

## Improving ESP Students' Writing Skill through Cooperative Learning Instruction and Peer Feedback Technique

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**Abstract:** The need for learning English has increased lately due to its status as an important tool of communication in different domains along with being a lingua franca. Accordingly, university students' demand for learning English for Specific Purposes (ESP) in their preparation for future career skills has risen. In this context, among the skills that students have to master in order to succeed in their studies and future jobs, writing is the most challenging. Consequently, recent empirical studies held in Algerian universities revealed that students suffer from low proficiency at writing and lack motivation towards learning this skill. Therefore, the aim of this paper is to investigate the effectiveness of incorporating peer feedback technique (PF) within cooperative learning (CL) instruction in ESP classrooms in enhancing students' writing competency via reviewing the findings of previous theoretical and empirical research that tackled the subject. It also accounts for the efficiency of CL in promoting students' motivation and attitudes towards learning the writing skill. The gathered data show that the integration of PF technique and CL instruction in the ESP course has a significant effect in enhancing ESP students' writing competency and promoting their motivation and attitudes towards learning writing.

**Keywords:** Cooperative learning, ESP, Peer feedback, Writing skill

### Introduction

The mastery of English language has become a necessary requirement in almost all fields. Despite the fact that its status in Algeria remained secondary to French language (first foreign language), English holds a fundamental position in different domains such as communication, science, technology, politics, and economy. Hence, due to its dominance in almost all the fields and the rising awareness of its importance as a medium of communication and a tool that facilitates the access to scientific and technical literature, the Algerian government, like many other countries, has decided to adopt English as the second foreign language in public schools in addition to its implementation in higher education institutions and universities. Furthermore, with the remarkable changes that took place in the Algerian organization of workplace systems and the opening of the Algerian business market to the world, English has become an indispensable tool that enables communication with foreigners. As a result, the need for designing, planning and teaching ESP courses in Algerian universities has increased tremendously and ESP courses became compulsory modules in almost all tertiary level branches. However, despite its incorporation in many higher education departments nationwide, the effective teaching and learning of ESP in the Algerian university is still not achieved since ESP students have a low performance in English and lack motivation towards learning it. Among the challenges that face ESP students, writing is the most difficult and less motivating skill, which is due mainly to its complex nature as it requires the involvement of "highly complex" skills such as planning and organizing as well as lower level skills like spelling, punctuation and word choice (Richards &

Renandya, 2002). Hence, the researcher introduces, within this paper, cooperative learning instruction and peer feedback techniques as teaching tools that can facilitate the teaching of writing to ESP students and enhance their motivation towards learning this skill.

## **I. The Importance of Writing Skill for EFL and ESP Students**

Writing is a complex human activity that permits the writer to transmit his/her ideas, and knowledge to his/her audience. It also enables him/her to convey meanings and communicate his/ her thoughts with the reader (Jozef, 2001). Being an essential medium of communicating one's ideas, writing holds an influential position in students' course starting from primary education till tertiary one and it goes beyond that to affect their careers as well. Shangraphan and Mamipour (2011) argued that writing skill is indispensable in the learning of any language since any further or higher education is impossible without the mastery of this skill. Accordingly, Suleiman (2000) highlighted the importance of writing to language learning as he asserted that "writing is a central element of language, any reading and language arts program must consider the multidimensional nature of writing" (p. 155). Furthermore, Hosseini, Taghizadah, Abedin & Naseri (2013) stated that "writing skills are primary tools for communicating knowledge, especially in educational settings" while "the capacity to communicate specifically may prove to be an achievement in life chances" (p.10)

Hence, when having strong writing skills, the student will enhance his/her chances of academic success. In addition to that, the mastery of writing skill does not affect only student's academic achievement but it also has a great impact on his future career. Hosseini, Taghizadah, Abedin & Naseri (2013) explained that good writers are usually prized in the workplace and academic settings as generally only few people do possess high writing abilities. Thus, excelling in writing skill "opens the door to progress in almost any field a person might opt for in the future" (Hosseini, Taghizadah, Abedin & Naseri, 2013, p. 11)

Therefore, the writing skill should be developed and sharpened in any language course, especially ESP courses, which have the aim of preparing students to fulfill the requirements of their future jobs by equipping them with specific skills and vocabulary needed in their field. In the same line of argument, Lui & Hansen (2002) asserted that business managers and academicians consider the writing skill as crucial requirement, however; the majority of these professionals declared that university graduates usually face difficulties in writing academic English. Thus, the learning of academic English writing is not necessary to only students of the English Department, yet it is essential to students in other departments, who take ESP courses, since "the ability to represent oneself well on a paper will help him/her secure a job or higher educational chances after graduation". Furthermore, it will also make him/her "more attentive to the significance of the quality of the presentation of his/her written work" Hosseini, Taghizadah, Abedin & Naseri (2013, p.10).

