**ORIGINAL ARTICLE**

# The Impact of Cooperative Learning on Students' Paragraph Writing Skills: The Case of Third Year Health Informatics Students at University of Gondar

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*Abstract*

*This study looked into the impacts of cooperative learning on students' overall paragraph writing skills and the writing components such as content, organization, vocabulary, grammar, and mechanics. To this end, a true experimental study in, which participants were randomly assigned to the control and experimental groups, was employed. The participants of the study, who were selected purposively, were fifty-six third year Health Informatics students at University of Gondar in 2018/19 academic year. The experimental group accomplished the writing tasks in groups of four, whereas the control group completed the same tasks independently for six weeks. Paragraph writing tests were given before and after the intervention and the scores were analyzed through SPSS. The independent samples t-test result showed that there was no significant difference between the two groups both in their overall writing and the components of writing. The paired samples t-test result, on the other hand, indicated that both groups significantly enhanced their overall writing, content and organization; however, none of the groups got better in vocabulary and grammar and only the experimental group improved in mechanics. Therefore, it can be concluded that cooperative learning had no better impact in improving students' writing skills than the independent learning except for mechanics. The investigation showed that the two approaches could be employed sparingly in EFL classes, but cooperative learning may be advisable when the focus is on mechanics.*

## 1. Introduction

Cooperative learning, one of the active learning methods, has its roots in social constructivism. The theory asserts that learning can be maximized by interacting and communicating with others through discussion, collaboration and feedback (Vy-

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2 The terms cooperative and collaborative learning are synonymous; hence they are used interchangeably in this article (Palmer et al., 2018 and Jacobs, 2014).

gotsky, 1978). Cooperative learning can generally be defined as a process of working jointly in pairs or small groups to achieve common goals and to develop one's own and others' knowledge and skills (Johnson & Johnson, 1999). In addition, it helps to develop their thinking, problem solving, communication and transferable skills (lifelong learning) and creates opportunities to practice language. Its ultimate purpose is making group members stronger individuals who can perform better than before.

Employing effective cooperative learning, however, is a demanding undertaking that requires understanding and applying the basic principles and strategies carefully and strictly. The principles constitute positive interdependence, face-to-face interaction, individual accountability, small group and interpersonal skills and group processing (Johnson & Johnson, 2002). Both teachers and students need to be well-informed about and trained in the use of the principles before putting this active learning method into practice. The researcher believes that such preparation is missing and that is why group-based learning is implemented inappropriately (Muhammed, 2014). Cooperation is deep-rooted in the society long ago that it is described in the Bible, in proverbs and in sayings such as "Many hands make light work" and "Two heads are better than one". Several ancient and recent philosophers, scientists, religious leaders, businessmen and politicians also have explained emphasizing the power of cooperation for success. For instance, Benjamin Franklin (1706 - 1790) is known for his saying which reads as "Tell me and I will forget. Show me and I may remember. Involve me and I learn." Charles Darwin (1809 - 1882), in his part, states "It is the long history of humankind… that those who learned to collaborate and improvise most effectively have prevailed."

Learning in collaboration has also been practiced in language teaching/education since Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) gained popularity in the 1970's. It is considered as an extension of CLT because, like CLT, it is a learner-centered approach which emphasizes learner interaction. Then, teachers started to apply cooperative language learning strategies in their classrooms when teaching the four main skills 9listeig, speaking, reading and writing) alongside grammar, and vocabulary (Bilen & Tavil, 2015).  Language scholars such as Swain and Lapkin (2002) emphasize the role of collaborative dialogue in the process of second language learning. They explain that collaborative interaction is not only used as a source of comprehensible input but also as an opportunity to use the target language (output). In other words, interaction creates conducive environment for language learning, and it helps students to develop their language skills. Supporting this point, (Pica, 1994; Long, 1996 and Gass, 1997, cited in Lightbown & Spade, 2006) argue that conversational interaction plays a pivotal role in foreign or second language (L2) learning.

