EFL Learners' Attitudes towards Cooperative Learning in the Writing Skill

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Abstract

Cooperative learning is an effective modern learning style. It includes small group's work that implies individuals of divergent abilities to accomplish specific group goal. This study investigated Kordofan University (Sudan) EFL students' views on learning writing skills through cooperative strategies. The researcher adopted both descriptive and analytical methods and a questionnaire was employed for data collection. A random sample of (41) EFL learners out of (55), in the Faculty of Education, responded to the questionnaire. Frequencies and percentage values were utilized for data analysis. The study has found that the majority of the participants were in favor of cooperative writing learning strategies via positive interactions, individual accountability and group processing.

Keyterms*:* cooperative operative learning – writing skill – EFL learners

1. Introduction

It is worth mentioning that numerous current researches and pedagogical instructions in English as a foreign or second language education shift the focus from lecturer-fronted hall to learners-centered performance running after promoting the target language acquisition. Working cooperatively students can approach the language in a more naturalistic environment and relatively reduce foreign language learning stress. Nonetheless, the ability to employ cooperative learning strategies in lecturing as in creating and introducing ample successful opportunities to raise writing strategies awareness among learners for enhancing linguistic competence implies a skillful ELT lecturer (Gonzales& Torres 2016).

1.1 Statement of the Problem

Among the various difficulties encountered in foreign language learning contexts is that in an overloaded lecture room a student may not get sufficient opportunities to interact utilizing the target language for communicating his/her intentions and thoughts and maintain peers comments and participations. Typically, the bright students might present accurate writings whereas the weak students are hesitant, do not try or even lack knowledge needed to carry out tasks. Undoubtedly, such environments are in demands for cooperative writing learning, that in a way or another, could bring all learners to work together, and which can be set as an implementation of learner-centered strategies.

1.2 Goals of the Study

* To shed some light on the concept and domain of cooperative learning.
* To explore the attitudes of the learners towards using cooperative learning during the writing lectures at Kordofan University.
* To broaden EFL educators' experiences in coping with the writing skills.

1.3 The Study Method

To conduct this study, the investigator will follow both descriptive and analytical methods. Data will be collected from secondary sources, i.e., reference books, journals, the Internet and the previous studies as well as primary sources. Forty-one undergraduate students in semester four will participate through a one-time questionnaire. Then, the obtained data will be coded and analyzed to reveal the findings of the research. It is well known that a rich source for undertaking the present study will review the relevant literature.

2. Literature Review

In the related literature, the researcher has indicated the definitions and elements of cooperative learning, its advantages and limitations, the role of cooperative learning in the language classroom, besides the previous studies.

2. 1 Concept of Cooperative Learning

Various educators have provided explanatory definitions about cooperative learning (CL). It has been explained as "a group learning activity organized so that learning is dependent on the socially structured exchange of information between learners in groups and in which each learner is held accountable for his or her own learning and is motivated to increase the learning of others" (Olsen and Kagan1992, as cited in Chinnery2008). Similarly, Firestone (2018) highlights cooperative learning is held in a mixed-ability class where classmates are divided into groups and rewarded according to the group efforts rather than individual member's success. It is worth mentioning that cooperative learning was firstly devoted for general education, then several researchers and practitioners applied it on second language teaching and learning (High 1993; Holt 1993; McCafferry; Jacobs; and DaSilvaIddings 2006 ibid 2008). The small groups are well structured to promote learner learning and interdependence, classmates are given a task and they work collaboratively to accomplish the task, each student takes responsibility and is held accountable for helping to complete the task, thus, success depends on the work of everyone in the cooperative group (Olsen, access 2018).

Likewise, Richards et al (2001) agree with them and emphasize *"Co-operative-learning activities are often used in COMMUNICATIVE LANGUAGE TEACHING. The use of Co-operative Learning principles in language teaching is known as Cooperative Language Learning."* In addition to that, Richards (2008:6) argues that content-based instruction, cooperative language learning and task-oriented instructions are all updated applications of the communicative approach. In sequence, cooperative language learning (CLL) is an instructional strategy that maximizes achievements engaging pairs and small groups of students in the classroom under certain conditions to accomplish a common goal. Additionally, various cooperative learning activities are mentioned such as comprehending and indicating a concept, solving a problem or conflict, interpreting and analyzing a situation (Akhtar et al 2012). Nonetheless, some educators mentioned a significant difference between CL and the traditional group/pair work. In the classical group activities learners are assigned to work without drawing attention to the functions of the group. On the contrary, CL is relatively, more organized, planned and examined (Jacobs, 1997; Johnson & Johnson, 1994; cited in Akhtar (2012).

