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LEARNING BY COLLABORATION: THE IMPACT OF COOPERATIVE LEARNING ON STUDENTS' ESSAY WRITING SKILLS AT GRADUATION LEVEL IN PAKISTAN

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Essay writing is considered a significant skill at graduation level in Pakistan. However, it is taught in traditional teacher-centered ways in most of the colleges and universities where students do not get a chance to collaborate and interact with other class fellows. Kagan (1992) has suggested the use of cooperative learning in teaching writing to students. This research was carried out to find the impact of cooperative learning on students' essay writing skills at graduation level in a public sector university in Pakistan. The main objective of the current study was to determine whether cooperative learning could be used as an effective method for teaching essay writing skills at graduation level in Pakistan. In this regard, an experiment was conducted to see the impact. Experimental group was given a treatment in the form of cooperative learning technique whereas control group was taught as usual. The instruments used in the present study were pretest and posttest. The data collected through pretest and posttest were analyzed through descriptive and inferential statistics. The students' writing performance was assessed employing the writing evaluation rubric in Ismail's (2006). The five writing components, content, vocabulary, organization, grammar, and mechanics were analyzed. Findings of the study suggested that the overall performance of the experimental group was significantly better than that of the control group on posttest. This study proved that there was a positive impact of cooperative learning on students' essay writing skills and that cooperative learning could be used as an effective technique to teach essay writing skills at graduation level.

Keywords: Cooperative learning, Traditional teaching, Essay writing.

Introduction

The popularity of English language is on continuous rise in Pakistan. The importance of teaching English language in Pakistan is continually on increase and it is a mandatory subject in most of the schools and colleges. The English language learners need to have a strong grip on the English language communication skills, including reading, writing, listening and speaking. Out of these four skills, writing is very important as it is considered a powerful medium to express one's thoughts and perceptions. Though different methods are being adopted in teaching writing skill but the dominant one adopted in Pakistani schools, colleges, and universities is the traditional methodology for teaching writing in the classrooms. As a result of this traditional methodology, learners cram the already available material and regurgitate it in the tests and exams. Such cramming habit does not develop creativity and linguistic competence in students.

Kagan (1992) has recommended the incorporation of cooperative learning methodology for teaching writing. He described cooperative learning a type of active learning where students are divided in small groups to carry out specific tasks. Researchers like Kagan (1989) claimed that teaching through cooperative learning method can develop linguistic, social, and communicative competence among learners.

Literature Review

Harmer (2006) in his study concluded that writing in groups is effective as students found the activity motivating when they discussed the topics with their peers, had peer assessment and attained group's goals. Kagan (1994) supported Harmer's views that showed students' performance in writing was significantly better when co-operative learning was incorporated in the classroom. Similarly, Ekawat (2010) conducted a study in Bangkok to see the effects of co-operative learning on EFL university students' summary writing. The findings of his study revealed that participants produced more accurate statements and fewer grammatical errors in their summary writing after the intervention of the cooperative learning method they received in the study. Ismail's (2006) study on Malaysian students concluded that cooperative learning had positive effects on students' five writing components including content, vocabulary, organization, grammar and mechanics. As a result, the positive effects of cooperative learning enhanced the writing performance of the students. Additionally, studies conducted by Ahangari and Samadian (2014) in Iran, Khan (2008) in Pakistan, and Chen (2006) in Taiwan revealed a positive impact on the writing skills of the Iranian, Pakistani, and Taiwanian EFL/ESL learners respectively.

Most of the studies on co-operative learning in writing have been conducted in different countries like Bangkok, Malaysia, Iran, and Taiwan. Cooperative learning technique has been used successfully in different subjects like Mathematics, Science, English, etc. at school and college level in these countries. In Pakistan, some research on cooperative learning has been conducted in subjects like Mathematics, Social Studies and English at elementary and higher secondary level. However, there is very little research conducted at graduation or higher level in Pakistan. Therefore, the aim of the present study was to see the impact of cooperative learning on students' essay writing skills at graduation level in Pakistan.

Methodology

Participants

In order to conduct research on the issue in hand, the students of graduation from a public university in Pakistan were considered population of the study. All of the students were females and belonged to the age group 18-20 years. All of them had studied English as a compulsory subject in their schools and colleges till higher secondary level. A sample of 60 students was drawn out of 500 students of graduation through simple random sampling to avoid personal biases. Since it was a small-scale research so the sample size was kept 60.

