

ROLE OF COOPERATIVE LEARNING IN ENHANCING STUDENTS' WRITING SKILLS IN PAKISTANI COLLEGES: A REVIEW OF LITERATURE

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ABSTRACT:The current study examined the causes of poor writing skills of intermediate students in the public sector colleges of Pakistan. Besides, the study discusses the methods being used in these colleges and how those methods can be replaced by cooperative and collaborative learning techniques to enhance the writing skills of the students successfully and effectively. Research conducted so far in Pakistani context indicated that a large number of students in Pakistan fail due mainly to their poor writing skills as writing is being instructed through rote learning in teacher-centered classroom. To tackle this issue of students' poor writing skills, the paradigm needs to be shifted from rote learning to cooperative learning. The paper purports to explore as to why pedagogues in Pakistan are employing rote learning and teacher centered approach for the instruction of writing skills. To explore this issue, the paper employed the technique of review of literature. The findings indicated that the lecturers employed the conventional methods to teach writing skills especially descriptive essay writing skills. The literature reviewed showed that large classes, maintaining discipline, compulsion to complete the course in time are the causes of lecturers' sticking to such conventional methods. Besides, the current paper gives recommendations for the enhancement of writing skills which include encouragement of group work, face to face interaction and discussion as learning strategies. Finally, to attain this objective, the current study recommends the employment of cooperative and collaborative learning strategies for the improvement of intermediate students' descriptive essay writing skills.

KEYWORDS: cooperative learning, rote learning, poor writing skills, Pakistani intermediate students

INTRODUCTION

English, undoubtedly is the most important language which is being employed for communication purposes across the globe (Akinwamide, 2012) and according to Haim (2014), it is the official language of Pakistan which is taught in all the educational institutions of Pakistan at all levels Rahman (1997). Despite its importance, it is not being taught as a language rather like a content subject. Among the four language skills, the most ignored skills is the writing skills (Dixon & Nessel, 1983). If the results of intermediate are observed for the last three years, the emerging picture tells the whole reality that it is only the writing skills that mostly affects students' results. The whole result of the intermediate level is based upon the writing skills as it is the only medium to test the proficiency of the students in English language. Besides, writing skills are necessary for students, at all educational stages and in the profession also (Dovey, 2010). However, one of the effective method to instruct writing skills is the integration of the cooperative learning (Kagan, 2002).

Though it has already been pointed out by researchers like Sultana & Zaki (2015) in Pakistani context that the students at intermediate level face difficulty in writing correct English, yet no serious attempts have been made so far to address this issue. The teaching and learning theories coupled with their practical instruction followed by the lecturers have far reaching effects upon the learning of students' writing skills (Sahin, Bullock, and Stables, 2002). Since only rote learning is practiced in intermediate classes particularly, the question of the application of any learning theory is out of place in this context. No learning can take place let alone writing skills where the practitioners are not following any learning theory for the instruction of any

subject especially in the field of language learning. The lecturers in Pakistani context have to be trained to make use of some learning theory for the instruction of language skills in general and writing skills in particular. Among the countless language learning theories, cooperative learning theory can help the lecturers while teaching writing skills especially essay writing skills.

Kagan (1992) 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). Richards and Rodgers (2001) claimed 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 task and also share their views among other group members. In this connection Savage, Savage and Armstrong (2012) also opine that learning which is a social process and turns the classroom into such a communicative platform enabling students work together to understand the teaching materials (p. 242).

In the field of writing pedagogy a lot of research has been conducted so far (Hossein and Nasrin, 2012) and collaborative and cooperative learning theories have been suggested to be followed for the instruction of writing skills. But in Pakistani context specially, cooperative learning is not being practiced particularly at intermediate level in the public sector colleges where mostly rote learning is taking place in the teacher-centered classrooms throughout the country.

OBJECTIVES

The sole aim of the current paper is to examine the effectiveness of the cooperative learning strategy especially with regard to the enhancement of the intermediate students’ ability to write descriptive essays. It was all done in an environment where rote learning, teacher centered classroom situations are prevalent leaving no space for face to face discussion and group work. Based on these facts, the following objectives will direct the study:

1. To explore the reasons of low performance in writing skills among intermediate students in the Punjab, Pakistan.
2. To analyze the role of cooperative learning as a strategy to enhance writing skills.
3. To offer suggestions to utilize cooperative learning strategy to enhance writing skills of intermediated students in the Punjab, Pakistan.

METHODOLOGY

To realize the above mentioned objectives, a thorough review of already existing literature was employed as technique to investigate the issue and to propose solutions. According to Fraenkal, Wallen & Hyun (1993), the analysis of literature is strategy to evaluate the existing literature in the field on the point under investigation. The important function and purpose of the review is the provision, evaluation, and incorporation of the concepts, perceptions, opinions and interpretations contributed by other researchers on the issue under consideration. The researchers employed the same technique of reviewing of the already existing literature to address the objectives of the current paper as according to Gay, Mills and Airasian (2009), the review approach has been used substantially as a research tool by the writers and researchers in the social sciences.

