

Students and Teachers: Trouble Shared, Trouble Halved

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ABSTRACT: *The study reported here sought to investigate the use of the Cooperative Learning (CL henceforth) approach in the English as Second Language (ELS henceforth) writing classrooms at institutions of higher learning. More specifically, it took a closer look at the importance and efficacy of the use of CL strategies in teaching writing skills as perceived by ESL learners and teachers. A mixed-design approach was adopted in data collection. Information was derived via questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. The results indicated a favourable view of CL as an instructional approach. Both teachers and learners viewed this approach to be effective as it engenders a risk-free environment that promotes learning specifically writing. Nevertheless, the teachers perceived the CL approach to be time-consuming and tedious on their part as the use of CL strategy added to an already heavy work load. The respondents indicated that they needed formal training in CL to be able to make a distinction between its application and the group work that they often assigned in ESL classrooms. This study concludes that CL a beneficial pedagogical approach that could provide invaluable insights into meaningful learning in ESL classrooms of higher learning. However, small-scale and class-based CL activities can be introduced in the classroom to enhance teaching. To provide tertiary level, students with an opportunity to elevate their language skills, collaborative efforts among Curricular Designers, Administrators, and English Teachers must be initiated.*

KEY WORDS: *Cooperative Learning, English as Second Language, instructional approach, teachers and learners, and meaningful learning.*

Introduction

Cooperative Learning (CL henceforth) is acknowledged as a set of pedagogical practices in which students are grouped and encouraged to work together to facilitate active participation in discussing different perspectives on a common topic (Johnson & Johnson, 1999; Hirst & Slavik, 2005; and Chapman *et al.*, 2006). Small group activities in CL provide more opportunities for students to have hands-on activities (Wentzel & Watkins, 2002; Kreie, Headrick & Steiner, 2007; and Lee, 2007). Furthermore, assisting peers to learn through explaining to one another has been positively correlated with academic achievement (Depaz & Moni, 2008).

Therefore, it is argued by some researchers such as A.K. Azizah (2001); N. Chandrika (2001); and F.A. Brown (2008) that CL is an effective instructional approach in the ESL (English as Second Language) writing classrooms. Besides, numerous studies

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such as A. Iwai (2000); K.A.S. Lancaster and C.A. Strand (2001); and K. Mason (2006) have also shown that CL provides confidence, self-esteem, social skills, and enhances academic achievement to limited English proficiency students who can find positive social benefits in the spirit of cooperation within the classroom. Therefore CL is a much debated topic and has created a lot of interest amongst researchers.

Statement of Problem

Writing in an ESL (English as Second Language) classroom is not purely writing but it involves a lot of other processes such as asking for personal reactions rather than “text responsible” responses where learners have to put down what they have grasped (Atkinson, 2003). When learners write, they are expected to find and organise ideas, consider many issues such as content, organisation, purpose, target audience, appropriate vocabulary, correct spelling, and mechanics (Atkinson, 2003; and Kim & Kim, 2005) which hammers that writing requires cognitive competence to come up with a writing task. Probably out of the four basic language skills (listening, speaking, reading, and writing), writing has often been regarded by teachers and learners alike as the most difficult and tedious skill to teach, learn or acquire for non-native (Azizah, 2002) as well as native learners (Abu Rass, 2001). ESL learners struggle with many structural issues, including selecting proper words, generating ideas, and developing ideas (Kim & Kim, 2005; and Lee, 2007). Thus, learners with language learning problems are not motivated to engage with the writing activity (Gleason & Isaacson, 2001).

Mariam Mohamed Nor (2004) has pointed out that many learners in Malaysia cannot write well even after eleven years of learning English. The Ministry of Education (MOE) Malaysia has, therefore, identified three main weaknesses in learners’ writing, namely the inability to: (1) develop interesting and thoughtful ideas; (2) present ideas clearly and coherently; and (3) plan paragraphs or essays cohesively. The learners’ basic deficiencies are often not detected until the learners enter an institution of higher learning. It is therefore assumed, given the above weaknesses, the group writing approach would be able to counter this situation.

