



## BENEFITS OF USING COOPERATIVE LEARNING STRATEGY FOR ESSAY WRITING INSTRUCTION AT THE SECONDARY SCHOOL LEVEL OF EDUCATION

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### **Abstract**

*Writing is one of the four language skills which is given emphasis in second language learning. At the secondary school level students learn different types of essay writing like descriptive, expository, argumentative and narrative based on the prescribed syllabus of the Ministry of Education. The mastery of the writing skills is crucial since constant evaluation either formative or summative is conducted to gauge student's acquisition of their writing skills based on their writing performances. Hence teachers adopt and adapt various methods in writing in classroom interaction to ensure that the students excel in writing. One of the methods recommended in learning writing is the incorporation of cooperative learning. This study investigates the impact of cooperative learning in enhancing students' essay writing in English language. The students' essay writing performance is evaluated using analytical scoring on the composite scores and the live components of essay writing which are content, vocabulary, organization, grammatical accuracy and mechanics. The findings lend credence to the positive effects of cooperative learning in enhancing writing performance. Based on the issues discussed in the paper it recommends that secondary school teachers should make use of the cooperative learning technique in teaching essay writing, seminars, conferences and workshops should be organized so as to train teachers on the use of the cooperative learning technique in second language teaching and learning.*

**Keywords:** Benefits, cooperative strategy essay, writing instructions

## Introduction

One of the core subjects taught at a secondary school level is English Language. The curriculum specifications prescribed by the Ministry of Education 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 (Pusal, 2019). These areas incorporate the integration of four language 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, recount and narrative based on the prescribed syllabus of the Ministry of Education. 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 (Kagan, 2022).

Cooperative learning strategy is the umbrella term for a variety of educational approaches involving joint intellectual effort by students, or students and teacher (Wendy, 2020). It requires a small number of students to work together on a common task, supporting and encouraging one another to improve their learning through interdependence and cooperation with one another (Larny & Flartman, 2019). Cooperative learning groups usually comprises two to five students in a group that allow everyone to participate in learning activities to achieve a common goal. Students in cooperative learning are encouraged to share ideas and materials and divide the work when appropriate to complete the task. Gillies (2018) revealed that students benefit academically and socially from cooperative small group learning.

The strategy for increasing higher level comprehension is to have two or three students form a pair and share group. Students share questions and ideas from the text with their partners, and discuss them in detail. Ideas and thoughts are then later shared with the larger group in a whole class discussion (Tankersley, 2021). In the cooperative learning setting of the reading classroom, students could also help each other to decode words and to recognize words accurately and rapidly. Cooperative group

members may also use their background to comprehend the task by relating an event or events in the passage to their own experience. Then, with sufficient knowledge of the task topic can elaborate on the task to other group members to make unclear points clearer, giving them examples.

It is important to note that some scholars view cooperative learning as a strategy that has the potential to help students feel good about themselves, feel good about each other, feel good about what they are learning and learn more effectively (Gillies, 2018). In addition, (Johnson & Johnson, 2021) expressed the view that when efforts are structured cooperatively, there is considerable evidence that students will exert more effort to achieve, build more positive and supportive relationships, and develop in more healthy ways. This again implies that in this learning arrangement, small groups of students discuss topics and learn to take charge of their own learning. Team spirit, rather than individual competition is stressed as students work together. As positive interdependence is the goal of cooperative learning, the success of the group depends on each member attaining both the group learning goal and individual learning goal (Putnam, 2021).

When used in an effective manner cooperative learning can make students acquire a whole range of skills while they cooperatively interact every day with their team mates and classmates to master academic content. Social skills are honed through practice and use by watching team mates, modelling appropriate behaviour, practicing their social skills, and receiving instant feedback from their peers (Kagan, 2022).

In cooperative learning settings, students see a variety of other students in various stages of mastery of the cognitive tasks and peers provide support and assistance to one another. As a result, cooperative learning is high likely to lead to the better comprehension of the texts through enhancing the exchange of reading strategies (Furnish, 2022). This means that students who have inappropriate reading strategies could apply appropriate strategies used by other students. Steven and Slavin (2022) also explained that

cooperative learning can serve as just such an apprenticeship where students work with a variety of other students who are in various stages of mastery of the cognitive task and the students provide the cognitive support and guidance to one another. They added that observing others and practicing in such settings help learners internalize the cognitive functions they are attempting to master, or those that are within their “zone of proximal development”. This could indicate that as students interact cooperatively, they explain strategies to one another in their own words, as well as helping them further process the complex cognitive activity. It has been stated that when students work together to master material presented by a teacher, the interaction among them can rouse deeper processing of material by individuals by encouraging peers to explain, elaborate, organize, and generate examples and analogies (Tankersley, 2021).