Research Design

In this study, the researcher made use of the quantitative research method. This study was experimental in nature. 30 students were made experimental group randomly and 30 acted as control group. In the experimental group, 6 heterogeneous groups were formed on the basis of English teacher's perception and the result of mid-term exam. The control group was taught through traditional methodology whereas the experimental group was taught through cooperative learning technique. Cooperative learning was the independent variable, whereas essay writing skills served as dependent variable in this study. The randomized pretest-posttest control group design was employed. Two groups of the subjects were used,

with both groups being measured or observed twice. The first measurement served as the pretest, the second as the posttest. Random assignment was used to form the groups. The measurements or observations were collected at the same time for both groups. The data collection tools used in the present study were pre-test and post-test.

Procedure of the Experiment

To study the effect of cooperative learning on students' essay writing skills, an experiment was conducted at a public university in Punjab, Pakistan. The experimental group consisting of 30 students received treatment in the form of cooperative learning instruction while the control group students received instruction as usual from the subject-teacher during the same period of university timetable. The treatment on experimental group was conducted personally. There was no chance of mixing of the students of the control group with students of the experimental group. The treatment started on April 4, 2011 and ended on May 30, 2011 after 20 sessions of cooperative learning instruction. A post-test was administered to both the experimental and the control group students at the end of the treatment period in order to find the impact of cooperative learning on students' essay writing skills. Class teachers and English language experts were involved in the construction of both pretest and posttest. For pretest, students wrote a narrative essay on the topic "A memorable journey" and an argumentative essay on "Should boys and girls be in separate classes?" for forty-five minutes each and the word limit for these essays was 300-500 words. For posttest, students wrote a narrative essay on the topic " My first day in college" and an argumentative essay on "Should all students wear uniform?" for forty-five minutes each and the word limit for these essays was 300-500 words. In this way, both tests were made equivalent. At the start of the lesson, the teacher introduced the class to co-operative learning, telling them that co-operative learning is more than just sitting and working together in groups. In the experimental group, the students were divided into six groups. All the students were given the same topic for essay writing. Then, students were briefed about jigsaw writing, which is one of the techniques in Kagan's structures of co-operative learning. Jigsaw is a grouping strategy in which members of the class are organized into "jigsaw" groups. After forming jigsaw groups in the class, the instructor organized an "expert" group that contained one member from each jigsaw group. Members of the expert group worked together to learn from their peers in the expert group and then returned to their jigsaw groups to share their learning. In this way, the work of the expert groups was quickly disseminated throughout the class, with each person taking responsibility for sharing a piece of the puzzle. Finally, each student was assessed in the five writing components (grammar, vocabulary, content, organization, mechanics) based on the evaluation rubric used by Ismail (2006) in his study.

Data Analysis

The students' pretest and posttest essays were analyzed in terms of five writing components, content, vocabulary, organization, grammar and mechanics. The pretest and posttest comprised of 50 marks each (25 marks for narrative essay and 25 marks for argumentative essay). Each writing component was allocated 10 marks. The data collected through pretest and posttest were analyzed through SPSS and the test employed was the independent sample t-test.

Findings

The main finding of this study was that there is a positive impact of cooperative learning on students' essay writing skills at graduation level. The details are:

Table 1. Comparison of Pretest Experimental and Control group

Area of Pretest	Group	No.	Mean	Std. Deviation	Mean Difference	t-value	Sig. (2-tailed)
Overall	Control	30	23.20	4.45	.20	.157	.876
	Experimental	30	23.00	5.38			
Grammar	Control	30	4.77	1.13	.13	.43	.666
	Experimental	30	4.63	1.24			
Vocab	Control	30	4.77	1.04	.13	.42	.670
	Experimental	30	4.63	1.35			
Content	Control	30	4.77	1.16	.25	.10	.915
	Experimental	30	4.73	1.23			
Organization	Control	30	4.67	1.06	.06	.23	.818
	Experimental	30	4.73	1.17			
Mechanics	Control	30	4.23	1.10	.03	.11	.908
	Experimental	30	4.27	1.11			

The results obtained by the application of Independent sample t-test on pretest scores of experimental and control group students revealed that there was no significant difference in the pretest scores of experimental and control group which indicated that both groups were equal. Mean scores of the experimental and the control groups were found 23.00 and 23.20 respectively.

