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Developing EFL learners' academic writing through collaborative writing projects¹

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Abstract

Over the last decade, globalisation has invaded our world and reformed education. This has deeply affected the learners' level and interests. As far as the writing skill is concerned, EFL learners tend to use a more informal English rather than academic with many other problems. For instance, academic writing is a highly problematic task to the students. They face many challenges that negatively affect their productions such as cohesion and coherence problems, in addition to vocabulary and grammatical issues. This makes the central aim of the teachers nowadays is to enhance their students' performance towards better academic writing. Accordingly, the present research paper tries to spot light on the obstacles that most EFL learners encounter. It also attempts to help the learners overcome these challenges through collaborative writing projects. To reach this end, many cooperative activities are implemented in the writing classes, and a collaborative writing project is assigned in order to evaluate the students' outputs and examine to what extent they can improve their writing. The major findings show a significance improvement in the students writing productions through collaboration.

Key words: Academic writing, collaborative writing projects, cooperative learning, EFL classes.

Yabancı dil olarak İngilizce öğrenen öğrencilerin işbirlikçi yazma projeleri ile akademik yazılarını geliştirme

Özet

Son on yılda, küreselleşme dünyamızı etkisi altına aldı ve eğitimimizi yeniden şekillendirdi. Bu durum, öğrencilerin seviye ve ilgilerini derinden etkiledi. Yazma becerisi düşünüldüğünde, İngilizceyi yabancı dil olarak öğrenenler, başka birçok sorunla birlikte akademik İngilizce yerine daha informal bir İngilizce kullanmaya eğilimlidirler. Örneğin, akademik yazma öğrenciler için daha sorunlu bir iştir. Kelime bilgisi ve dilbilgisi konularının yanı sıra, bağlaşıklık ve bağdaşıklık problemleri gibi üretimlerini olumsuz etkileyen birçok güçlükle karşılaşmaktalar. Bu durum, öğrencilerin performanslarını daha akademik bir yazı yönünde geliştirmeyi öğretmenlerin bugünkü temel hedefi yapıyor. Dolayısıyla, bugünkü araştırmalar İngilizceyi yabancı dil olarak öğrenenlerin en çok karşılaştığı engellere ışık tutmaya çalışmaktadır. Ayrıca, işbirlikli yazma projelerinde öğrencilere bu zorlukları yenmesi için yardım etmeye çalışmaktadır. Hedefe ulaşmak için yazma sınıflarında öğrencilerin kazanımlarını değerlendirmek ve yazılarını ne ölçüde geliştirdiklerini incelemek için

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işbirliğine dayalı birçok etkinlik uygulanır ve işbirlikli bir yazma projesi ödev verilir. Ana bulgular işbirliğine dayalı yazı üretiminde anlamlı bir gelişme bulunduğunu göstermektedir.

Anahtar kelimeler: Akademik yazı, işbirlikli yazma projeleri, işbirliğine dayalı öğrenme, İngilizceyi yabancı dil olarak sınıflar.

Introduction

Writing occupies a major importance in learning a language. In fact, learning English requires the development of the four skills, namely: speaking, listening, reading, and writing. Even though writing has received a great attention in EFL classes, as the centre of teaching and learning in higher education, students' achievement is still unable to meet the readers' expectations. Besides, writing has an influence on various patterns in addition to the other skills. Mandal, for instance, says "writing trains ears and eyes and fixes vocabulary, spelling and patterns in our mind" (Mandal, 2009, p. 95). However, students usually encounter different hindrances and other factors of distraction that may affect their writing ability. One of the most broadly speaking factors is globalisation. The latter has brought with it an endless use of ICTs and social networking sites which, undoubtedly, makes the world smaller and learning foreign languages and communication easier, but also affects the nature of the learners' writing, particularly academic writing. They tend to encourage the use of informal language rather than academic. Hence, this research paper aims at shedding some light on the challenges that especially hinder students' writing performance and enhance their academic writing via the integration of a cooperative learning approach in the classroom. Since it is commonly believed that cooperative learning has a potential to maximise students' performance at numerous levels, this study is intended to develop students' writings by means of group works and collaborative writing projects.

