

EFFECTIVENESS OF COOPERATIVE LEARNING ON WRITTEN PROFICIENCY OF NON-ENGLISH MAJOR STUDENTS OF THAI NGUYEN UNIVERSITY OF SCIENCES, VIET NAM

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ABSTRACT

In Vietnam, when the National foreign language project 2020 was launched, English language education has become the main concern of the government, the Ministry of Education and the whole society. The project aims at improving the students' communicative abilities in English. Cooperative learning, therefore, has been increasingly adopted and applied in Vietnamese higher education institutions. This study investigated the effectiveness of Cooperative Learning on writing skills. 60 non-English major students at a mountainous university in North of Vietnam were involved in the experiment. They were divided into two groups of experimental and control that took a pre-test and posttest in writing. The results revealed that Cooperative learning as an instructional strategy is an effective alternative to the conventional method such as traditional writing instruction in developing the students' written proficiency. It, therefore, should be widely applied in the process of foreign language teaching and learning.

Keywords: Effectiveness, Cooperative Learning, Written Proficiency.

INTRODUCTION

By nature, human beings are social creatures that cannot be isolated from each other. There, therefore, always exists a demand for communication. They need to contact with each other to exchange information, to express their ideas and feelings. Similarly, social interaction plays a very important role in educational activities, especially in language teaching and learning. To meet this demand, Cooperative learning emerged in the last century as an effort to eliminate disadvantages of group work. It maximizes the students' participation in group activities as they benefit from sharing ideas rather than working alone and from helping one another to reach the common goals. Maximizing the opportunities for student – student interaction with variety of input and output in motivated environment, cooperative learning has become the key techniques in language teaching of all levels and ages. At Thai Nguyen University of Sciences, in which most of students are of ethnic minority groups, English is a basic subject which accounts for totally 10 credits and is normally taught in the first two years of bachelor programs. It follows the communicative orientation with the integration of the four skills listening, speaking, reading and writing. However, to master this language is not an easy task for the students who come from mountainous areas in Northern Vietnam with rather limited English competence. They face numerous difficulties in speaking and in writing using the language. The reason lies in the fact that many students are hesitant to communicate with their teachers and classmates in English because they have few opportunities to do so. On one hand, when students cannot understand the lesson, they are not motivated and become passive in the

classroom. On the other hand, better students are sometimes hesitant to help the slow learners since they are not required to do so. It is in this context that the researcher would like to conduct the study in the hope that cooperative learning may be effective in getting the students to involve and participate more in lesson activities, specifically in improving their English proficiency.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Cooperative learning and Written Proficiency

Johnson & Johnson, leaders of cooperative learning since the 1970s, define it as “the instructional use of small groups so that students work together to maximize their own and each other’s learning”. Cooperative learning refers to a method of instruction in which students work together in groups to reach common goals. Within cooperative learning, students benefit from sharing rather than working alone. Students help one another so that all can reach certain success. Cooperative learning not only brings students opportunities to use the language but also to discover its vocabulary and grammar. Furthermore, students’ social skills are enhanced through the cooperation with other members of groups. Students become more engaged in their learning and their motivation increases. To be motivated to learn, students need opportunities to interact with each other as well as encouragement and support of their learning efforts. By working in groups and fulfilling the tasks that require interdependence, each group member becomes accountable for achieving a shared goal. Students are then motivated by the team efforts as well as by seeing their own contributions accepted by the group. The active exchange of ideas within small groups not only increases the interest among the students but also promotes critical thinking.

A meta-analysis of 122 studies that compare cooperation, competition, and individualistic learning conducted by Johnson and his colleagues from 1924 to 1980 find out that 65 studies confirm that cooperative learning contribute to higher achievement of learners than competitive learning method. (Johnson, Johnson & Holubec, 1987; Johnson & Johnson, 2000). According to Duin (1984), 800 studies show that students who study through cooperative learning as compared to competitive or individualistic learning achieve more academic performance. Students have more positive attitude toward schools, subject areas, each other, and teachers, regardless of their background and ability. Legenhausen and Wolff (1990) opine that writing in groups is an efficient way to promote writing abilities and it is an excellent interaction activity. Their views are supported by a study conducted by Kagan and High (2002) which shows that students perform better in writing when cooperative learning is incorporated in the classroom. The study was conducted in Catalina Ventura School in Phoenix where a high percentage of students learned English as a second language. The school’s eight graders showed tremendous improvement in writing which is from 49% to 82% in their mastery level.