Writing, one of the major language skills, plays a significant role in academic success and life. Unless students produce/write their answers, assignments, projects and research with appropriate language, they will not be effective in their studies and this, in turn, affects their life out of school. In line with this, the National Commission on Writing (2003) states that proficiency in writing skills is necessary if students are expected to be successful in school, college, and life. That is why writing is one of the key requirements in English for General Purposes (EGP) and English for Academic Purposes (EAP) syllabi (Biria & Jafari, 2013). In fact, they added, writing is such a complicated process that "composing an accurate and fluent paragraph is by no means an easy task" (p, 164). Supporting this, Heaton (1990) asserts that writing skills are complex and difficult to teach because they require: constructing correct and appropriate sentences; using the proper mechanics; developing relevant ideas; employing variety of sentence styles; composing for a given purpose and audience and organizing information.

Writing skill, which is mastered only through schooling or training, has several pedagogical advantages. For example, it helps to provide learners with different learning styles and encourages independent learning (Byrne, 1988). It also lets learners use the grammar and vocabulary taught; feel they control the language and take risk; and get involved with the new language (Raimes, 1983). It is, therefore, crucial to inform these very facts to both English teachers and students so that writing instruction could be interesting and meaningful.

In the past, writing was seen as an individual or lonely process and only instructors offered feedback to students (Wigglesworth & Storch, 2012). Still Students are asked to write on a certain topic and submit their compositions for corrections. Adeyemi (2008) asserts that the individualized strategy to writing does not allow learners to entertain a variety of ideas in their compositions. This is because it does not encourage cooperation, help and motivation from peers (Harmer, 2001). Although there are attempts to employ the cooperative strategy to writing in EFL classes, teachers failed implementing the basic principles of cooperative learning such as interdependence, interaction and responsibility. Thus, students merely gather, but only one or two members complete the task (Adeyemi, 2008).

The interest toward collaborative writing started in the early 1970's through the work of Bruffee (1973) who argued that by making students write compositions and fictions in pairs, students produced better texts in comparison to the times they wrote alone (Ansari & Jafari, 2012). Storch (2011, p.1) defined collaborative writing briefly as "the joint production of a text by two or more writers". That is to say, students sit in pairs or groups, discus on the task, decide on the points, write them, revise the written text, and submit it. After examining differing definitions of collaborative writing, Rbuiaee, et al. (2015) describe it in four points. Firstly, it is a socio-cognitive process carried out by two or more people to produce one text based on consensus. Secondly, it requires processing information as a group and constructing knowledge through verbal and non-verbal interactive tasks all the way through the phases of writing. Thirdly, as participants get involved in the group tasks, they also enhance their writing ability. Finally, reconstructing a text such as editing others work is not considered collaborative writing.

Bearing in mind the positive effects of learning in groups in different subjects, language scholars started to test its value in the context of writing. In this regard, Bruffee (1973), who is considered as a pioneer in the area, found out that pairs of learners produced better texts than individuals did, (Ansari & Jafari, 2012). Then, the use of writing activities in pair works continued following Swains (1985) paper on the role of output in foreign language development (Storch, 2011). Several other studies conducted based on the socio-cultural theory of learning also witnessed that writing tasks completed in pairs "offer learners an opportunity to collaborate in the solution of their language-related problems, co-construct new language knowledge, and produce linguistically more accurate written texts" Dobao (2012, p.1).

