Effects of Cooperative Learning Strategy on Enhancing EFL Tertiary Students' Writing Skills

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Abstract

The study aimed to examine the effect of co-operative learning on developing EFL tertiary students' writing skills. Forty-one EFL students at a public university in Yemen were selected to participate in this study. They were taught writing through the traditional method of teaching adopted by the teachers in the college for a month and a half. Then they were taught writing through using co-operative learning strategy for another month and a half. Three pre-tests and three post-tests as well as attitudinal questionnaire were used to collect the data of the study. The study employed descriptive statistics, inferential analysis as well as the effect size to determine the effect of co-operative learning on developing the students' writing skill. The results of the tests revealed that the students' scores of the post-tests after using the co-operative learning strategy were significantly better than their scores of the pre-tests after using the traditional method. The results of the questionnaire responses showed that the students' attitudes towards co-operative learning were positive. The study has come up with some recommendations for educators and for future researches concerning the issue in question.

Keywords: cooperative learning, EFL, writing skill, EFL tertiary students

Introduction

The direction of the modern methods of English Language Teaching (ELT) has changed language teaching from mainly teacher-centered to more student-centered (Lim, 2002). Learning English in small groups is very useful in achieving many aims of learner-centered teaching (Brown, 2014). Co-operative learning (CL) is one of the most important strategies in this field. In this strategy, the success of the group mainly depends on the contribution of each member in the group (Johnson & Johnson, 1999). In addition to that, co-operative learning improves social interaction skills of students and polishes many of their abilities (ibid). Jacobsen, Eggen and Kauchak (1993) also reveal that co-operative learning strategy can take care of individual differences between students who may be heterogeneous in one aspect or more such as culture, age, ethnicity, previous knowledge, motivation, etc. Also, it improves the students' achievement because it provides an active participation in classrooms. Moreover, it helps students to control their learning process (Oludipe & Awokoy, 2010).

Regarding Yemeni schools and universities, the majority of their classrooms are still mainly depending on teacher-centered methods (Naif, 2003). As writing skill is one of the important skills for English students, a lot of English students in Yemeni colleges find it very difficult to write a small composition or even a paragraph. This difficulty is due to the teaching methods used in their schools and universities (Bose, 2002).

From a practical perspective, the traditional method in teaching writing at the university level - in the best case – is giving the students the topic, and the students try to write about it individually. Thus, the students do not find any chance to exchange their ideas and backgrounds about the topic. Therefore, they keep their ideas without enriching them and keep their mistakes in writing without correction, especially when their teacher cannot edit all their writings. Consequently, the class becomes very boring because there is no interaction among students (Zhang, 2010). This traditional way of teaching in Yemeni universities motivates the current study towards examining the effect of using co-operative learning which might encourage students to do their best to improve their writing skills.

Writing is a skill of expressing one' ideas and feelings in the written form. Therefore, it is important to be mastered by students in primary, secondary and tertiary levels (Tierney, 1989). In the ESL (English as a second language) and EFL (English as a foreign language) classes, students need to try their best in order to acquire this skill because it is considered as a complex cognitive skill that requires cognitive strategies, good knowledge and motivation (ibid). Because of the complexity of writing, different approaches are adopted to make teaching writing easier and more effective (Harmer, 2006). The product approach and the process approach are two of the most effective approaches in teaching writing. The product approach focuses on the result of writing and concentrates on the parts of the text, such as words, sentences, paragraphs rather than ideas and meanings (Siti, 2004). On the other hand, the process approach focuses on the act of the writer, how he or she actually composes a text. Writers usually adopt certain strategies in their writing starting by generating ideas arriving in drafting (ibid).

> In this approach, the focus in the first instance is on quantity rather than quality, and beginning writers are encouraged to get their ideas on paper in any shape or form without worrying too much about formal correctness. The approach also encourages collaborative group work between learners as a way of enhancing motivation and developing positive attitudes towards writing (Nunan, 1991, p. 87).

At an early time, the product approach was considered as an insufficient approach in enhancing the writing skill (White, 1988). With the emergence of the idea that the writing process is both a cognitive process and a socio-cultural activity, the paradigm shifted from the product approach to the process approach (ibid). The writing skill is not acquired but culturally learned. It does not come naturally but is possessed through much practice and cognitive effort. Even the skillful writers, they do not write the final texts at the first attempt of writing, but their completed and final texts are come out through several exhausting attempts (Nunan, 1991). Here the teacher's role was redefined. The teacher changed from the authority of the class and the evaluator of the students' writing to a facilitator by providing assistance and consultation to the students

in the writing process (White & Arndt, 1991). Teachers also found it more interesting to follow the processes through which learners compose their writing, rather than looking only at their final drafts (Nunan, 1991). Most of the previous researches in this field suggest that cooperative learning is of great effect on developing students' writing skill and also in improving their attitudes towards learning.

In Yemeni context, Naif (2003) states that huge number of EFL students in Yemen are found to have an inadequate competence in writing even at university level. Students graduate from secondary schools as well as in tertiary levels with poor writing skills. This poor level in writing highlights the need for effective classroom techniques to improve the writing skills (Naif, 2003; Bose, 2002). English teachers of Women's College in Mukalla say that the majority of their students cannot write compositions. Not only do they have difficulty in language proficiency, they are also unable to generate, organize, write and expand the ideas for their compositions. Nevertheless, there is an apparent lack of interest in writing and poor writing habits among them.

