

Effectiveness of Cooperative Learning in Enhancing Students' Essay Writing Skills in Pakistani Colleges

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ABSTRACT: Language teaching in the modern era needs to be underpinned by some language learning theories which can have the potential to define the origin of the target language, its application, formation as well as understanding of as to how that language can be taught and learnt successfully. Keeping this perspective in view, the current study was undertaken by employing cooperative learning theory to enhance the writing skills of the intermediate students. The study was conducted to investigate the role of cooperative learning strategies on the writing skills of the intermediate students in the M.A.O College, Lahore, Pakistan. Total 90 science students enrolled in the said college participated in the study. In order to ascertain whether both experimental and control group students had significant difference in their overall mean scores, the pre and post-test were given to both groups. The quantitative data thus gathered was processed in the SPSS version 22 whereby Independent Samples t-test was applied to determine the difference between the overall mean scores of both groups. The findings indicated that both groups had significant difference in their overall mean scores on the post-tests. The experimental group outperformed the control group by scoring higher than the control group.

Keywords: cooperative learning, intermediate students, poor essay writing skills, rote learning

I. INTRODUCTION

Among the four language skills, writing holds a prominent position but when it comes to teaching and learning of this important skill, it is ignored by pedagogues and students alike. In the context of Pakistani public colleges, intermediate students are supposed to have ability to write essay consisting of 300 to 400 words. Moreover, it is supposed to be a creative piece of writing, prepared using their own words. But the ground reality is the reverse of it as far as the creativity and writing the essay in students' own words is concerned. What is mostly produced is the banal, a dime a dozen type sentences which are the outcome of just rote learning. It may be because writing is a difficult skills to master as according to Pennington (1995, [1]), "writing is a thinking process in the sense that one writes to externalize one's thought, both as a way to express those thoughts to others." And which is why it is not so easy a task for the intermediate students of the public sector colleges in the Punjab, Pakistan. Besides, lecturers themselves promote rote learning as it favours them many ways. Rote learning helps them maintain discipline and also it saves their time and energy to mark the students' essay scripts. However, Kagan and High (2002, [2]) recommend cooperative learning as the most effective methods to teach writing skills.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Cooperative learning strategy which is being used these days by the pedagogues for teaching language skills, is best at work when students work in small groups and get rewards as well as appreciation based on their respective group's performance (Slavin, 1980, [3]). And according to Artz and Newman (1990,[4]) in cooperative learning, students work in small groups as a team to complete a given task, or solve a problem for achieving a common goal. However, Goodsell (1992, [5]) considers cooperative learning as collaborative learning where students in groups work mutually for finding meaning, solution, understanding and creating a product. And to Tengku Nor Rizan (2007, [6]), cooperative learning culminates positive results and outcomes, which according to Slavin (1995, [7]) can improve students' performance in different features of language and generate positive social outcomes.

However, Kagan (1992, [8]) expounds the necessity for cooperative learning in the following: "because cooperative teamwork, interaction and communication will characterize the workplace of the future, it is imperative that our classrooms include not only individualistic and competitive interaction, but also cooperative interaction" (p. 2:1).

Besides, Richards and Rodgers (2001, [9]) claim that cooperative learning encourages students to be responsible for their learning and "learning is something that requires students' direct involvement and

participation” (p.199). Therefore, the writing process becomes easier when students involve individually in the writing tasks and also share their views among other group members. In this connection Savage, Savage and Armstrong (2012, [10]) also opine that learning being a social process helps turn the classroom into such a communicative platform enabling students work together to understand the teaching materials (p. 242).

Anyway, cooperative learning is not merely a group work where students' participation is sometimes unequal as some group members contribute nothing tangible in their respective group's work. Whereas, in a cooperative learning classroom, all the members of the group are supposed to shoulder specific roles to make their group distinguished in performance. Thus, the cooperative learning is structured and the lecturer or facilitator ensures that the method is being followed in true letter and spirit and each group member performs their role by contributing their personal effort in the success of their respective group where simultaneously each member is dependent upon the other to achieve mutual goals. However, among many models of cooperative learning, Johnson's model is known as “Learning Together” which is appropriate for any grade and subject level (Kessler, 1992, [11]) where the lecturer monitors the students' work. However, according to Johnson, Johnson and Holubec (1993, [12]) this model has five important elements to focus including group processing, social skills, face to face interaction, individual accountability and positive interdependence. Whereas Slavin (1995, [13]) suggests group rewards to improve students' performance. The cooperative and collaborative learning can make group work effective to achieve the goals of a writing class especially essay writing class for the intermediate students of the Punjab, Pakistan. As the students sitting face to face, having dependency upon one another while sharing and discussing, brainstorm and outline the essay. And then together with the consultancy of all group members write the whole essay, revise, edit and rewrite it thereby to present finally to the lecturer through their respective group leaders. The lecturer corrects their essays with them and appreciates them by giving some gifts which further motivates students to do better next time. Anyway, this not only gives autonomy to the students but also the learning of the difficult task like essay writing becomes easy for the students which ultimately plays important role in their intermediate board exam results.

III. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

As mentioned earlier, writing skills play a vital role in the results of the intermediate students in the Punjab, Pakistan. A very large number of students fail in the board of intermediate exams only due to their poor English writing skills. Despite its importance and necessity, no proper methodology is being employed by the pedagogues except rote learning in the teacher-centred setting where sharing of knowledge and discussion in a group work are not practiced. With a view to enabling the students to write at least correct English, the pedagogues need to employ such approaches and methods as can ensure students mastery in the writing skills especially essay writing which can minimize the number of failures in the board exams. Instead the students' ability to learn in a group work is underestimated as to pedagogues even working noise amounts to disturb the discipline of the classroom. Therefore, the students for them are merely empty vessels which only pedagogues can fill with their knowledge about the target language not the language itself. It further, promotes spoon feeding and rote learning from the substandard essay writing books easily available in the market. This results into a sort of very banal writing of students which is just the copy of the material which they crammed from the essay books. All this demands from the pedagogues to employ such approaches as can make the students learn the writing skills which can ensure their success in the intermediate board exams. One such approach according to Kagan and High (2002, [14]) is the integration of cooperative learning. This approach not only improves students' writing skills but according to Johnson and Johnson (1989, [15]) also ensures positive relations among students as well as better psychological health. The current paper will investigate the effects of cooperative learning strategy on essay writing skills of the intermediate students at M.A.O College, Punjab, Pakistan.

IV. OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

The sole objective of the study is to investigate as to whether there is significant difference between the mean score of the control group which was taught through conventional approach and the experimental group that was taught by employing cooperative learning approach for their overall achievement in the essay writing skills.

V. RESEARCH QUESTION

Is there significant difference between the mean score of the control group which was taught with conventional approach and the experimental group that was taught using cooperative learning approach in their overall achievement for essay writing skills?

VI. METHOD

The researchers took two groups of 45 students each (the control and the experimental group) to conduct the study. Both groups were given the pre-test before the study to determine that they were equal in

their performance in the pre-test. The time period for the study was six weeks. At the end of the study, both groups were given the post-test.

VII. INSTRUMENT

The instrument used for the study was pre-test and post-test to gauge the students' capability to write the descriptive essay. They were asked to write essay consisting of three hundred words to four hundred words.

VIII. DATA ANALYSIS

The data collected through pre-test and post-test was duly analyzed quantitatively to explore whether both groups had any difference in their performance after the intervention. The independent samples t-test was applied and for this purpose SPSS v. 22 was used.

IX. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

The samples t-test was used on the pre-test of both the control as well as the experimental groups to determine if both groups were equal in their scores for the writing skills before the intervention. The results of the samples t-test showed that both the control and the experimental groups were almost equal in their performance in the pre-test. However, when the t-test was applied to determine if there was significant difference in their overall learning for the essay writing in the post-test, it was indicated that the control group was surpassed by the experimental group.

The overall mean score for the control group in the pre-test was 62.2667 whereas the overall mean score for the experimental group was 62.6889. Thus the t-test conducted for the pre-test showed that there was no significant difference between the overall mean score of the control group and the experimental group. However, when t-test was applied on the post-test of both groups, the figures indicated that the overall mean score for the control group was 66.7556 whereas the overall score for the experimental was 79.1556. Thus the t-test results proved the experimental group had performed better than the control group. Hence the study concluded that the employment of cooperative learning theory is helpful in teaching essay writing skills in a country where teacher-centred conventional approach is in vogue which failed to enhance writing skills of intermediate students.

X. CONCLUSION

The current study has significance on the instruction as well as the learning of the writing skills for the intermediate students in the Punjab, Pakistan. The findings have revealed that the employment of cooperative learning approach for the instruction of essay writing is very effective than the conventional methods especially rote learning under the strict discipline of the lecturer. It makes the class a student-centred where they can discuss, share and construct their own sentences of varied structures. The findings of the current study are helpful for the lecturers of the public sector colleges of the Punjab, Pakistan. In addition, lecturers of the private colleges can also benefit from the findings of this research. This study had only 90 students in two groups which lasted for 6 weeks and it has laid the foundation for more studies with large class samples and of different duration of time with a view to determining the effects of cooperative learning approach for teaching essay writing skills.

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