In independent learning, the scope of information available to learners is limited to two sources, “the learner’s cognitive resources and the aggregate of information fixed in the sources of information the students consult during study: books, databases and physical apparatus” (Whine, 2021). In a social context, the information is expanded because peers or tutors offer information beyond one’s own information through elaboration and organization. Therefore, the peer learning experience elaborates on and organizes the process of adding information to material being learned (Schunk, 2022).

Cooperative learning is an instructional method whereby students in small groups collaborate to maximize one another’s learning and to achieve mutual goals (Schunk, 2022). He further explained that the following characteristics should be evidence in a cooperative learning classroom setting: positive interdependence, individual accountability, face-to-face interaction, social/interpersonal skills, group processing, and the opportunity for equal success. Cooperative learning was one of the most popular methods, and has been shown to have positive effect on students performance in English essay writing.

### Cooperative Learning

There are a few definitions on cooperative learning made by eminent scholars. Slavin (2022) Describes cooperative learning as students working in small groups and are given rewards and recognition based on the group’s performance. Artz and Newman (2020) define cooperative learning as a small group of learners who work as a team to solve a problem, complete a task or achieve a common goal. A definition on cooperative learning as a category under collaborative learning is given by Goodsell who maintained that cooperative learning is seen as a learning approach which falls in the more general category of collaborative learning, which is described as students in groups of two or more, working together mutually to find an understanding, solutions or meaning and create a product (Goodsell, 2018).

Cooperative learning is a learning approach which has been proven to culminate positive results and outcome. This approach is believed to enhance students’ performance and achievement in various subjects and aspects of the language and producing positive social outcomes (Slavin, 2022).

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 on a free ride without contributing the group’s work and objective. In a cooperative learning lesson, 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. This is to guarantee that each member performs their part in ensuring the success of the group’s task and each member is dependent on the other to achieve the required goals.

There are different approaches and models in cooperative learning. Johnson’s model of cooperative learning is referred to as “Learning Together”. “Learning Together” can be applied at any grade level with any subject (Kessler, 2020). In this cooperative learning model, the teacher plays a crucial role to monitor the students work

or impart collaborative skills to the students. Another cooperative learning model is introduced by Kagan (2022) called Structural Approach. Structural Approach is based on the use of content-free ways of organizing interaction called structures. The structures can be adopted and adapted in various contexts (Kessler, 2020). Group Investigation techniques are proposed by Sharan (2020). Group Investigation is designed to lead and propel students toward predetermined facts and skills. There are also other cooperative learning models such as Curriculum Packages. The Curriculum Packages are usually specific for certain age group and curriculum.

Cooperative learning is an approach under the umbrella of collaborative learning. But unlike collaborative learning or group work, in cooperative learning, the teacher plays a significant role to incorporate elements of cooperative learning and ensure that the students know how to work cooperatively in a cooperative learning situation. The absence of even one element in the lesson will lead to a non-cooperative environment. The elements of cooperative learning differ from one approach to another. The cooperative learning model, "Learning Together" focuses on five elements which are positive interdependence, individual accountability, face-to-face interaction, social skills and group processing (Johnson & Johnson 2021). Slavin (2022) and his colleagues give emphasis on 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, 2022). The scholar also emphasizes on four basic principles of cooperative learning which are positive interdependence, individual accountability, equal participation and simultaneous interaction.

Similarly, the main elements of cooperative learning from the cooperative learning researchers, seven elements are discovered (Biehler & Snowman, 2020). The elements of cooperative learning are group heterogeneity, positive interdependence, promotive interaction, individual accountability, interpersonal skills, equal opportunities for success and team competition (Biehler & Snowman, 2020).

In cooperative learning, the teacher needs to provide a conducive environment and appropriate task for equal opportunities such as giving students learning assignments which are on par with their current level or giving marks for the improvement of scores compared to the previous test scores (Biehler & Snowman, 2020). The element of team competition should also be incorporated once in a while in cooperative learning between well-matched competitors and without grading them for the norm-referenced grading system. This is because team competition can spur students to achieve the group's goal.