Many studies concerning writing have been conducted to investigate the effect of modern teaching methods on developing the writing skill including co-operative learning. Therefore, the current study might be the first attempt to deal with the effect of co-operative learning on developing the writing skills among Yemeni university students.

Theoretical Background

Co-operative Learning

Co-operative learning has been defined in the literature as "the instructional use of small groups so that students work together to maximize their own and each other's learning as well as that of their group members" (Johnson and Johnson,1999, p. 5). Another definition is provided by Seng (2006, who defines it as "Cooperative learning is described as a large group of instructional strategies in which students collaborate in order to reach a common goal. Cooperative learning has been practiced throughout human history and is a part of educational practice. Its effectiveness has been documented through numerous research studies" (p. 3). Thus, co-operative learning is considered as one of the teaching strategies which provides more student-centered learning activities rather than teacher-centered learning activities by dividing students into small heterogeneous groups with regard to achievement levels. Each group members co-operate and interact with each other in order to achieve the targeted goals of the group.

Basic Elements of Successful Co-operative Learning Group

Johnson, Johnson, and Stane (2000) propose five essential elements of co-operative learning. The first one is positive interdependence. It is the most important element of co-operation among group members is positive interdependence which makes them responsible to each other. This responsibility happens through two roles. The cognitive role that motivates the group members to achieve the goals of the group, and the social role that helps them work as one whole and makes their interaction effective. The second one is face-to-face interaction. It refers to the idea that Interaction among group members becomes more effective when they work together in a given task to achieve shared goals. The third element is individual accountability. It means that the success of the whole group depends on the success of each group member.

Therefore, it cannot be achieved unless each member contributes to the goals shared by the group members. The fourth element is interpersonal and Small Group Skills. It implies that Students need to be taught how to work together in small groups. Social skills will be required here to help them achieve their goals and maintain their relationship effectively. The last element is group processing. It refers to the effectiveness of co-operative learning among group members. It focuses on students' contribution to each other and their feedback on the learning process. It involves the students' reflection on the group working by determining the effective action that should be maintained and the ineffective actions that should be modified or cancelled.

Duplass (as cited in Farzaneh and Nejadansari 2014) adds three basic features of co-operative learning. The first one is teacher supervision. It implies that the role of the instructor in group activity should be as a facilitator, monitor and guider. The instructor also is required to answer students' questions, provide them with help if they need, encourage them and make sure that they do not go far off the assigned task (Al-Yaseen, 2014). The second one is heterogeneous groups. It refers the idea that groups should be assigned of students with different levels of ability and backgrounds. Teachers should use heterogeneous groups in co-operative learning (Johnson & Johnson, 1999). Huss (2006) suggested that co-operative groups should be composed of one low-level student, two medium-level students, and one high-level student. Finally, evaluation is important with co-operative learning strategy in order to investigate the effectiveness of it. Johnson and Johnson (1999, p. 2) define assessment as "to judge the quality and quantity of learning and award grades". Both the individual and group assessment is necessary in evaluation of co-operative learning by determining students' level before using it, their progress through it and finally their level after it.

Literature Review

Many studies have carried out on the benefits and the positive effects of co-operative learning in developing the writing skill. For instance, Stevens and Salvin (1995) studied the effectiveness of the Co-operative Integrated Reading and Composition (CIRC) programme. The participants were 1,299 students studying at the sixth grade in a suburban, working-class school district in Maryland. All teachers in the study were volunteers (control as well as experimental groups). The control group teachers were offered the option of receiving training in the CIRC programme. Thirty-one experimental classes in three schools were compared to thirty-two non-experimental classes in four schools. In the control group, teachers continued using their traditional methods and curriculum materials while the experimental group teachers used the CIRC programme. During the first 6 weeks of implementation, teachers were observed frequently by the project staff and coached to improve their implementation. The results of this study supported the effectiveness of the CIRC programme as a multifaceted, co-operative learning approach to elementary reading and language arts instruction. These results also showed that significant and positive effects on standardized measures of reading vocabulary, reading comprehension, and language expression can be obtained from an elementary literacy programme.

Another study conducted by Lim (2002) to examine the effectiveness of co-operative learning among sixty- two thirteen-year-old heterogeneous students in a selected secondary school, that is, Sekolah Meneengah Kebangsaan Georgetown, in Penang. It was an experimental study in which the participants were divided into two groups, control and experimental groups. A pre-test and a post-test, an observation and questionnaires were used as instruments. The results showed that there is a relationship between the students' perception and their ability to write their compositions. The difference between the mean of the post-test scores and the pre-test scores in the experimental group shows that the mean of the post-test score was higher than the mean of the pre-test score. Generally, the study found out a significant increase in the achievement levels for the students participating in co-operative learning groups.

Farrah (2011) conducted a study at Hebron University to investigate the students' attitudes towards using collaborative learning in enhancing students' writing skill and their communication and critical thinking skills. Moreover, it aimed to explore if there are differences in students' attitudes due to gender, level of proficiency, and learning styles. 95 male and female students (72 females and 23 males) were involved in the study. They were from four sections of undergraduate Writing and Integrated Language Skills Courses taught by the same teacher. The data was collected using a questionnaire with 32-items which was distributed to the students at the end of the study. The students were divided into groups consisting of five to six students per group and were asked to write essays about several topics throughout the spring semester and the summer semester of the academic year 2010/2011. The results showed that the students had positive attitudes towards collaborative learning. Moreover, the results revealed that female students favored collaborative learning activities more than male students, less advanced learners favored the collaborative activities more than high advanced learners and extrovert students favored collaborative activities more than anxious students.

