

STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS AND ATTITUDE TOWARD THE USE OF COOPERATIVE LEARNING IN WRITING AT THAI NGUYEN UNIVERSITY OF SCIENCES, VIETNAM

Hoa P. T. Thai Nguyen University of Sciences, Vietnam,
Thao N. T. Thai Nguyen University of Sciences, Vietnam

ABSTRACT

Teachers seem to be real artist in language teaching. They should make use of a variety of methods and techniques to enhance their students' participation in the lessons then gradually improve their communicative competence. Especially in teaching writing, it demands teachers for enthusiasm and patience in getting students actively involved in lessons. Cooperative learning emerged in the last century as a powerful teaching approach because of its widespread use as a contemporary teaching technique in English language teaching in Vietnam. This descriptive study aimed at examining the students' perceptions and attitude toward Cooperative Learning in writing English at Thai Nguyen University of Sciences. The results revealed that students of Thai Nguyen University of Sciences hold a positive perceptions and attitude toward Cooperative learning strategies. They fully perceive the advantages of the strategies used. Cooperative Learning, therefore, should be widely applied in teaching English language.

Keyword : - Cooperative learning , perceptions, attitude

1. INTRODUCTION

Johnson & Johnson, leaders of cooperative learning since the 1970s, define it as “the instructional use of small groups so that students work together to maximize their own and each other’s learning”. Cooperative learning refers to a method of instruction where students work together in groups to reach common goals. Within cooperative learning, students benefit from sharing rather than working alone. Students help one another so that all can reach certain success.

Cooperative learning not only brings students opportunities to use the language but also to discover its vocabulary and grammar. Furthermore, students’ social skills are enhanced through the cooperation with other members of groups. Students become more engaged in their learning and their motivation increases. To be motivated to learn, students need opportunities to interact with each other as well as encouragement and support of their learning efforts. By working in groups and fulfilling the tasks that require interdependence, each group member becomes accountable for achieving a shared goal. Students are then motivated by the team efforts as well as by seeing their own contributions accepted by the group. The active exchange of ideas within small groups not only increases the interest among the students but also promotes critical thinking.

Cooperative Learning has become a common teaching approach in English language teaching in Vietnam. However, at Thai Nguyen University of Sciences where most of students are from mountainous areas in the

northeast of Vietnam, the use of cooperative learning in teaching English especially writing certainly have some challenges. It is in this context that the author would like to conduct a study on examining the students' perceptions and attitude toward this approach in order to make appropriate changes in its application in teaching and learning process.

2. SUBJECT AND METHODOLOGY

The descriptive method was also used in the study to collect the data related to students' perceptions and attitude toward Cooperative Learning.

The study was conducted in the College of Sciences, Thai Nguyen University. The College offers 20 full-time bachelor programs majoring in natural and social sciences. It has 250 fulltime instructors and professors. Every year, the college admits more than one thousand students who mainly come from mountainous provinces in the north of Vietnam.

The subjects of this study were 60 students coming from 2 classes of General English 1 during the second semester of school year 2019-2020 at Thai Nguyen University of Sciences. They are studying different majors including natural and social sciences at the College. Most of them are from mountainous provinces in the North of Vietnam which limits their opportunities for the use of English.

A survey questionnaire was prepared to collect information of the students' attitude toward cooperative learning. The questionnaire was modified from the one which was previously used in related studies by Quines (2010) and Lori L. More (2010).

3. FINDINGS

The following are the findings of the study:

3.1. Students' Exposure to the Use of Cooperative Learning Strategies

Table 1 shows the students' exposure to the use of cooperative learning strategies.

As can be gleaned from the table, more than one third of students (37,5%) admit that they are interested in writing whereas more than half of them (57.5%) are not sure about their preference of writing. It can be implied that writing seems not to be a favourable skill partly because of its difficulties. This more or less affects students' interest in writing. It is particularly true for students coming from disadvantageous areas like northeast of Vietnam.