Group work or collaborative learning is the learning approach umbrella for cooperative learning. Erudite researchers had redesigned group work by incorporating elements that will make group work more effective and achieve its objectives, in a cooperative learning lesson, the elements of cooperative learning need to be implemented in order to make the lesson a cooperative learning lesson. If a lesson is devoid of any of the elements of cooperative learning, thus the lesson could not be considered as a cooperative learning lesson. Even though cooperative learning is cooperative learning which are positive interdependence, individual accountability, equal participation and simultaneous interaction.

Based on the synthesis of the main elements of cooperative learning from the erudite cooperative learning researchers, seven elements are discovered (Biehler & Snowman, 2020). The elements of cooperative learning are group heterogeneity, positive interdependence, promotive interaction, individual accountability, interpersonal skills, equal opportunities for success and team competition.

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### Concept of Writing

Writing is one of the four basic language skills. It is the act of making graphic symbols from Oral symbols. In writing, thoughts and ideas are recorded using socially acceptable graphic symbols. It is the creation of meaningful texts such as stories, descriptions, invitations or informative piece (Slavin, 2022). In Nigeria Primary and Secondary Schools, however, the assumption is that students learn to write by simply telling them to write. Slavin (2022) hold that most Nigerian graduate teachers in English do not have adequate training in how to teach writing and the most texts in use only set composition topics and fail to give adequate guidelines for effective teaching of writing skills.

Also, Kagan (2022) says that writing is taught as a product and not as a process. According to the researcher, what happens in a writing lesson is a test of composition since no conscious effort is made to develop specific writing skills in the students. Students must be taught to write if they are to learn to write effectively because learning to write does not develop automatically on the course of schooling. Students should be given adequate opportunity to write. A love for writing should be promoted among the students to make writing lesson lively and interesting. It should be taught as a process in order to overcome students' passivity in writing. This is where Collaborative

group work and peer evaluation is essential (Qivi, 2020) because it will motivate the students and enable them to develop interest in writing.

Corporative learning may be of great assistance because when students are put in peers in which their writing are read aloud and evaluated holistically and analytically by members of the group the students will learn from each other on a continuous basis. Peer evaluation or editing entails having group members assess the strengths and weaknesses of their writings along four broad guidelines namely, general impression, organization, sentence structure and diction.

According to Qiyi, (2023:30)

The seemingly simple activity of reading is helpful because it makes one's work public and turns writing into a social act. The sympathetic response of one's peers turns a group of individuals into a "learning community" and a writing workshop.

In teaching writing, therefore, the focus of attention should shift from finished product to the process of writing in which experience, questions, pre-writing, re-writing, preparation, draft writing, editing, re-writing, showing, response and feedback from group members should be emphasized. These seem to be possible when cooperative learning method is used in teaching English language skills (Ezema, 2022). Writing should be influenced by the student's background and language abilities. According to Cooper (2021) students who lack sufficient background on a topic and do not have the ability to relate to the topic in their Oral language will have difficulty in writing about it. Teachers should, therefore, prepare the students adequately to have what to say and how to say it in written form. Ideational and linguistic preparation should be the focus in order to enable the students to become good speakers and writers. This is based on the grounds that writing is a critical language skill, which should not be treated casually, because a literate man should be able to write a comprehensible essay.

Conversely, the student who is unable to write a good essay cannot in all likelihood satisfy

either traditional or recent standards of educational accomplishment. This perhaps explains why most students have difficulty in performing as expected in English language in national examinations such as the senior secondary school certificate examinations conducted by the West African Examinations Council. It may not be out of place to say that the teacher's job is not complete until he/she has sufficiently equipped his/her students to meet the literacy demands of the students' educational aspirations and that of the modern society. In order to equip the students to meet their literacy demands for educational and personal aspirations of the contemporary society, alternative method of teaching the language skills should be a matter of concern. Thus, the researcher considers peer review technique for teaching English essay writing so that its effect on achievement will be determined.

### Essay writing

An essay is a short piece of writing that discusses, describes or analyses a topic. It can discuss a subject directly or indirectly, seriously or humorously. It can describe personal opinions, or just report information. An essay can be written from any perspective, but are most commonly written in the first person, or third person (subjects that can be substituted with the 'he, she, it, or they' pronouns) (Ezema, 2021). The importance of essay writing cannot be overstressed. Essay writing is a common linguistic activity. Writing an essay provides natural outlet for the writers' reflections on a given topic. It is a form of composition whose content and organization are guided by the topic and purpose of writing (Eyisi, 2006). Essay writing is a process. It involves a series of steps in which a writer organizes and expands his ideas according to his central purpose and his audience (Ezema, 2021). As an essay is designed for a particular audience, care is taken by the writer to see that its content and diction are appropriate to the background, needs and interests of the audience. Effectively writing different types of essays had become critical to academic success. Essay writing is a common school requirement, a plan of standardized tests, and requirement on

college applications. Often on tests, choosing the correct type of essay to write in response to a writing prompt a key to get right question(s). Clearly, students can't afford to remain confused about types of essays. It is pertinent to say that 50 marks is allotted to the essay section in a language examination. Consequently, a candidate who possesses the ability to write a good essay is most likely to perform well in such examination. The ability to write an essay is, therefore, an effective tool for communication even in everyday life.

