

THE EFFECT OF LT COOPERATIVE LEARNING MODEL AND TEACHER’S FEEDBACK ON SECOND-YEAR EFL STUDENTS’ WRITING

Abstract :

The current study aims at evaluating the effects of the Johnsons’ 1987 “Learning Together” model and teacher’s feedback on EFL students’ writing ability. To carry out this research, a true randomized post-test only control group design is relied on. The experimental group practised writing cooperatively through the LT model and received teacher’s feedback, whereas the control group wrote their essays individually. The study results revealed that students in the experimental group produced better assignments than students who wrote individually. The t-test statistically confirmed the obtained results at the .05 level of significance and determined the effectiveness of teacher’s feedback and cooperative learning on EFL students’ writing performance.

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Résumé :

La présente étude vise à évaluer les effets du modèle des Johnsons «Learning Together» (apprendre ensemble) de 1987 et l’évaluation des enseignants sur la compétence rédactionnelle des étudiants d’ALE (anglais comme langue étrangère). Pour mener à bien cette recherche, un véritable post-test aléatoire sur un groupe de contrôle a été utilisé. Le groupe expérimental a pratiqué la rédaction en collaboration suivant le modèle LT suivit de l’évaluation des enseignants, tandis que le groupe de contrôle ont rédigé leurs essais individuellement. Les résultats de l’étude ont révélé que les élèves du groupe expérimental ont produit de meilleures rédactions que les étudiants écrivant individuellement. Le test-t a statistiquement confirmé les résultats obtenus avec un niveau de signification 0,05 et a déterminé l’efficacité de l’apprentissage coopératif sur la performance rédactionnelle des étudiants d’ALE ainsi que l’évaluation des enseignants.

Introduction :

Writing occupies the central position among the literature subjects, and plays a vital role in social, cultural, and academic settings. Furthermore, the development in this mode of communication assists the students’ overall use of language as well as predicts their academic success. In fact, the teaching of writing as a skill attracts papers, articles, journals, and dissertations. However, writing is still an area of lively debate and research. In addition, students in different academic settings are still finding it the most

intellectually demanding, and cognitively complex of the four modes of communicating through language.

The goal of the second-year writing program at the department of English, university of Constantine 1 is to have students master the art of writing effective essays. Students deal with three forms of essay organization: illustration essay, cause and effect essay, and comparison and contrast essay. At the end of the year, they are supposed to be able to write well organized, unified, and effectively communicative essays. Unfortunately, a considerable percentage of students end the year unable to write an effective essay. Thus, it is the aim of this study to investigate whether implementing the LT model of cooperative learning, and the teacher's feedback in the second-year writing classes would help reduce the percentage of students who fail in writing a good essay. The research question addressed in this study is as follows:

Do students who write within the framework of LT cooperative model and receive teacher's feedback throughout the process of composing write better essays than students who write individually?

Therefore, we hypothesize that

If students wrote essays cooperatively and received effective teacher's feedback while writing, their writing ability would be improved.

Literature Review

1.1-The Scope of Writing in Language Classes

For a long time, the study of languages was much more concerned with the spoken rather than the written language (Brooks & Grundy, 1998). The written language was seen as a system to support the learning of oral language, grammar, and vocabulary, not as a skill in its own right (Harmer, 2004; Weigle, 2002). Recently, however, more attention has been given to writing as a skill. In addition, writing "effectively is becoming increasingly important in our global community, and instruction in writing is thus assuming an increasing role in both second and foreign-language education" (Weigle, 2002:1).

Writing is a difficult skill to master for both first and second language learners. It is a complicated and frequently mysterious process. While we can see it just as an act of arranging letters and words on a page, a few moments reflection reveals that writing is much more than that (Torres, 2007). The reason for writing considered as a difficult task is that writing is neither a natural, nor a spontaneous activity. In fact, all people spontaneously learn to speak a language as a result of being exposed to it, but not all people learn to write spontaneously, i.e., writing has to be taught (White, 1981 in Nunan, 1989).

Writing is a skill that fulfils crucial roles in teaching languages. First, writing is the key for students to gain proficiency in the learned language in that it "consolidates and reinforces language learned orally" (Grauberg, 1997: 213). That is, since students take considerable time to plan and revise their written production before it is finally produced, they get a sense of command over the language being taught. This complex process also allows them to discover more about how the language being taught works. In addition, writing nowadays is the primary means for evaluating students' performance, and abilities in mastering a given language (Harmer, 2004). Visibly then, good writing "increases your ability to earn good grades in college." (Downing, 2011: 235).

