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Improvement of Creative Writing Skills in English Among Secondary School Students Through Cooperative Learning

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Improvement of Creative Writing Skills in English Among Secondary School Students Through Cooperative Learning*

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Abstract

This paper discusses the effect of cooperative learning techniques on the creative writing skills of 10^{th} grade students, who are non-native speakers of the English language. The research is conducted on a sample of around 100 students comprising of 50 boys and girls each. These students are divided into two groups, i.e. the control group and the intervention group, each comprising of 50 students with a gender ratio of 100. The control group is taught creative writing in the traditional way, whereas the intervention group is taught creative writing through cooperative learning. Both groups are given the same writing task and assessed using the same rubric that was shared in advance with them. The results obtained were tested for significance using the independent, two-sample t-statistic, which resulted in a *p-value* of 0.01493451 that was substantially less than the significance value of 0.05 indicating that the difference between the two groups was not a chance event but the effect of cooperative learning technique.

Contents

1 Introduction

Creative writing skills involve the ability to express oneself through various literary forms, such as poetry, fiction, non-fiction, drama, and screenplays. It involves having a good command of language, including vocabulary, grammar, syntax, and style, as well as being able to construct compelling narratives and create well-rounded characters [Graham and Perin, 2007]. Some essential skills for creative writing include: *Imagination*: The ability to create new ideas and worlds, and to think outside the box. *Observation*: The ability to pay close attention to detail and to observe the world around us. *Creativity*: The ability to develop original and innovative ideas and to use language in unique ways. *Writing mechanics*: The ability to use correct

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grammar, punctuation, and syntax. *Editing*: The ability to revise and improve one's writing, including identifying areas that need improvement and making changes accordingly. *Structure*: The ability to organize and structure one's writing in a way that is coherent and compelling. *Characterization*: The ability to create fully realized characters with depth and complexity. *Dialogue*: The ability to write authentic and compelling dialogue that advances the story and reveals character [Huot, 1996].

Creative writing skills can be developed through practice, feedback, and a willingness to take risks and try new things. Improving creative writing skills in English for non-native speakers can be challenging but there are a few strategies that have been found to be helpful [Graham and Perin, 2007]. These include the following:

1. *Reading*: Encouraging students to read extensively in English is helpful in exposing them to a wide range of vocabulary, sentence structures and writing styles that they can then incorporate into their own writing.

2. *Writing Prompts*: Providing students with writing prompts that stimulate their imagination and creativity have been found to be helpful in developing their writing skills and giving them a starting point to work from.

3. *Vocabulary Building*: Encouraging students to learn new words and expressions, which can be done through reading, writing, and vocabulary-building exercises is helpful in providing students with a list of commonly used words and phrases that they can use in their writing.

4. *Writing Workshops and Peer Review*: Conducting regular writing workshops where students can share their work with their peers and receive constructive feedback. Encouraging students to read and provide feedback on each other's work has been found to be helpful in developing their critical thinking skills and providing them with different perspectives on writing.

5. *Practice, Practice and Practice*: Encouraging students to practice writing regularly, which can through short writing assignments, journaling, or creative writing exercises, has been found to be very helpful in developing their creative writing skills [Council et al., 2000].

In this research we are interested in studying the effect of cooperative learning or collaborative writing on the creative writing skills of non-native students in English. Before we go into the details of how we set up our study, we will first introduce cooperative learning to the readers. Cooperative learning is an instructional approach in which students work in small groups to achieve a common goal or complete a task [Johnson et al., 2014a]. In this approach, students are encouraged to actively participate in the learning process and to work together to accomplish a shared objective [Marzano et al., 2001]. Students are typically grouped together based on their abilities and interests, and they are given specific roles within the group [Slavin, 1995]. Each student is responsible for contributing to the group's success, and each student's success is dependent on the success of the group as a whole. Cooperative learning is based on the idea that students learn better when they work together and collaborate with their peers [Kagan, 1989]. It allows students to take ownership of their learning and to develop important social and interpersonal skills, such as communication, teamwork, and leadership. Examples of cooperative learning activities include group discussions, collaborative projects, problem-solving tasks, and peer tutoring. The goal of cooperative learning is to create a positive and supportive learning environment in which students can learn from each other and achieve their academic goals together [Johnson et al., 2014b].