The table also discloses that, writing in groups is the most favourable activity for students. The majority of students (60%) claim to enjoy writing in groups. Peer and individual writing take the same account of 20 percent each. Students find writing in groups joyful because they can share ideas with each other and learn from others.

The finding above supports Brown's (2008) survey about 300 students' perception of collaborative learning using interview and questionnaire administered to first year ESL students at the University of Botswana. About half of the respondents indicate that they gain social skills, find collaborative learning enjoyable and make new friends. Moreover, Mariam and Napisah (2005) state that when peer interaction is incorporated in learning writing the students generate ideas and construct sentences together. Thus, this leads to a better understanding of the topic that they are required to write on. Moreover, students are also able to write concrete, accurate and creative piece of writing.

As shown in the table, all of the students say that they are familiar with cooperative learning. They also further state that before this study they have never heard about this method. Furthermore, most of the students admit that the teacher is the very person who introduces it to them. Besides, several students (5 out of 40) get information about cooperative learning through the internet.

It can be surmised that students have few opportunities to write in groups. Almost all of the students (97.5%) admit that they sometimes have chances to write in groups which imply that cooperative learning is not a current popular strategy in teaching writing at the school.

The table clearly indicates the teacher's instructions when implementing cooperative learning. Almost all students (95%) reply that the teacher assigns roles to them when working in groups. More interestingly, most of the students (60%) admit that the role they can do best is "follower". The rest of 40 percent is divided equally to such roles as "group leader", "time keeper" and "checker". It can be deduced that students seem to be of low self-confidence and they have difficulty in facilitating others. This finding can be explained by Beryl (2005) whose study reveals that Asian students are described as 'typically passive, shy and/or quiet' learners as they find it difficult to lead group activities and to speak in front of the whole class.

Table 1. Students' exposure to Cooperative learning strategies.

Items	Frequency	Percent
Do you like writing in English?		
Yes	15	37.5
No	2	5
Neutral	23	57.5
Do you like writing?		
individually	8	20
in pair	8	20
in group	24	60
Are you familiar with cooperative learning?		
Yes	40	100
If yes, from which source were you introduced the method to?		
Teacher	35	87.5
Internet	5	12.5
How often do you write in groups?		
sometimes	39	97.5
Never	1	2.5
When working in groups, does your teacher assign you any roles?		
Yes	38	95
No	2	5
If yes, which role do you do the best?		
Group leader	5	12.5
Time keeper	6	15
Follower	24	60
Checker	5	12.5

3.2. Students' Perceptions and Attitude towards the Use of Cooperative Learning Strategies

Table 2 shows the perceptions and attitude of students towards the use of cooperative learning strategies. The overall weighted mean of 2.84 indicates that cooperative learning is a favorable strategy in teaching writing for students. Generally, it can be inferred that students have positive attitude towards the use of cooperative learning strategies.

Specifically, the result shows that students "strongly agree" on the statement: I am more comfortable when roles are rotated in the group (3.28). They "agree" on the following statements: Writing in groups allows me to learn from others (3.18); I think Cooperative learning (CL) should continue to be used in writing lessons and I feel accountable towards my peer group because of cooperative learning; (3.15); I learn to adjust my behavior towards others (3.12); I have more interest in English writing when I work in groups and I enjoy the cooperative learning strategies (3.10). Based on this result, it can be inferred that students realize the importance of cooperative learning strategy. They agree that students' participation is maximized, working with others is enjoyable, adjusting one's behavior is possible, developing confidence is achievable, trying in different roles is desirable, and cooperative learning can be a good strategy in teaching.

On the other hand, students "disagree" on the following statements: I become lazy because I rely much on my groupmates (2.50), My contribution to the group work is not recognized (1.98), I feel uncomfortable working with other students (1.88). Based on these results, it can be inferred that students disagree that cooperative learning is boring, individual contribution is ignored and comfort is diminished during the cooperative learning intervention.

