

Effect of Cooperative Learning on ESL Students' Writing Skills: A Systematic Review

Florinta Edward and Harwati Hashim

Faculty of Education, University Kebangsaan Malaysia, Bangi 43600, Selangor, Malaysia

Email: missfloed@gmail.com, harwati@ukm.edu.my

To Link this Article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.6007/IJARBSS/v12-i11/15699> DOI:10.6007/IJARBSS/v12-i11/15699

Published Date: 16 November 2022

Abstract

Cooperative learning remains an important tool for English as a Second Language (ESL)/English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers and learners interested in achieving success. However, the review of the effects of cooperative learning on the writing aspect of ESL students is scarce. Therefore, this review was conducted with the aim of systematically exploring the effects of cooperative learning in ESL students' writing skills. A total of 340 articles were obtained from four databases, including ProQuest, ERIC, Scopus, and Google Scholar. Following the application of a set of inclusion and exclusion criteria, 330 articles were discarded, leaving 10 articles for consideration in this review. The results indicate that cooperative learning improves ESL student's writing skills by creating a chance for them to develop cooperation skills, group members acting as a source of motivation for others, group work encouraging students to work independently without the teacher's intervention and creating a more relaxed and friendly learning environment. Challenges include the drawbacks created by those who may want to dominate the group and quiet students feeling uncomfortable in the cooperation process. Forming small groups can help in solving most of the drawbacks.

Keywords: Cooperative Learning, English as a Second Language (ESL), Writing Skills

Introduction

Cooperative learning continues to cement its place as an effective tool in educational curriculum development across different nations. It is defined as a teaching approach where students are categorized into small working groups and guided by the teacher to achieve a common goal (Widodo, 2013). It emphasizes the idea of individuals with different abilities working together to improve the group's likelihood of success. Students exposed to an environment that embraces cooperative learning have a chance to learn the value of cooperation, a virtue they will need in their future work life. The effectiveness associated with cooperative learning has made it an integral success ingredient for teachers and learners of language. Specifically, this instructional approach is being applied to improve the way the

English language is taught since English is used as a language of instruction in most countries (Al-Yaseen, 2014).

Individuals learning English as a second language (ESL) experience several challenges, creating a need to apply strategies proven to be effective in making the learning process easier. They have to learn new language rules and an alphabet that can be confusing at times. Yusof et al (2019) claims that application of cooperative learning as a tool in teaching ESL is encouraged by many researchers because it improves not only their language skills but also their interpersonal and work-related skills. For instance, learners applying this method can gain decision-making and leadership skills. This is because the success of their group is dependent on the contributions made by group members. Every group member has something to learn from others as they cooperate to achieve a common goal (Fujiwara & Sato, 2015).

The value of writing skills in effective communication cannot be ignored, especially for individuals who are not native speakers of the language in question. Therefore, ESL curriculum developers are in constant pursuit of methods and strategies that can help them improve the writing skills of the learners they target. Engaging in frequent writing exercises allows learners of ESL to improve how they express their opinions by creating sentences that adhere to the rules of the English language. Togatorop (2015) in his research claims that one can be a good speaker of the English language but find it difficult to write correct sentences and paragraphs of what they speak. Application of cooperative learning in the writing context is deemed important because one group member may be excellent at spelling words but poor at punctuation. The student who is good at punctuation can be a great help to the student who is not.

Although there is significant and growing research on the use of cooperative learning in educational aspects relating to ESL, previous studies have over-concentrated on general aspects like the effects of cooperative learning on the performance of ESL learners (Meena, 2020). There are few studies on specific aspects, such as the positive effects of this instructional method on specific aspects of ESL. As such, little is known about how applying cooperative learning can affect the writing skills of ESL learners. Again, systematic literature reviews on studies that have focused on this aspect remain scarce. This view is supported by Zamani (2016). Therefore, the current work is a systematic literature review and aims to review available academic literature on the effects of cooperative learning on ESL students' writing skills. This aim was achieved by focusing on three research questions as follows:

RQ1: How does cooperative learning improve the writing skills of ESL students?

RQ2: What are some of the drawbacks of application of cooperative learning to improve writing skills of ESL students?

RQ3: How can challenges of application of cooperative learning in the ESL classroom be overcome?