### Writing skills

Writing as an art of communication that requires competence in some essential writing skills. Good writing involves the following skills:

- i. Identification of the subject matters, originality of ideas
- ii. Originality of ideas, arrangement/organization of the points, appropriateness of language, mechanical accuracy.

The merit of a piece of writing is judged in terms of the writer's success in achieving the purpose, be it to entertain, inform, admonish or persuade.

### Stating the subject matter and stating the purpose:

Defining the subject matter and stating the purpose are the first skills students require in writing. Students' ideas have to be relevant to their topic and purpose and also have to be suitable for the audience, the medium and the setting. All writing should therefore be seen to have a purpose which should be established on commencement of the writing (Okoro, 2022).

### Organizing points and ideas

The points and ideas should be well organized by the students. They should master the skill of clear and logical presentation of ideas. Ideas are presented on the basis of the type of writing that is involved, e.g. narrative, descriptive, expository, or argumentative etc. There should be a suitable opening, good paragraphing and unity of ideas within each paragraph (Kolawole, 2021).

### Sentence construction

In order for the students to convey their thoughts and feelings as clearly as possible, they must

arrange their ideas in sentences. The students should learn to write good sentences: sentences that are simple, without any grammatical error, and also be able to convey their feelings and thoughts. The sentences are organized into paragraphs and a whole essay is formed (Eyisi, 2006).

Writing a good essay starts at the level of sentence construction because the very simplest way of expressing an idea is in one bare sentence, e.g. The ball is big 'The ball is green'. But we do not normally express ourselves in a succession of such simple sentences. Students need to master the skill of putting various pieces of information together in any of many different ways, such as: I have a big green ball or I have a ball that is big and green Paragraphing

The skill of putting sentences together to create a paragraph is important in writing good essays. A paragraph usually contains a series of sentences on an aspect of a given topic. An essay deals with a topic and paragraphs develop this topic. Ideas are not just put together in any haphazard form. Linking devices or connecting words help to make the relationship between sentences and paragraphs clear to the reader. Okoro (2022), maintains that some students who perform well in grammar exercises and who appear to have a good command of English are unable to produce good essays because they are unable to achieve cohesion within the paragraph.

### Linking the Paragraphs

Ideas have to be linked through the use of appropriate connections. Students need to know how to handle linking words properly. An essay in which each paragraph forms a unit all on its own without reference to other paragraphs will not be a good one. By the use of linking devices, each paragraph dovetails into the next until the conclusion is reached. Examples of the linking words or expressions include: 'However', 'Therefore', 'Moreover', 'Consequently', 'Then', 'Furthermore', 'Nevertheless', 'Despite these difficulties'.

### Qualities of a Good Essay

Focus on correct spelling and grammar is not merely required to write well. Writing well means

developing the content with concentration and having some particular thought in mind (Eyisi, 2006). Students have to follow certain rules while putting their thoughts and ideas on the paper. However, there are not fixed pattern of good writing. All writers demonstrate their own style and opinion in their writings. It is not easy to categorize good writing. Logical, concise and original writing touches the heart and provides new thinking dimensions to readers (Oyinloye, 2022).

When talking about academic writing, essay writing is the traditional way of judging the understanding of students worldwide. Students must follow certain rules when writing for academic purpose to make their writings understandable for the majority. Here are qualities of a good writing:

**Focused:** A good written essay must be focused on its topic and theme. It avoids vague details and all those information which will be avoided by the readers as well. The only purpose is to achieve that goal which is set in the introductory paragraph as a thesis statement. Any point that interrupts in between on the way of reaching the goal must be removed.

**Readable:** The main demand of essay writing is to support the point in the best possible way which is raised in the thesis clearly for readers. Most of the students think that good writing includes the flowery, heavy words with horrible terminologies and complex sentences. It's totally a wrong concept as good writing is the one which is clear, concise, and presents the thesis on front of the readers in the most interesting and readable way.