Table 2. Analysis of overall achievement scores of the experimental and control group

Group	No.	Mean score on posttest	Std. Deviation	Mean Difference	t-value	Sig. (2-tailed)
Control	30	22.66	3.94	5.00	4.08	.000
Experimental	30	27.66	5.41			

The overall performance of the experimental group was significantly better than that of the control group on posttest. Results were highly significant i.e. beyond 0.05 level of significance. Mean scores of the experimental and the control groups were found 27.66 and 22.66 respectively.

Table 3. Comparison of Experimental and control group scores on grammar component of posttest

Group	No.	Mean score on posttest	Std. Deviation	Mean Difference	t-value	Sig. (2-tailed)
Control	30	4.80	1.18	1.36	4.71	.000
Experimental	30	6.17	1.05			

The experimental group performed better than the control group on grammar component of posttest. Results were significant beyond 0.05 level of significance. Out of total ten marks for grammar component of posttest, the mean scores of the experimental and the control groups were 6.17 and 4.80 respectively.

Table 4. Comparison of Experimental and control group scores on vocabulary component of posttest

Group	No.	Mean score on posttest	Std. Deviation	Mean Difference	t-value	Sig. (2-tailed)
Control	30	4.70	.91	.06	.24	.806
Experimental	30	4.77	1.16			

The experimental group and the control group performed almost same on vocabulary component of posttest. The t-value was at .806 level of significance. It means there was no significant difference in mean scores of experimental and control group. Out of total ten marks for vocabulary component of posttest, the mean scores of the experimental and the control groups were 4.77 and 4.70 respectively.

Table 5. Comparison of Experimental and control group scores on content component of posttest

Group	No.	Mean score on posttest	Std. Deviation	Mean Difference	t-value	Sig. (2-tailed)
Control	30	4.63	1.06	.70	2.15	.035
Experimental	30	5.33	1.42			

The experimental group out-performed the control group on content component of posttest. Results were significant beyond 0.05 level of significance. Out of total ten marks for content component of posttest the mean scores of the experimental and the control groups were 5.33 and 4.63 respectively.

Table 6. Comparison of Experimental and control group scores on organization component of posttest

Group	No.	Mean score on posttest	Std. Deviation	Mean Difference	t-value	Sig. (2-tailed)
Control	30	4.27	1.04	1.10	3.33	.002
Experimental	30	5.37	1.47			

Students of the experimental group exhibited significantly better achievement in organization component than the students of the control group. Results were significant beyond 0.05 level of significance. Out of total ten marks for organization component of posttest, the mean scores of the experimental and the control groups were 5.37 and 4.27 respectively.

Table 7. Comparison of Experimental and control group scores on mechanics component of posttest

Group	No.	Mean score on posttest	Std. Deviation	Mean Difference	t-value	Sig. (2-tailed)
Control	30	4.27	1.14	1.76	5.18	.000
Experimental	30	6.03	1.47			

Students of the experimental group exhibited significantly better achievement in mechanics component than the students of the control group. Results were significant beyond 0.05 level of significance. Out of total ten marks for mechanics component of posttest, the mean scores of the experimental and the control groups were 6.03 and 4.27 respectively.

Conclusion

This study concluded that the use of cooperative learning technique enhanced the students' writing performance and that it is a more effective technique than traditional methods of teaching with respect to students' essay writing skills. Apart from better composite scores, the students' essays were of better quality in terms of grammar, content, organization and mechanics.

One of the limitations of the present study is that the researcher did not get sufficient time for best results in cooperative learning practice as the participants had to meet the other course requirements also during the semester. Due to the time constraints, the actual time needed for each activity had to be shortened and this might have effects on the students' essays. If the participants were given one full semester to practice cooperative learning, they might have benefited more from it and achieved more distinct results. The length of the study being limited to only 20 sessions was too short to help the participants improve their essay writing skills with reference to all five components i.e grammar, vocabulary, content, organization and mechanics. Students in the experimental group could not develop vocabulary because vocabulary building requires sufficient time. Moreover, there might be extraneous variables that could invariably affect the findings such as the cultural and educational backgrounds of the students, thus affecting the reliability of the findings.

Hence, cramming and other traditional methods for teaching writing could be replaced by some motivating and effective teaching strategies such as cooperative learning. In conclusion, this study proved that the implementation of cooperative learning in the essay writing lesson produced positive effects in students' learning of writing.

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