## **II. The Nature and Challenges of EFL and ESL Writing**

Writing is a complex cognitive activity in which writers are required to control a variety of variables simultaneously (Nunan, 1989). Hence, when they write, students face several

difficulties that prevent them from producing correct, accurate and appropriate texts. While native speakers find the requirements of their writing courses challenging, the difficulty in coping with the complex nature of the writing task increases when English is the student's second or foreign language. Accordingly, Hinkel (2004) indicated that the majority of non-native speakers, even the highly trained ones, face problems and commit errors when writing, especially when they are asked to produce an academic piece of writing. Therefore, the major writing challenges that EFL students face are listed and discussed.

### **A. Major Challenges of EFL Writing**

The difficulty in producing an academic piece of writing might be related to different factors such as grammar, cohesion, organization, syntax, etc.

#### **1. Difficulties in Grammar**

Grammar, according to Harmer (2001), is "the description of the ways in which words can change their forms and can be combined into sentences in that language" (p. 12). The ways in which words are appropriately used by the language user are called grammar rules, which are fundamental elements in any language, particularly in producing written texts (Hartwell, 1985). Hence, in order to write appropriately, the writer should have a thorough knowledge of parts of sentence, the different structures of the language and its linguistic devices. Accordingly, Brooks and Penn (1970) stated that "for one thing in writing, we must understand the structure of the language, what the parts of speech do, how the words are related to one another, what the individual words mean, the rules of grammar and punctuation" (p. 20). With all these requirements that students have to cope with when writing, EFL students usually find writing a daunting task. And maybe the students' major writing difficulty in relation to grammar is the poor understanding of grammar rules which will result in obstacles in producing a proper piece of writing (Bahri & Sugeng, 2010).

#### **2. Difficulties in Vocabulary**

The use of appropriate vocabulary can be one of the main difficulties students face when writing. EFL students usually have a problem of poor vocabulary which may lead to failure in recalling important words, and will consequently make them use inappropriate vocabulary or vague one. Seely (1998) listed the main elements in vocabulary problems: 1) active vocabulary: which refers to the words used by students in their writing, 2) passive vocabulary: which concerns words that students comprehend however not necessarily used in their writing, 3) vocabulary that we never deal with, 4) vocabulary that is seen to be passive, and finally 5) vocabulary words, which we have seen before, but their meaning is not clear.

#### **3. Difficulties in Spelling and Punctuation**

Both spelling and punctuation errors are common feature of EFL students' writing. Learning spelling normally takes place during the early stages of education (primary, middle schools); however, university students still struggle to avoid spelling errors. Banacha (2013) indicated that the writing difficulties that are related to spelling generally include the misspelling

of words, which is due mainly to the irregularities of English spelling system such as the similarities of vowels, homophones, etc. Bancha (2013) also added that spelling errors and/or mistakes may result from students' lack of concentration, their tiredness or carelessness about their writing correctness. On the other hand, punctuation, which possesses a crucial position in both reading and writing according to Seely (1998), often poses challenges on language learners. According to Carroll and Wilson (2013), this difficulty is due mainly to the fact that punctuation is complex and has no exact rules as it depends on the writer's style to determine the meaning.

#### **4. *Difficulties in Organization and Clarity***

Though organization is one of the main requirements in academic writing, the majority of EFL students still struggle to organize their ideas and thoughts in a piece of writing. Starkey (2004) argued that the main cause of organization problems is that EFL students face great deal of difficulty when they start writing their texts, hence, they just start writing whatever comes to their minds and, consequently, the texts they produce will not be organized appropriately. Thus, he insisted that "it is important to recognize that in order to do it well, you must commit yourself to a process" (p. 1). On the other hand, clarity is another important factor an academic piece of writing should have. However, university teachers usually complain that EFL students often produce ambiguous written assignments which lack organization and clarity. Starkey (2004) explains that since the writer's objective is to convey meaning, that objective cannot be achieved if the reader does not understand the first few sentences or paragraphs and will consequently stop reading as the intended meaning is not comprehensible even though he/she reads the whole passage. Thus, Starkey (2004) stated that "learning how to be a clear and accurate writer will help make your essay readable and will guarantee that those who read it understand exactly what you mean to say" (p. 11).