For many years, teachers have been grouping students to work on specific tasks and assignments. Engaging students with group learning activities benefits them with high quality learning outcomes; builds up sense of responsibility; develops generic skills such as teamwork, communication, and project management skills; and reduces the heavy workload of teachers (Chan, 2010). Cooperative work, if properly managed, also gives an opportunity for learners to practice and develop the language skills. In completing a group assignment, for example, participants are expected to collect information, take notes, share their ideas, discuss them, listen to others, organize the points and produce the project. In short, group work helps students improve the four major language skills. However, Ross & Mahlck (1990) state that the attainment of more complex educational objectives, such as 'individuals capable of working in cooperation with others

or 'demonstrating ability to solve problems' are rarely evaluated. Johnson & Johnson (2002, p.1) also assert, "How students perceive each other and interact with one another is a neglected aspect of instruction" while it affected students' achievement, feeling about the school, the teacher and each other, and their self-esteem.

If students are not clear about the objectives and expectations of the cooperative work, or if they are questioning the validity and fairness of the assessment, it may cause confusion and competition among the group. Consequently, the educational benefits of group work will be less effective and may even be negative (Chan, 2010). In line with this, teacher educators complained that "… they are not satisfied with the way they are currently grading group projects … grades given to individual students are invalid because some students do not participate properly in the group work and many do not learn the basic concepts and skills, they are supposed to learn from the group activities" (USAID/ Basic Education Program, 2006, p.1).

 Regarding group tasks, a study by Mohammed (2009) on the treatment of collaborative writing activities in grade 11 English textbook found out that less weight was given to such tasks and the elements of cooperative learning were not treated properly. The present textbooks (MoE, 2003 E.C.) share the same problem though there are tasks that invite learners to plan writing and provide feedback in pairs and groups. The case is worst in our university. The harmonized Basic Writing Skills syllabus (EnLa 1012) (MoE, 2013), which we instructors had been making use of, had no place for collaborative activities.

Thus, one can recognize that group work has been mismanaged, and there has been less cooperative effort. This, in turn, is affecting quality and+ increasing dependency, negligence, dissatisfaction and unfairness (Johnson & Johnson, 1999). It is also encouraging people who do assignments for other students with payment both in and out of educational institutions. As to the role of English in Ethiopia, the Education and Training Policy (1994) states that English will be taught as a subject starting from grade one and serves as the medium of instruction for secondary and higher education. In addition to the education sector, it has been used by banks, telecom, air lines, business centers and others sectors side by side with local languages; and it has been used for trans-boundary communications and diplomacy. Although English has been given such emphasis in education and other institutions, "… the appropriateness and accuracy of the English in use is low. The quality of English language education and training is poor" (Amlaku, 2010:13). Mebratu (2015:1) also confirmed that "…there were serious English language proficiency problems in the English teachers, students and teachers of other subjects…" The case of the writing skill is no exception. Studies, generally, indicate that although both teachers and students had positive perception on writing, the status of writing instruction was poor and students' writing ability was far below expected of them (Kefelegn, 2003; Teshome, 2007; Meseret, 2012 and Eskedar, 2014). The researcher has also been noticing the problem in his teaching experiences in high schools, colleges and university. Only very few students were capable of composing acceptable paragraphs. For instance, of the 42 students who were taught by the researcher at University of Gondar and sat for Basic Writing Skills final examination in 2017, 28 of them scored below 50% in the paragraph writing section. Of these, 5 of them wrote nothing and 6 of them wrote only 2 or 3 lines. Similarly, Tewodros (2016) states that of the applicants for the assistant lecturer position in Jimma University in 2012/13, almost all failed to write an argumentative essay. Here, it could be inferred that the failure in academic writing has been impacting the students' achievements in other courses. Currently, it is good that the language skills are being treated in the textbooks; however, the teaching of speaking, writing and listening are not yet paid the proper attention (Meseret, 2012). Students' poor written works, for example, are evident for the less treatment of the skills. Even after taking several courses of writing, most students' writ-

ing performance remains unchanged (Tewodros, 2016). The researcher believes that this happens partly because we instructors are still employing the conventional or the same method of teaching writing (independent writing). In fact, students' poor background on the language skills and being examination centeredness are other sources of the problem.