The results above can be best explained by Chafe (1995). Social cohesion perspective focuses on the fact that students want one another to succeed and that is why they help one another learn. They help their teammates because they care about the group. Moreover, Kagan (1994) claims that to speak out in front of the whole class is frightening, but to speak out in front of supportive teammates is relaxing. This claim shows that grouping is not boring because there is greater chance for every individual member to be exposed. Furthermore, Farzaneh (2014)

states that students hold generally a positive view of the implementation of cooperative strategies in teaching and learning context because when they work in groups they feel that they can depend on others for help and this gives them the confidence to solve problems and enjoy learning. Positive attitude towards cooperative approaches may directly change the learners' attitude towards language learning and encourage their interest.

Table 2. Students' perceptions and attitude towards the use of cooperative learning strategy.

Statements	Weighted Mean	Description
1. I think Cooperative learning (CL) should continue to be used in writing lessons	3.15	Agree
2. I enjoy the cooperative learning strategies.	3.10	Agree
3. I feel accountable towards my peer group because of cooperative learning.	3.15	Agree
4. Overall, I feel that members of my group put in as much effort to learn as I do.	3.05	Agree
5. Cooperative learning enables me to improve my writing performance.	3.00	Agree
6. I learn more in the lessons because of cooperative learning.	2.95	Agree
7. I have more interest in English writing when I work in groups.	2.98	Agree
8. CL helps me to have greater responsibility for myself and my group.	3.00	Agree
9. Knowing I would cooperate with my peers I make more effort than I would have if I work individually.	3.10	Agree
10. I am frustrated when members of my group are absent.	3.18	Agree
11. Writing in groups allows me to learn from others.	3.00	Agree
12. I am more comfortable when roles are rotated in the group.	3.28	Strongly Agree
13. I feel uncomfortable working with other students.	1.88	Disagree
14. My contribution to group work is not recognized.	1.88	Disagree
15. I feel that other students simply rely on me during group work.	1.98	Disagree
16. I develop my self-confidence through interaction with the group.	3.08	Agree
17. I become lazy because I rely much on my groupmates.	1.98	Disagree
18. I learn to adjust my behavior towards others.	3.12	Agree
19. I have freedom and creativity to learn when I do group activities.	3.08	Agree
Overall Weighted Mean	2.84	Agree

Legend:

1.0 – 1.75	Strongly Disagree
1.76 – 2.50	Disagree
2.51 – 3.25	Agree
3.26 – 4.00	Strongly Agree

3.3. Students' perceptions related to the advantages and disadvantages of Cooperative learning

An analysis of the students' perceptions related to the advantages of cooperative learning strategies also reveals similar results as seen in table 3. It can be clearly seen that opportunities to increase the writing scores and opportunities for discussion to increase the understanding of writing are the foremost advantages of cooperative learning with the frequency of 32 and 30 respectively. The students admit that they "get a few more points thanks to the contribution of other groupmates" and they "produce better writing after group's discussion". Moreover, they

note that group discussion can bring them better understanding of writing. "Discussing with friends makes the writing lessons easier"; "with the explanation of groupmates" they can "know how and what to write". More interestingly, the two next advantages that students recognize with the use of cooperative learning are chances for collaboration and team work as well as enhancement of individual accountability with frequency of 26 and 22 respectively. They emphasize that "it is good to work in groups and share ideas with each other". Similarly, some students state that they "learn how to work as team when doing group activities". More importantly, they realize that they get more pressure in order not to let their teammates down. They must study more because they are not responsible for their own grade but for the group as well. The students further state that "it creates accountability toward other group members so it makes you study more". Finally, students consider the increase in their confidence and preference of writing to be benefits of cooperative learning. 18 out of 32 students admit that they "find writing lessons more interesting" with the intervention of cooperative learning. Besides, students "forget all shyness when discussing in groups". They even state that they "feel more confident to raise question or speak in groups".