Academic Writing

Academic writing is defined as "a mental and cognitive activity, since it is a product of the mind" (Al Fadda, 2012, p. 124). Irvin (2010), in his turn, describes academic writing as a form of "evaluation that requires students to demonstrate knowledge and show proficiency with certain disciplinary skills of thinking, interpreting, and presenting" (Irvin, 2010, p. 8). Academic writing can be defined as a process of writing that is required in any academic situation. It involves the students to write from a formal perspective applying writing rules and be more accurate (Ankawi, 2015). In the same vein, Thaïss, Chris and Zawacki (2006) state that academic writing is any writing provided to fulfil an educational purpose at the university or college. It includes writing assignments, or professional writings such as researchers' publications or conference presentations.

Features of Academic Writing

Based on a research conducted by Thaïss, Chris and Zawacki at George Mason University, academic writing has three main characteristics. They are summarised by Irvin (2010, p. 14) as follows:

1. Clear evidence in writing that the writer (s) have been persistent, open-minded, and disciplined in study.
2. The dominance of reason over emotions or sensual perception.

3. An imagined reader who is coolly rational, reading for information, and intending to formulate a reasoned response.

Broadly speaking, academic writing is characterised by the use of a formal tone, the third-person rather than the first-person, and precise word choice. However, there are ten main features of academic writing that are commonly discussed (Vineski, 2003). These features are represented in Figure 1.

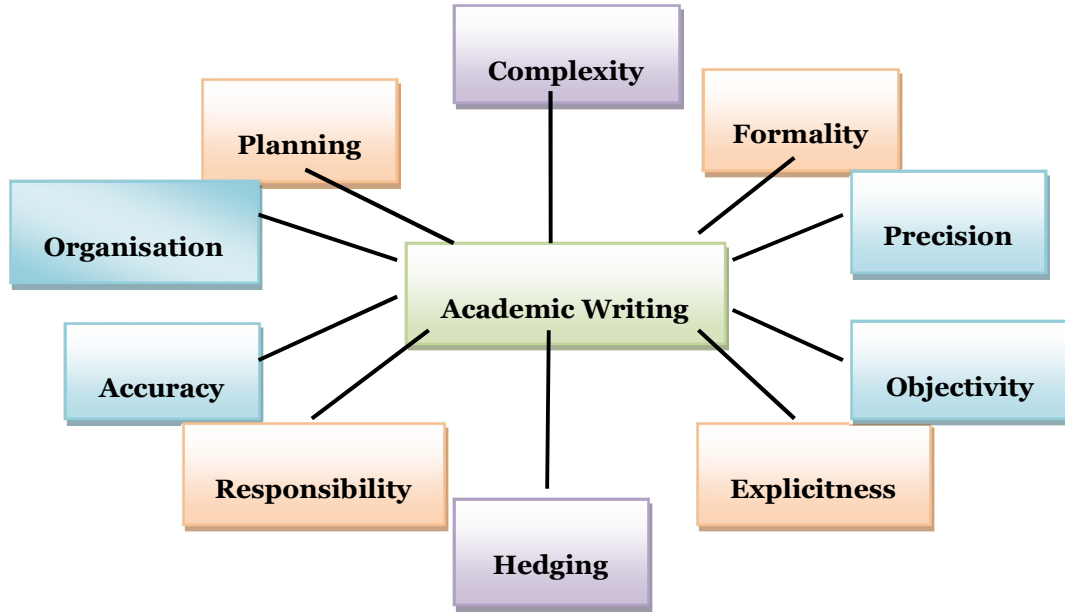


Figure 1: Features of Academic Writing

1. Complexity: Academic writing is more complex. It has longer words with varied vocabulary and usually complicated grammar, compared to spoken language.

2. Formality: In academic writing words and phrases are relatively formal. This means that colloquial words and expressions should be avoided.

3. Precision: Facts are given precisely. In other words, the used sources and the quality of information provided in a piece of writing should be reliable and precise.