Firestone (2018) highlighted both the students and the instructor might need some practice several times in order to get accustomed to and feel comfortable with this learning/teaching CL approach. Each group is normally preferred to be a mixture of bright and weak - two to five students. Taking these into accounts, the lecturer herself is responsible of setting up the groups and the learners are given no choice to change sites. These structured groups can continue up to, for instance, two months or a whole semester.

2.2 Features of Cooperative Learning

Johnson & Johnson (2009); Johnson et al (1994 cited in Neo et al 2012) pointed out five characteristics essential to successful cooperative learning: positive interdependence, individual accountability, interactions enhancement, appropriate social skills and group structuring. The positive interdependence implies outcome, means and boundary. Outcomes are objectives and rewards which enhance productivity and achievement. Means interdependence contains resource, role and task. The three terms are dependent on each other. Boundary interdependence refers to the binds that bring members together as a union. All these types of interdependence are overlapping and related to each other. Hence, success of an individual is associated with the success of the other group mates. The positive interdependence which brings the group members together creates feeling of responsibility as in facilitating and completing the work of other participants in the group.

In individual accountability, tasks are assigned to the group members in that everyone is responsible and accountable for to carry out a certain part of the work. The work of each student in the group is evaluated and the feedback is given to the individual and the group to compare it against a standard norm. Then, promoted interactions should be taught to students in order to obtain high level cooperation.

It implies learners know and trust each other, accept and aid each other, manage conflicts constructively. Beside, interpersonal skill indicates a member gets an opportunity to communicate his/her own expressions and thoughts. Group structuring is set up to enhance the effectiveness with which the group mates carry out the group goal. .A group that includes bright students and weak ones is pointed out to gain high achievement. Positive relationships are developed between participants who are taught social skills and involved in group processing. Similarly, Gonzales and Torres (2016) provided interesting explanations to the five characteristics of CL indicated as follows:

- positive interdependence : "sink or swim together"
- promotive interaction : "promote each other's success"
- individual accountability : "no hitchhiking, no social loafting"
- interpersonal skills : "ask clarifying questions to members"
- group processing : "ask what has been a success and what can be improved"

2.3 Advantages of using Cooperative Learning

Numerous positive features are attributable to CLL such as creating chances for naturalistic second language learning through learners' interactions. There are great differences between learning about a language and actually using the language. In the traditional classroom students study lots and lots of courses about the various aspects of the language; on the contrary, when they tend to utilize it they lack the functional fluency. CLL enhances instruction methodology as more explanation to language items and communication strategies are developed through the interactive tasks. Besides, CLL promotes students' motivation and reduces stress to develop a positive affective classroom environment. Of course, acquiring and using a second language can cause stress. In teacher-fronted classroom, questions are set up in front of all students in that some do not get the correct answer or apprehend public and such situations considered to be threatening for language learning. That is to say researchers indicate that stress has a negative impact on learners' attitudes and languages learning (Zegarra 2008, Kagan 2009). Additionally, Olsen (2018) pinpoints many benefits in using cooperative learning strategies such as funny, interactive and developing critical thinking.

2.4 Potential Limitations of Cooperative Learning

Three notes are pointed out as drawback on cooperative learning. In the first place, a great challenge of cooperative learning implementation is that it is dependent on successful group dynamic function. Conflicts between the group mates may reduce their ability to work together if they lack the conflict resolution skill. The high level students may complain from the learning ability of the weak teammates, or might take roles of leadership whether they are assigned to them or not and diminish learning. Secondly, there are uneven workload and assessment. The bight learners may dominate work running after facilitation and saving time, at the same time, ignoring weak members' participation and learning. Additionally, it is often difficult to assess an individual member of a group; hence, all the group mates awarded the same grade regardless of how much a person participated. Finally, classroom management challenges instructors. Students often as working together need to talk to each other and this may lead to off topic chatters and class confusion (Bartsch 2017). In general, cooperative learning demands a skillful instructor.

2.5 Using Cooperative Learning in English Language Context

Divergent researches and studies worldwide have been conducted to validate the effectiveness of cooperative learning and attitudes towards using it in education. However, the following investigations are restricted to student's attitudes in EFL classroom. Among these is Er and Atac (2014) study which was carried out to emphasize ELT university students' views on utilizing CL. The researchers have followed descriptive analytical method and inquired students in different faculties. A questionnaire was adopted to collect data and the findings exhibited that the respondents pinpointed benefits and limitations in CL. Additionally; they mentioned gender differences that is positive supportive female students.

In the same year, Farzaneh and Nejadansari (2014) have introduced a paper to highlight learners' attitudes towards employing CL in reading comprehension at intermediate level. Their questionnaire results are that the students indicated positive support for using CL. A third research was presented by Ali (2017) to estimate the gender variations in CL when learning the writing skill based on English for Ethiopia primary level. The data were collected through questionnaires, interviews and observations.