1.2-Cooperative Writing

Hamp-Lyons and Heasley (2006) argue that competent writing is considerably the last language skill that is acquired by both native speakers and foreign/second language learners and that the atmosphere in the writing classroom has a great effect on students' writing performance. Thus, according to them, students need to write in a warm, supportive, and non-threatening atmosphere in which they help each other and point to each others' strengths and weaknesses. Moreover, Weigle (2002, 19) contends that "it is important to view writing not solely as the product of an individual, but as a social and cultural act". Cooperative learning is one of the successful and widely used social activities that offer students the opportunity to exchange ideas confidently while working and interacting with classmates in each team. Students in cooperative writing groups write with one or more colleagues on a single product. Each team member actively contributes to the writing assignment through writing together, sharing ideas, responding to each other's writing via feedback, monitoring and evaluating each other's writing.

In cooperative writing groups, "Peerreviewersoffer writers multiple perspectives on "what works" in the compositionand what pointsneedto be clarified or expanded. This broaderaudiencefor their writingalso gives studentsagreater sense of purpose for the writing task." (Beers and Howell, 2005: 65). In a similar vein, Hamp-Lyons and Heasley (2006) note that cooperative writing provides each student writer with a reader, and makes the writing process more realistic and enjoyable. "Individual students also found themselves saying and writing things they might not have come up with on their own, and the group's research was broader than an individual's normally was." Harmer (2001, 260). Moreover, cooperative learning assists teachers in giving detailed and constructive feedback because the teacher in a cooperative writing class deals with a small number of groups instead of dealing with many individuals (Boughey, 1997; in Harmer, 2001).

1.3-Learning Together (LT) Cooperative Model

According to Slavin (1995), LT was developed by Johnson and Johnson, 1987, at the University of Minnesota. In this method, students work in heterogeneous groups of four or five to achieve a common goal. This common goal will be achieved if students learn, discuss, exchange and share ideas together, then "The groups hands in a single sheet, and receive praise and rewards based on the group's product" (Slavin, 1995: 11). Likewise, Johnson and Johnson (1975; in Slavin, 1985: 8) strongly argue that the LT cooperative model is "the closest to pure cooperation".

According to Ellis (2005), LT model is based on a generic group process theory applicable to all disciplines and grade levels. Students in LT are placed in formal or informal base groups that are charged with solving problems, discussing issues, carrying out projects and other tasks. LT model is based on the five elements of cooperative learning; thus, the absence of one element leads to unstructured group work (Slavin, 1985; 1995; Ellis, 2005). Moreover, Jacoband Mattson (1995: 232) argue that LT is "a framework for applying cooperative learning principles (Johnson & Johnson, 1975; Holubec, & Roy, 1984). It does not have a specific method of organization, but outlines decisions teachers need to take to apply cooperative learning".

1.4-The Nature and Role of Teachers' Feedback

Although the approaches of teaching writing have changed over the years, teachers' feedback on students' writing remains for both students and teachers "a critical, non-negotiable aspect of writing instruction" Ferris & Hedgcock (2005: 185). Atkinson & Connor (2008) consider teachers' feedback on student writing as a critical part of writing instruction, and contend that this feedback can have different forms such as face-to-face dialogue in teacher-student writing conferences, or written comments at various points in the writing process. Feedback helps the writer recognize the different problems in his writing because "Through feedback, the writer learns where he or she has misled, or confused the reader by not supplying enough information, illogical organization, lack of development of ideas, or something like inappropriate word-choice or tense" Keh (1990:295).

According to Harmer (2001: 110), feedback is one of the devices that teachers can use to improve their students' writing because "when we respond, we say how the text appears to us, and how successful we think it has been and, sometimes, how it could be improved. Such responses are vital at various stages of the writing process cycle". Arndt (1993: 91) sees writing as "an interactive, social process of construction of meaning between writer and reader", and asserts the crucial role that feedback plays in this social process. In addition, Ferris, Pezone, Tade, and Tinti (1997; in Lee, 2007: 4) claim that though responding to students' writing is the most complicated task for writing teachers, its positive effects on motivating students and improving their writing cannot be denied.

Unlike the earlier paradigms in which teachers responded to the students' finished piece of writing for the aim of justifying the given grade, different scholars today strongly suggest giving comments and feedback to students during the process of composing; that is, while students are still drafting (Ferris, 2003). Ferris (2003) strongly supports this opinion arguing that "feedback is effective when it is delivered at intermediate stages of the writing process" (p. 122). In addition, Booth (2011) argues that verbal and written feedback is influential when given to students while they are writing drafts because students during the composing process "are more inclined to use it to revise and edit their drafts than they would be if they received the suggestions on a graded, polished copy" (p. 139).

