



**THE EFFECTIVENESS OF COOPERATIVE LEARNING APPROACH  
IN IMPROVING FORM ONE STUDENTS' WRITING PERFORMANCE  
IN ENGLISH**

**by**

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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

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ESL	English as a Second Language
CL	Cooperative Learning
KBSM	Kurikulum Bersepadu Sekolah Menengah
LEP	Limited English Proficient
SC	Students of Control Group
SE	Students of Experimental Group
SPSS	Statistics Package for the Social Science

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## ABSTRACT

### THE EFFECTIVNESS OF COOPERATIVE LEARNING APPROACH IN IMPROVING FORM ONE STUDENTS' WRITING PERFORMANCE IN ENGLISH

Lona Mark

This study investigates the effectiveness of cooperative learning approach in improving the writing performance of the Form One students in English. The findings in this study were based on data collected from pre and post test which were marked by three assessors. The means scores of the tests were compared using paired t-test of significance. Additional instruments used were audio-taping interaction among the students and semi-structured interview. Both instruments were analyzed to find out students perception towards cooperative learning approach. The result of the paired t-test showed that there was a significant difference between the means scores of the pre and post-test for the experimental group. This means that the use of cooperative learning approach benefits the students.

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## **ABSTRAK**

### **KEBERKESANAN PENDEKATAN BERKUMPULAN (COOPERATIVE LEARNING APPROACH) UNTUL MENINGKATAN TAHAP PENULISAN PELAJAR TINGKATAN SATU DALAM BAHASA INGGERIS**

*Lona Mark*

*Kajian ini bertujuan untuk mengenalpasti keberkesanan pendekatan berkumpulan (cooperative learning) terhadap penulisan esei oleh pelajar-pelajar Tingkatan Satu di dalam Bahasa Inggeris. Keputusan kajian adalah berdasarkan maklumat yang telah dikumpul sepanjang proses 'pre-test' dan 'post-test' yang telah diperiksa oleh tiga orang pemeriksa. Perbandingan jumlah min yang diperolehi daripada kedua-dua ujian adalah dikira dengan menggunakan "paired t-test". Kaedah mengumpul maklumat yang lain turut digunakan di dalam pelaksanaan kajian ini. Kaedah-kaedah tersebut adalah rakaman interaksi antara pelajar-pelajar semasa sesi perbincangan dan pelaksanaan sesi temuramah bersama pelajar-pelajar terlibat. Kedua-dua kaedah tambahan ini adalah bertujuan untuk mengenalpasti pendapat dan pandangan pelajar-pelajar berkenaan pendekatan berkumpulan terhadap penulisan esei di dalam Bahasa Inggeris. Keputusan 'paired t-test' telah menunjukkan bahawa terdapat perbezaan yang ketara di antara keputusan yang diperolehi semasa 'pre-test' dan 'post-test' bagi kumpulan eksperimental. Ini bermakna kegunaan pendekatan berkumpulan terhadap penulisan esei oleh pelajar-pelajar telah memberikan kebaikan kepada pelajar-pelajar di dalam meningkatkan mutu penulisan esei dalam Bahasa Inggeris.*

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# CHAPTER ONE

## INTRODUCTION

### 1.0 Background of the study

English language teaching in Malaysia has made great progress in recent decades, but it is also true that many problems still exist. Although the English language is taught from primary school onwards, most students are still not capable in mastering all the four important language skills, especially writing (Fauziah and Nita, 2000). So, teachers are expected to spend more time on teaching the writing skill. As such, there is a need to experiment with new techniques and approaches in order to address the persistent writing problems.

Among the four skills, writing is regarded as the most difficult to be acquired in language learning. Therefore, in the ESL context where learners have limited ability and exposure to the English language, these problems make them reluctant to write. Even with the introduction of the process writing in the classroom, students still face problems in writing.

In our Malaysian ESL classroom, Chan & Ain Nadzimah (2004) indicated that our ESL students come with a myriad of backgrounds, experiences and needs. These differing experiences and needs together with other factors such as the differing English proficiency level of the students; the time constraint of a normal class schedule as well as

large classes in most schools (Jayakaran, 1992) make it difficult for teachers to carry out the process writing approach in the fullest sense, in the Malaysian ESL classroom. In a normal Malaysian context, group discussions are usually dominated by those with better language proficiency in the English language. Many Malaysian students are found to be weak in the writing and speaking skills (Fauziah and Nita, 2000). Therefore in normal writing classes in the local context, the students are unable to maximize meaningful learning when carrying out pre-writing activities such as brainstorming for ideas or discussing a given topic. This is consistent with what is being highlighted by Crawford (1995) that active students tended to take control over the whole writing task. As a result, some of the students especially Limited English Proficient (LEP) students choose to adopt a more passive role in the groups. Based on this statement, cooperative learning (CL) could be a solution to overcome this problem.