Studies done on CL both internationally (Atkinson, 2003; Chen, 2004; and Mason, 2006) and locally (Chandrika, 2001; and Mariam Mohamed Nor, 2004) have highlighted the positive effects of using CL in ESL writing classrooms. These studies indeed highlight the virtues and significance of employing the CL approach but have been mostly confined to the incorporation of the approach and writing in the secondary school setting. Further, numerous studies (Chen, 2004; and Mason, 2006) have reported on the benefits that accrue to students from CL experiences, but little is known about two important parties: (1) the learners and teachers; and (2) their point of views in learning strategy. Most importantly, very little seems to have been done to show how these parties view CL approach. This gap leads to the conclusion that there is an urgent need to investigate the perceptions of learners and teachers within the higher education setting. Therefore, this study will attempt to fulfil this research niche.

Methodology, Sample, and Tools

The efficacy of the CL approach, the students' and teachers' perceptions as to what extent the CL approach enhances writing skills. In order to facilitate data collection, the study adopted a mixed methodology. A set questionnaire, focusing on students' perceptions of the effectiveness of CL in ESL writing classrooms, was administered to the treatment group. As for the teachers, survey questionnaire consisting two parts, (1) Part I related to their perceptions on CL; and (2) Part II related to teaching styles in ESL classrooms, were administered to elicit information from twenty six ESL teachers in location of the survey. Subsequently, semi-structured interviews were undertaken to elicit qualitative data about the issues under study i.e. the effectiveness of CL and ability to be fully engaged in CL activities. As for the student sample, two groups from two different programmes of study were chosen for this study.

The subjects of experimentation were two groups of Part 3 diploma students: Diploma in Business (38 students) and Diploma in Mechanical Engineering (25 students). This study was carried out in a one-semester period (10 weeks). The groups received two hours of CL-based writing instruction per week. Hence, this research attempted to answer the following questions: (1) How do the students in the experimental groups perceive the CL approach?; and (2) What views do tertiary-level ESL teachers have about the CL strategies in their writing classrooms?

Results and Discussion:

A. Demographic Profile: Learners and Teachers

The data indicate that the parents of students Diploma in Business are relatively superior, in terms of education. Many of them hold respectable, top level posts with the government, and in the private sectors. The parents of the students in Diploma in Mechanical Engineering generally appear to be labourers. As the disparity in terms of the socio-economic standings of both sets of parents is indisputable, it is unfair to compare the achievement of the students. Therefore, there will not be any comparison made between the two groups. The twenty-six teachers who participated in the study were teaching English at institutions of higher learning in Malaysia. All possessed postgraduate degrees in ESL though their areas of specialisation were different. Most of the teachers had more than 10 years of experience in teaching English.

B. How Do the Students View the CL?

The students indicate that they favoured CL (Cooperative Learning). As claimed by some researchers (Chen, 2004; Mason, 2006; and Brown, 2008) that the learners in both cases have shown positive outcomes of CL. In IA, 74% of the learners perceived group writing to help them understand assigned tasks well, while 76% responded that group writing fostered exchange of knowledge, information, and

experiences, and 71% said that they received helpful feedback in IB. A majority of the learners (84%) felt that group writing enabled them to help limited learners in the group and at the same time it assisted them to improve their performance in writing skill respectively.

A total of 63% admitted that learners actively participated in writing process. In IB, the learners too perceived group writing to be facilitating writing process. Around 76% of the learners said that group writing helped understanding writing tasks; 80% felt it fostered exchange of knowledge, information, and experiences; and 72% revealed that they received helpful feedback from their peers to complete their assigned tasks. A total of 72% agreed that group writing enabled proficient learners to help limited proficient learners. Interestingly, 96% in IA and 76% in IB perceived that they had improved their writing performance. As previous studies had highlighted that CL facilitated academic advancement of the learners (Azizah, 2002; Mason, 2006; and Brown, 2008), the present finding further strengthens the role of CL in academic performances.

As for social benefits in IA is concerned almost all (95%) while 96% learners perceived group writing to be fun and 68% (IA) and 84% (IB) revealed that they made new friends. This finding concurs with the findings of a previous study (Depaz & Moni, 2008). Furthermore, I. Depaz and R.W. Moni (2008) claimed that group writing creates a “risk-free” environment where the learners are not worried of the adult or teacher’s presence. Learners try out expressions and negotiate meaning with a familiar audience without having to worry about getting everything right. Such an environment creates a “stress-free” learning context (Mason, 2006). A large number, 89% (IA) and 96% (IB) agreed that group work should be continued. At IA, a total of 90% and 96% (IB) of the learners said the maximum group size must be four members. This could be a good reason to avoid “free-riders” in group work (Brown, 2008). If there are too many members in the group, the learners may dwell in unnecessary talk and waste time. As such, three to four members to a group would be an ideal number to make all the members to be committed.