#### **5. *First Language Interference***

Interference, also termed negative transfer, is the result of the negative influence of the student's mother tongue on his/her writing in the foreign language (Lado, 1964). In this vein, Jackson (1987) asserted that interference happens "when an item or structure in the second language manifests some degree of difference from, and some degree of similarity with the equivalent item or structure in the learner's first language" (p. 101). In addition to that, Interference can cause serious writing problems to students; hence, Weigle (2002) stated that "in order to write good English, I know that I had to be myself actually meant not my Chinese self. It meant that I had to create an English self and be that self" (p. 37).

### **B. Writing Difficulties Related to ESP Context**

In addition to the above mentioned writing difficulties, ESP writing poses other challenges on students. "ESP is an approach to language teaching which aims to meet the needs of particular learners" (Hutchinson et al, 1987, p.21) as it involves students who have specific professional communities. Thus, writing teachers' task goes beyond teaching the writing skill and written production process to "contextualizing language within the learners' study environment"

(Belmekki & Sekkal, 2016, p.83). Consequently, the specific requirements of ESP teaching/learning context impose further challenges on both ESP teachers and students.

Maybe the first writing difficulty imposed by ESP contexts does not concern ESP students in the first place, yet it involves ESP teachers. The problem is that the vast majority of teachers who give ESP courses in Algerian universities have been prepared to teach General English and according to Strevens (1988), when they are asked to teach ESP courses, these teachers may find this shift as a hard task or even a shock. Moreover, Hutchinson et al (1987) described these teachers' situation as they stated that "teachers who have been trained for General English teaching or for the teaching of Literature may suddenly find themselves having to teach with texts that they know little or nothing about" (p. 160). Actually, teachers' little knowledge about the writing genres specific to the ESP domain they are teaching may result in a poor teaching/learning experience since "ESP students are concerned with the communicative needs of particular academic and professional groups and so genres are seen as the purposive actions routinely used by community members to achieve a particular purpose" (Belmekki & Sekkal, 2016, p.83). Furthermore, ESP teachers may face challenges other than the shift from teaching GE to ESP teaching. Johns (1981) lists further problems that ESP teachers face when trying to cope with the requirements of ESP teaching situation:

Low priority in timetabling; lack of personal/professional contact with subject teachers; lower status/ grade than subject teachers; isolation from other teachers of English doing similar work; lack of respect from students. Cited in Hutchinson et al (1987, p.164)

Furthermore, Mebitil (2014) added other teaching constraints that belong particularly to the Algerian context as she asserted that

It is generally presumed that the common two features of ESP teaching are notably; time allotted for English teaching which is only a period of one hour and half per week; the second common feature is the nature of the job; language teachers, in almost cases, are, only part-time practitioners. (p. 238)

In addition to the fact that ESP courses are considered as less important and of a secondary position, ESP sessions are usually scheduled as the last course of the day, or even last course of the week, which may have a negative impact on students' motivation and attendance. Mebitil (2014) added another factor that can hinder ESP teachers from achieving the goals they set at the beginning of the course, which is the groups' size, as ESP teacher find themselves teaching large classes with mixed abilities and of heterogeneous needs. In addition to these challenges, Belmekki & Sekkal (2016) highlighted the problem of materials unavailability as Algerian ESP teachers rely on themselves to provide materials suitable for the ESP they are teaching.

To sum up, given all those challenges that face teachers when giving ESP courses in general and teaching ESP documents' writing in particular, the task of ESP teachers is very

challenging as it not only demands high language command among ESP teachers yet it requires the application of an effective writing instruction as well.

On the other hand, students are also challenged by many other difficulties belonging to ESP in general and ESP writing particularly. Maybe the first important element that is widely noticed in the Algerian context is ESP students' low level of language proficiency and lack of motivation towards learning English. They also lack appropriate terminology related to their fields of study (Mebitil, 2014). Accordingly, Belmekki & Sekkal (2016) have also discussed other problems confronted in Algerian ESP classes, which may hamper acquiring the writing skill, such as the limited attention paid to the teaching of writing in ESP classes in comparison with the other skills. Furthermore, the in-class writing activities lack meaningful contexts and sometimes fail to deal with topics that students may be confronted with in real life situations and their use of outdated teaching materials and methodology. They also noticed that students are not actually motivated to generate any kind of writing due to their low level in the writing skill. Finally, to overcome all these challenges and constraints, teachers need to develop a teaching instruction that "helps students understand how to create a text that is both rhetorically and linguistically appropriate and design useful exercises for practicing both rhetorical and language aspects" (Belmekki & Sekkal, 2016, p.84).

