not simply about producing grammatically correct sentences but also about understanding how language functions to communicate ideas effectively. Coulmas (2003) identifies at least six meanings of writing: (1) a system of recording language through visible or tactile marks; (2) the activity of using such a system; (3) the result of this activity—a text; (4) the specific form of the text, such as block letter writing; (5) artistic composition; and (6) a professional occupation. Effective writing instruction in EFL classrooms often focuses on building a strong foundation in vocabulary, syntax, and discourse structures, which enables students to express themselves clearly and appropriately in different contexts. Additionally, teachers encourage students to develop critical thinking skills, guiding them to organize their ideas logically, present arguments coherently, and use language strategically to achieve their communicative goals (Ferris and Hedgcock, 2014).

A crucial aspect of writing instruction is feedback. Teachers play a key role in guiding students through the writing process, making it a dynamic and iterative practice rather than a one-time task (Harmer, 2004). Students are encouraged to engage in drafting, revising, and editing their work, honing their skills over time and learning to reflect on their writing. Peer review activities are also valuable in this regard, as they promote collaboration, critical analysis, and the ability to evaluate and improve one's work based on feedback from others. This process fosters a sense of ownership over their writing and enhances their ability to communicate effectively.

Furthermore, exposing students to diverse writing genres and contexts enriches their understanding of different language registers and styles. Students can write narratives, descriptive essays, opinion pieces, and research papers, each requiring distinct writing strategies and approaches (Hyland, 2007). For instance, when teaching opinion essays, students can engage in structured debates before drafting their arguments, helping them organize their ideas logically. This diversity not only keeps the writing process engaging but also allows students to apply their skills in varied, real-world situations. Encouraging students to draw upon their personal experiences and perspectives further enhance motivation and self-expression.

Integrating authentic materials such as articles, advertisements, and social media posts from native speakers into writing tasks enhances the relevance of the writing process (Guariento and Morley, 2001). This approach connects language learning to real-world communication, making writing more

practical and engaging. Additionally, focusing on both fluency and accuracy ensures that students not only produce error-free writing but also gain confidence in expressing their ideas freely and creatively. EFL learners often face specific challenges, such as limited vocabulary, difficulties with grammar, and differences in rhetorical conventions between their native language and English. Effective instruction must address these obstacles by providing structured support and targeted feedback.

Overall, writing instruction in the EFL classroom aims to equip students with the tools necessary to express themselves effectively, think critically, and navigate diverse communicative contexts. By addressing common writing challenges, incorporating collaborative learning, and using authentic materials, teachers can enhance students' writing skills and prepare them for success in both academic and real-world settings.

3- Methodology

This study adopts a descriptive research method, aiming to explore the impact of cooperative learning on the writing skills of EFL students at Biskra University. The primary data collection tool is a questionnaire, which will be used to gather insights from both students and teachers.

3.1- Population and Sample

The study focusses on third-year LMD students in the Department of English at Biskra University, totalling 370 students. A sample of 50 students, selected randomly, will participate in the survey. Additionally, 5 English teachers from a pool of 33 will provide their perspectives on the use of cooperative learning in the classroom.

3.2- Data Collection Tools

Two questionnaires will be designed: one for students and another for teachers. These questionnaires aim to capture data on the use and effectiveness of cooperative learning as a strategy to enhance writing skills.

To ensure comprehensive data collection, two questionnaires will be designed: one for students and another for teachers. These questionnaires aim to capture qualitative and quantitative data regarding the implementation and effectiveness of cooperative learning as a strategy to enhance writing skills.

Table1:

Data Collection Instruments for Examining Cooperative Learning in EFL Writing

Data Collection Tool	Target Group	Type of Data Collected	Focus Areas
Student Questionnaire	EFL Students	Qualitative and Quantitative	Perceptions of cooperative learning - Engagement levels - Benefits and difficulties in writing improvement
Teacher Questionnaire	EFL Teachers	Qualitative and Quantitative	- Teaching strategies - Observations of student progress - Effectiveness of cooperative learning in writing instruction

3.4- Limitations

The study is limited by its scope, focusing on third-year students at a single university. The findings may not be generalizable to all EFL students. Additionally, the reliance on questionnaires as the sole data collection method may introduce biases such as dishonesty or incomplete responses.

4- Results of the Teachers' Questionnaire

The analysis of the teachers' questionnaire revealed significant insights into the teachers' perspectives on various aspects of teaching writing in English as a Foreign Language (EFL).

4.1- Background Information:

The majority of teachers hold a Magister degree, with a few having a Doctorate, indicating that the participants are well-qualified professionals. The teachers' years of experience in teaching English ranged from five to over 15 years, with most having substantial experience.

- Writing Skills:

Regarding the teaching of writing, the teachers unanimously agreed that productive skills (such as writing) are more challenging for students to master compared to receptive skills (like reading and listening). Despite recognizing the importance of writing in a foreign language, teachers noted that the time allocated for writing instruction is insufficient. Teachers also expressed the importance of considering both form and content when assessing students' writing. However, they highlighted that students' lack of motivation, experience, and proficiency are key challenges in writing instruction. Teachers indicated that their students' writing proficiency is generally at an average level, but they expressed a desire to improve their students' writing skills. Common writing issues reported included grammar, vocabulary, punctuation, cohesion, and the organization of ideas.

- Teacher Role and Correction Methods:

Teachers suggested that, to motivate students, they should adopt roles as assistants and audience members rather than evaluators and examiners. In terms of correction, there was a division in preferences: some teachers prefer to allow students to correct their own mistakes, fostering independence, while others prioritize direct correction to focus on specific issues faced by the students.

- Cooperative Learning:

All participating teachers implement cooperative learning in their classrooms, particularly when teaching written expression. The majority of teachers work with small groups or pairs, carefully considering factors such as gender, proficiency levels, and performance when forming groups. Teachers also emphasize the importance of raising students' awareness about the value and benefits of cooperative learning, fostering positive interdependence among peers. Teachers agreed that cooperative learning not only helps improve writing proficiency but also reduces student anxiety, encourages peer correction, and creates a positive learning environment, thereby boosting students' self-confidence.

5- Conclusion:

This study sought to explore the impact of cooperative learning on enhancing writing proficiency among third-year LMD students at Biskra University. The findings derived from the analysis of both learners' and teachers' questionnaires strongly support our hypothesis that cooperative learning is an effective strategy for improving learners' writing skills. Both teachers and students demonstrated a clear understanding of the value of cooperative learning in teaching writing, with both groups agreeing that the writing skill is better developed when students collaborate in groups.

The results show that cooperative learning fosters an environment where students can share ideas, correct each other's mistakes, and learn collaboratively, all of which contribute to improved writing outcomes. The positive feedback from both students and teachers suggests that this teaching approach not only helps enhance writing proficiency but also addresses challenges such as lack of motivation and writing difficulties.

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