Of course, much has been done to upgrade English teachers' performances through English Language Improvement Program (ELIP) and Teaching English for Life Learning (AIR TELL) but their fruits were not visible and long lasting (Tesfaye, 2012). This could show that learning and teaching another language is a long and complex undertaking accompanied by various factors such as learners, teachers, ways of teaching, the required time, the place and our purpose of learning another language (Ahangari & Samadian, 2014).

By its very nature, "Learning to write in a foreign language is ... harder and it takes a considerable amount of time and effort to write skillfully" (Biria & Jafari, 2013, p.164). But writing has been paid to less attention, time and endeavor in Ethiopia particularly in high schools. Teachers tend to give much emphasis to grammar, vocabulary and reading because the lion's share of English examinations covers these language items – wash back effect. Thus, it is a bare fact that the teaching of writing has to be reconsidered, and should be thought of beyond offering a course.

Regarding research on collaborative writing, although the idea came into view half a century ago, the investigations made so far are so scant (Storch, 2011 and Khatib & Meihami, 2015). Of these, many of them are experimental which examine the impact of collaborative learning on one or more of the different aspects of writing (accuracy, fluency, complexity and language components such as content, grammar, vocabulary, organization, mechanics) in different contexts (L1, ESL and EFL, discourse types, levels of proficiency, age, gender and groupings) (Abdul-Hamed, 2004; Adeyemi, 2008; Ismail & Maasum, 2009; Nude, 2010; Niesyn, 2011; Ansari & Jafari, 2012; Biria & Jafari, 2013; Kwon, 2014; Chen, 2015; Khatib & Meihami, 2015 etc.). Following the dynamic advancement of technology, research on web based (online) collaborative writing is also getting attention (Squires, 2010; Caruso, 2014 and Bikowski & Vithanage, 2016).

However, the findings of these studies are inconsistent for different variables and a few revealed that cooperative groups failed to be productive. For example, Louth et.al, (1993) a study conducted on college freshmen in USA indicated that there was no significant difference between the control and experimental groups in overall writing performance. But Ahangari & Samadian (2014) in Iran University reported that the experimental group significantly developed their overall writing.

Regarding the components of writing, Shehadeh (2011), a study carried out in a university in USA, found out that cooperative learning helped in improving content, organization and vocabulary. Kotb (2016), a research held in a language center in Egypt, showed that the experimental group considerably performed better in mechanics and organization. Chen (2015), an investigation conducted in a university in USA, revealed that students who worked as a group substantially improved content, organization and grammar. One can note that the results of these studies are not in harmony except for organization. This depicts that the area needs additional investigations in various variables and settings as it is vital to decide which aspects of writing are best enhanced through collaborative writing.

As to studies on collaborative writing in Africa, it is evident from the document by Talib and Cheung (2017), who synthesized 68 sampled researches carried out on the same area for 10 years (2006 - 2016), that only South Africa was in the list. Related stud-

ies were also conducted by Adeyemi (2008) in Botswana and by Kotb (2016) in Egypt. A quasi-experimental study conducted by Wondwosen (2018) is the only published Ethiopian work that the researcher came across so far on the impact of social learning on writing in Grade 11. He indicated that the experimental group significantly improved their content, grammar, vocabulary and mechanics. However, the tests were not similar among the students since the students were made to compose on any two of the four topics of different discourses. This might have affected the validity and reliability of the test because various types of compositions require special scoring criteria in some aspects of writing. To sum up, first, research on collaborative writing is scarce both in the continent and in Ethiopia. Second, previous studies on the area revealed conflicting findings. Last, the conventional method of teaching writing has not made most of the students compose acceptable paragraphs. Therefore, these were the issues that triggered the researcher to carry out this study. Hence, this work could be considered as a contribution to the area, and it attempted to test the following hypotheses:

 HO - There is no significant difference in the writing scores between students who are taught individually and cooperatively.

H1 - There is a significant difference in the writing scores between students who are taught individually and cooperatively.

