

Enhancing Writing Skills: Application of Kagan's Cooperative Learning Structures for EL Learners

Prasad Seemusuru

Research Scholar, Department of English and Communication, Dravidian University, Kuppam, Andhra Pradesh

Ch. A Rajendra Prasad

Research Supervisor, Department of English and Communication, Dravidian University, Kuppam, Andhra Pradesh

ABSTRACT

Having good writing skills is a key factor in the continuous assessment, both formative and summative, of a student. Teachers at various levels have adopted various innovative and creative methods in the classroom to ensure that the students excel in their writing skill. At this juncture, Kagan's structures for English language learners provide a wide platform to enhance writing skills among high school and higher level of learners. This study investigates the effects of cooperative learning in enhancing the writing performance of students from urban areas. The students' performance was assessed using analytical scoring on the composite scores. The results of the investigation indicate that the students perform better after inclusion of cooperative learning in the writing skills course. These findings provide support to the positive effects of cooperative learning in enhancing students' writing skills.

Keywords: English language teaching; cooperative learning; writing skills.

Introduction

Education undoubtedly plays an important role in the efforts towards attaining the status of a fully developed country. The young generation needs to be well educated to prepare them for the era of globalisation. In the engineering colleges in Andhra Pradesh and some other parts of Telangana State, a comprehensive educational system is being offered. Subjects from the arts and sciences, vocational, and technical that provide a practical approach to learning, are included in the curriculum to mould the

students into individuals who are prepared to face the challenges in a world dominated by science and technology—the 21st century. The Curriculum Specifications prescribed by the UGC/AICTE specify the four skills which need to be mastered by the learners in three areas of language use, namely the interpersonal, the informational and the aesthetic. These areas incorporate the integration of the four skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing.

Writing is one of the skills which need to be

mastered by the learners. Students learn different genres of writing like descriptive, expository, recounting and narrative, based on the prescribed syllabus of the JNTUK and other institutions. There are many methods adopted by the teachers in teaching writing in the classrooms. One of the methods recommended in teaching writing is the incorporation of cooperative learning introduced by Kagan.

Review of Literature

‘Cooperative learning’ has been defined by scholars in different ways. For instance, Slavin (1980) describes ‘cooperative learning’ as students working in small groups, who are given rewards and recognition based on the group’s performance. Artz and Newman (1990) define ‘cooperative learning’ as a small group of learners working as a team to solve a problem, complete a task or achieve a common goal. A definition of ‘cooperative learning’ as a category under ‘collaborative learning’ is given by Goodsell, Maher and Tinto (1992). They define ‘cooperative learning’ as a learning approach which falls in the more general category of ‘collaborative learning’, which happens when students work together in groups of three or more, cooperatively to find an understanding, solutions or meaning and create a product. ‘Cooperative learning’ is a learning approach which has been proven to culminate in positive results and outcomes. Contrary to popular belief, ‘cooperative learning’ is not mere group work. In group work, sometimes the participation of the group members is not equal and there are group members who

indulge in a free ride without contributing to the group’s work and objective. In cooperative learning, all of the team members have to assume roles to make the group task a success. The learning approach is highly structured and the teacher has to make sure that the elements of cooperative learning are evident in the lesson.

Spencer Kagan’s Model

A cooperative learning model was introduced by Spencer Kagan (1994) and it is based on the use of content-free ways of organising interaction called structures. The structures can be adopted and adapted in various contexts. Group investigation is designed to lead and propel students towards predetermined facts and skills. The Curriculum Packages, one of the models, is usually specific for certain age groups and curriculum. Thus the packages are not suitable for all grade levels or all curriculum topics.

Role of Teacher

The teacher plays a significant role in incorporating elements of cooperative learning and ensuring that the students know how to work collectively in a cooperative learning context. The absence of even one element in the lesson will lead to a non-cooperative environment. This paper emphasises the use of group reward to enhance students’ performance. There are four important elements of cooperative learning which need to be incorporated in Kagan’s Structures (Kagan 1994). He emphasises four basic principles of cooperative learning: positive inter-

dependence, individual accountability, equal participation, and simultaneous interaction. Based on the synthesis of the main elements of cooperative learning from researchers, seven elements have been identified. These elements are: group heterogeneity, positive interdependence, promotive interaction, individual accountability, interpersonal skills, equal opportunities for success, and team competition.

Objective of the Study

The main objective of this study was to investigate the effects of cooperative learning on students' writing performance in engineering colleges. This research focused on the effects of cooperative learning in enhancing students' writing performance in the narrative genre. The cooperative models used are a combination of Learning Together and Structural Approach.

Research Question

The study will answer a research question based on the objective of the study. The research question was: 'What are the effects of cooperative learning on students' writing performance?'

Methodology

In the lesson designed for the study, each student became an expert on the assigned topic and met with experts on the same topic from other teams. As a group expert, they presented their points to the whole class. Then, students returned to their original teams, i.e. home teams. They shared and used the points and came up with a writing piece. The method they followed was

prescribed by Kagan. It is a combination of mastery and concept development which involves theory and practice. Thus the incorporation of the lesson design for students in their writing lessons would be suitable.

Cooperative Learning and Writing

Writing is one of skills that students need to master. Students' acquisition of the writing skills is given much emphasis in the educational system. However, Kagan states that the writing process receives relatively little attention in research on foreign language teaching; yet it is a valuable communicative skill to convey a person's thoughts and feelings. It is also a means of self-discovery and linguistic discipline. Harmer (2006) believes that writing in groups is effective in genre-based and process approach. Students found the activity motivating in terms of the writing itself. They also found the activity to be motivating when they embarked on the research, discussed the topics, had peer evaluation, and achieved the group's goal.

A survey was conducted for this purpose at an engineering college, using the pre-test and post-test method. Mechanical engineering students were asked to write about their personal experiences after joining the institute and 28 students participated in the survey. Their primary draft at the pre-test level was very poor and there were also many typographical and syntactical errors.

The researcher spent 26 days on training

to enhance the systematic formation of sentences and also paying attention to the spelling patterns of the words. The students' performance was then examined after the training and their performance in writing showed improvement of 32%. After a couple of weeks, when the researcher again conducted a survey on the writing skills of the students, their performance was seen to increase from 32% to 46%.

Conclusion

The data collected for the survey clearly shows that the students had some pre-existing knowledge and the difference in their performance from pre-test to post-test was the result of cooperating learning among them, which enhanced their writing performance. The instruments used in the pre-test and the post-test were in the form of a narrative essay in English. The analysis of the data showed that the students performed better in the post-test compared to the pre-test as a result of cooperative learning in the writing classes. The findings confirmed the positive effects of using Kagan's model of cooperative learning. All the tools and samples used in the study showed that there was a striking enhancement in the writing skills of the engineering students in the engineering colleges in Andhra Pradesh.

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