Furthermore, Baliya (2013) studied the use of co-operative learning approach affected the writing abilities of primary class students. The sample was 42 students of grade fifth of K.V. No1 Jammu (J&K-India). The study employed one-group pre-test and post-test design. Comparison between the scores of the pre-test and post-test was measured using a dependent samples t-test. The study revealed that the post-test score was higher than the pre-test score at the .01 level of significance. This gave evidence that using the co-operative learning approach helped students of grade fifth to improve their writing abilities. Also the study concluded that co-operative learning provides students with more comfortable and less anxiety-producing context.

In the same vein, Mahmoud (2014) utilized co-operative language learning to teach writing to second level students at the college of language and translation at Al-Imam University in Saudi Arabia. He studies the effectiveness of co-operative learning in developing EFL writing skills and students' attitudes towards writing. The sample was only twenty students who participated in this study as one group and were exposed to pre-test and post-test. The data were collected through two instruments; a pre-posttest, and an attitude questionnaire. The findings revealed that there were improvement in students' writing ability to some extent and positive attitudes towards using co-operative learning in developing the writing skills.

Writing is a fundamental skill for all students. It is an important learning tool because it helps students to understand ideas and concepts better (Voon Foo, 2007). Previous studies have identified that Arab university students lack the required English language proficiency that hinder their academic progress (Javid, Farooq & Gulzar, 2012; Javid & Khairi, 2011; Raymond, 2008; Rababah, 2003). Several research studies have indicated that international students studying in the Asian universities encounter challenges in coping with the writing demands in their disciplines (Jackson, 2006). This problem seems to exist in a much intensive form in the Arab world. Besides, a lot of studies conducted in the different parts of the Arab world reported the difficulties of Arab learners of English in this regard (Rababah, 2003).

In Yemeni context, the huge numbers of EFL students in Yemen are found to have an inadequate competence in writing even at university level. Students graduate from secondary schools as well as in tertiary levels with poor writing skills. This poor level in writing highlights the need for effective classroom techniques to improve the writing skills (Al-Jaro, 2016; Naif, 2003; Bose, 2002).

From a practical perspective, English teachers of College of Women, at a Public University (henceforth, PU) in Yemen say that the majority of their students cannot write compositions. Not only do they have difficulty in language proficiency, they are also unable to generate, organize, write and expand the ideas for their compositions. Nevertheless, there is an apparent lack of interest in writing and poor writing habits among them.

Many studies concerning writing have been conducted to investigate the effect of modern teaching methods on developing the writing skill including co-operative learning. Therefore, the current study might be the first attempt to deal with the effect of co-operative learning on developing the writing skills among Yemeni university students. Therefore, there is an urgent need for an instructional approach to help students to be able to write their composition well. With these research problems in mind, the researcher presents the following research objectives and questions.

Research Objectives

This study is intended to achieve the following objectives:

1. To find out the effect of co-operative learning on developing 2nd level EFL students' writing skill at College of Women, PU.

2. To identify the attitudes of 2nd level EFL students at College of Women, PU towards using co-operative learning strategy in teaching writing.

Research Questions

The study addresses the following research questions:

1. To what extent is co-operative learning effective in developing the writing skill among 2nd level EFL students in College of Women, PU?

2. What are the attitudes of 2nd level EFL students in College of Women, PU towards using co-operative learning strategy in teaching writing?

Methodology

1. Study design

The study adopted an experimental design with a single group interrupted time-series. The independent variable is the effect of co-operative learning versus the traditional method used for teaching writing. The dependent variables are the students' achievement in writing composition and the students' attitudes towards using co-operative learning. The students' achievement is measured by comparing their achievement in the pre-tests with their achievement in the post-tests, and their attitudes were found out through an attitudinal questionnaire.

2. The participants of the study

All the participants of this study are the 2nd level EFL students at College of Women, PU. They were 41 females of similar age ranging from 22 to 24 years. They all are Yemeni students studying English as a foreign language. They are all homogeneous with regard to age, sex, ethnicity, mother tongue and educational and cultural background.

The researcher uses an experimental reseach. It studies the cause and effect between the independent variable (co-operative learning) and the dependent variables (the development of students' writing composition and their attitudes toward cooperative learning). " Because experiments are controlled, they are the best of the quantitative designs to use to establish probable cause and effect (Creswell, 2012, p. 295)."

The researcher also employs a single group interrupted time-series design because random assignment of the participants to experimental and control groups is difficult. Moreover, in the circumstances of this study, a control or a comparison group is unavailable, that is, there is only one class of the second level in the Women's college in Al-Mukalla where the study is conducted. According to Gottman, Mcfall and Barnett (1969, p. 300), "the time series can function as a quasi-experimental design for planned interventions imbedded in the total program when a control group is implausible."

In addition, this setting helps the researcher to control all other variables (extraneous variables) which might have, by a way or another, an influence on the outcome of the study except for the independent variable (co-operative learning) (ibid). Similarly, Creswell (2012, p. 315) states that "the time series design permits significant control over threats to internal validity. The effects of history are not always clear cut. History effects are minimized by the short time intervals between measures and observations".