The study conducted by Nakamol Nuddee (2010) indicates that cooperative learning enhances students’ writing performance. In cooperative learning, the students are given opportunities to write and to rewrite what they have written. Peer criticism helps them to have higher level of writing performances because they have the opportunity to evaluate each other work separately. Furthermore, it can be concluded from the findings that cooperative learning make equal interest to both teacher and the students. Simply putting students in groups does not guarantee positive results. Teachers cannot simply place students together and expect them to work well with each other. Central components of effective Cooperative Learning must be in place so that students can feel that they are positive contributors, not only to their teams, but to the class as a whole. The studies conducted on the incorporation of cooperative learning in learning writing

show that cooperative learning is an effective educational approach to improve student's achievement in writing. This study will contribute to existing body of literature in investigating the incorporation of cooperative learning in teaching writing to students in the context of Thai Nguyen University of Sciences.

METHODOLOGY

This study used the experimental method using the repeated measures design. Each group was exposed alternately to both strategies – the cooperative learning and traditional writing instructions. This method was considered to be suitable for groups which are not matched on certain variables. Before the experiment was carried out, each class was divided based on the students' English scores in National examination, into six groups known as cooperative base groups including high achievers, middle achievers and low achievers. Students worked in those appointed groups during the four lessons. Before the actual discussion of each lesson, a pretest was administered to the subjects. The same test was used as the posttest which was administered at the end of every lesson. A significant difference between the samples' scores indicated that one method was better than the other. The two cooperative learning strategies used were Student Teams Achievement Divisions (STAD) and Roundtable and Round Robin. The respondents of this study were 60 students coming from the two classes of General English randomly chosen for the experiment at Thai Nguyen University of Sciences during the second semester of the academic year 2019-2020.

RESULTS

Comparison between the Pre-test Writing Performance of Students Taught under the Two Methods

Table 1 compares the pre-test writing performance between the students taught with cooperative learning strategy and the students taught with the traditional method.

For the students grouped by writing traditional instruction, the data reveal that *Narrating about a holiday* has the highest mean score which is 4.5. This is followed by *Writing about a special day* and *Describing a friend* with the mean score of 4.15. It is observed that *Writing informal letter* has a mean score of 4.05 which is the lowest mean score. For the students grouped by cooperative learning, the table discloses that *Narrating a holiday* has the mean score of 4.6 which is the highest mean score of all. *Writing about a special day* has the lowest pretest mean score which is 4.0.

Generally, *Narrating a holiday* has the highest pre-test mean score of both groups. It can be explained by the fact that this is the last writing lesson when students have certainly gained such improvement after three weeks studying writing continually. For overall performance of students, the data reveal that the pretest mean scores of both groups are similar. The computed t-value of the overall writing scores and of all lessons discussed indicates that there is no significant difference between the pre-test scores of the students under the two methods. Before being exposed to both methods of instruction, students' writing performance is quite low. It can be implied that writing seems to be a challenging skill to them.

Table 1. Comparison between the Pre-test Writing Performance of Students Taught under the Two Methods

Variables	Mean	SD	Std. Error of Difference	t-value	Prob.
Writing Informal Letter					
<i>Cooperative Learning (STAD)</i>	4.1	1.41			
<i>Traditional Strategy</i>	4.05	1.46	0.455	0.110 ns	0.913
Writing about a Special day					
<i>Cooperative Learning (STAD)</i>	4.0	1.48			
<i>Traditional Strategy</i>	4.1	1.38	0.454	0.330 ns	0.743
Describing a friend					
<i>CL (Round Robin)</i>	4.2	1.31			
<i>Traditional Strategy</i>	4.1	1.33	0.417	0.239 ns	0.812
Narrating about a holiday					
<i>CL (Round Robin)</i>	4.6	0.99			
<i>Traditional Strategy</i>	4.5	1.27	0.362	0.276 ns	0.784
Overall Writing Score					
<i>Cooperative Learning</i>	16.95	5.19			
<i>Traditional Strategy</i>	16.85	4.98	1.61	0.062 ns	0.951

Legend

* = significant at 0.05 level

** = significant at 0.01 level

Comparison between the Pretest and Post-test Writing Performance of Students Taught under Traditional Writing Instruction

Table 2 shows the performance of students under traditional writing instruction. In the pretest, the data reveal that *Narrating about a holiday* has the highest mean score which is 4.5. This is followed by *Writing about a special day* and *Describing a friend* with the mean score of 4.15. It is obviously noticed that *Writing informal letter* has a mean score of 4.05 which is the lowest mean score. During the posttest, the mean score of *Narrating about a holiday* which is 6.65 remains the highest among mean scores of all the four lessons. This is followed by *Writing about a special day* and *writing informal letter* with the mean score of 6.4 and 6.3 respectively. *Describing a friend* with mean score of 6.5 ranks the lowest in the group.