Cooperative learning can be an effective approach to improving the creative writing skills of students. By working collaboratively in small groups, students can support and learn from each other, which can enhance their writing abilities. An example of a cooperative learning activity that can improve creative writing skills is peer editing. In this activity, students exchange their writing pieces with their peers and provide constructive feedback on the content, organization, grammar, and other aspects of the writing. By receiving feedback from their peers, students can identify areas for improvement and learn different approaches to writing [Kagan, 1989]. Another example is collaborative writing, where students work together to create a piece of writing, such as a story or a poem. In this activity, students can brainstorm ideas, share their perspectives, and contribute to the writing process [Hmelo-Silver, 2004]. This approach can help students develop their writing skills and creativity by allowing them to learn from their peers, exchange ideas, and explore different writing techniques [Kagan, 1989].

In this research an effort has been made to find an answer to the question, i.e, does cooperative learning or collaboration among students in creative writing tasks offer any benefits to the students in improving their creative writing skills? We conduct our research on non-native speakers of English, i.e., 10^{th} grade students of Army Public School and College Zamzama, which is located in Nowshera, a garrison city in the North-Western province of Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa. The methodology that was used to conduct this research along with the sample size for data collection is discussed in Section 2, whereas the results of the findings of this study are presented and discussed in Section 3, while Section 4 presents the conclusions of this study.

2 Data and Methods

To design research to test the hypothesis whether cooperative learning can benefit students in improving their creative writing skills, a study is conducted to compare the effectiveness of cooperative learning versus traditional learning approaches. We begin by clearly stating the objective of the study through the research question, i.e.,

Does cooperative learning improve the creative writing skills of secondary school students more than traditional learning approaches?

In order to test this hypothesis, we need to collect and analyze data, which inevitably requires the selection of a students' sample. Hence, for the purpose of this study, we select four sections of students from class 10^{th} of Army Public School and College Zamzama, Nowshera Cantonment. The size of each section is approximately 25, on average. Two of sections comprised of male students, whereas the other two comprised of female students. These four sections are divided into two groups. Each group comprises of roughly 50 students, around 25 girls and 25 boys. One group, i.e., the control group, is taught creative writing the traditional way, i.e., the teacher delivers a lecture on creative writing to the entire class detailing the steps involved in the process, and then asks the students to write a creative piece by following those steps individually, without interacting with each other about the writing task. Whereas, the second group, i.e., the intervention group, is allowed to engage in cooperative learning, i.e., they can collaborate with each other on the writing task by brainstorming together, sharing and discussing their ideas together. This is done by dividing them into ten sub-groups of five students each. These sub-groups engage in brainstorming ideas, sharing and discussing them together. Students in the second group complete their writing tasks individually, just like students in the first group, but unlike the first group, they do it after mutually going through the process that culminates in writing. The students in both groups are selected purely randomly, i.e., no specific criteria determines their presence in a given section. On a whole they present a similar mix of socio-

Table 1: Details of the students' sample used in this study.

Group ID	No. of Students	Gender Ratio	Methodology
1	50	100	Traditional
2	50	100	Cooperative Learning

economic backgrounds and previous academic achievements. There is no significant difference between the two groups [Field, 2013]. The details of the students' sample used in this study is given in Table 1.

The two groups of students are given the same writing task, i.e., they are asked to write a non-fictional piece. The writing task is assessed using rubrics that are shared and explained in advance to both groups [Andrade, 2000]. The rubrics used for the assessment of writing tasks are described as follows:

- **Criterion 1 - Content:**
  - *Excellent (4):* The narrative effectively communicates a significant event or experience and demonstrates a deep understanding of its impact. The story is engaging, well-developed, and showcases personal growth.
  - *Good (3):* The narrative effectively communicates a significant event or experience and demonstrates a good understanding of its impact. The story is mostly engaging and well-developed.
  - *Fair (2):* The narrative communicates a significant event or experience, but lacks depth in understanding or impact. The story is somewhat engaging and may lack development in some areas.
  - *Poor (1):* The narrative fails to effectively communicate a significant event or experience. The story lacks engagement, understanding, and impact.
- **Criterion 2 - Organization:**
  - *Excellent (4):* The narrative follows a clear and logical structure, with a strong introduction, well-paced transitions, and a satisfying conclusion. Paragraphs are well-structured and flow smoothly.
  - *Good (3):* The narrative follows a mostly clear and logical structure, with appropriate transitions and a conclusion. Paragraphs are generally well-structured and flow adequately.
  - *Fair (2):* The narrative has some inconsistencies in structure and transitions, making it less coherent. Paragraphs may lack clear organization and flow.
  - *Poor (1):* The narrative lacks a clear structure, making it difficult to follow. Transitions and paragraph structure are weak or absent.
- **Criterion 3 - Language and Style:**
  - *Excellent (4):* The language is vivid, precise, and evocative, enhancing the reader's understanding and engagement. The writer effectively uses sensory details, literary devices, and varied sentence structures.
  - *Good (3):* The language is descriptive and engaging, creating a clear image for the reader. The writer uses sensory details and varied sentence structures, although some improvements could be made to the use of literary devices.