2- Population and Sample

The population in this study is 770 second-year EFL students from the Department of Foreign Languages at University of Constantine 1. From this population, we constructed the sample that encompasses 54 students. The participants in the sample are randomly assigned to an experimental group (n = 30), and control group (n = 24). The number of participants was larger in both groups, but some papers were excluded from the study because of their writers' absences during the study, or when the post-test was administered. Each group had two sessions of "Written Expression" per week.

3- Methodology

A true randomized post-test only control group design, adopted from Chandra & Sharma, (2007), is used in this research. Using this design, subjects are randomly assigned to groups, exposed to the independent variable, and then post-tested. This design is “one of the simplest and most powerful experimental designs. The available subjects are assigned to two groups through randomization which controls all possible relevant extraneous variables”. (Chandra and Sharma, 2007: 371).

4- Research Procedures

In this design, we randomly chose two groups from our population. Then, two random samples of about 30 subjects were assigned to experimental and control group condition by tossing a coin. After assigning the subjects into two groups, the experimental group practised writing cooperatively through the Learning Together model and received teacher’s feedback, while students in the control group wrote their essays individually through the conventional method for a semester period of time. After that period of time, the subjects of both groups were administered a writing test. The mean scores of the groups were compared to determine the effectiveness of combining the LT cooperative learning model and teacher’s feedback by using a t-test computation.

4. 1-The Experimental Group

The application of the LT model and teacher feedback in the experimental group was carried out, applying the following steps: (1) Before implementing the LT method in the writing classroom, we have presented mini-lessons introducing the concept of cooperative learning. (2) We assigned students in the classroom to four member heterogeneous groups. (3) We assigned roles to students. (4) We gave the essay question to the whole class. When students completed the planning phase, we provided feedback on each group's plan. Then, students wrote about their topic in details to produce their first draft. While students were discussing their first draft, we were walking around the class and moved from group to group to provide feedback (written/oral whatever fits). (5) Following the teacher’s comments, each group had to revise their drafts, and upload them to write the final one. Finally, each group analyzed how well their group was functioning, and presented only one essay for each group.

4. 2-The Control Group

In the class that was exposed to the traditional teaching technique, writing tasks were carried out by students individually. The steps in the implementation phase were as follows: (1) The teacher presented the essay question; (2) Individual brainstorming; (3) Writing the first draft; (4) Revising the first draft in class individually. After revision, each student wrote his final draft and submitted it to the teacher.

5-Post-test Description and Analysis

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As a final step to realize the purpose of this study, students in both groups were given a post-test to check the improvement of the participants in the writing performance. The post-test was to write an in-class essay within 90 minutes time period. Correction of students' essays was conducted carefully because it is at this stage that we can measure the extent to which the teaching method was effective and efficient. For this reason, and more importantly for the sake of being objective, students' essays were analytically scored on five components of writing which are content, organization, vocabulary, language use and mechanics. The writing samples scored using a modified version of the ESL composition profile by (Jacobs et al., 1981, cited in Weigle, 2002: 116). In this study, the scores are equally divided between the five aspects because we see that our population which is 2nd year-university students have dealt with all these aspects during their instruction at university. So, each component was assigned a grade ranging from 1 to 4 using a four-point scale: 1 (very poor), 2 (fair to poor), 3 (good to average), and 4 (Excellent to very good) these account for 20 as a whole score for each assignment.

6- Results of the Post-test

The overall results of the post-test for the experimental and control group are shown in the following table:

		N	SD	Mean Difference
EXP Group	11.97	30	1.60	
CTR Group	10.54	24	1.72	1.43

Table X

1-Writing Performance / Post-test Results

As showed in the above table, the mean score and standard deviation of the EXP group in the post-test equal 11.97 and 1.60 respectively. This demonstrates that the students' level in writing is approximately good. Then, the CTR group got (10.54) and (1.72), in that the mastery level in writing for the CTR is average. A comparison of the means of the two groups indicated that the participants vary in their writing competences, and that there is a considerable difference (1.43) between the two groups. These results imply the EXP group that wrote essays under the LT cooperative model and teacher's feedback had better level in the writing skills than the CTR group.

To further investigate the differences in the writing ability between the EXP and CTR groups, students' performance in each writing aspect is compared. The mean scores for the five writing aspects confirm the perfection of the EXP group over the CTR group as clearly indicated in table (2). The results indicate that the EXP group had the highest means compared to the CTR group in the five items of the grading criteria which are content, vocabulary, organization, grammar and mechanics, but with different distinctions. In content and organization, both groups were in good-average mean with a slight perfection (mean diff. = 0.12 in content, and the same mean diff. 0.12 in organization) of the EXP group over that of the CTR group. However, the EXP

group was better with significant differences in vocabulary, language use, and mechanics with mean difference of 0.37, 0.56, and 0.26 respectively.