A total of 81% felt that CL enhanced their communication skills, while 87% admitted it fostered team spirit in line with C. Ingleton *et al.* (2000). The majority perceived that CL to be helpful as 76% of the respondents found it to aid problem-solving and enhanced collective efforts rather than individual respectively. A total of 80% admitted that they have greater responsibility of their own as well as for their group’s achievements. Besides, 92% revealed that group writing enhanced communication skills and fostered team spirit which reaffirms Mariam Mohamed Nor (2004) and A. Iwai’s (2004) findings that CL develops communication skills.

When asked if CL is a “Waste of time explaining things to others”, the majority (79%) disagreed to the statement. In the structured interview, a learner said that, “*Though it was difficult getting members to actively participate in tasks, they found it to be less burden as their peers shared the workload*”. Perhaps, the teacher needs to watch the involvement of learners in group work to facilitate group writing. These responses indicate the importance of practicing oneness “swim together” as stressed by D.W. Johnson *et al.* (1991) and D.W. Johnson and R.T. Johnson (1991). Thus, the teacher

needs to ensure that the learners have effective training to participate effectively in group writing. As such, while the intricacies of the English language proved challenging too many, they felt that working in groups made it easier for them to learn and improve their writing skills (Sweeney, Weaven & Herington, 2008).

C. Teachers' Perceptions of the CL

The majority of the teachers revealed that they would use the CL approach in their writing classrooms because it facilitates learning. They believed that CL could be effective if the teachers are successful in encouraging the learners to cooperate with one another.

The use of this approach also encourages feedback, which serves to strengthen it. Unfortunately, the CL approach is perceived as an energy and time-consuming technique. Thus, only 19% used it always, while 22% of the teacher sample used it more than half the time, and 50% used it sometimes. The remaining 9% revealed that they did not employ CL-based group work at all in their writing classrooms. Although the approach was not their favourite, the majority of the teacher sample was optimistic towards the CL approach. They agreed it gave good opportunities for learners to interact with one another during group work and learn from one another which reaffirm the benefits of the approach in writing class as suggested by some researchers like K. Mason (2006) and A. Sweeney, S. Weaven and C. Herington (2008).

Many teachers considered that CL is a good approach for teaching and learning the writing skill, especially when it is combined with the process writing skill of problem-solving. They perceived that the CL-based group work encouraged the learners to brainstorm and discussed the assigned topic in their group. Such discussions give the learners opportunities to have practical contexts to use the language in and to learn from one another. They regarded CL as an appropriate approach in all writing classes because it promotes interaction and meaningful communication. A teacher said, "*Not only does CL break the monotony of individual learning but it also assists the learners retain what is taught better in the writing class and this definitely makes them learn it without pressure*". This opinion is in line with J. Kreie, R.W. Headrick and R. Steiner (2007) who put forward that CL significantly increased learners' retention ability. However, a large proportion of the sample, 39% felt that CL would add to their burden, as they had to do extra work to be prepared for the classroom. This was a disabling factor as A. Sweeney, S. Weaven and C. Herington (2008) had pointed out that teachers need to go the "extra mile" to experience positive outcomes.

Another dimension of CL related to teachers is that it is easier for the teachers to evaluate group projects. A teacher said that "*In CL groups, I have fewer papers to be marked and I also noticed that while working in groups, the learners tend to achieve higher competence levels, increased learning, and motivation*" as also put forward by M.L. Chen (2004). Teachers seemed to like the camaraderie that developed among the learners and the ambiance that was created in class that really had a captive audience.

The teachers thus perceived that CL-based group work provides opportunities for learners in large classes, especially to interact using the language more effectively (Iwai, 2000; and Kreie, Headrick & Steiner, 2007).

In addition, many teachers agreed that CL was a good technique to increase language proficiency because the learners felt more comfortable working with peers. They also revealed that the use of CL increased learners' confidence which corroborates the findings of the previous studies (Mason, 2006). Thus, the teachers perceived this approach to be very useful, though the classroom could be noisy sometimes.

