EFL Students' Perceptions towards Cooperative Learning in Writing Skills at a University in the Mekong Delta

Phan Thi Thuy Quyen[1*]

[1] Tra Vinh University, Tra Vinh, Vietnam
*Corresponding author's email: quyenphan0806@gmail.com
* https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8861-073X
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ABSTRACT

The cooperative learning approach to writing skills has been found to be effective in many different contexts, as evidenced by many studies. That shows us the interest of researchers in the importance of writing and the cooperative learning approach. This paper aims to review EFL students' perceptions of cooperative learning in writing skills. The participants in this study were fourteen junior non-English major students from a university in the Mekong Delta. The primary qualitative analysis reported in this paper is to show how the students perceive their learning progress in cooperative activities. The result backs up the advantages as well as disadvantages of using cooperative learning in the classroom. The participants primarily acknowledge the benefits of cooperative learning. The atmosphere for learning is made more dynamic, participative, and exploratory via cooperative learning. Responsibility at a high level is the second prerequisite for cooperative learning. Thirdly, weaker foreign language students do better when grouped with strong students. Despite the benefits, participants admitted that it would be challenging to reach a consensus when working in small groups if they had divergent or opposing ideas.

Introduction

One of the core subjects taught in schools is English. The Curriculum Specifications, as prescribed by the Ministry of Education, specify the four skills which need to be mastered by the learners in three areas of language use: interpersonal, informational, and aesthetic (MOET, 2020). These areas integrate the skills of Listening, Speaking, Reading, and Writing. Writing is an important skill that needs to be practiced by students. Students learn different genres of writing such as descriptive, expository, recount, and narrative according to the established curriculum of the Ministry of Education (2020).

Although writing can be an enjoyable and creative experience, the way EFL Writing is taught and learned has led to negative perceptions among learners who view it as a skill they like the

least (Do & Le, 2023). According to Nguyen (2009), writing skill is not easy to teach. The author states that the problem of most of EFL teachers in Vietnam is how to make students aware of writing in English. There are many approaches that teachers use to teach writing in the classroom. One of the approaches often recommended for teaching writing is cooperative learning (Kagan & High, 2002).

It is believed that the study of EFL students' views is of ultimate relevance in the teaching of English as a foreign language since it may have a substantial influence on what teachers need to accomplish in the classroom (Andrade, 2006). Students' perspectives play a crucial role since they need to be motivated in order to develop experience, motivation, and a writing attitude in addition to being taught the material . Many studies on students' perspectives of cooperative learning in writing skills have been conducted to examine the impacts of cooperative learning in the teaching of writing (Vo, 2022). However, there is still a shortage of studies about how junior non-English major university students-particularly those who attended a university in the Mekong Delta- perceived cooperative learning while learning how to write.

It is the reason that this subject should be investigated. This study will look at how junior non-English major students perceive learning to write when it is done in a cooperative learning environment.

To achieve that, the research question should be answered is "What are EFL students' perceptions toward cooperative learning in writing at a University in Mekong Delta?" In this article, EFL students' views about the impacts of cooperative learning in the teaching of writing in the Mekong Delta will be reported.

Literature review

Defining writing skills

According to Hamp-Lyson (1996, as cited in Autila, 2017), as a personal act, writing involves the writer taking concepts and transforming them into a personal voice. According to the notion, writing is characterized as a unique action with a clear goal in which the author receives inspiration and adapts it to their own subject and style. According to Brown (2001) the capacity to write naturally, logically, grammatically correct, fluently, genuinely, and purposefully is referred to as writing competence. According to Brown's definition, a writer's capacity to write clearly, as naturally as possible, with accurate grammar, cohesive, and authentic thoughts, while keeping the reader and the writing's objective in mind, constitutes writing talent. Besides, Nunan (2003) stated that writing is a mental process that involves coming up with, expressing, and structuring ideas so that they are understandable to the reader. According to the theory, writing is described as the act of thinking that includes coming up with intriguing ideas, communicating those ideas via language, and arranging those ideas into coherent paragraphs that the reader can comprehend. Moreover, according to Oshima and Hogue (2007) writing is defined as a process that includes thinking of thoughts, putting them into words, and then revising the writing until the writer is pleased that it represents exactly what they want to convey to the reader.

According to Hedge (2001), the ability to handle the writing process through various tactics is

referred to as writing talent. He described the many steps involved in writing as procedures, such as goal-setting, idea development, information organization, word selection, drafting, reviewing, editing, and rewriting.