For the overall performance of students, the data reveal that there is an increase of mean scores from the pretest to the posttest. As clearly shown in the table that in the pretest the mean score is about 4.0, but in the posttest the mean scores increase to about 6.0. It can be inferred that there is a significant difference between the pretest and posttest scores of the students taught under traditional writing instruction. The computed t-value for each lesson as well as overall writing score tells that the difference is significant at .01 level. The table vividly shows that there is an increase of mean scores in all the four lessons discussed which proves that students' writing performance has improved after being exposed to the traditional writing instruction method. It can be inferred that traditional writing instruction can still be a good strategy in teaching writing.

Table 2. Comparison between the Pretest and Post-test Writing Performance of the Students Taught under Traditional Writing Instruction

Variables	Mean	SD	t-value	Prob.	Effect Size
Writing Informal Letter					
<i>Before</i>	4.05	1.47			
<i>After</i>	7	1.49	18.291**	.000	0.9
Writing about a special day					
<i>Before</i>	4.15	1.39			
<i>After</i>	6.40	1.35	22.650**	.000	0.9
Describing a friend					
<i>Before</i>	4.15	1.31			
<i>After</i>	6.25	1.33	16.998**	.000	0.9
Narrating about a holiday					
<i>Before</i>	4.50	1.28			
<i>After</i>	6.65	0.99	14.333**	.000	0.9
Overall Writing Score					
<i>Before</i>	16.85	5.19			
<i>After</i>	25.60	4.95	35.000**	.000	0.9

Legend

* = significant at 0.05 level

** = significant at 0.01 level

Comparison between the Pretest and Posttest Writing Performance of Students Taught under Cooperative Learning

Table 3 shows the performance of students under cooperative learning strategy. In the pretest, the table discloses that *Narrating a holiday* has the mean score of 4.6 which is the highest mean score of all. *Writing about a special day* has the lowest pretest mean score which is 4.0. In the posttest, the mean score of *Narrating a holiday* remains the highest mean score which is 7.85. *Writing about a special day* still has the lowest posttest mean score which is 7.5. As gleaned from the table, the pretest and posttest results on *Writing a special day* have the lowest mean scores among the four lessons discussed. It is also observed that the ranking of the lowest to the highest mean scores from the pretest remains in the posttest.

For overall performance of students, the data reveal that there is a notable increase of scores from the pretest to the posttest in all lessons discussed. As vividly shown in the table that in the pretest the mean score is about 4.0, but in the posttest the mean scores increased to about 7.5. This remarkable increase proves that students' writing performance has improved after the cooperative learning intervention.

It can be inferred that there is a significant difference between the pretest and posttest scores of the students taught under cooperative learning strategies. The computed t-value for each lesson and overall writing scores tells that the difference is significant at .01 level. The result clearly indicates that cooperative learning is a good teaching strategy in improving students' writing performance.

Table 3. Comparison between the Pre-test and Post-test Writing Performance of the Students Taught with Cooperative Learning Strategies

Variables	Mean	SD	t-value	Prob.	Effect size
Writing Informal Letter					
<i>Before</i>	4.10	1.41			
<i>After</i>	7.70	1.45	32.031**	0.000	0.9
Writing about a special day					
<i>Before</i>	4.00	1.49			
<i>After</i>	7.55	1.76	25.250**	0.000	0.9
Describing a friend					
<i>Before</i>	4.25	1.33			
<i>After</i>	7.80	1.11	26.250**	0.000	0.9
Narrating about a holiday					
<i>Before</i>	4.60	0.99			
<i>After</i>	7.85	1.39	18.482**	0.000	0.9
Overall Writing Score					
<i>Before</i>	16.95	4.99			
<i>After</i>	30.90	5.33	52.383**	0.000	0.9

Legend

* = significant at 0.05 level

** = significant at 0.01 level

Comparison in the Post-test Writing Performance of Students Taught under the Two Methods

Table 4 compares the post-test writing performance between the students taught with cooperative learning strategy and the students taught with the traditional method. In the traditional writing instruction, *Narrating about a holiday* has mean score of 6.65 which is the highest mean score among the four lessons discussed. This is followed by *Writing informal letter* and *Writing about a special day* with mean score of 6.4 and 6.3 respectively. *Describing a friend* has the lowest mean score which is 6.25.