### **1.1 Cooperative Learning in Writing**

Writing is a skill not everyone can acquire easily. It is a complex skill and many experts are still looking for the best way to teach writing. One of the ways recommended by scholars like Johnson and Johnson (1991), and Slavin (1995a) is the use of cooperative learning approach in the teaching and learning of writing.

According to Slavin (1995a), in a cooperative learning situation, students will work in a heterogeneous group cooperatively adopting positive social skills. Fowler (1994) cited in Chan & Ain Nadzimah (2004) argues that it is impossible to isolate a social process from

the minds that carry out the act of writing. Therefore in a mixed ability group, there will be good interaction between the group members when they organize their ideas. For instance, while revising their drafts students can figure out whether the draft has fulfilled the requirements of the writing task.

Researchers and experts such as Lehr (1995), Johnson and Johnson (1990 & 1994), Turnure & Zigler 1958 cited in Panitz, 1999 promote the use of cooperative learning especially in the classroom writing activity which would help students not only to enrich their writing skills but also to enhance their writing performance. Generally, in a group activity, students begin by reflecting on their own opinions and ideas on the topic and will finally write them down on the paper provided. In the next stage, students are required to share their ideas and collect a group response. Hence, they are encouraged to help one another by actively participating in the brainstorming session.

Cooperation enhances student satisfaction with the learning experience by actively involving students in designing and completing class procedures and course content (Johnson and Johnson 1990). Effective teams or groups assume ownership of a process and its results when individuals are encouraged to work together toward a common goal, often defined by the group. This can be seen when the students revise the draft together as a group, the good students can assist weaker students by voicing out their ideas in the target language. As the low proficiency students may have the ideas but are hampered by their lack of vocabulary to express themselves in the target language, therefore, the good students can help to structure the sentences based on the low proficiency students' ideas.

This aspect is especially helpful for individuals who have a history of failure (Turnure & Zigler 1958 cited in Panitz, 1999).

Thus, this kind of learning perceives a more meaningful learning experience as when they are interacting with one another during the writing process, they are learning and acquiring writing skills from their peers. This supports Johnson and Johnson's (1994) claim that students who participate in cooperative learning often perceive a more meaningful learning experience and in some cases actually learn more than students in conventional learning situations.

Olsen and Kagan (1992) support the claim that learners are motivated to increase each other's learning through interaction with others and between themselves. A primary benefit of CL is that it enhances students' self-esteem which in turn motivates students to participate in the learning process (Johnson & Johnson 1989 cited in Panitz, 1999). As such, students will learn and acquire writing skills in an easier and less burdening way as students can interact with each other during the writing process, brainstorming for ideas, peer writing and editing. Students help each other and in doing so build a supportive community which raises the performance level of each member (Kagan 1986 cited in Panitz, 1999).

Brufee (1998) claims that learning is a social process that enable students to learn more through the interaction with their peers, using dialogue and discussions. Learning through interaction gives the students more chance to gain useful information rather than learning individually. Similarly, Golub and Reid (1989) acknowledged the significance

of social interaction in the learning process and also recognized the influence of a peer audience on the knowledge acquired. As such, the ability to write well can be increased by writing cooperatively and the peer group will exert a strong influence on the progress of writing of each member.

## **1.2 Statement of Problem**

The writing skill is an essential language skill that students in Malaysia need to acquire and master. However, it is often considered as a difficult task to master. This idea is parallel to Richards (1990) who highlights that writing in a second language is one of the most difficult tasks for any learner. Learning to write well is a difficult and lengthy process as learners encounter anxiety and frustration in their attempts. This often leads to problems in the teaching and learning of writing. To prevent this from happening, the teacher should consider what students actually mean when they say they are “bored”, and the possibility that students are actually expressing their insecurity and lack of confidence in completing the given task. A teacher who does not try to see the real message behind these comments could easily become discouraged. At the end of the day, both teacher and the students will feel that teaching and learning writing is a challenging task. As such, students need proper instructions, guidance and encouragement to become the willing participants in the writing class. Therefore, there is a need to facilitate the teaching of writing as well as to explore strategies that will motivate and make this process of learning meaningful.