Cooperative Learning

There are several definitions of cooperative learning made by eminent scholars. Slavin (1980) defined cooperative learning as students working in small groups and being rewarded and recognized based on the group's performance. Artz and Newman (1990) defined cooperative learning as a cooperative process in which students work together to solve a problem, complete a task, or achieve a common goal. Additionally, cooperative learning is a category of collaborative learning, which was defined by Goodsell (1992). Cooperative learning is a learning approach in which students work together to achieve a common goal. It is a more general category of collaborative learning, which describes students working in groups of two or more.

Benefits of cooperative learning techniques

There are many benefits to cooperative learning, including:

Helping students become more engaged in the writing process: It can also promote a sense of community and cooperation among students, as well as provide an opportunity for them to learn new skills. Students' intellectual and social development can be greatly enhanced via cooperative learning. Particularly, highly organized cooperative learning gives students the opportunity to better understand the key aspects of their coursework on their own while fostering positive interactions with peers by supporting and guiding them. According to Kagan (1994), working cooperatively strengthens positive attitudes toward learning the writing process and increases motivation and self-esteem, allowing students to become more involved in their writing tasks and improve their writing skills.

Helping students to find ideas for their writing in group work activities: Aldana (2005) found that the cooperative learning approach was used to apply the ideas of process writing in order to improve their writing skills. He also showed that students preferred to work in pairs or small groups rather than alone. Al-Sheedi (2009) conducted a survey to determine how group work affects students' learning. Ninety-eight per cent of the teachers said group projects benefited students' performance. Additionally, 98% of respondents thought group projects lead to more significant learning than individual ones. They all concurred that using group work in the classroom is a valuable strategy.

Helping to relieve students' anxiety in writing classes: Siddique and Singh (2016) claims that cooperative learning reduces students' fear, creates a positive attitude toward language acquisition, and boosts self-esteem in a very flexible setting. Furthermore, it taught children not to be selfish and reduced peer competitiveness and isolation (Slavin, 2011). Besides, the classroom environment improved, and students' self-esteem was restored (Johnson et al., 2000; Slavin, 2011). Ghufron and Ermawati (2018) have come to the conclusion that cooperative learning and writing skills may be combined to develop a variety of academic and personal qualities.

Helping students to be more motivated in writing classes: Shammout (2020) suggests that cooperative learning's strengths are increasing student self-confidence and motivation, lowering student uneasiness, increasing student responsibility in learning, and making students easier to learn. According to Nair and Sanai (2018), the cooperative learning approach increased students' writing skill since they had the opportunity to modify their group essays. Students were actively involved in the process of writing during group work, and their social skills increased as a result of the observation.

Teachers' and students' roles in cooperative learning

In cooperative learning, teachers need to create an environment that is conducive to learning and appropriate tasks that allow all students to have an equal opportunity to improve their skills. According to Shammout (2020), he element of team competition should be incorporated into cooperative learning occasionally between well-matched competitors without having them graded on the norm-referenced grading system. This is because team competition can motivate students to achieve team goals (Thach, 2022). Group work or cooperative learning encompasses a variety of cooperative learning approaches. Erudite researchers redesigned group work to make it more effective and achieve its objectives (Slavin, 2011; Siddique and Singh, 2016). In a cooperative learning session, the elements of cooperative learning must be implemented in order to make the lesson a cooperative learning session. If a lesson is devoid of any of the elements of cooperative learning, then such a lesson cannot be considered as a lesson of cooperative learning (Shammout, 2020). Even though cooperative learning is student-centered, the teacher still has a pivotal role to play in structuring and planning the lessons (Johnson et al., 2000).

Some limitations of cooperative learning

In cooperative learning, each student needs to have different specific tasks, and is responsible for a common goal. Therefore, many studies have found that cooperative learning has the disadvantages of taking a long time to implement, requiring active engagement from both instructors and students, being difficult to manage, and requiring more preparation. According to Nihalani et al. (2010), teachers play an important role to ensure that students follow all aspects of cooperative learning throughout the classroom, otherwise students will receive lower-than-expected results. Low marks, however, had been given to groups when top performers seized charge. Moreover, Siddique and Singh (2016) said that cooperative learning has some weaknesses about equally participat in cooperative activities as more conscientious students generally take responsibility for the tasks assigned. They also mentioned that when students believe their lecturer is not as involved as they are, there is a risk that students will not pay full attention to the new structures of the target language.