3. Study Instruments

The study mainly employed two research instruments. The first one is per-tests and post-tests, in which the participants were required to write a short composition. These tests are prepared by more than one teacher and they matched the requirements of the English language syllabus. The total score for each test was 20 points and the time allotted was one hour. At the beginning of the study, the pre-test is offered to the participants. Then it is followed by two other pre-tests as a kind of continuous evaluation before introducing the treatment (co-operative learning) in the middle of the study which occupies about three months. Then three post- tests are offered to the participants at the last three sessions of the study. The second instrument is the attitudinal questionnaire that was administered at the end of the study. The aim of it is

to find out the students' attitudes towards the use of co-operative learning in enhancing EFL writing skill.

The items of the questionnaire were adopted from Farrah's study (2011). They were adapted to suit the current study. The main part of the questionnaire consisted of 32 statements with a 5 point Likert's scale (1932), (strongly agree, agree, neutral, disagree and strongly disagree).

Subjective marking is usually used for tests of writing. Scorers need to judge the students' writing skill more than giving the right or wrong decisions (Hughes, 1989). According to the nature of writing, the researcher found it reasonable to employ subjective scoring tests which require students to write compositions. These compositions need certain criteria to be scored in their lights. As this study concentrates on the development of the various main aspects of the students' writing abilities, analytic methods of scoring was more appropriate than holistic methods in the situation of this study.

Holistic scoring is a type of rating where examiners are asked not to pay too much attention to any one aspect of a candidate''s performance, but rather to judge general writing ability rather than to make separate judgement about a candidate''s organization, grammar, spelling, etc. Analytic scoring is a type of rating scale where a candidate''s performance (for example in writing) is analyzed in terms of various components (for example organization, grammar, spelling, etc.) and descriptions are given at different levels for each component (Wang, 2009, p. 39).

Therefore, the scale of analytic method of Hughes (1989) was adapted to be used for pre-tests and post-tests scoring in this study. This scale contains five aspects of writing compositions, grammar, vocabulary, spelling and punctuation, relevance, coherence and cohesion and organization (see appendix G). To obtain high inter-rater reliability, the teacher and the researcher took the same set scripts (test papers) and corrected them according to the adapted scale. Without influencing one another, the degree of similarity between the two scorings was very high; 15.3 and 14.5 were the means of the two scorings of the teacher and the researcher respectively.

The study included a questionnaire that was administered at the end of the study. The aim of it is to find out the students' attitudes towards the use of cooperative learning in enhancing EFL writing skill. The items of the questionnaire were adopted from Farrah's study (2011). They were adapted to suit the current study. The main part of the questionnaire consisted of 32 statements with a 5 point Likert's scale (1932), (strongly agree, agree, neutral, disagree and strongly disagree) (see appendix H).

4. Experimental Procedures

The participants were taught through the traditional method during the first half of the course period, a month and a half. In this period, two pre-tests were conducted for them before the final one which was conducted for them at the end of using traditional method of teaching writing. Then the teaching method was changed to co-operative learning. The participants were taught by it through the other half of the period, a month and a half. Then they were given two post-tests before administering the last one and the questionnaire at the end of the study. At the beginning of using co-operative learning method, the teacher had randomly put the participants in groups consisting of five or six girls with different achievement levels. This division was fixed during the alternate weeks of the study. Then the participants were given a briefing on the elements of co-operative learning to help create a feeling of co-operation among the

group members. The participants were taught in groups through eight sessions. During the group work, each group would have to write a composition and submit it at the end of the session. The topics of these compositions were carefully selected by the researcher and the teacher to match the students' materials. The final writer's paper is signed by each member and submitted to the teacher by the end of the session. They also were encouraged to read aloud their composition to the whole class so that the other groups could benefit from it. The compositions were evaluated by the teacher, and a point system was used to determine the best composition: 5 points (36-40 marks); 4 points (30- 35 marks); 3 points (25- 29 marks); 2 points (20-24 marks) and 1 point (below 20 marks). The group which obtained the highest score rewarded at the end of the study.

Creswell (2012, p. 159) defines the validity as "the development of sound evidence to demonstrate that the test interpretation of scores about the concept or construct that the test is assumed to measure matches its proposed use". It is necessary to validate the instruments of the study. Therefore, the expert-validation was applied. According to Assamawi (2000), expert-validation is one of the best ways through which research instruments can be validated. The experts or the validation-jury judge the items of the research instruments and change them in order to match the objectives and variables of the research.

The study contains six developed tests. Three of them were put as pre-tests and the other three as post-tests. To establish the content validity and face validity of these tests, they were given to a group of experts at Hadhramout University and Najran University. The experts state that the tests were clear and relevant to the objectives and variables. Also, the scoring scheme was suitable to get reliable scores. They also gave some suggestions which were taken into consideration. For example, they suggested that the best three tests of the six should be chosen to be the pre-tests at the first period of the study as well as the post-tests at the other period of the study. This, according to their views, would be better in comparing the students' achievements before and after the treatment of co-operative learning if the paper of tests were kept until the end of the study. In addition, they asked to make the instructions of the tests clearer by exactly determining the number of words that was required to be written in the tests. With regard to reliability, Creswell (2012, p. 159) states that "Reliability means that scores from an instrument are stable and consistent. Scores should be nearly the same when researchers administer the instrument multiple times at different times."