### **III. Introducing CL Instruction and PF Technique as Solutions to ESP Students' Writing Problems**

Since the teaching of ESP writing in Algerian universities seems to have its own requirements and challenges, the researcher introduces CL instruction and PF technique as a remedy to the existing obstacles which hamper the effective teaching of writing skill in ESP classes.

#### **A. Cooperative Learning**

The term cooperative learning is widely used to describe any situation where students work together into small groups; however, this is not a right use of the term. According to Johnson, Johnson & Smith (1991) cooperative learning is an instruction that involves students working in small "carefully structured" groups to achieve a common goal with the aim of maximizing their own and each other's learning (p. 12). In addition to that, in order to term a teaching instruction as cooperative, it should meet the five pillars of cooperative learning demonstrated by Johnson, Johnson & Smith (1991), which are:

1. ***Positive Interdependence***

The members of the group should depend on one another to accomplish the goal, and if one of the group members fail to do his/her part of the work, all the group members will suffer from the results of that failure.

2. ***Individual Accountability***

Each member of the group is required to do his/her part of the work towards the achievement of the common set goal and is accountable for the mastery of all the learned content.

### **3. Face-to-face Promotive Interaction**

All members of the group help and encourage one another to learn, and although some of the work can be performed individually, members of the group should sit together and interact with one another, clarify, provide feedback, teach and support one another.

### **4. Interpersonal and Small Group Processing**

Students are asked and encouraged to develop social skills necessary to achieve an effective communication among group members and efficient conflict resolution and problem solving.

### **5. Group Processing**

Group members should reflect on their common goal, discuss what has been achieved and how it was done and make necessary changes to achieve a more effective functioning in the future.

When the above five pillars of cooperative learning are present in a teaching /learning situation, it is then called a cooperative learning situation.

## **B. Peer Feedback**

It is a method to errors correction in which students help one another when experiencing difficulties in a cooperative way and not a competitive one, while the teacher remains only as a monitor and guides the students (Freeman, 2000). This important stage of cooperative writing involves peer editing, peer evaluation and peer response as well.

Gebhardt (1980) claimed that feedback is the essence of cooperative writing, and this feedback is nothing without the response of peers. Furthermore, Elbow (1975) encouraged the use of peer correction method in both revising and editing stages as it aids the reader become familiar with the writer's style and helps the writer accept and get acquainted with the comments of others.

## **C. Cooperative Learning and its Effectiveness in the University Classroom**

The majority of research studies on cooperative learning, that were conducted at the university level, have yielded positive results on the efficiency of this instruction method (Felder & Brent, 2007). Furthermore, Cooperative learning instruction has proved its efficiency in achieving higher academic performance over the other competitive and individualistic structures (Johnson et al, 1998; 2000; 2007; Johnson & Johnson 1989; Slavin, 1996; Springer et al, 1998). The positive outcomes of this instruction do not affect only the cognitive aspect; however, they include the social aspect as well. Therefore, the advantages of using a cooperative learning instruction in tertiary education should be highlighted and carefully analyzed in order to investigate the effectiveness of this instruction method when used in the university classroom.

Faust & Paulson (1998), after conducting a study on the effectiveness of cooperative learning instruction at the university level, have declared that the use of active learning strategies within a cooperative learning instruction can be very effective teaching method that develops students' communicative and team works skills. Furthermore, students taught within this innovative teaching instruction exhibited positive attitudes towards the learning experience, the studied content and the university as well (Spinger, Stanne & Donovan, 1998; Johnson, Johnson & Smith, 1998; Towns et al, 2000).

#### **D. The Efficiency of Cooperative Learning in Improving EFL Students' Writing Competence**

Harmer (2001) indicated that group writing is a very effective writing approach as he reported that students engaged in cooperative writing activities found the process of writing motivating in terms of writing process itself and in the pre-writing stages such as collecting ideas and topic discussions and final stages like peer review and evaluation. While, Elbow (1975) highlighted that cooperative writing is a very useful and important activity in language classrooms; since if a student faces a difficulty in his/her writing, they will contact one of their mates to help them. Accordingly, he claimed that "two heads are better than one because two heads can make conflicting material and interact better than one head usually can" (p. 49).

Furthermore, after interviewing a sample of ESL students, Storch (2002) reported that collaborative writing helped ESL students improve their writing ability and encouraged them share responsibility in making decisions on all aspects and categories of writing such as content, structures and language.