4. Objectivity: In general, academic writing is objective. There are very few situations where personal writing is tolerated whereby the writer or the readers are referred to. This means that the main emphasis should be on the information to be provided rather than the writer.

5. Explicitness: Academic writing is explicit about the relationships in the text. It requires precise structure of the texts and clear connections between different parts of the provided texts.

6. Accuracy: Academic writing uses accurate vocabulary. Most of words have different meanings, so the writer should use the most accurate word to convey the meaning to the readers.

7. Hedging: It is a complicated feature of academic writing. Generally speaking, hedges help the writer makes the necessary decisions about the choice of words and phrases that determines the strength of a claim or a particular argument.

8. Responsibility: In academic writing you have to be responsible for what you write and give evidence and justifications for your claims.

9. Organisation: Academic writing is well organised from one section into another.

10. Planning: Academic writing is well planned. It is realised based on specific plan and objective.

In brief, academic writing is mainly characterised by outlining, objectivity and accurate language used by the author. In other words, academic writing is any process in which the author breaks down ideas through formal language, deductive reasoning, and third person point of view. It reflects what the author is thinking and what evidence and justification he has to support this thinking (Vineski, 2003).

Students Challenges in Academic Writing

It is highly believed that writing constitutes one of the most difficult skills to master due to its complexity. Jozsef, for instance, states “writing is among the most complex human activities. It involves the development of a design idea, the capture of mental representations of knowledge, and of experience with subjects” (Jozsef, 2001, p. 5). Academic writing in English at advanced levels is very difficult for English language learners and even for native English speakers (Al Fadda, 2012). This state of affairs makes teaching writing a very challenging task for EFL teachers. Hence, it makes academic writing even harder.

Abdulkareem (2013) and Ankawi (2015) point to some difficulties students face in academic writing including difficulties with grammatical competence, difficulties with the different structure of Arabic and English, and difficulties with differences in genres and socio-cultural differences. Abdulkareem (2013) mentions other problems Arab students face in writing in English language, including paraphrasing, sentence structure and the interference of the students' mother tongue. Gomez (2010) spots five common mistakes Arab students make while writing due to the influence of Arabic, their mother tongue: run-on sentences, redundancy, Arabish, punctuation, and writing organisation. In this study, the subjects are Algerian students who have all the stated earlier problems. In addition to that, they have other problems such as time management, lack of vocabulary, problems of cohesion, coherence and unity. They also have problems of punctuation and capitalisation.

Cooperative Learning

Cooperative learning is an approach that requires students to work together and help each other in different learning activities (Jolliffe, 2007). To become cooperative, Jolliffe states that groups need to work as a team, discuss different elements together and support each other to understand and fulfil shared objectives (Jolliffe, 2007).

Cooperative learning is an instructional strategy based on the human instinct of cooperation. It is the utilization of the psychological aspects of cooperation and competition for curricular transaction and student learning. The concept of cooperative learning refers to instructional methods and techniques in which students work in small groups and are rewarded in some way for performance as a group. (Mandal, 2009, p. 96)

Cooperative learning is a student-centred instructional strategy in which the teacher is a facilitator and the students, constituting small groups, are responsible for their own learning and the whole group's

members learning. Students in these small groups interact with each other to learn, practise, do exercises, and achieve particular goals (Har, 2005).

In other words, the concept of cooperative learning refers to the instructional methods and techniques in which students work together in small groups.

Elements of cooperative learning

According to Kagan (1994), there are 5 essential components of cooperative learning (Figure 2).