**Research Methodology**

**Design**

As the aim of this study was to check whether cooperative learning develops students' writing skill or not, a true experimental study was conducted. Such an experiment was conducted because it helps to highly minimize extraneous factors. For example, it enables to have a group of students that take same courses by same teachers, to have equivalent class size and to form homogeneous groups. Therefore, a group of students were divided into control and experimental groups randomly by lottery.

**Participants**

The participants of the experiment were 56 Third year Health Informatics students in the first semester of 2018/19 academic year at University of Gondar. This group was selected purposively satisfying two criteria. One was the class size. Several scholars agreed that experimental studies which make use of statistical procedures are supposed to take a minimum of 30 samples (Dornyei, 2007 and Creswell, 2012). The other was mode of course delivery. The students have to study the course the whole semester with the intention that the researcher will have extended time for implementing the intervention and marking. After the selection, these groups of learners were randomly assigned to control and experimental groups each consisting of 28 students. They were made to call number one and two in a row, and students who called the same number sat together. Then, representatives from each group were invited to draw lottery (control or experimental) and identify to which group they belong to; thus, a simple random sampling was employed. Of the 56 students, 8 students who missed the pre- (6), post- (1) and both tests (1) were excluded, and only 48 students, 24 in each group, were made to be part of the study.

**Data Gathering Instrument - Writing Test**

The study made use of quantitative data, particularly test scores, to attain its objectives. Thus, pre- and post-paragraph writing tests on the same topic that is "Opportunities of being a University Student" were given. The topic was accompanied by situation and 45 minutes was allotted. Participants were supposed to compose the paragraph in 100 - 120 words.  The criteria for marking their texts were made clear in the instruction. The pre-test served as a control and to make sure that there is no difference in the scores of the groups. The posttest was used to check if change occurred.

The tests were evaluated and marked by two TEFL scholars (PhD candidates) who were briefed about the scoring criteria and whose ratings were checked for reliability (0.721). Test-retest reliability was also made which is 0.863.

**The Marking Scale**

Analytical scoring method was employed to mark the tests as the study aimed at testing not only the overall writing performance but also the various writing aspects: content, organization or structure, grammar, vocabulary and mechanics. It was adapted from Test of English for Educational Purposes (1984, cited in Alderson et al., 1995) and Jacobs et.al (1981, cited in Hughes, 1989). The adaptation includes making the marking criteria less subjective and specific; merging them and avoiding zero scales. That is, terms like some, low, frequent are replaced by figures; the zero marks assigned for grammar, vocabulary and mechanics were cancelled out; and punctuation, capitalization and spelling are fused and treated under mechanics.

**Training Material**

The manual comprises of three sections. The first deals with introduction about the manual, the training agreement form and the time allocated for the training. The second discusses the theory underpinning cooperative learning. This helps the trainees to gain knowledge of the approach before its implementation. Studies reported that those who were made aware of cooperative learning performed better than who were not (Chen, 2015).  Kotb (2106), in her part, advised that students have to be introduced to and trained on cooperative learning before carrying out the tasks. The last section treats 21 cooperative and writing tasks that make students work in groups. 4 of them are team bonding activities that help participants exercise principles of cooperative learning such as positive interdependence, face-to-face interaction and interpersonal and small group skills. They also serve as energizers to motivate students. 8 of them which last for 10 minutes are group processing tasks in which participants evaluate how they are doing in groups at the end of each task. The rest 9 are paragraph writing tasks. Of these, 5 of them are controlled and guided tasks which focus on paragraph structure, principles, development methods and discourse types. The last 4 are free writing tasks accompanied by contexts. The topics are familiar with students, more of expository and are related to university and education. The topics were the following:

• Ways of Improving the Quality of Education in Ethiopia;
• How to Be Successful in University Education;
• Challenges of University Life and
• The Role of English for Academic Success

The same material and the process approach to writing were used for both the control and

experimental groups, but they were taught in a different methodology. Individualistic approach was employed for the control group whereas the collaborative learning approach was used with the experimental group. Team bonding and group processing tasks were used only with the experimental group since such tasks are vital for effective cooperative learning.