COOPERATIVE LEARNING IN TEACHING WRITING SKILLS

In the present day world, language teaching specially writing skills are difficult to teach and learn without following proper language teaching approaches based on linguistics theories. The research in the field of sociological, neurological and psychological sides of learning has unequivocally proved that it is not merely cognitive or behavioral phenomenon upon which the construction of knowledge relies instead it is a holistic

process involving effective and social elements (McCombs, 2000). This perception has caused the aim of education undergo a paradigm shift, changing it from surface-level, rote learning under the authority of authoritarian lecturer to a context grounded as well as student-centered approach where the purpose of education is to inculcate among learners the ability to construct knowledge themselves in groups with the help their group members in varied situations having lecturer as facilitator. Collaborative or cooperative learning is based upon constructivist approach where students are supposed to actively construct their knowledge by amalgamating their previous knowledge with their new experiences (Fer, 2009). The students with cooperative learning approach learn in a student centered environment which further helps build their social and communicative skills, increases their critical ability as well as increases their retention ability (Johnson & Johnson, 1994; Richards & Rodgers, 2001).

According to Kagan (1994) cooperative learning is a communal act in which learning is based upon mutual exchange of information. Group members construct knowledge themselves and also facilitate other group members in construction of knowledge. According to Johnson and Johnson, (1989) and Johnson, Johnson and Holubec (1998) there are five elements in cooperative learning. a. Positive interdependence, b. individual accountability, c. face to face interaction, d. social skills and f. group processing:

1. Positive interdependence helps linking students who not only support each other constantly for their respective group's task rather one group's work helps complete the other group's task.
2. Individual accountability helps students become stronger as individuals shouldering personal responsibility as group members for personal success and the success of the whole group by learning cooperatively.
3. Face-to-face interaction encourages individual's success by helping as well as praising peer efforts made for the group task achievement.
4. Social skills including interpersonal skills and small group skills help students achieve the tasks of their respective groups successfully and effectively.
5. Group processing helps group members exchanging ideas for the achievement of their goals whilst enjoying good working relationship.

In cooperative learning situation, all the class is divided in groups who sit face to face to write the essay on a given topic. All of them work together to brainstorm, outline, write paragraph by paragraph, edit, revise, correct and present cooperatively. One sentence is spoken by a group member and after the consultation of the whole group, that sentence is made the part of the essay. Thus all learn at the same time being much engaged and active participants. At the presentation stage, only the group leaders present having already revised and corrected the essay with the help of their group members. And every week, the group leaders are changed so that all group member get equal chance of learning even presentation skills also. At the presentation stage also the lecturer facilitates in correction of mistakes with the help of all the groups. Thus the five paragraph essay is completed in five days and the sixth day the whole is revised and edited cooperatively and presented by the group leaders. Hence all students can practice their social and interpersonal skills to learn essay writing themselves side by side helping their peers to do the same.

STRENGTHS OF COOPERATIVE LEARNING IN LEARNING WRITING SKILLS

Since communicative language teaching is the focus in the present day world (Richards & Rodgers, 2001), countless advantages of cooperative learning strategy have so far been reported with reference to the foreign and second language learning classroom. Crandall (1999), for example proposes that cooperative language learning is very effective in the reduction of students' anxiety. In addition, it fosters positive attitude towards language acquisition and enhances self-esteem in a very flexible setting. As the scenario in the public sector colleges in the Punjab, Pakistan is teacher-centered where students are not allowed to discuss and share their views with their class-fellows, cooperative learning can enable the students to master the writing skills successfully.

Likewise, Slavin (1996) proposes that team work is an important part in cooperative learning. By adopting cooperative learning technique, lecturers can empower the learners who can learn individually and also help their peer to do the same which Johnson & Johnson (1999) termed as shared learning goals.

Besides Allport (1954), Slavin (1986) claimed that cooperative learning helps students to actively participate in the whole learning process and hence it changes the teacher-centered classroom into a students'-centered one. Therefore, in public sector colleges, the lecturers can become facilitators in the whole learning process. They can give students chance to learn by discussion and sharing with other class-fellows being facilitators, lecturers can further extend help in editing, revising and correcting the students' collaboratively written essays.

Studies by Newmann and Thomson (1987) and Sharan (1999) opine that cooperative learning can ensure maximum learning among students. The researchers also believe that the goal of learning of writing descriptive essay can be achieved by employing cooperative learning strategy. The research by Khan, Javaid and Farooq (2015) also supports cooperative learning being effective to teach writing skills to Pakistani students. It is only due to this that the students by contributing their ideas and involving themselves in the team work can brainstorm, write, revise and correct each other's essays which is their common goal.

WEAKNESSES OF COOPERATIVE LEARNING

Thornton (1999) observes that all students may not equally participate in collaborative activities as more conscientious students generally take the responsibility for the tasks given. Besides, Pica (1994), claims that there is likelihood that when students feel that their lecturer is not as involved as they are, there is chance that the students may not pay full attention to the new structures of the target language. This can give them liberty to revert to L1 especially when the facilitator is out of hearing range. In addition, Richards and Rodgers (2001) also claim that cooperative learning may cause extra burden to lecturers making them uncomfortable with their changed role of being a facilitators in the classroom.

CONCLUSION

Finally, to sum up the whole issue the researchers propose that the paradigm must be shifted from rote learning and teacher-centered approach to cooperative or collaborative approach creating space for the group work, students' autonomy and freedom to exchange ideas to construct their own knowledge by their active participation. And this can only be done by following the cooperative learning strategies. In view of all the research mentioned above, it has become clear that the cooperative learning strategy can be very effective for the intermediate students of the Punjab, Pakistan. Therefore, it can be summed up thus that the lecturers should employ cooperative learning strategies to help students enhance essay writing skills successfully and effectively.

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