  - *Fair (2):* The language is mostly adequate, but lacks vividness or originality. The writer may need to enhance their use of sensory details, sentence variety and literary devices.
  - *Poor (1):* he language is plain and lacks creativity. The writer's use of sensory details, sentence structures and literary devices is limited or ineffective.

- **Criterion 4 - Grammar and Mechanics:**
  - *Excellent (4):* The narrative demonstrates exceptional control of grammar, punctuation, spelling, and capitalization. There are virtually no errors, allowing the reader to focus on the content.
  - *Good (3):* The narrative shows good control of grammar, punctuation, spelling, and capitalization. Errors are minimal and do not distract from the content.
  - *Fair (2):* The narrative contains some noticeable errors in grammar, punctuation, spelling, and capitalization, but they do not significantly hinder understanding.
  - *Poor (1):* The narrative has numerous errors in grammar, punctuation, spelling, and capitalization, making it challenging to comprehend.

3 Results and Discussion

The writing tasks turned in by the students are assessed based upon the rubrics [Andrade, 2000] given in Section 2. The results of the two groups are tested for significance using the independent, two sample t-test, which is a statistical test used to compare the means of two independent groups of data of equal size and having approximately the same variance. It is commonly used in research to determine whether there is a significant difference between two groups, such as an intervention group and a control group [Field, 2013]. In our study, group 1 is the control group, which follows the traditional method, whereas group 2 is the intervention group, which uses the cooperative learning technique. The *t-statistic* to determine whether there is a significant difference between the means of the two groups is calculated using Eq. 1.

$$t = \frac{\bar{X_1} - \bar{X_2}}{s_p \sqrt{\frac{2}{n}}}, \tag{1}$$

where $\bar{X_1}$ and $\bar{X_2}$ are the mean scores obtained by the students in groups 1 and 2, respectively, while $n = n_1 = n_2$ is the number of students in each group, which is equal. Whereas, s_p represents the pooled standard deviation [Field, 2013] and is calculated using Eq. 2

$$s_p = \sqrt{\frac{s^2_{X_1} + s^2_{X_1}}{2}}, \tag{2}$$

where $s^2_{X_1}$ and $s^2_{X_2}$ represent the population variances for groups 1 and 2, respectively. Moreover, the degrees of freedom for significance testing in this test are given by $2n-2$, where $n = 50$ is the sample size, i.e., the size of each group in this study. After the tests were assessed using the rubrics in Section 2, the values for different parameters that go into the calculation of the *t-statistic* and the determination of its probability of significance are given in Table 2.

The *p-value* for the parameters given in Table 2 turns out to be 0.01493451 less than the significance level of 0.05 chosen for this study. Which implies that the difference between the

Table 2: The values of different parameters for the calculation of the t-statistic and the value of probability p that determines the significance of the intervention, i.e., cooperative learning strategy.

Parameter	Group 1	Group 2
Sample Size	$n_1 = 50$	$n_2 = 50$
Average Score	$\bar{X}_1 = 7.04$	$\bar{X}_2 = 8.1$
Population Variance	$s^2_{X_1} = 3.28$	$s^2_{X_2} = 5.69$

two groups is not a result of pure chance, but the result of the intervention, i.e., cooperative learning that the students of group 2 engaged in. A significance level of 0.05 means that there is a 5% chance of obtaining these results by chance. Our results in this study clearly indicate the benefits that cooperative learning offers in improving the creative writing skills of 10^{th} grade students, who are non-native speakers of the English language [Field, 2013].

4 Conclusions

This paper studied the effect of cooperative learning techniques on the creative writing skills of 10^{th} grade students, who were non-native speakers of the English language. The research was conducted on a sample of around 100 students comprising of 50 boys and girls, each. The students were divided into two groups, i.e. the control group and the intervention group, each comprising of 50 students with a gender ratio of 100. The control group was taught creative writing in the traditional way, whereas the intervention group was taught creative writing through cooperative learning. Both groups were given the same writing task and assessed using the same rubric that was shared in advance with them. The results obtained were tested for significance using the independent, two-sample t-statistic, which rendered a *p-value* of 0.01493451 that was substantially less than the significance value of 0.05 indicating that the difference between the two groups was not a chance event but the effect of cooperative learning technique. Hence, after this study, we can confidently say that cooperative learning technique is an effective tool to enhance the creative writing abilities of high school students.

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Declarations

The authors declare "no conflict of interest".

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