The learning together model was employed with different structures such as round robin, group discussion, think-pair-share, group processing, brainstorming, pairs check, round-table, think-write-round robin and all write consensus where appropriate with some modifications.

As it is not expected that all learners can communicate comfortably in English, they were also allowed to use a shared language/mother tongue (Amharic in this case). Studies found out that using L1 in L2 collaborative writing facilitates learning in general and idea generation in particular (Abiy, 2012). This is, of course, one challenge where there are diversified languages. Fortunately, all the participants in this study can speak Amharic.

**Procedure**

Initially, the training material, pre-/posttest and scoring scale were prepared, and they were evaluated by advisors and colleagues. Secondly, after the participants had been selected, ethical considerations were carried out, i.e., the respective department head was contacted for permission, and the students were oriented about the experiment, asked for their consent to receive the training in two groups and filled in an agreement form. Thirdly, after the pretest had been administered, the control and experimental groups were formed randomly through draw, and their pre- and posttest scores were tested if they were normally distributed through Shapiro-Wilk test (p, 0.56, 0.092, 0.295 and 0.405 > 0.05). Then, independent samples t-test was made between the scores of the two groups which showed that there was no significant difference (p>0.05). In addition, the experimental group was divided into seven mixed ability groups of four based on pretest results. Fourthly, each group took the training by the researcher in a separate class for 16 hours in 6 weeks. Finally, the posttest was given, marked and analyzed with the scores of the pretest.

**Findings**

To test the hypotheses presented earlier, independent samples t-test was made for overall writing and aspects of writing. Paired samples t-test was also calculated to check the impacts of the treatments on writing.

Table 1 - Independent Samples T-Test of Overall Writing Performance

| Test | Control | | | Experimental | | | D/f | t-value | p-value | Sign |
|------|---|---|-----|---|---|-----|-----|---------|---------|------|
| | N | X | S.D | N | X | S.D | | | | |
| Pre | 24 | 9.44 | 2.557 | 24 | 10.51 | 2.392 | 46 | -1.496 | .141 | Not Sign |
| Post | 24 | 11.33 | 2.794 | 24 | 11.83 | 2.801 | 46 | - 0.619 | .539 | Not Sign |

The table demonstrates that though there is a mean difference of 1.07 between the groups in the pretest, the result of the t-test revealed that there is statistically no significant difference between them (p, 0.141 > 0.05). This shows that the groups had more or less similar writing ability in paragraph writing before the intervention.

Regarding the post test, it is indicated in the table that there is no significant difference between the control and experimental groups (p, 0.539 > 0.05). This implies that cooperative learning has no better impact on students' overall writing than the independent learning.

Table 2 - Paired samples T-Test of Overall Writing Performance

| | Pre | | | Post | | | D/f | t-value | p-value | Sign |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Group | N | X | S.D | N | X | S.D | | | | |
| Control | 24 | 9.44 | 2.557 | 24 | 11.33 | 2.794 | 23 | -5.341 | 0.000 | Sign |
| Experimental | 24 | 10.51 | 2.392 | 24 | 11.83 | 2.801 | 23 | - 4.895 | 0.000 | Sign |

The figures in the table signify that though the mean scores suggest that the control group improved by 1.89 which is better than the experimental group (1.32), both groups improved their paragraph writing skill significantly (p, 0.00 < 0.05). This reveals that the two approaches are helpful in enhancing students writing performance.