In the cooperative learning strategy, the mean score of *Narrating about a holiday* is the highest of all (7.85). This is followed by *Describing a friend* and *Writing an informal letter* with the mean score of 7.8 and 7.7 respectively. *Writing about a special day* has the lowest mean score which is 7.55.

Comparing closely the two employed methods, it is observed that the mean scores of different lessons under cooperative learning are higher than the mean scores under traditional writing instruction method. The notable difference reveals that students' writing proficiency is more developed when they are exposed to cooperative learning strategies. The computed t-value of overall writing score proves that there is a significant difference between mean scores of traditional writing instruction and cooperative learning. The t-values is significant at .05 level. It can be implied that of the two methods employed in the study, Cooperative Learning seems to be more effective and therefore should be applied in teaching writing.

Table 4. Comparison between the Post-test Writing Performance of Students Taught under the Two Methods

Variables	Mean	SD	Std. Error of Difference	t-value	Prob.	Effect Size
Writing Informal Letter						
<i>Cooperative Learning (STAD)</i>	7.70	1.45				
<i>Traditional Strategy</i>	6.30	1.49	0.466	3.006*	0.005	0.2
Writing about a special day						
<i>Cooperative Learning (STAD)</i>	7.55	1.76				
<i>Traditional Strategy</i>	6.40	1.35	0.458	2.315*	0.026	0.1
Describing a friend						
<i>CL (Round Robin)</i>	7.80	1.10				
<i>Traditional Strategy</i>	6.25	1.33	0.387	4.004**	0.000	0.3
Narrating about a holiday						
<i>CL (Round Robin)</i>	7.85	0.99				
<i>Traditional Strategy</i>	6.65	1.39	0.403	3.151*	0.003	0.2
Overall Writing Score						
<i>Cooperative Learning</i>	30.90	5.33				
<i>Traditional Strategy</i>	25.60	4.95	1.625	3.260*	0.002	0.2

Legend

* = significant at 0.05 level

** = significant at 0.01 level

Extent of Help by the Use of Cooperative Learning as Reflected in the Effect Size

Table 5 shows the extent of help by the use of Cooperative Learning as reflected in the effect size. As gleaned from the table, the mean scores of different lessons under cooperative learning are higher than the mean scores under traditional writing instruction method. The computed t-value of all the four lessons and overall score prove that there is a significant difference between mean scores of traditional writing instruction and cooperative learning. The notable difference reveals that students' writing proficiency is more developed when they are exposed to cooperative learning strategies as clearly shown and proven by the effect size. The average effect size of 0.2 on overall writing score reveals that 58 percent of students under cooperative learning is above the mean of the students under traditional writing instruction method, 14.7 percent of students under the two methods overlap. It can be implied that cooperative learning is of great help to students because they can share and listen to others' ideas, which contribute to the success of their personal writing. This strategy, therefore, is strongly encouraged more often in teaching writing in order to enhance students' writing proficiency.

Table 5. Extent of help by the use of Cooperative Learning as reflected in the effect size

Variables	Mean	SD	Std. Error of Difference	t-value	Prob.	Effect Size
Writing Informal Letter						
<i>Cooperative Learning (STAD)</i>	7.70	1.45				
<i>Traditional Strategy</i>	6.30	1.49	0.466	3.006*	0.005	0.2
Writing about a special day						
<i>Cooperative Learning (STAD)</i>	7.55	1.76				
<i>Traditional Strategy</i>	6.40	1.35	0.458	2.315*	0.026	0.1

Describing a friend						
<i>CL (Round Robin)</i>	7.80	1.10				
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<i>Traditional Strategy</i>	6.65	1.39	0.403	3.151*	0.003	0.2
Overall Writing Score						
<i>Cooperative Learning</i>	30.90	5.33				
<i>Traditional Strategy</i>	25.60	4.95	1.625	3.260*	0.002	0.2

DISCUSSION

From the analysis and interpretation of the data gathered the following significant findings are drawn:

Regarding the performance of students under traditional writing instruction and cooperative learning strategies in the pretest, both groups' mean scores are generally quite low. Moreover, there is no significant difference between the pre-test writing scores of the two groups. Considering the students' performance under the two methods in the posttest, the mean scores of the students exposed to cooperative learning are much higher than those of the students under traditional writing instruction method. This remarkable difference proves that students' writing performance seems to be enhanced more with the intervention of cooperative learning compared to traditional writing instruction. The performance of students under traditional writing instruction displays an increase in mean scores from the pretest to the posttest. The finding reveals a significant difference between the pretest and posttest scores of the students taught under traditional writing instruction.

The performance of students exposed to cooperative learning obviously reveals a remarkable increase in mean scores from the pretest to the posttest in all lessons discussed. The findings display that there is a significant difference between the pretest and posttest scores of the students taught under cooperative learning strategies. The effectiveness of cooperative learning strategies is clearly proven and identified through the large effect size of .1. It can be implied that cooperative learning is of great help to students because they can share and listen to others' ideas, which contribute to the success of their personal writing. This strategy, therefore, is strongly encouraged more often in teaching writing in order to enhance students' writing proficiency. Comparison between the post-test writing performance between the students taught with cooperative learning strategy and the students taught with the traditional method reveals that the mean scores of different lessons under cooperative learning are higher than the mean scores under traditional writing instruction method. The notable difference reveals that students' writing proficiency is more developed when they are exposed to cooperative learning strategies. Specifically, of the two strategies used, Round Robin & Roundtable seems to be more effective.

These findings validate Quines' (2000) findings in his study where he found out that the first three weeks of the experiment using cooperative learning did not give significant relationship between students' performance and the strategy employed. The last three weeks, however, gave significant relationship between the two variables. This only proves that achievement is improved once the strategy is fully understood and the advantages are realized by the learners. Similarly, Khamruangsri (2005) found out that students perform very well under the cooperative learning conditions because they are more responsible for completing work

assigned to them. They participate more in class activities and display both roles as a leader and a follower very well, while each member in groups supports, helps and advises his/her peers regularly. The result on the comparison of the mean scores between cooperative learning strategy and traditional writing instruction supports the studies conducted by some local and foreign researchers such as Legenhausen and Wolff (1990) who stated that writing in groups is an efficient way to promote writing abilities and it is an excellent interaction activity. They believed that students perform better in writing when cooperative learning is incorporated in the classroom. The students hold responsibility in their writing and be given opportunity to share their work with others. The feedback and positive reinforcement from friends increase their motivation to engage in writing activities. The findings of the present study were also supported by results of the research conducted by Jones and Carrasquillo (1998). Their research indicated that cooperative learning improve students' writing skills.

In the same vein, the study conducted by Nakamol Nudee (2010) indicates that cooperative learning enhances students' writing performance. In cooperative learning, the students are given opportunities to write and to rewrite what they have written. Peer criticism helps them to have higher level of writing performances because they have the opportunity to evaluate each other work separately.

CONCLUSIONS

In the light of findings of the study, it is concluded that Cooperative learning as an instructional strategy is an effective alternative to the conventional method such as traditional writing instruction in developing the students' written proficiency. Emphatically, Cooperative learning strategies become conduit in helping students accomplish given tasks through teamwork and cooperation as they get and share ideas with other groupmates and learn together in a less threatening atmosphere; hence they perform better in writing. Furthermore, with the intervention of cooperative learning, students enjoy more the writing skills and develop their social skills.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the foregoing findings and conclusions, the following are recommended:

1. Teachers are strongly encouraged to consider applying cooperative learning strategy as an alternative to traditional writing instruction method or other teaching methods for it was proven effective in developing the written proficiency of students.
2. Teachers and students should be properly guided on the objectives and procedures of cooperative learning to realize the advantages of this strategy.
3. Aside from the employed strategies in this study, teachers should identify other cooperative learning strategies that would develop the writing performance of students.
4. Other researchers should undertake similar studies on the effectiveness of cooperative learning strategies in other fields of specialization to enrich information on the teaching-learning process.
5. The administration should support the participation of their teachers in seminars on cooperative learning strategies to improve better instruction.
6. A seminar-workshop on cooperative learning should be conducted by school administrators for faculty members as well as practice teachers to learn the procedure for the conduct of this method.

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