Since the questionnaire was adopted from the study of Farrah (2011), its validity and reliability have been established before. However, further validation was required to ensure that the items of the translated questionnaire were clear and relevant to the objectives and variables of the study. This was done by submitting the questionnaire to seven experts in the field of writing and ELT. All the remarks received from the experts were taken into consideration.

5. Statistical Methods

Three approaches were used in order to analyze the data of the study. Descriptive statistics were used to get the mean score and standard deviations of the pre-tests and the post-tests. Also, descriptive statistics were used to get the frequencies, percentages, mean scores and standard deviations of the items of the main part of the questionnaire. Inferential statistics were used in order to find out the significant differences between the pre-tests and post-tests. Significant differences mean any value

which equals to or exceeds the minimum value necessary at 0.05 level. This level means that the probability of error will happen five times out of 100. If the probability of the statistical value is greater than 0.05, the hypothesis of no difference will be accepted. Vice versa, if the probability of the statistical value is 0.05 or less, the hypothesis of no difference will be rejected. Finally, effect size approach gives the size of the effect of the experiment. Therefore, this study used the 'd' effect size by Cohen (1992). Cohen interprets the effect size through certain criteria: 0.20 is a small effect size, 0.50 is a medium effect size and 0.80 is a large effect size.

This section presents the analysis of data based on the scores of the pre-tests of the students' writing compositions before conducting the experiment (writing cooperatively) and the post-tests after conducting the experiment. To answer the first research question, To what extent is co-operative learning effective in developing the writing skill among EFL students of the second level in Women's College at Hadhramout University in Mukalla?, the results of the pre-tests and the post-tests of writing compositions are presented and analyzed. Descriptive statistics, inferential statistics and effect size are used to compare between the scores of the pretests which were conducted before the experiment and the post-tests which were conducted after the experiment. The first pre-test was compared with the first post-test, the second pre-test was compared with the second post-test, and the third pre-test was compared with the third post-test. The overall mark of each test is 20.

Results

The two research instruments (pre-test and post-test, and the attitudinal questionnaire) were used to analyze the data collected. Thus, the results of this study were presented according to the research questions. Descriptive statistics, inferential analyses and effect size were used to analyze the results of this study.

1. Descriptive Statistics of the Pre-tests and the Post-tests

Mean scores and standard deviations of the first pre-test and the first post-test were presented in order to report the statistical findings. Table 1 shows the mean scores and the standard deviations of the two tests.

Table 1

Mean Scores and Standard Deviations of the First Pre-test and the First Post-test in Writing Composition

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
pre-test 1	41	9.4146	4.67961
post-test 1	41	13.0488	2.96607

As shown in Table 1, the overall mean scores of the students' scores in the pre-test and the post-test were 9.4146 and 13.0488 with standard deviations of 4.67961 and 2.96607 respectively. The mean score difference between the two tests is 3.6342, which indicates an increase in the post-test mean score.

Consequently, mean scores and standard deviations of the second and third pre-tests and the second and third post-tests were compared. Tables 2 and 3 show the mean scores and the standard deviations of the second pre-test with the second post-test and the third pre-test with the third post-test, respectively.

Table 2

Mean Scores and Standard Deviations of the second Pre-test and the second Post-test in Writing Composition

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
pre-test 2	41	10.3659	4.06667
post-test 2	41	11.4146	3.44221

Table 2 shows that the overall mean scores of the students' scores in the pre-test and the post-test were 10.3659 and 11.4146 with standard deviations of 4.06667 and 3.44221 respectively. The mean score difference between the two tests is 1.0487, which indicates also an increase in the post-test mean score.

Table 3

Mean Scores and Standard Deviations of the third Pre-test and the third Post-test in Writing Composition

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
pre-test 3	41	10.1220	4.66474
post-test 3	41	13.6585	3.79216

This table 3 shows that the overall mean scores of the students' scores in the third pre-test and the third post-test are 10.1220 and 13.6585 with standard deviations of 4.66474 and 3.79216 respectively. The mean score difference between the two tests is 3.5365, which indicates also an increase in the post-test mean score.

2. Inferential Analyses of the Pre-tests and the Post-tests

In this inferential analysis, a paired sample t-test was conducted to find out the significance of data. Statistical significant difference was found at (t- value -7.656) with Sig. .000 < 0.05. The results indicate that t-value has a statistical significant result between the pre-test and the post-test.

Table 4

Paired Samples t- Test of the First Pre-test and the First Post-test in Writing Composition

	Paired Differences				t	Df	Sig. (2-tailed)
Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
			Lower	Upper			
-3.63415	3.03938	.47467	-4.59349	-2.67480	-7.656	40	.000

Table 4 shows that the students performed better in the post test than the pretest on the writing composition after they were exposed to cooperative learning. Moreover, the following two tables 4.5 and 4.6 show that the performances of the students in the second and third post-tests are better than their performances in the pre-tests before they were exposed to co-operative learning.

Table 5

Paired Samples t- Test of the Second Pre-test and the Second Post-test in Writing Compositions

	Paired Differences				t	Df	Sig. (2-tailed)
Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
			Lower	Upper			
-1.04878	2.17889	.34029	-1.73652	-.36104	-3.082	40	.004

Table 6

Paired Samples t- Test of the Third Pre-test and the Third Post-test in Writing Compositions

	Paired Differences				t	Df	Sig. (2-tailed)
Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
			Lower	Upper			
-3.53659	2.65610	.41481	-4.37495	-2.69822	-8.526	40	.000

3. Effect Size

For this study, the effect size of cooperative learning on writing skill improvement was calculated as the post-test mean score minus the pre-test mean score divided by the pooled standard deviations. The results indicate that the effect size (Cohen's d) of the first pre-test with the first post-test is .94 which is interpreted as a large effect. The effect size of the second pre-test with the second post-test is .28 which is interpreted as a small effect and the effect size of the third pre-test with the third post-test is .84 which is interpreted as a large effect.