Table 3 - Independent Samples T-Test for Writing Components

| Writing Components | | Control | | | Experimental | | | D/f | t-value | p-value | Sign |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Test | N | X | S.D | N | X | S.D | | | | |
| Content | Pre | 24 | 1.58 | 0.72 | 24 | 2.04 | 0.62 | 46 | -2.362 | 0.022 | Sign |
| | Post | 24 | 2.04 | 0.69 | 24 | 2.5 | 0.66 | 46 | -2.352 | 0.023 | Sign |
| Organization | Pre | 24 | 2.50 | 1.14 | 24 | 2.79 | 1.35 | 46 | -0.808 | 0.423 | Not Sign |
| | Post | 24 | 3.58 | 1.53 | 24 | 3.38 | 1.44 | 46 | 0.486 | 0.629 | Not Sign |
| Vocabulary | Pre | 24 | 1.92 | 0.41 | 24 | 2.08 | 0.28 | 46 | -1.645 | 0.107 | Not Sign |
| | Post | 24 | 2.12 | 0.34 | 24 | 2.17 | 0.38 | 46 | -0.401 | 0.690 | Not Sign |
| Grammar | Pre | 24 | 1.71 | 0.55 | 24 | 1.88 | 0.45 | 46 | -1.151 | 0.256 | Not Sign |
| | Post | 24 | 1.88 | 0.54 | 24 | 1.96 | 0.46 | 46 | -0.575 | 0.568 | Not Sign |
| Mechanics | Pre | 24 | 1.74 | 0.37 | 24 | 1.72 | 0.50 | 46 | 0.11 | 0.913 | Not Sign |
| | Post | 24 | 1.71 | 0.41 | 24 | 1.83 | 0.44 | 46 | -1.020 | 0.313 | Not Sign |

As depicted in the table, before the treatment, the difference in the scores between the groups was not significant except for the content (p, 0.022 > 0.05). That means the independent and cooperative learning groups were in the same line in terms of organization (p, 0.423 > 0.05), vocabulary (p, 0.107> 0.05), grammar (p, 0.256 > 0.05) and mechanics (p, 0.913 > 0.05).

After the treatment, no significant variation was observed between the control and experimental groups in all the writing components except in content (p, 0.629, 0.690, 0.568 and 0.313 > 0.05). Regarding content, as there was a significant discrepancy between the groups in the pretest, the post test result will not be considered valid. However, the differences of the pre- and posttest mean scores of the two groups in content is the same, 0.46 (2.04 - 1.58 and 2.5 - 2.04). This roughly implies that the change is not significant.

Thus, it could be concluded that writing in groups has no better effect than independent

writing in developing aspects of writing such as content, organization, vocabulary, grammar and mechanics.

Table 4 - Paired Samples T-Test for Writing Components

| Writing Components | Group | Pre | | | Post | | | D/f | t-value | p-value | Sign |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | N | X | S.D | N | X | S.D | | | | |
| **Content** | Control | 24 | 1.58 | 0.72 | 24 | 2.04 | 0.69 | 23 | -2.30 | 0.03 | Sign |
| | Experimental | 24 | 2.04 | 0.62 | 24 | 2.50 | 0.66 | 23 | -3.41 | 0.002 | Sign |
| **Organization** | Control | 24 | 2.5 | 1.14 | 24 | 3.58 | 1.53 | 23 | -5.21 | 0.00 | Sign |
| | Experimental | 24 | 2.79 | 1.35 | 24 | 3.38 | 1.44 | 23 | -3.25 | 0.004 | Sign |
| **Vocabulary** | Control | 24 | 1.92 | 0.41 | 24 | 2.12 | 0.34 | 23 | -2.46 | 0.22 | Not Sign |
| | Experimental | 24 | 2.08 | 0.28 | 24 | 2.17 | 0.38 | 23 | -1.00 | 0.33 | Not Sign |
| **Grammar** | Control | 24 | 1.71 | 0.55 | 24 | 1.88 | 0.54 | 23 | -1.45 | 0.16 | Not Sign |
| | Experimental | 24 | 1.88 | 0.45 | 24 | 1.96 | 0.46 | 23 | -0.81 | 0.47 | Not Sign |
| **Mechanics** | Control | 24 | 1.74 | 0.37 | 24 | 1.72 | 0.41 | 23 | 0.46 | 0.65 | Not Sign |
| | Experimental | 24 | 1.72 | 0.50 | 24 | 1.83 | 0.44 | 23 | -2.33 | 0.029 | Sign |