The obtained results also point out that the five writing aspects ranked similarly in both the EXP and CTR groups with content ranked highest by mean score ($M = 2.70$) for the EXP group and ($M = 2.58$) for the CTR, followed by organization with ($M = 2.50$) for the EXP group and ($M = 2.38$) for the CTR group, and vocabulary ($M = 2.37$) for the EXP group and ($M = 2$) for the CTR group, then language use with ($M = 2.27$) for the EXP group and ($M = 1.71$) for the CTR group. Mechanics was rated lowest in both groups with ($M = 2.13$) in the EXP group and ($M = 1.87$) for the CTR group. Moreover, the results of the study reveal that the participants in both groups, but with significant variation, had struggles with language use and mechanics compared to the three other aspects.

Aspects	Group	Mean	SD	Mean Diff.
Content	Experimental	2.70	0.53	0.12
	Control	2.58	0.71	
Organization	Experimental	2.50	0.50	0.12
	Control	2.38	0.74	
Vocabulary	Experimental	2.37	0.46	0.37
	Control	2	0.70	
Language Use	Experimental	2.27	0.62	0.56
	Control	1.71	0.61	
Mechanics	Experimental	2.13	0.57	0.26
	Control	1.87	0.61	

Table 2-Descriptive Statistics of the Five Aspects of Written Performance in the Post-test

7- Discussion and Interpretation of the Results

Although group work and teachers' feedback are largely used in the writing classes, writing groups are usually not structured, and teachers' feedback is usually given haphazardly at the end product of students' writing. Hence, the aim of this study was to determine whether the use of structured groups based on LT cooperative model proposed by Johnson and Johnson (1987) and selective teacher's feedback that is given immediately after the first draft have a considerable positive effect on second-year students' essay writing. To achieve the aim of this study, it was hypothesized that

H^0 = There is no significant difference between the achievement of the EXP group, and the CTR group with 0.05 level of significance, and 52 degrees of freedom.

H_a = There is difference between the achievement of the EXP group, and the achievement of the CTR group with 0.05 level of significance, and 52 degrees of freedom.

Based on the results of the data analysis, the null hypothesis of the present study is rejected. So, we can claim that there is a significant relationship between LT cooperative model, teacher's feedback, and EFL students' writing achievement. The results of the t-test analysis confirmed that

these results are statistically significant and that the probability that the difference between the means arose by chance is less than 0.05.

Both the results of the study and the theoretical framework support the use of cooperative learning and teachers' feedback in the writing classes. It has been claimed that these are successful techniques which create an atmosphere that stimulates students and raises their aptitudes. Thus, interaction in cooperative writing groups provides learners with opportunities for the exchange of thoughts, and peer feedback raises their motivations and offers them a warm and encouraging atmosphere to write. Moreover, Teacher's feedback is an effective tool that has positive effects in the writing class, and more than that, teachers' feedback is a critical part of the students' writing instruction.

Overall, this study shows that if well trained and correctly implemented, cooperative learning and teacher's feedback would benefit and satisfy both teachers and students. In addition to the obtained supporting and positive results, we observed that students who wrote in groups had more fun than students who wrote individually. Throughout the experimental process, students in the treatment group were quite involved, enthusiastic, and motivated when they were writing. In addition, we perceived from the treatment period that providing feedback for groups is easier than giving feedback for each student individually, and it saves the teacher's time and energy. So, providing feedback to cooperative writing groups is an effective teaching technique, especially for crowded classes. In addition, when students write in groups, they have a chance to explain their ideas and thought to their peers; at the same time, they benefit from their peers' review and suggestions.

Conclusion

This is an experimental study that was carried out with the aim of verifying the effect of Learning Together cooperative model and teacher's feedback on second-year LMD university students' writing. Two groups were chosen, and a dependent t-test was conducted to measure the efficacy of the used treatment. The main findings of the study proved that implementing the Johnsons' (1987) model and providing teacher's feedback throughout the writing process play a very important role in improving students' writing and minimizing their mistakes in the different aspects of writing. The implication that can be drawn from these findings is that the Learning Together cooperative model and teacher's feedback can be effectively used in EFL writing classrooms to improve students' writing proficiency. In addition, these techniques have many implications for future research and for classroom pedagogy as well.

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