The result indicated that the post-tests mean scores of the students after the experiment was higher than the mean scores of the pre-tests before the experiment. Additionally, using the paired sample t-test on the scores of the pre-tests and post-tests of the students revealed a statistically significant difference between them in the favor of the post-tests. Finally, the effect sizes (Cohen's d) of the three pre-tests with the three post-tests are large, small and large respectively.

4. The Analysis of the Attitudinal Questionnaire

Table 7

The Frequencies and Percentages of the Participants according to Their Agreement

NO.	Statements	Disagree	Neutral	Agree
1	Working in groups fostered exchange of knowledge, information and experience.	1	4	36
		2.4%	9.8%	87.8%
2	Working in groups enabled us to help weaker learners in the group.	7	3	31
		17.1%	7.3%	75.6%
3	Working in groups made problem-solving easier.	6	5	30
		14.6%	12.2%	73.2%
4	Working in groups helped me to work in a more relaxed atmosphere.	10	8	23
		24.4%	19.5%	55.1%
5	Working in groups helped me to receive useful feedback.	5	9	27
		12.2%	22.0%	65.8%
6	Working in groups helped me to focus on collective efforts rather than individual effort.	6	6	29
		14.6%	14.6%	70.8%
7	Working in groups helped me to have a greater responsibility – for myself and the group.	5	2	34
		12.2%	4.9%	82.9%

Table 7 *(Continued)*

NO.	Statements	Disagree	Neutral	Agree
8	While working in groups, all group members contributed equally to the project.	18	8	15
		43.9%	19.5%	36.6%
9	We sometimes disagreed about what to say or how to express our ideas.	4	4	33
		9.8%	9.8%	80.4%
10	Despite disagreement, the group was able to reach consensus.	4	2	35
		9.8%	4.9%	85.3%
11	I had the chance to express my ideas in the group.	3	4	34
		7.3%	9.8%	82.9%
12	I get more work done when I work with others.	5	8	28
		12.2%	19.5%	68.3%
13	Working in groups is a waste of time as we keep explaining things to others.	27	6	8
		65.8%	14.6%	19.6%
14	Working in groups makes it difficult getting members to actively participate in tasks.	25	4	12
		61.0%	9.8%	29.2%
15	While working in groups, we spent more time planning than I do when I write alone.	13	5	23
		31.7%	12.2%	56.1%
16	While working in groups, we spent more time generating ideas than I do when I write alone.	14	5	22
		34.1%	12.2%	54.6%
17	While working in groups, we spent more time checking spelling, punctuation and grammar than I do when I write alone.	13	11	17
		31.7%	26.8%	41.5%
18	While working in groups, we spent more time revising than I do when I write alone.	12	13	16
		29.3%	31.7%	39.0%
19	The group produced a better description and a story as compared to individual writing.	4	7	30
		9.8%	17.1%	73.1%

Table 7 *(Continued)*

NO.	Statements	Disagree	Neutral	Agree
20	Having completed group projects, I feel I am more cooperative in my writing.	1 2.4%	9 22.0%	31 75.6%
21	Having completed group projects, I feel I have more confident working with other students.	1 2.4%	8 19.5%	32 78.1%
22	Working in groups increased my comprehension.	4 9.8%	7 17.1%	30 73.1%
23	Working in groups stimulated my critical thinking skills.	3 7.3%	7 17.1%	31 75.6%
24	Working in groups improved our performance.	2 4.9%	5 12.2%	34 82.9%
25	Working in groups enhanced our communication skills.	4 9.8%	6 14.6%	31 75.6%
26	Working in groups enabled us to use skills which individual assessments do not.	3 7.3%	8 19.5%	34 73.2%
27	Working in groups helped us to participate actively in the teaching/learning process.	2 4.9%	5 12.2%	34 82.9%
28	I learned new ways to support my points of view.	6 14.6%	7 17.1%	28 68.3%
29	I learned new ways to plan my paragraph from the group.	7 17.1%	3 7.3%	31 75.6%
30	I enjoy writing more than I did before due to collaborative writing.	7 17.1%	13 31.7%	21 51.2%

Table 7 *(Continued)*

NO.	Statements	Disagree	Neutral	Agree
31	Working in groups should be encouraged/continued.	1	9	31
		2.4%	22.0%	75.2%
32	Overall, this (cooperative learning) was a worthwhile experience.	0	6	35
			14.6%	85.4%

The second part of the questionnaire has two open-ended questions through which the participants qualitatively evaluate the cooperative learning strategy by giving the advantages and disadvantages of group work. After reading all the answers of the participants, the researcher summarized them in the following points:

The advantages.

1. CL provides students with useful ideas and correct structure and enriches their vocabulary, understanding and writing style.

2. It encourages students to improve their writing skills and benefit from others' knowledge.

3. It helps students to know their weaknesses in writing.

4. It helps group members to feel responsible towards each other.

5. It teaches them how to respect others' points of view and support their self-confidence at the same time.

6. It helps the weak students to improve their level.

The disadvantages.