The paired samples t-test in the table clearly depicts that both groups made a considerable progress in the content (p, 0.03 and 0.002 > 0.05) and organization (p, 0.00 and 0.004 > 0.05) of their paragraphs. Conversely, vocabulary (p, 0.22 and 0.33 > 0.05) and grammar (p, 0.16 and 0.47 > 0.05) were not enhanced in both conditions. This might be because there were no tasks that focused on vocabulary and grammar. The collaborative group was more effective in mechanics (p, 0.029 > 0.05) than the independent learning group (p, 0.65> 0.05).

**Discussion**

The major objective of this experimental study was to test the impact of cooperative learning on individual students' paragraph writing skills. The independent samples t-test disclosed that there were no significant differences between the control and experimental groups both in overall writing performance and in the writing components. This implies that collaborative writing has no better benefit over independent writing. Hence, the finding rejects the alternative hypothesis. This finding is in agreement with Louth et.al, (1993) and completely contradicts with Wondwosen (2018) and other non-local studies such as Ismail and Maasum (2009), Ahangari and Samadian (2014) and Khatib and Meihami (2015) which reported that cooperative learning had better impact on all aspects of writing. It also partially agrees with other works, for instance, Shehadeh (2011), Chen (2015) and Kotb (2016) which reported that it had better impact on some aspects of writing.

The students' poor English language proficiency (Amlaku, 2010) and weak communication culture may have not allowed participants in the experimental group to confidently provide the expected input and support to the rest of the group members or to influence each other. In addition to this, most of the students' learning styles might be individualistic, or they might not like to work in groups.

The paired samples t-test, however, showed that both the control and experimental groups significantly enhanced their overall writing performance, content and organization skills. It could be inferred that students improved their overall writing ability on account of content and organization. But, neither of the groups got better in vocabulary and grammar, and only the experimental group developed in mechanics better than the control group. These findings inform us that both approaches of writing could help learners develop nonlinguistic aspects of writing - content, organization and mechanics.

Students' failure in both groups to get better in vocabulary and grammar, which are key elements of a language, is due to the students' poor English language proficiency. In line with this, Amlaku (2010) and Mebratu (2015) confirmed that the learner's proficiency in English is poor and English language teacher training is ineffective. Another paradox is that while it is reported that English language teachers have given much emphasis to grammar and vocabulary (Anto, Coenders & Voogt, 2012), students were not capable of making significant progress in these language items. This confirms the findings of several studies such as Daniel (2010) and Birhanu (2012) that CLT is not implemented properly, i.e., grammar and vocabulary are taught separately, out of context.

Another reason for students' improvement in terms of content and organization could be the presence of tasks that help learners exercise on these writing features in the intervention. On the other hand, as there were no grammar and vocabulary related tasks that could narrow the existing gaps, students might have performed poorly in these key language elements.

**Conclusion**

The results of the independent samples t-test verified that there is no significant difference between the independent and cooperative learning methods in enhancing students' writing skills. Hence, the null hypothesis is accepted. This does not mean that both approaches are not helpful. The paired samples t-test showed that they helped learners' in improving some nonlinguistic aspects of writing namely, content and organization. It is important, however, to bear in mind that students' poor L2 might have greatly affected the finding.

In general, though writing collaboratively has no greater impact over writing independently on students writing skills, it could be advisable to employ it when our focus is on content and organization and particularly on mechanics. It will also be helpful if grammar and vocabulary inputs are provided in writing lessons.

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