Cooperative Learning

Research work on cooperative learning has yielded different definitions of this term. However, it is universally agreed that this teaching method involves students working in groups to achieve a common goal. Zamani (2016) also agrees that members cooperating in a group are given rewards based on the performance of the group as a whole. There is interdependence among group members in such a way that the group's outcome is determined by the summation of efforts from individual group members. This is different from collaborative learning, where students in a group progress personally, although their aim is to achieve a common goal. The teacher is an important element of cooperative learning

because he or she plays the role of assigning specific roles to the students in the group. Teachers are also tasked with the responsibility of supplying information for learners to read and analyze. They observe the cooperative learning process, listen and intervene whenever a need arises (Aminloo, 2013; Zarei & Layeq, 2016; Zamani, 2016). Research shows that the success of cooperative learning is dependent on the ability of the teacher to provide not only a conducive environment but also appropriate tasks that give students equal opportunities. Team competition between well-matched competitors can help strengthen the effects of cooperative learning.

Research on ESL

Research indicates that teaching as a second language remains a huge challenge regardless of the teacher's experience level or background. Learning English as a second language is also difficult, requiring learners to come up with strategies that can help them remain successful in their studies. The field of ESL is changing rapidly as new challenges and knowledge emerge (Namaziandost et al., 2019). For instance, scholars in this field recommend that those teaching or learning ESL have to view English as a means of communication as opposed to focusing on becoming a native English speaker. Through this approach, one would be motivated to focus on content learning, just like the case in other subjects such as mathematics and science. It is now known that ESL learners can improve their skills through e-learning (Al-Yaseen, 2014). Since the world is already in a digital era in which almost every person has a tablet, smartphone, or other digital device, cooperative learning through platforms accessed via such devices is becoming a common trend in teaching and learning ESL. Researchers suggest that the starting point towards making cooperative learning part of ESL is improving the attitude of teachers towards this method of instruction. This is so because teachers are the centre of cooperative learning through the provision of instructions and intervening whenever deemed necessary.

Writing in ESL

The teaching of ESL writing continues to evolve in major ways. For a number of years, ESL students have been found to remain highly successful if asked to write about things they know, especially those that they are passionate about. 11. Togatorop (2015) argues that cooperative teaching in the writing facet is now gaining momentum following an increase in the understanding that working with peers can help learners increase their English language competencies. Some studies found that making peer reviews part of ESL writing improves the students' writing skills as they edit their work based on suggestions made by their peers (Astuti & Lammers, 2017). It is also evident that ESL instructors interested in remaining successful in their work must adhere to three foundations of writing, including grammar, vocabulary, and spelling.

Materials and Methods

This systematic review was executed in accordance with the suggestions made in the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analysis (PRISMA). As shown in figure 1, this method consists of four aspects or steps, including identification, screening, eligibility, and inclusion. PRISMA was preferred because it is described as a comprehensive method that can be adapted to suit the needs of a researcher in a certain study (Namaziandost et al., 2019).

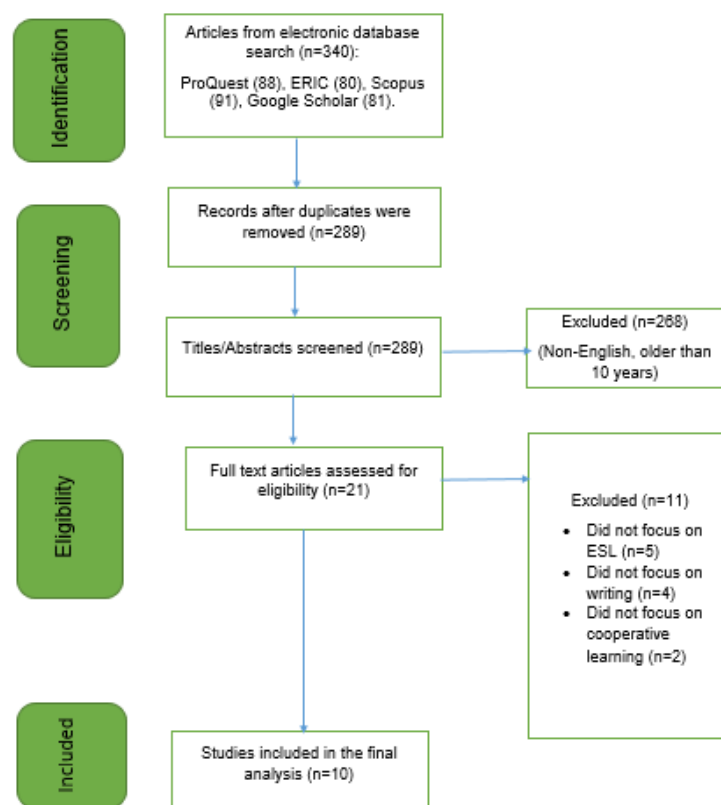


Figure 1: PRISMA diagram for the study

The four steps of the said method were executed as follows

Identification

Four online databases were searched for studies useful in answering the research questions of the study. These were ProQuest, Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC), Scopus, and Google Scholar. Appropriate key terms were used to obtain sources containing information specific to the issues under study. Boolean operators were used to widen the search outcomes. For instance, the operator 'AND' was used when the idea was to obtain sources containing both search terms, while 'OR' was used to find sources containing one of the used search terms. The truncation symbol (*) was also used at the end of a root word to obtain sources containing words with the said root. Table 1 below illustrates the search terms used in each of the four databases.