The traditional approach to the teaching of writing among ESL students has always emphasized on the product. In this approach, the language teacher is usually the only 'audience' for students' writing. Students' perception about the subtle messages of the teacher regarding the orthographic systems, content and style and the destiny of the final prose greatly affects their writing (Byrne, 1991). Thus, many ESL students, especially those with weak writing ability have been left anxious, frustrated and unmotivated towards writing.

With the implementation of the integrated syllabus, or the *Kurikulum Bersepadu Sekolah Menengah (KBSM)* in 1989, the teaching of writing had shifted from product-based to process-based. This process approach to writing involves a number of steps beginning with discussion, drafting, conferencing, revision, editing, and publishing. It is believed that the process approach can help students to think and organize their ideas before writing. However, this approach has not been fully implemented by the language teachers due to time constraint.

Jayakaran (1992) in his research on ESL writing in Malaysian classrooms argues that due to the lack of time teachers cannot provide enough attention to individual writers in large classes. He refers to such classes as the "40-plus writing class". He further argues that most ESL students' deficiencies in the language itself impede teachers' efforts to teach process writing. This is because in the Malaysian English syllabus in secondary school, the English teacher has been allocated only 200 minutes (5 periods) of English lesson per week, which need to be divided equally to teaching of all the four language



skills, listening, speaking, reading and writing. The low proficiency students are unable to express ideas as they lack the ability to recognize basic words to describe or to convey meanings. While some teachers do attempt to teach it by giving almost totally controlled compositions, others give up and do not provide adequate writing exposure to students. It is also difficult for lower proficiency students to “free write” a piece of prose and most of all, as they may lack self-esteem in using the language. As a result, they may think that they cannot write any composition at all. These problems have prompted the researcher to look into the use of cooperative learning in improving students’ writing performance in English.

### **1.3 The objectives of the Study**

The objectives of the study are:

- a) To find out the effectiveness of CL in improving students’ performances of writing in English language in the classroom.
- b) To identify students’ perceptions regarding the use of CL in relation to the writing.

### **1.4 Research Questions**

This study is designed to answer the following research questions.

- i) Is CL effective in improving students’ writing performance in the classroom?
- ii) What are students’ perceptions towards the use of CL in relation to the writing task?

## **1.5 Significance of the Study**

The use of CL in ESL writing lessons in Malaysia is relatively new but it is believed that the findings from this study will benefit teacher in terms of teaching. The teachers can use this study to come up with new ideas/concepts and look for more alternatives in their approach to teach writing. It also helps learners to enhance their confidence and ability in writing as the writing process requires the learners to enhance their social skills and extend their knowledge in the subject matter through the group work during the writing task.

### **Definition of terms**

For the purpose of this study, the given terms were defined as follows:

#### **1.6.1 Cooperative Learning Approach**

Cooperative learning approach is 'the instructional use of small groups so that student's work together to achieve shared goals' (Johnson & Johnson, 2001).

Another researcher, Brown (1995) defines cooperative learning approach as a diversity of techniques used in which two or more students are assigned a task that involves collaboration and self- initiated language.

## 1.6.2 Writing

Kirszner and Mandell (1988) highlighted that writing is a process of choosing of selecting and rejecting, expanding and compressing, adding, deleting and rearranging at every stage of the writing process. Additionally, the writing process is not direct or linear, but it can be divided for convenience into three stages: planning, drafting and revising.

According to Chitrvelu, Sithamparan & Teh (1995), 'writing is a system for interpersonal communication using visible signs or graphic symbols on a flat surface such as paper, cloth or even stone slabs.'

## 1.7 Limitation of the study

This study seeks to examine the effectiveness of CL in the ESL writing class in SMK Muara Tuang, Kuching thus, the respondents for this study are only a representation of the Form One students in a selected school, therefore it would not be sufficient to generalize the perceptions for other students in different schools throughout Serawak.

Time constraint is another factor that does not allow the researcher to conduct an in depth study on the topic.

## 1.8 Summary

This chapter presents the background of the study on cooperative learning in improving students' writing performances, statement of the problem, research objectives, rationale of the study, research questions, significance of the study, and limitation of the study and definition of terms. The next chapter will focus on the underlying concepts and will review previous researches related to the field of this study.