**Concrete:** It provides the most suitable facts and daily life examples to support the subject matter. It's not based on imagination or stories. It must have a concrete connection with the real world issues that are easily approachable. Students must discuss those issues which people care about or in which the writer wants to care about. For this, students need to care about their writing and evidence about the theme.

**Relevant and flows naturally:** All the parts of the structure must relate with each other.

It must be a coherent and relevant piece of writing that flows naturally without any break. Students must provide an environment which compels reader to read from the first till the last line with attention on the things which are relevant and catchy.

### **Benefits of using cooperative learning on academic performance of students in English language**

Writing is one of skills that students need to master. Students' acquisitions of the writing skills are given much emphasis in the educational system. However, Grabe and Kaplan (2022) state that writing process received 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.

Thereupon, it is believed that writing in groups is effective in genre-based and process approach. Students found the activity motivating in terms of the writing itself. Therefore writing in small groups is an efficient way to promote writing abilities and it was an excellent interaction activity. 415 views were supported by a study conducted by Grabe and Kaplan (2021) which showed that students performed better in writing when cooperative learning was incorporated in the classroom. In a study conducted in Catalina Ventura School in Phoenix where a high percentage of the students were students who learned English as a second language and low income students, the school's eight graders showed tremendous improvement in writing which is from 49% to 82% in their mastery level. Okoro (2022) postulates that when peer interaction was incorporated in learning writing, the students generate ideas and construct sentences together. Thus this will lead to a better understanding of the topic that they are required to write on. The students will also be able to write concrete, accurate and creative piece of writing.

Collaborative work between learners is encouraged to increase motivation and develop positive attitudes towards the writing activities (Nunan, 2021). The students should be responsible in their writing and given the

opportunity to share their work with others. The immediate feedback and positive reinforcement will boost their motivation to engage in writing activities.

The studies conducted on the incorporation of cooperative learning in learning writing, showed that cooperative learning is an effective educational approach to improve the students' achievement in writing. Literature abounds on the effectiveness of co-operative learning strategy on the academic of students. Studies such as Pudan (2020) investigate the effect of cooperative assisted learning method on student's achievement. Result showed that students on the cooperative assisted instruction group showed remarkable post test mean differences over their counterpart who learned the same Biology through traditional method. In addition Moore (2022), showed that after a classroom lecture by teachers, students were only able to retain 5% of the information presented and after a classroom demonstration by the teacher students were only able to retain 30% of the information both after 24 hours, but when cooperative learning was used students were able to retain 75% to 90% of the material after 24 hrs.

### **Conclusion**

In this article before cooperative learning was incorporated in the lesson, the students obtained low scores for the narrative essay. However, after the implementation of cooperative learning, the students scored significantly better in their essay writing. When the essays were analyzed based on the compartmentalization of the five writing skills which were content, organization, vocabulary, grammar and mechanics, it was indubitably obvious that the students showed significant enhancement in all the five components of the uniting skills. This indicates that the incorporation of cooperative learning provides the mechanism in improving the students' writing performance and at the same time improving the five writing skills which are also vital language skills in language learning. Thus the benefits of the incorporation of cooperative learning are twofold. Not only will the students perform better in the composite score but at the same time they will improve in the five components writing



which are also important elements in language learning in general.

In conclusion, this study lends credence to the belief that cooperative learning has positive effects on the students' writing performance. Therefore, teachers should consider this learning approach as a viable alternative for them in teaching writing.

### Recommendations

The following recommendations were made based on the findings.

1. Secondary school teachers should make use of the cooperative learning technique in teaching essay writing.
2. Seminars, conferences and workshops should be organized so as to train teachers on the use of the cooperative learning technique in second language teaching and learning.
3. Teacher trainers in the various universities and colleges of education should incorporate the cooperative learning technique as a useful technique in second language teaching and learning and train the teacher trainees on how to use the technique.
4. Curriculum planners should include the use of the cooperative learning technique in the next review of the curriculum so as to use it in teaching English essay writing and other areas of English language and other subjects.
5. Students should be encouraged to engage in extensive writing activities with aid of peer review technique.
6. Adequate facilities and materials should be provided by government, donor agencies, parents and old students' associations to facilitate language learning. Adequate textbooks should be placed in the library and made available for students use.
7. Teachers and school administrators both in the rural and urban schools should make the learning environment conducive for students and should provide equal opportunities for males and females.

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