While there are scholars who argued that cooperative writing is suitable only for final stages of writing (reviewing and editing), Gebhardt (1980) asserted that cooperative writing has proved very satisfactory results in the improvement of primary stages of writing (brainstorming, planning and outlining). In the same line of argument, he stated that "collaborative writing strategies should be applied to finding a promising topic, generating details on the topic and locating the intended audience for a paper" (p. 73). Furthermore, in his studies on the effectiveness of cooperative learning in enhancing students' writing skill, Storch (1999, 2002 & 2005) pointed out that the application of a cooperative learning instruction in writing classes has a positive impact in primary stages of writing and final stages as well. Accordingly, Legenhausen & Wolff (1990) indicated that cooperative writing is an effective method to enhance students' writing competencies and promote an efficient class interaction. Their positive views on cooperative writing were supported by Kagan & High's study (2002), which was conducted in Catalina Ventura School in Phoenix. The data gathered in this study showed that students' writing performance was enhanced after cooperative learning was incorporated in EFL language classroom. The findings of the study revealed that students, who had a low level in writing skill, showed great improvement in their writing mastery level (from 49 % to 82 %). Plus, results of a study on ten limited English proficient community college students, who were engaged in a four months cooperative writing session's program, were very positive and reported a tremendous improvement on students' writing skills (Jones & Carrasquillo, 1998).

Finally, it is evident that most of the studies that tackled the implementation of cooperative learning in writing classes have approved its effectiveness in enhancing students' writing ability. It also increased their motivation and made them develop positive attitudes towards the writing activity through making them responsible in the writing process and providing them with the opportunity to share their work with their peers.

#### **IV. Research-Based Benefits of CL and PF in Enhancing ESP Students' Writing**

The findings of studies on the effectiveness of incorporating CL in ESP writing classes are not different from those which tested its efficiency in enhancing GE students' writing ability.



Firstly, Wang (2015), in a study that aimed at improving Taiwanese students' English writing skill for business, reported that students who were engaged in the cooperative writing sessions gained high mastery in business writing, they also developed interest in language learning and acquired collaborative skills needed for the success in the workplace.

Furthermore, Yumi & Erina (2015) investigated the effects of incorporating cooperative writing in Japanese EFL classroom of Science English (SE) as ESP in promoting their writing fluency. The findings of the study revealed that the implementation of cooperative learning instruction in ESP writing class has positive effects in enhancing students' writing competence through increasing their self-confidence towards their writing abilities.

Moreover, Jahin (2012), in a study that investigated the effectiveness of using online collaborative ESP writing tasks in developing EFL major student teachers' ESP writing ability and attitudes towards EFL writing, declared that the students, who took a course in Writing for Business and Commercial Correspondence, were disinterested, unmotivated and under pressure when they were engaged in solitary writing activities. Besides, their writing product was far below satisfactory. Yet, after the implementation of online collaborative ESP writing tasks, the researcher attained the following positive research-based results:

- Students engaged in this online collaborative writing experience have become more aware of the importance of audience awareness through the process of collaborative evaluation and writing.
- Peer feedback technique helped students reduce anxiety and pressure and escape from the name and shame traditional style of teacher correction method.
- The vast majority of participants exhibited positive attitudes towards ESP writing and stated that they enjoyed the collaborative writing lessons more than the traditional ones.
- The online collaborative writing course had a great impact in enhancing ESP students' writing ability and attitudes towards EFL and ESP writing.

On the other hand, concerning the implementation of peer feedback technique, Nor & Kepol (2005) stated that the implementation of peer interaction in the writing course had positive effects on students' collaborative ideas generation and sentence construction. It also helped them develop a better understanding of the writing assignment's topics which resulted in the production of concrete, creative and accurate texts.

Also, in an empirical study that investigated the effect of peer reviewing on Saudi EFL students' writing apprehension and essay writing ability, Jahin (2012) reported that the incorporation of peer reviewing in EFL writing classes had positive impact on experimental group participants' writing apprehension and writing ability. Thus the implementation of peer review technique in ESP courses will aid students' overcome grammar, spelling and punctuation difficulties through the help and effective feedback of their peers.

## Conclusion

The findings explored within the review of literature of both theoretical and empirical studies that investigated the effectiveness of cooperative learning instruction and peer feedback technique in enhancing ESP students' writing performance show that these teaching methods are effective tools that can be incorporated in ESP writing courses. Hence, CL and PF when implemented effectively within ESP writing classes, do not only maximize the learning and enhancement of the writing skill, but they also improve students' motivation and attitudes towards the learning of writing skill. Furthermore, cooperative learning activities develop ESP students' communication and interaction skills which will make them survive in their professional carriers in the future.

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