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## CHAPTER TWO

### REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

#### 2.0 Introduction

This chapter reviews some of the studies that have been carried out by past researchers on the use of cooperative learning in the teaching of English language and other subjects. The aspects reviewed in this study are: an overview of cooperative learning and essential principles of cooperative learning. In the later stage, this chapter will look at the benefits of cooperative learning techniques which have been proven workable in bringing students to succeed in writing.

#### 2.1 An overview of Cooperative Learning in the ESL Classroom

The notion of cooperative learning is a wide array of cooperative approaches which diversifies in their effectiveness in classroom instruction. Chafe (1998), defines cooperative learning as of purposeful group work which requires students to accomplish a shared goal. Many other researchers share similar view, by stating that cooperative learning involves in grouping students into smaller group to work collaboratively in achieving a shared goal (Johnson & Johnson, 2001; Johnson, Johnson & Holubec, 1994a, Johnson, Johnson & Holubec, 1994b; Slavin, 1995). However, there is a fine line between having students to work in smaller groups and to structure groups of students to

work cooperatively. Panitz (1998) makes it an effort to clear the confusion by defining cooperative learning as "a structure of interaction designed to facilitate the accomplishment of a specific end product or goal through students (people) working together in groups". It is in contrast with collaboration between students, where "individuals are responsible for their actions, including learning and respect the abilities and contributions of their peers". Thus, cooperative learning in an ESL classroom allows students to work in smaller group with peers towards the achievement of a shared goal.

Social interactions can be difficult for English as Second Language (ESL) students. Specifically, ESL students lack the knowledge of when and how to use the following social skills in a group setting: asking for help or clarification, using quiet voices, participating actively, respecting others, describing feelings, taking turns, sharing ideas and opinions, encouraging others' participation, and staying on task. These problems with social development might decrease if ESL students are given social skill instruction and opportunities to interact with peers. Cooperative learning is one of the main instructional strategies that can be used to promote positive social interactions and to create an appropriate learning environment for ESL students (Grundman 2002).

Another benefit of cooperative learning is that it helps students to work together effectively, regardless of their race, language, or personal appearance. At the elementary level, students are conscious of factors such as academic achievement, personal appearance, and language proficiency that cause some students to be considered at a higher status level than others. Cooperative learning activities are designed to sustain and

develop positive attitudes toward students from various racial and cultural backgrounds. Students learn to regard their peers as valued sources of support in their effort to become successful socially, linguistically, and academically (Madrid, 1993 cited in Grundman, 2002).

## **2.2 Essential principles of Cooperative Learning (CL)**

According to Johnson & Johnson (1999), in cooperative learning, there are five basic fundamental principles which include face-to-face interaction, positive interdependence, individual accountability, interpersonal and cooperative skills and group processing of interaction. Therefore, in this study, the five basic principles fundamental to cooperative learning would be discussed in details in the next paragraphs.

### **2.2.1 Face-to-face Interaction**

In cooperative learning, the students work face-to-face with the others who have little knowledge about the tasks given to share their knowledge and understanding concerning the tasks assigned to them. This would mean that in cooperative writing, students who are placed in a group are given the rare opportunity to help each other in generating ideas, constructing sentences structures, drafting their writing task and finally, supporting each other during the writing process.

### 2.2.2 Positive Interdependence

Positive interdependence is the belief by each individual that there is a value in working with other students and that both individual learning and work products will be better as a result of collaboration (Slavin, 1990). In cooperative learning approach, students are placed in small groups and work collaboratively by eliciting and sharing ideas to solve the writing task assigned to them. The idea is that one student's success ensures the success of the other members of a group.

Johnson & Johnson (1994) point out that if all the members of the group is united around a common goal, they can promote situation in which students see that their work benefits group mates and their group mates work benefit them. This means that students will have to depend on each other in group to ensure that the tasks assigned would be completed on time. For example, in pictures series essay with short phrases given where students with different experience can contribute to the outcome of the essay. Each group member is given/assigned a task to write a paragraph in order to form a complete essay.

Positive interdependence is solidly structured, it highlights that each group member's efforts are required and indispensable for group success and each group member has a unique contribution to make to the joint effort because of his or her resources and task responsibilities (Johnson & Johnson, 1994). This can be done when students can work together in small groups to maximize the learning of all members by sharing their