- 1. Positive Independence:** Students work as a team to achieve shared goals, but each student has a unique contribution within the same team.
- 2. Individual Accountability:** Students must do their best, share ideas and communicate effectively, and each student must complete his/her part of work to be more efficient as a team.
- 3. Face-to-face Promotive Interaction:** It involves group discussion and interaction in which students assist each other to solve problems and draw conclusions to reach the group's shared goals.
- 4. Interpersonal and Social Skills:** Students are encouraged to develop their decision making, communication, collaboration, leadership, trust building within the members of the group and avoid or manage to solve problems and conflicts.
- 5. Group Processing:** It involves group assessment and learning tasks analysis. Students assess their effectiveness as a team and identify what changes are needed to improve the group performance (Har, 2005; Kagan, 1994)

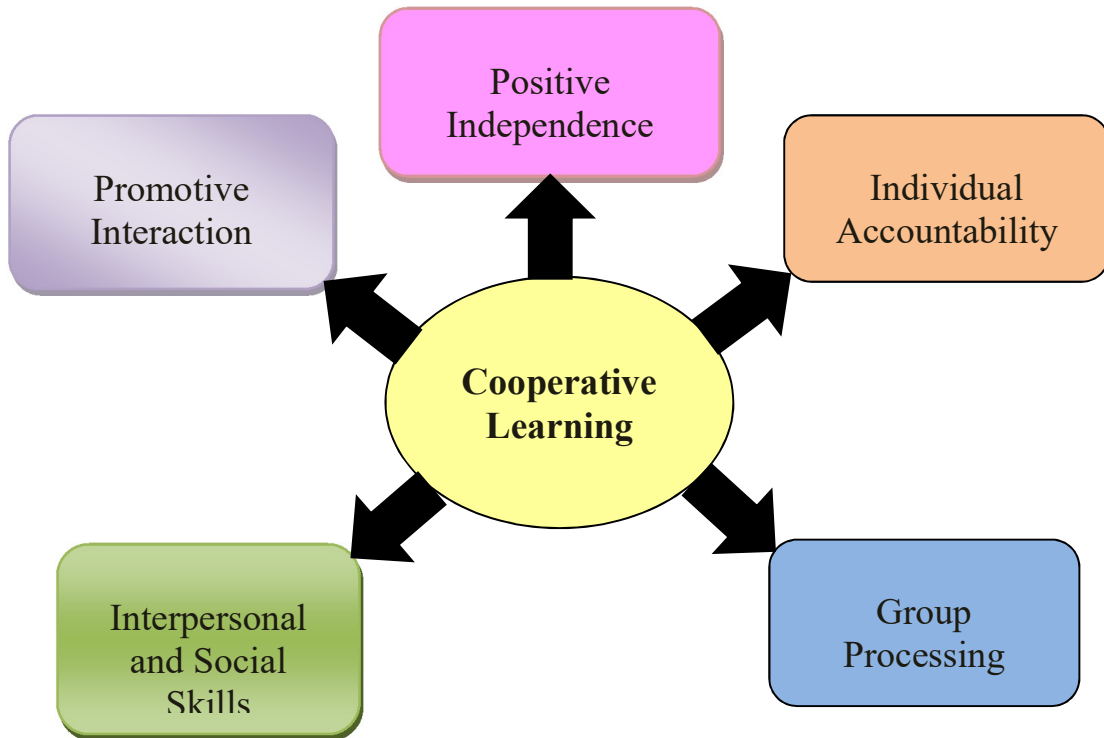


Figure 2: The Essential Components of Cooperative Learning**Advantages of cooperative learning**

Cooperative learning has many advantages in developing the students' achievement and writing skills. According to Jolliffe (2007), cooperative learning has three main categories of advantages namely: achievement, interpersonal relationships, and psychological health and social competence. For the first category, it concerns developing the students' productivity, problem-solving skills, time management, and improving the performance of weak students when matched with good ones. The second category is concerned with promoting the students' sense of caring, friendship, support and morals. The third category involves fostering the students' self confidence, independence, collaboration and problems sharing among the peers (Jolliffe, 2007).

In her turn, Mandal (2009) points out to some of the benefits of cooperative learning. She states that cooperative learning improves students' critical thinking skills. It creates a good atmosphere for active and exploratory learning. It also considers the students' different learning styles they use (Mandal, 2009).

In a nutshell, cooperative learning supports and deepens learning and develops the students' critical thinking skills.