The subjects proposed favorable views towards using CL in the writing skills. Besides, the study showed insignificant statistical gender difference, that is, female students were in favor of applying CL in English writing. In contrast the investigator found out various drawbacks in implementation such as large classes, teachers were unable to follow up their students appropriately, learners frequently turned to use their mother tongue rather than the target language, there was no time limit for the activities, and there was no assessment for the collaborative writing tasks. Despite the aforementioned limitations, the researcher preferred to teach the writing lessons through CL in the Pupils' English textbook.

Relatively, the present study differs a bit from the previous ones, for instance, it was oriented to investigate the students' views about the cooperative writing skills learning at tertiary level in Sudanese settings. The usual lecture time for teaching the writing course was two hours weekly in which the students have to spent most of the time working collaboratively to carry out the tasks. The total mark in the writing course was one hundred- twenty five were devoted to CL activities during the lecture throughout the term, while seventy five for the final test. Hence, the cooperative group maintained time limit and assessment. In addition to that, the total number of the learners was not too large; and it was neither problematic nor disturbing, to some extent, to follow up or monitor the lecture hall.

3. Research Methodology

This section of the current study focuses on the procedures adopted in the empirical study to emphasize students' attitudes towards using cooperative language learning during the writing lectures. In other words, it outlines the sample, tools of data collection and the statistical measurements for data analysis.

3.1 Participants

The respondents for this research were 41 (16 males and 25 females) university non-native speaker students of English out of 55; in semester four at the Faculty of Education, Kordofan University, Sudan during the year 2018. Their ages are approximately between 18- 22 and they were all fresh students. The group is homogeneous, that is to say, Arabic is their mother tongue or at least a means for communication in the university environment.

3.2 Instruments

In order to determine EFL students' views about utilizing CL in learning writing a questionnaire was administered to them. It contained 16 statements. This tool maintained validity and reliability. That is to say, all the questionnaire items are largely focused and covered the five essential characteristics of CL. Furthermore, a common scale to measure person's reaction to something is the **Likert scale** which is graded as 1. Agree 2. Strongly agree 3. Disagree 4. Strongly disagree. Thus, the questionnaire employed both content and construction validity. It is worth mentioning that the investigator has used tables, percentage values and graphs to display, analyze and interpret the gathered information.

4. Displaying and Analyzing the Results of the Questionnaire

The obtained data are presented in five tables typical to the five essential characteristics of CL, followed by comments either positive or negative support. The investigator has employed this assessment on the basis of summating the categories 'agree' and 'strongly agree' on one side; and 'disagree' and 'strongly disagree' on the other one.

Table (4-1) Participants' responses to the 'positive interaction' element of CL.

No.	Statements	Agree		Disagree	
		Frequency	percentage	frequency	percentage
1	I like to work in a group with my classmates	39	95%	2	5%
2	We help each other to achieve the group goal	37	90%	4	10%
3	Each student success depends on the success of all the group members	35	85%	6	15%

The statistical scores above explain that the majority of the subjects who responded to the questionnaire (95 %) preferred group work with their classmates. Similarly, 90 % help each other to attain the group aims and 85% indicate an individual' achievement rely on the success of all the team members. Hence, these results show positive support for CL

Table (4-2) Respondents' views on the second structure of CL- individual accountability

No.	Statements	Agree		Disagree	
		Frequency	percentage	frequency	percentage
4	Each member of the group has a certain part of the work	28	68%	12	29%
5	In cooperative learning each member produces his or her own work	33	81%	7	17%
6	We appreciate and listen to the individual work	38	93%	3	17%

It is apparent that most of the subjects (68%, 81%, 93% respectively) pinpoint each group member has a specific work to produce and they listen to and encourage the group mates. Only one questionnaire is odd as the participants has written nothing as an answer to statement (4). Thus, the sample is in favor of the second element of cooperative learning.

Table (4-3) Responses of the sample to the 'promoted interaction' dimension

No.	Statements	Agree		Disagree	
		Frequency	percentage	frequency	percentage
7	Face to face interaction helps me to communicate with students	40	97 %	1	3 %
8	Group work makes the writing exercises easier	30	73 %	11	27 %
9	I find working cooperatively motivating	35	85 %	5	12 %

It is almost all the respondents emphasize face to face interaction help them to interact with each other. Additionally, statements (8) & (9) are confirmed by the sample, i.e., 73% state group work facilitate the writing tasks, 85% find out working cooperatively motivating. However, one participant left the options null (did not give any answer). These findings are acceptable for positive support of the third characteristics of CL.