Although the teacher sample perceived CL positively, in the structured interviews about the actual use of CL, the responses revealed otherwise. The majority of the teacher sample said that they had stopped using CL due to their heavy workload and other administrative tasks they choose not to use this approach in their classrooms. However, looking at the benefits, they agreed to consider CL first if they decide to incorporate any new approach in their class. The actual use of the CL approach in reality is not congruent to the perceptions as to the effectiveness and benefits. In other words, the teachers found this approach to be the most beneficial, but the majority have yet to embrace it fully. This finding corroborates with the previous results of J. Kreie, R. W. Headrick and R. Steiner (2007) and A. Sweeney, S. Weaven and C. Herington (2008) revealing that teachers hesitate to use this approach due to the heavy workload and time constraint.

Further comments elicited from the teachers structured interviews revealed that "*the CL approach be used not only writing but for all ESL classes because the learners like the idea of working in groups*". A teacher shared, "*It definitely has a role in ESL writing classrooms*" and "*it encourages confidence, accountability, and increases self esteem*". Another said this approach "*helps the group oriented tasks and learners would be able to achieve their intended goals easily*". Another teacher strongly recommended CL to be used when learners had to complete a lot of projects.

The group projects could reduce the burden of the learners as well as instructors. In addition, many teachers agreed that CL was a good technique to increase language proficiency because the learners felt more comfortable working with peers. They also revealed that the use of CL increased learners' confidence which corroborates the findings of the previous studies (Lancaster & Strand, 2001; and Mason, 2006). Thus, the teachers perceived this approach to be very useful, though the classroom could be noisy sometimes.

Conclusion

Students and teachers perceived CL (Cooperative Learning) to be an effective approach in improving the writing ability in comparison to the TFI (Teacher Fronted Instruction). They agreed that CL also enhanced students' interpersonal skills and created a stress-free learning environment. The students revealed that not only they have improved in the written aspect of the language component, but also in the spoken aspect. The improvement came about as a result of a stress-free

environment, peer coaching, and meaningful and authentic learning experiences. Students became more engaged, motivated, and their attitudes were also positively shaped as they learnt to share and care for their peers.

CL will not take place in the classroom without teachers who employ transactional styles of teaching/learning. Nevertheless, it requires a lot of effort on the teachers' side, especially when they already have so many hours of teaching. It is essential for both teachers and students to be trained for CL activities to bring about effective outcomes.

Further, the teacher has to understand individual differences. Some students do not enjoy working in groups. They prefer to get help from the teacher rather than their friends in class. In such cases, the teacher has to guide the students by giving them space to work individually instead of pushing them into group work.

Some teachers who employ a more traditional approach have found CL lacking in provoking interest and promoting productivity among students when used in the ESL (English as Second Language) writing classroom. However, it is noted here that teachers generally do not like changes in their teaching methods and usually do not make changes unless they perceive that something is not working well.

While it is undoubtedly an effective language learning approach, it also creates opportunities for students to shirk their responsibilities. Thus, CL should be implemented whenever possible with discretion. Moreover, time constraints often prevent the full implementation of the CL approach. Thus, once the speaking test was completed, the researcher had to "steal" the time allotted for speaking to complete the writing sessions for the experimental groups. However, as a teacher, I find that CL is an effective way for me to discover and empower myself in becoming a more reflective teacher. This study illuminated a complex web of language learning and gave me insight into CL.

In short, we can conclude that CL creates better learning opportunities in ESL writing instruction when the "experimental factor" is utilised by practising teachers. It encourages a more interesting and creative approach to language proficiency and this is invaluable, especially with regard to weaker students. That CL in tandem with process-oriented techniques in writing instruction also instils positive values such as cooperation, leadership skills, and interpersonal skills among group members is a plus point.

Recommendations

Recommendations are hereby made to reform the pedagogical approaches to bring about a paradigm shift in the ESL (English as Second Language) classrooms in higher education so that the aspired and envisaged educational reforms can manifest in the true sense. To do so, CL (Cooperative Learning) instruction should be strongly advocated to teachers as an avenue to adopt. Administrators should appreciate that the use of this approach is a time-consuming one and perhaps try to lessen workloads. This would take the toll off teachers who have to shoulder heavy workloads besides planning and preparing CL lessons.

In addition, the decision to reconsider the workload of teachers may bring about a commitment to higher levels of involvement. Teachers should be trained to use the CL approach interactive activities in the classroom. However, small-scale, class-based CL activities can be introduced in the classroom to enhance teaching. To provide tertiary level students with an opportunity to elevate their language skills, collaborative efforts among Curricular Designers, Administrators, and English Teachers must be initiated.

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