1. CL is time consumed. Group members find it difficult to manage time for their sessions.

2. Some group members do not share at all or very little because of shyness, fear or any other reasons. They depend on one or two students, usually the most efficient students in the group.

3. Sometimes one student or two dominate the group and force the other to follow their opinions ignoring most of others' opinions.

The findings indicated that the participants have positive attitudes towards cooperative learning. The first part of the questionnaire reveals that the total mean of all the items is high with high percentages which mean that the majority of the students agree that CL has positive effects on their writing skill. The second part summarized the advantages and disadvantages of CL which have been given by the students. This part reveals that the students agree that CL has many advantages while they focused on wasting time and unequaled participations as disadvantages of CL.

Discussion

The findings of the study are discussed according to the main questions of the study; the effect of co-operative learning on developing students' writing composition and attitudes towards writing.

1. Writing performance of the students after being exposed to co-operative learning

The first research question sought to find out whether co-operative learning has any effect on improving writing composition of university EFL students in Women's College. The performance of the students in the writing composition after being exposed to co-operative learning strategy showed a significant difference in their results. While the performance of the same students of writing composition remained the same while they were exposing to traditional method in learning writing. The mean scores for pre-tests among the treated sample were 9.4146, 10.3659 and 10.1220 respectively compared to the mean scores of 13.0488, 11.4146 and 13.6585 respectively in the post-tests. The post-tests showed an increase of 3.6342, 1.0487 and 3.5465 respectively in the mean scores among the sample after the experiment. This finding was consistent with the findings of many previous studies such as the study of Lim (2002), Baliya (2013), and Mahmoud (2014) that showed significant difference scores between the pre and posttests. These studies showed that co-operative learning resulted in higher achievement and greater productivity. On contrast, these findings were not consistent with the findings of the study of Alhaidari (2006) that showed no progressing in the participants' reading comprehension after using co-operative learning strategy. This contradiction can be justified that the findings of that study might be influenced by some extraneous variables, such as these variables which appear through selection, treatment, instrumentation, testing, etc.

The output of the paired samples t-test indicated that there was a significant difference in the scores and achievement between the students' performances in the pre and posttests. The result had proven that co-operative learning was essential for maximizing writing proficiency and ensuring healthy cognitive development. This was in line with the finding of Johnson and Johnson (1999) who stated that cooperative learning resulted in higher individual achievement.

The findings of this study supported the study conducted by Stevens (1995), who stated that cooperative learning strategy can increase students' achievement. This is also consistent with the findings of Zamanian and Bagheri (2013) who mentioned that co-operative learning can bring positive effects on academic achievement as well as positive aspects on social relationship among all students. They added that when compared with traditional method, co-operative learning also promotes higher achievement and greater motivation than individual learning.

Similarly, the finding was consistent with the finding of Wu (2010) and Al-tamimi & attamimi (2014) that showed significant difference between experimental and control groups. The results were also consistent with those studies which compared co-operative learning strategy against lecture or independent styles of instruction. The respondents in the experimental group conducted by Bolukbas, et al (2011) gained greater achievement than that of the control group. The justification of these findings is that co-operative learning activities used during the experiment allowed the students to get more practice and provide them with useful feedback. Also, these activities increase individual students' participation in terms of conversational turns. They contributed to

a learner-focused classroom that allow for both student-student and student-teacher interaction. These characteristics of co-operative learning lead to better achievement and performance in the post-tests.

2. Attitudes of the Students towards Using Co-operative Learning in Teaching Writing

This study examines the students' attitudes towards using co-operative learning strategy and whether it could improve writing better than the traditional method. The results in this study supported previous studies that show significant difference in students' performance between students being taught through co-operative learning strategy and the students being taught through the traditional method (Wu, 2010; Johnson and Johnson 1999).

The results in this study revealed that the participants have a more positive attitude towards using co-operative learning and also towards the writing skill after being exposed to the co-operative learning strategy. They enjoyed the co-operative learning approach since their academic accomplishments were valued and rewarded better than their achievements when they were exposed to the traditional method. This is also because working in groups means that they work with others and benefit from their experiences. For example, with reference to table 4.18, most of the students agree that co-operative learning is a worthwhile strategy with (m = 4.2927). They also agree that it helped them in exchanging knowledge, information and experience with (m = 4.2683). Moreover, they agree with (m = 4.0244) that CL helps students feel responsible towards themselves and others in the learning process.

The results in this study support the findings of Farzaneh and Nejadansari (2014) and Farrah (2011), who found that students have more positive attitudes towards their course when relying on co-operative learning approach. Likewise, the results in this study support the findings of Al-tamimi & attamimi (2014) who found significant differences between the students' attitudes in the experimental group who were exposed to CL and the students' attitudes in the control group who were exposed to the traditional method.

With reference to table 4.15, the findings show that the academic benefits during group work and after group work have high percentages of agreement (67.6% and 74.4%, respectively). This is in line with a number of studies such as Lim, (2002), Farzaneh and Nejadansari (2014), Mahmoud (2014), Schniedewind (2004) and Farrah, (2011). For example, Farzaneh and Nejadansari (2014) stated that more than 88.4% students willingly learn through co-operative learning. For example, Farrah (2011), regarding these issues, reported that his respondents agreed with a high rating 77.4% that co-operative writing is a very useful and important experience and more than 76% agreed that it helped them in exchanging knowledge, information and experience. Moreover, about 79.2% of the participants agree that they achieve more, in group working, than when they work alone. These findings might probably be due to the fact that the use of co-operative learning helped the students to achieve high scores that they could not achieve during the use of the traditional method. This positive gain in the students' scores created positive attitudes inside them towards CL.