The findings above are supported by the claim of Johnson and Johnson (2000) that there is overwhelming evidence on the development of more positive relationships among peers, superiors, and subordinates in cooperative learning than in competitive or individualistic situations. As a result, more constructive moral socialization tends to take place in cooperative situations. Furthermore, Mariam and Napisah (2005) state that when peer interaction is incorporated in learning writing, the students generate ideas and construct sentences together. Thus, this leads to a better understanding of the topic that they are required to write on. Students also are able to write concrete, accurate and creative piece of writing. Obviously, cooperative learning is obviously the easiest way to promote the needed positive relationships in schools and in any community.

However, some disadvantages of cooperative learning are also identified by the students. Conflict among group members seems to be the biggest problem students have to face with the frequency of 28. The students say that "there are so many different ideas among the group members making it difficult to reach a conclusion"; they even "quarrel with each other". One more disadvantage enlisted is the reliance of some group members on others' efforts. The students complain that "Some friends are not enthusiastic", "Some members just wait for the other's help". The last problem mentioned by the students is the weak leadership. They claim that their "leader does not clarify the tasks among group members".

Overall, the advantages of cooperative learning appear to outweigh the disadvantages according to the perceptions of students. Six themes are identified as advantages of cooperative learning while only three themes are mentioned as disadvantages. It can be implied that cooperative learning is an advantageous strategy which is encouraged to be widely used in teaching languages. As Brown (2008) postulates "students gain academic benefits such as better comprehension and improved performance and acquire the communication and problem-solving skills".

Table 3. Students' perceptions related to the advantages and disadvantages of Cooperative learning strategies.

Advantages of Cooperative learning	Frequency
Opportunities for discussion to increase the understanding of writing.	30
Opportunities to increase the writing scores	32
Chances for collaboration and teamwork	26
Increase in individual accountability	22
Improvement of confidence	15
Enjoyment of writing	18
Disadvantages of Cooperative learning	Frequency
Conflict among group members	28
Reliance of some group members on others' efforts	15
Unclear task assigned by group leader	10

4. CONCLUSIONS

Regarding the students' exposure to the use of cooperative learning strategies, the results show that writing seems not to be a favorable skill. Moreover, students have a few opportunities to be exposed to collaborative writing even though writing in groups is the most favorable activity for students. Interestingly, after four-week exposure to the strategy, all of the students state that they are familiar with cooperative learning and the teacher is the very

person who introduces it to them. When being exposed to cooperative learning, almost all students are assigned roles when working in groups. More interestingly, most of the students admit that the role they can do best is “follower”.

Students hold a positive perception and attitude towards the use of cooperative learning strategies. Some of the points where the students show strong affirmation are on the following: *I am more comfortable when roles are rotated in the group; Writing in groups allows me to learn from others; I think Cooperative learning (CL) should continue to be used in writing lessons and I feel accountable towards my peer group because of cooperative learning; I learn to adjust my behavior towards others; I have more interest in English writing when I work in groups and I enjoy the cooperative learning strategies.* Moreover, an analysis of the students’ perceptions related to the advantages and disadvantages of cooperative learning strategies also reveals the similar results. Overall, the advantages of cooperative learning appear to outweigh the disadvantages according to the perception of students. Six themes are identified as advantages of cooperative learning while only three themes are mentioned as disadvantages.

In the light of findings of the study, it is concluded that students of Thai Nguyen University of Sciences hold a positive perceptions and attitude toward Cooperative learning strategies. They fully perceive the advantages of the strategies used. Students believe that group tasks clear their concepts more than individual learning. It also makes learning interesting, it provides fun, done in satisfactory situation and their socialization enhance. Students also express responsibility over assigned tasks of work as they commit to success each member and their group.

Based on the foregoing findings and conclusions, Cooperative Learning should be widely applied in teaching English at Thai Nguyen University of Sciences.

5. ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I hereby acknowledge Thai Nguyen University of Sciences for allowing me to conduct the study. I would like to express my sincere thanks to all the students of the university for their participation the questionnaire.

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