Strategies of Cooperative Learning

There are many models of cooperative learning strategies. The following table represents the most common strategies applied by teachers in the classroom (Mandal, 2009).

Cooperative Learning Strategy	Significance
Learn together	The learning together model was developed by David and Roger Johnson. The students work cooperatively on different tasks and assignments.
Jigsaw	Students participate and are involved actively in a cooperative group work to do different activities. Each group member has unique information that he/she learns and has to teach it to the other members
Group Investigation	In this method, students form groups of 2 to 6 members and work together cooperatively in order to plan projects. Each group selects a subtopic from a whole unit and breaks it into individual tasks then the members discuss and present their final report with the others to be finally evaluated.
Round Robin	It is a brainstorming technique in which students generate ideas together. Group members take turns responding to a question with words, phrases, or short answers. This technique helps in generating many ideas without interrupting the flow of ideas.
Buzz Groups	Buzz groups are teams of four to six students that are formed quickly. Students discuss a given topic and exchange ideas together. Buzz Groups serve as a warm-up to whole-class discussion. They are effective for generating information in a short period of time.

Critical Debates	This activity could be used for argumentative writing. Students take one side opposing their opponents' views. They form teams and discuss their arguments together, then present them to the opposing team. This technique develops the students' critical thinking skills.
Praise Polish Question	In this technique the group members read their writings aloud and the others listen and take notes. After that, the students ask their peers what they liked about their work (Praise), then identify what exactly they did not understand (Question), and finally offer some suggestions to improve their work (Polish).

Table 1: Strategies of Cooperative Learning

Methodology

In this study, an experimental approach is opted for in which cooperative learning strategies were implemented in writing classes.

Subjects: 40 First year BA students of English, university of Constantine 1 Algeria, constitute the sample of the experiment. A group of 20 students who belong to the same population serves as a control group. The experiment was carried out during the academic year 2017-2018, particularly in the second semester of the year because at the time the students learn the basics of the writing skill, and especially how to write different types of paragraphs.

Material and Procedure: All the subjects had a pre-test in order to evaluate their writing level and identify the most common challenges they encounter when writing academically. Then, a series of cooperative learning strategies and collaborative writing projects were implemented to improve the students of the experimental group sense of sharing and collaboration. The duration of the experiment in which many cooperative strategies were integrated was 8 weeks. The students attended 270 minutes writing classes per week in which one session lasts 90 minutes. In other words, the students of the experimental group attended a total of 24 sessions of writing. A post-test was given to the students of the experimental group in order to determine the effects of these strategies and projects on developing the students' academic writing. The students of the control group were also given the same post-test in order to analyse their results and compare them with the scores obtained by the subjects of the experiment.

Discussion of the results

The students' scores obtained in the pre-test and the post-test are displayed in Table 2 in order to compare the achievement of the participants of the experimental group. The data obtained are analysed using SPSS (Statistical Package for Social Sciences). The version of the SPSS used in this study is 20.0.0. Descriptive statistics such as the mean and the standard variation are also reported using the same programme.

Students	Pre-test	Post-test	Difference
1	7	12	5

2	6,5	10	3,5
3	2,75	5	2,25
4	9	9	0
5	14	14,75	0,75
6	11	14	3
7	9	13	4
8	8	11,25	3,25
9	5,75	6	0,25
10	8	8	0
11	8,5	10	1,5
12	6,75	11	4,25
13	12,25	14	1,75
14	11,5	12,25	0,75
15	13	13,5	0,5
16	13	15	2
17	12,5	12	-0,5
18	14	14	0
19	10	14	4
20	9	13,75	4,75
21	10	12	2
22	10,5	13,25	2,75
23	6	9	3
24	7,5	9	1,5
25	7	8,75	1,75
26	6	8	2
27	6	13	7
28	12	13,25	1,25
29	10	13	3

30	13	14	1
31	4,5	8	3,5
32	9	8,25	-0,75
33	8,5	12	3,5
34	4,75	6	1,25
35	4	10	6
36	11	12	1
37	9	12,75	3,75
38	6	11,25	5,25
39	6,25	11	4,75
40	7	10	3

Table 2: Students scores in the pre-test and the post-test (Experimental Group)

Table 2 reveals that the greatest majority of the students have considerably improved their scores. It is noticeable that the differences between the means from the pre-test and post-test are positive for almost all of the students.

	Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pair 1 Pretest	8,7375	40	2,91380	,46071
Posttest	11,1750	40	2,58769	,40915

Table 3: Paired Samples Statistics (Experimental Group)

Table 3 indicates that the mean for the pre-test is 8.7375 whilst it has increased to 11.1750 for the post-test results. This means that the students have improved their scores significantly in the post test.

	Paired Differences			t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean			
Pair 1 Pretest - Posttest	-2,43750	1,86117	,29428	-8,283	39	,000

Table 4: Paired Samples Test (Experimental Group)

As shown in Table 4, the p value (Sig 2-tailed) is .000, which is a very low value. This means that the subjects have improved their scores and have statistically speaking shown a significant difference. This concludes that the implementation of collaborative learning activities has positively enhanced the students' writing performance.

In order to support the previously stated conclusions, the students' scores are compared to the ones obtained by the control group. Table 5 displays the participants' scores of the control group in the pre-test and the post-test.

Students	Pre-test	Post-test	Difference
1	9	11	2
2	6	7	1
3	3,75	6	2,25
4	7	7	0
5	10	12	2
6	10	10	0
7	9	10	1
8	6,5	6	-0,5
9	12	8	-4
10	7	7	0
11	10	9	-1
12	6,25	7	0,75
13	12	11	-1
14	14	14	0
15	11	10	-1
16	10	8	-2
17	13	12	-1
18	6	6	0
19	3	4	1
20	12	11,75	-0,25

Table 5: Students scores in the pre-test and the post-test (Control Group)

A glance at Table 5 shows that six students have improved their scores. However, the majority of the subjects did not improve their level (the same results) or even scored worse in the post-test. It should be noted that the students of the control group studied writing in the same duration between the pre-test and the post-test as the experimental group. However, they studied writing through the usual monotonous approach to teaching writing, without the integration of any group works or any other cooperative strategies. Thus, it can be seen from the students' results that they were unable to improve

their achievement considerably using the traditional approach to teaching writing, which is based on students' individual production.

	Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pre-test	8,8750	20	3,06991	,68645
Post-test	8,8375	20	2,62613	,58722

Table 6: Paired Samples Statistics (Control Group)

It can be clearly seen in Table 6 that the mean for the pre-test is 8.8750 and for the post-test is 8.8375. These results are very close, which means that the students of the control group remain at the same level. Even though the mean has statistically speaking decreased, one may assert that these results denote that the students simply did not progress in their writing performance.

	Paired Differences			t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean			
Pair 1 Pre-test – Post-test	,03750	1,46735	,32811	,114	19	,910

Table 7: Paired Samples Test (Control Group)

As shown in Table 7, the p-value (Sig. 2-tailed) is 0.910 which is higher than 0.05. This denotes that there is no statistically significant change in the subjects' scores. The mean difference between the students' results in the pre-test and the post-test is 0.3750, which is very small to be considered. Again, it can be concluded that the students' performance of the control group is not satisfying, especially compared to the great progress seen in the students' of the experimental group.

In brief, the major findings of this study conclude that the majority of students of the experimental group have considerably improved their academic writing style. Some grammatical mistakes and other problems such as wordiness and punctuation were inevitable. However, considering the overall achievement of participants, cooperative learning has enormously contributed in enhancing their level.

Conclusion and Recommendation

Academic writing is a very complex activity for many EFL students. This research advocates the implementation of collaborative writing projects and other cooperative strategies, which have shown effectiveness at different levels in EFL classes, in order to ultimately enhance students' academic writing skills and improve their engagement in the learning/teaching process through small groups or projects. Through cooperative learning, students can enhance their writing abilities by sharing and working together. This will eventually raise their motivation, enthusiasm, self confidence, critical thinking and sense of collaboration.

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