Table 1

Table 1: Study's search terms

Database	Search terms
ProQuest	"Cooperative learning" AND "Writing" AND "ESL"
ERIC	"ESL" AND "Teach*" AND "cooperative learning"
Scopus	"ESL" OR "English as a second language" AND "Cooperative Learning"
Google Scholar	"ESL" AND "Cooperative learning" AND "Writing" AND "students" OR "learners".

Screening and Eligibility

The identification process was followed by the screening process for the 340 articles obtained from the initial search. A total of 51 duplicate sources were discarded, leaving 289 articles for the next screening stage. The 289 sources were screened by title and abstract. Another 268 studies were excluded for being older than 10 years, while another 11 studies were excluded because they did not focus on all the three focus areas of the study. This is an indication that the study's inclusion criteria were as shown in table 2 below.

Table 2

Table 1: Study's search terms

Inclusion criteria	Exclusion criteria
Studies focusing on cooperative learning in ESL writing	Studies nor related to cooperative learning in ESL writing
Studies authored in English	Studies not authored in English
Studies conducted between 2013 and 2022	Studies conducted before 2013
Studies from journals	Reports, conference proceedings, book chapters, and review articles.

Based on the above description, only 10 articles were included in the systematic review.

Inclusion

The articles considered in this systematic review focused on the effects of cooperative learning on ESL students' writing skills. Table 3 is a summary of the 10 articles.

Table 2

Summary of included studies

Study	Databases	Aim	Sample	Findings
Alghamdi & Gillies (2013)	Google Scholar	To determine the value of cooperative learning (CL) in improving grammatical competence among EFL students	139 tenth grade male students	Students subjected to the CL environment performed better than those taught through conventional small group approach. Both experimental and control groups had significant improvements in the entire instruction period. However, the experimental group performed better in the posttest.
Aminloo (2013)	ProQuest, Google Scholar	To investigate the impact of collaborative writing on writing ability of EFL learners at their elementary level	64 EFL learners	Cooperative learning associated with a positive effect on the students' attitude toward ability to write.
Fujiwara & Sato (2015)	ProQuest	To use cooperative learning in promoting student fluency and capture their confidence in writing.	57 first-year Japanese university students	Learners working with both types of peers improved their performance. However, those working with heterogeneous peers recorded higher
Zamani (2016)	Google Scholar	To investigate the effect of heterogeneous and homogeneous groupings on writing ability of Iranian EFL students.	66 Iranian female students	

Zarei (2016)	ERIC	To compare the effects of competitive and cooperative teaching approaches in Iranian EFL learners.	88 non-English students		improvements than those working with homogenous peers. There was no significant difference between the impacts of the two teaching approaches.
Aghajani & Adloo (2018)	Google Scholar	To compare the effects of online cooperative learning and physical cooperative learning on students' writing skills.	70 university learners	ESP	Students cooperating through telegram had better performance scores than those cooperating physically.
Nair & Sanai (2018)	Scopus	To investigate the effectiveness of applying the students team-achievement divisions (STAD), a form of cooperative learning, in improve descriptive writing	20 year students	6	Learners enjoyed writing in groups and recorded improvements in their descriptive writing skills.
Yusuf et al (2019)	Scopus, Google Scholar	To explore the impacts of cooperative learning on the writing skills of ninth grade learners.	30 ninth grade students		Application of cooperative learning helped the participants to improve their writing skills.
Meena (2020)	ERIC	To investigate the impact of multiple intelligence-	48 learners		Multiple intelligence-based cooperative

Kondal et al Scopus (2021)	based cooperative learning strategies on a student's communication skills. To investigate the effect of cooperative language learning on the students' writing skills	learning strategies had positive effects on both learners' speaking and writing skills. Students' writing skills improved significantly after they were subjected to a cooperative learning environment.
----------------------------	--	---

Data Analysis Procedure

The 10 articles included in the final analysis were exported to Mendeley, a referencing software. Thematic analysis was used as the data analysis method. Through this method, similar concepts were grouped together to form themes that would answer the following research questions:

1. How does cooperative learning improve the writing skills of ESL students?
2. What are some of the drawbacks to the application of cooperative learning to improve the writing skills of ESL students?
3. How can challenges in the application of cooperative learning in the ESL classroom be overcome?