Table (4-4) Descriptive statistics of the fourth element of cooperative learning 'interpersonal skills'

| No.	Statements	Agree		Disagree	
		Frequency	percentage	frequency	percentage
10	In cooperation I get more chances to use English	35	85 %	5	12 %
11	I feel save to express my ideas in cooperative learning	31	76 %	10	24%
12	Cooperative learning helps us to solve language difficulties	37	90%	3	7 %
13	Group peers facilitate understanding the language activities	34	83 %	6	14 %

The statistical analysis reveals that, to a great extent, the subjects agree in cooperation they get more opportunities to use English, express their ideas freely, solve language problems and group mates help understanding language items. On the contrary, a minority pinpoint disagreement to the fourth element of CL. (12%, 24%, 7%, 14%). Beside, four respondents did not choose any of the options in statements (10), (12) and (13). All in all, these claims provide positive outcomes.

Table (4-5) Attitudes towards groupprocessing

No.	Statements	Agree		Disagree	
		Frequency	percentage	frequency	percentage
14	In group learning the bright students help the weak ones	34	83%	7	17 %
15	All the group mates support and benefit from each other	37	90 %	4	10 %
16	I enjoy the writing task more when I work with other students	25	61 %	15	37 %

The above table presents that most of sample (83%) believe in team learning the bright learners assist the weak ones, (90%) confirm all the group members get benefits in working together, (61%) manifest enjoyment in the group writing activities. One participants left the options empty in question (16). Hence, most of the answers favored CL. The fore coming chart provide a clear illustration of the EFL undergraduate students' opinions towards the five essential characteristics of cooperative writing learning.

Chart (4-1) Descriptive Statistics for the participants' views on CL elements
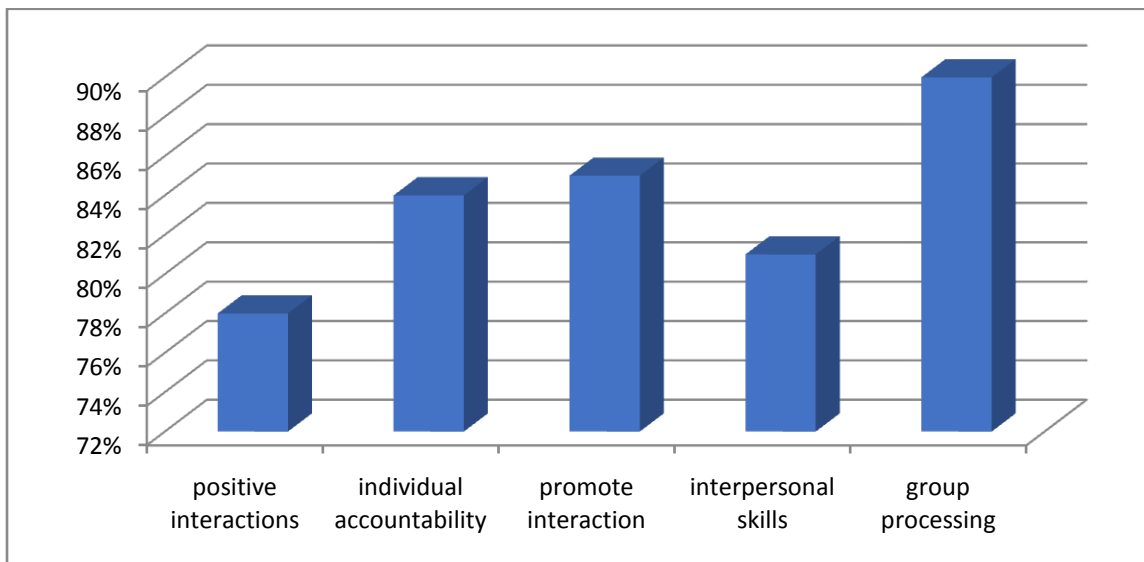
5. Conclusion

The research paper in focus investigated the utility of cooperative learning in coping with the writing skills at tertiary level. To attain the goals of the study, a questionnaire was administered to the EFL undergraduate students and which mentioned in advance. The sample was randomly selected from semester four learners who studied two courses entitled (1) an introduction to writing (2) advance writing. Hence, the participants are supposed to have good opinions about the effective strategies of how to learn the writing skills.

The findings of the study have drawn that the majority of the subjects confirmed positive attitudes towards cooperative learning activities in dealing with the writing courses. The supportive results of the entire questionnaire items were above 60% which regarded as high agreement and that could be acknowledged as satisfying in handling up-to-date ELT issues. When some structured writing tasks are carried out in class and under the lecturer supervision, one could guarantee the learner him/herself has practiced writing and in progress.

On the contrary, a minority of the respondents stated inadequacy of cooperative writing learning strategies. Therefore, more action and clarification still desired to those structural elements since CL is an effective modern application of the communicative language learning. In general, this investigation supports the positive findings of the previous studies for utilizing CLL techniques in acquiring the writing skill and promoting language acquisition.

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