Similarly, (with reference to table 4.15), the social benefits got high percentage of agreement. (78.1%) of the students agree that they gained social benefits through the use of CL. This category of the questionnaire tries to show how much the students feel interested when they write among their group members and how the use of the CL strengthened their relationships. This is in line with several studies in the literature. One of them is the study of Farzaneh and Nejadansari (2014) where about 87.8% of the participants agree that cooperative learning enhances socialization. Also, in the study of Mahmoud (2014), more than 70% of the participants agreed that CL makes composition activities more enjoyable. Moreover, this study found that the students felt more relaxed during the use of CL while the study of Duxbury & Tsai (2010) showed a great deal of contradict with it. It found that the significance for the correlation between foreign language anxiety and CL was greater than .05 and they suggested that there was no effect for CL on students' anxiety. These results indicate that there is no relationship between students' foreign language classroom anxiety and the use of co-operative learning strategy. These results might be justified that student's anxiety increases in co-operative learning atmosphere when a student feels that his or her level is lower than that of other group members.

Finally, (with reference to table 4.15), The least percentage of agreement among the three categories (45.7%) was for the negative aspects of CL. These aspects mainly focus on time and participation to show how much the students think that CL is a waste of time and how much they think it does not allow equal chances of participation for students. According to the above-mentioned percentage, less than half of the participants agree that CL is a waste of time and that they did not have equal chances of participation during the group work. In the study of Farrah (2011), about 64.4% agree that it is difficult in CL to participate and about 77.8% agree that CL is a waste of time. These points also were supported with what the participants themselves mentioned about the disadvantages of CL in the second part of the questionnaire (see the previous chapter, 4.3.2). This might be probably due to the nature of co-operative learning strategy that it needs much time in discussion and exchanging ideas, especially with the writing skill, as in the case of this study, which needs much time in drafting and revising (Lim, 2002). Similarly, as co-operative learning depends on students rather than the teacher in the classroom, it may give some students the chance to dominate the others (ibid). To overcome these negative sides of CL, teachers should be aware of how to apply it in their classrooms. "In order for the instructors and their students not to have negative experiences, they need to know how to implement collaborative learning from picking the task until the final assessment." (Farrah, 2011, p. 155). With regard to time, for example, teachers should inform their students with the allowed time for the discussion at the beginning of each session and within it. Unequal chances of participation, on the other hand, can be solved by making the roles of the group members rotated from one session to another. Moreover, it is suggested for teachers to make the evaluation and rewarding of groups according to the total marks of the students of each group after a test which they should do individually. Therefore, they might do their best to rise the levels of each other.

In summary, the findings in this study provide valuable insights on the benefits of co-operative learning strategy in teaching the writing skill to university students. The key finding in this study is that co-operative learning strategy could be a potential tool to prepare the students to the real world. This is done by providing them with essential skills of writing to become more skilled writers in order to succeed in their workplace in future.

Recommendations

This study has shed some light on the use of co-operative learning strategy and how educators can help in enhancing learners writing skill. It has opened the pathway for new research in the field of CL and foreign language acquisition at the university level in Yemen. According to the results discussed in this study, it is concluded that not only does co-operative learning improve the writing skill, but it can also strongly and indirectly enhance students' attitudes towards a totally different skill (for-example, the listening skill). Previous research (e.g. Lim, 2002) has often stressed that co-operative learning can improve the writing skill and the attitudes towards learning.

It should be noted that no data was collected in this study on the learner prior knowledge of the writing skill, because the students involved in the study were predicted to be fairly homogeneous in their English competency levels. As the pre-tests of the experiment in writing were completed, no statistically significant results occurred, suggesting that prior knowledge was not a confounding variable in this study under the specific design conditions.

The main skill that has been investigated in this study was writing. Future researches should also focus on whether the same results will be yielded by examining other skills such as listening, speaking and reading. Moreover, the researcher suggests that further researches on the effect of co-operative learning on students' attitudes would be beneficial in various fields. They could possibly evaluate students' attitudes towards learning, work, and life in general.

As mentioned earlier, this study is limited to a small size of purposeful sample (41 participants). Additional research should be conducted to examine whether these results are positive in a large sample in all forms, all disciplines, in urban, in rural, in suburban schools, and for high, average, and low achievers.

Besides this, it may be interesting to do further research into whether co-operative learning promotes better retention of knowledge gained after teaching. For better results, the teacher could give a posttest one month after the implementation of co-operative learning strategy. Based on the study findings, it is hereby recommended that: English teachers should adopt co-operative learning strategy as an effective learning strategy in order to improve student's writing performance. Therefore, co-operative learning strategy should be introduced in teaching university students' writing compositions. Since this study was conducted in a women's college, therefore, prospective researches might include the other gender to find out any difference of the effect of co-operative learning that might appear due to gender differences.

Finally, the other empirical findings suggest that the co-operative learning should be part of the daily instructional methods used in all teacher training programs. This decision could affect whether students perform to the best of their abilities. It is the responsibility of teachers to be aware of various learning preferences that students bring to classroom and try to take full advantage of them during the daily teaching and learning process.

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