For the first research question, specific effects of cooperative learning on the writing skills of ESL students acted as the themes. Similarly, specific drawbacks in the application of cooperative learning in the said context formed themes useful in answering the second research question. Lastly, strategies thought to be useful in circumventing challenges in the application of cooperative learning when teaching ESL students writing skills formed themes for the third research question. The outcomes of the data analysis process are presented in the next section.

Results

RQ1: How does cooperative learning improve the writing skills of ESL students?

This review found that the application of cooperative learning has four benefits as far as writing skills for ESL students are concerned. These were: (1) a chance to develop cooperation skills; (2) group members motivating others in case they lose interest; (3) group work encouraging students to work independently without the teacher's intervention; and (4) creating a more relaxed and friendly learning environment (Nair & Sanai, 2018; Yusuf et al, 2019; Meena, 2020; Kondal & Tilvyani, 2021).

RQ2: What are some of the drawbacks to the application of cooperative learning to improve the writing skills of ESL students?

The essence of asking the second research question was to identify the challenges or drawbacks associated with the application of cooperative learning when teaching ESL. These

drawbacks were as follows: (1) Group members may have varying capacities or different skill levels; (2) some group members may take over the group; and (3) quiet students may be uncomfortable [3].

RQ3: How can challenges in the application of cooperative learning in the ESL classroom be overcome?

The third research question focused on some of the strategies relevant authorities can use to overcome the challenges in the use of cooperative learning in the ESL setting. Three remedies were suggested as follows: (1) forming small groups with members with almost the same capacities; (2) making the teacher an important element in the control of how the cooperation unfolds; and (3) assessing the preferences of potential group members before creating groups (Alghamdi & Gillies, 2013; Aminloo, 2013; Fujiwara & Sato, 2015; Zamani, 2016; Aghajani & Adloo, 2018).

Discussion

The findings above highlight the benefits, drawbacks, and remedies of cooperative learning in the ESL setting. One of the objectives of this review was to understand how cooperative learning helps ESL students improve their writing skills. As the name suggests, cooperative learning encourages learners to share knowledge and use their skills to help other group members achieve better results. This is an important tenet in writing, which is a more physical activity than speaking. Experienced writers can easily help inexperienced peers identify and correct mistakes in their work (Nair & Sanai, 2018). For those learning ESL, constructing correct sentences and developing meaningful paragraphs may not be an easy task. As such, some learners may be tempted to give up along the way. Other members of the group can motivate them by giving them a reason to keep going. Although the teacher is expected to guide group members as they cooperate, a significant level of independence is encouraged (Kondal & Tilvyani, 2021). It is through this independence that ESL students learn through making and correcting mistakes. Likewise, Yusuf et al (2019) holds the view that most students prefer to learn in environments characterized by collaboration since the assurance that they are not doing the activity in question alone can give them a reason to work hard, even when the tasks are challenging.

The researcher in this review was also interested in identifying the challenges experienced by those applying cooperative learning when teaching ESL. A student working in a group that executes its tasks too fast may feel lost because of their inability to work as fast as other members of the group. Similarly, Meena (2020) asserts that some students may feel that they are being slowed down if the group is working slower than they are. The disparities may create some tension among the group members. Secondly, some groups may be hit by the problem of a lack of a balance of power. This is where some members feel that they have more control of what happens in the group than others. Some group members may feel overlooked and lose interest in the group's affairs. Quiet students have been found to struggle in their effort to improve their writing skills through cooperative learning. This is because they hardly participate in group discussions and may miss out on decisions concerning areas in need of improvement (Alghamdi & Gillies, 2013).

The study finally focused on identifying specific remedies to the challenges experienced by those applying cooperative learning. It is essential to make sure that the formed groups are not too large. One of the ways ESL teachers can give even quiet students a chance to contribute to group activities is to have a few members in the group (Fujiwara & Sato, 2015). Although students' independence is encouraged when using cooperative learning as an

ingredient for success, too much of it may be harmful. Teachers must observe how the group operates and intervene whenever one or more students want to dictate what should happen in the group. It is also paramount to appreciate that different learners have their unique preferences. The secret to avoiding problems is to make sure that there are commonalities among group members (Aminloo, 2013; Zamani, 2016; Zarei & Layeq, 2016; Aghajani & Adloo, 2018).

Conclusions

To sum up, the current systematic review analyzed papers around cooperative learning applications in improving ESL writing skills. Therefore, the work has partially filled the existing gap in the lack of sufficient research on the effects of cooperative learning on ESL students' writing skills. Four databases acted as the sources of the articles used for this review, with 10 articles being considered in the final analysis. The databases were ERIC, Scopus, Google Scholar, and ProQuest. The study findings highlighted three categories of themes based on the pre-developed research questions.

With regard to the first research question, the study identified four ways through which cooperative learning improves ESL students' writing skills. These were: creating a chance to develop cooperation skills; group members motivating others in case they lose interest; group work encouraging students to work independently without the teacher's intervention; and creating a more relaxed and friendly learning environment. The second research question helped in the identification of challenges associated with the application of cooperative learning when teaching ESL. The challenges identified were: group members may have varying capacities or different skill levels; some group members may take over the group; and quiet students may be uncomfortable. Lastly, strategies relevant authorities can use to overcome the challenges in the use of cooperative learning in the ESL setting were identified through the third research question. These were: forming small groups with members with almost the same capacities; making the teacher an important element in the control of how the cooperation unfolds; and assessing the preferences of potential group members before creating groups.

Although the study has provided some pertinent information, it was limited by the failure to focus on students at a specific level of education, such as primary, secondary, or tertiary learning institutions. Future researchers should appreciate that each level of education has its own unique challenges, hence the need for unique remedies. However, the study provides preliminary insights and knowledge that can be tailored to different educational settings and levels of education.

References

- Aghajani, M., & Adloo, M. (2018). The Effect of Online Cooperative Learning on Students' Writing Skills and Attitudes through Telegram Application. *International Journal of Instruction*, 11(3), 433-448.
- Alghamdi, R., & Gillies, R. (2013). The impact of cooperative learning in comparison to traditional learning (small groups) on EFL learners' outcomes when learning English as a foreign language. *Asian Social Science*, 9(13), 19-27.
- Al-Yaseen, W. S. (2014). Cooperative learning in the EFL classroom. In *International Academic Conference Proceedings*, pp92-98.
- Aminloo, M. (2013). The effect of collaborative writing on EFL learners' writing ability at elementary level. *Journal of Language Teaching and Research*, 4(4), 801-806.

- Astuti, P., & Lammers, J. C. (2017). Individual accountability in cooperative learning: More opportunities to produce spoken English. *Indonesian Journal of Applied Linguistics*, 7(1), 215-228.
- Fujiwara, Y., & Sato, E. (2015). Effects of cooperative learning on writing activity of English for special purposes in Japanese university students. *Journal of Academic Society for Quality of Life*, 1(1), 32-39.
- Kondal, B., & Tilvyani, S. A. (2021). Developing ESL Writing Skills through the Cooperative Language Learning Approach. *TESOL International Journal*, 16(4.3), 132-142.
- Meena, R. S. (2020). The effect of cooperative learning strategies in the enhancement of EFL learners' speaking skills. *Asian EFL Journal Research Articles*, 27(2.3), 144-168.
- Nair, S. M., & Sanai, M. (2018). Effects of Utilizing the STAD Method (Cooperative Learning Approach) in Enhancing Students' Descriptive Writing Skills. *International Journal of Education and Practice*, 6(4), 239-252.
- Namaziandost, E., Neisi, L., & Kheryadi, Nasri. (2019). Enhancing oral proficiency through cooperative learning among intermediate EFL learners: English learning motivation in focus. *Cogent Education*, 6(1), 168-393.
- Togatorop, E. (2015). Teaching writing with a web based collaborative learning. *International Journal of Economics and Financial Issues*, 5(1), 247-256.
- Widodo, H. P. (2013). Implementing collaborative process based writing in the EFL college classroom. *Research Papers in Language Teaching and Learning*, 4(1), 198-206.
- Yusuf, Q., Jusoh, Z., & Yusuf, Y. Q. (2019). Cooperative Learning Strategies to Enhance Writing Skills among Second Language Learners. *International Journal of Instruction*, 12(1), 1399-1412.
- Zamani, M. (2016). Cooperative learning: Homogeneous and heterogeneous grouping of Iranian EFL learners in a writing context. *Cogent Education*, 3(1), 1-11.
- Zarei, A. A., & Layeq, H. (2016). EFL Learners' Use of Direct Strategies in Competitive and Cooperative Learning Contexts. *European Journal of Educational Research*, 5(1), 19-25.