Related studies

Aldana (2005) found that the cooperative learning approach was used to apply the ideas of process writing in order to improve their writing skills. He created a case study because it helps the researcher to investigate, comprehend, and articulate a specific subject. As previously stated, his personal difficulty was a lack of passion and participation in writing duties. The diagnostic stage revealed that the ninth graders' lack of involvement and engagement was

related to their fear of making mistakes, a lack of interest in the English language, and the fact that only a few engaged in order to receive excellent scores. It was also shown that students preferred to work in pairs or small groups rather than alone.

Suwantarathip and Wichadee (2010) looked at the mean learning anxiety ratings before and after taking part in cooperative learning activities. After that, they looked into the students' perceptions toward cooperative learning by contrasting the mean English proficiency scores obtained before and after participating in cooperative learning activities. The pre-test and post-test designs were used in this investigation. The data were obtained from one section of 40 students enrolled in an obligatory EN 211 three-credit course in the first semester of the 2009 academic year because students were already assigned to their sections. The questionnaire was presented to the participants first. Then, for 14 weeks, a 3-hour session was presented using a cooperative learning technique. After the intervention, the FLCAS questionnaire and a post-test were administered. The results of both instruments were compared to earlier results to see whether there were any changes in language performance or language anxiety. Six students, whose scores increased the most and least, were chosen to express their feelings about learning using this strategy in order to discover how they felt. The study's findings suggested that cooperative learning should be included as part of a language learning strategy since it reduced anxiety and improved language competence.

Li and Vandermensbrugghe (2011) examined how 38 international research students responded to group work. Students' opinions were gathered through focus groups, questionnaires, and classroom observations. The findings showed that group writing exercises inspired international students to improve their writing abilities, boosted their self-confidence as writers, and supported them as they wrote.

Farzaneh and Nejadansari (2014) provided a paper to demonstrate how learners feel about utilizing cooperative learning for intermediate-level reading comprehension. According to their questionnaire responses, the students showed strong support for using cooperative learning. Questionnaires, interviews, and observations were used to acquire the information. The participants expressed support for the application of cooperative learning in writing abilities. Additionally, the study found a very slight statistical gender gap in English writing; female students preferred using cooperative learning.

Siddique and Singh (2016) investigated the causes of poor writing skills among intermediate students in Punjab, Pakistan. They also examined the function of cooperative learning as a means of improving writing abilities. Then, they made recommendations for using a cooperative learning technique to improve intermediate students' writing skills in Punjab, Pakistan. To study the problem and provide answers, a thorough evaluation of previously published material was used as a strategy. The provision, appraisal, and assimilation of thoughts, perspectives, opinions, and interpretations offered by other researchers on the problem under examination is an essential function and purpose of the review.

Ghufron and Ermawati (2018) assessed the benefits and drawbacks of cooperative learning in EFL writing classes. This investigation made use of the case study methodology. Two EFL writing instructors and 60 students enrolled in an EFL writing course at a private university in

East Java, Indonesia, made up the study's participants. The respondents were chosen through a technique called purposive sampling. Questionnaires, in-depth interviews, and observation were used to gather information. According to the results of the descriptive data analysis, one of cooperative learning's benefits is that it boosts students' enthusiasm and self-confidence while reducing their anxiety and making them more open to learning. The drawbacks of cooperative, on the other hand, are the lengthy implementation time, the need for active participation from both instructors and students, the difficulty of management, and the need for greater preparation.

Nair and Sanai (2018) looked into the effectiveness of the STAD technique in helping students at an international school in Selangor, Malaysia, developed their descriptive writing skills. In this study, an action research design was employed. The study involved 20 of grade 6 students, whose ages ranged from 11 to 12. Data for the study were gathered via a pre- and post-test, student focus groups, instructor reflection, and an observation checklist. The six-week action research project was conducted. While the quantitative data was assessed using descriptive and inferential statistics, the qualitative data (interviews, teacher reflections, and observations) were reviewed based on emerging themes. The quantitative data showed that the STAD method helped students' descriptive writing abilities. The analysis of the qualitative data revealed that students enjoyed writing in groups and gained a lot of knowledge from their peers during this process.

Shammout (2020) further supported the idea that modern methods of teaching foreign languages had moved away from the conventional teacher-centered classroom and toward more learner-centered situations. His study used cooperative learning strategies to help students write more effectively. They employed a questionnaire to pinpoint their problems and weak points. Two different types of essays were used as the instrument for the pre- and post-tests in a quasi-experimental design. Two basic forms of research—qualitative and quantitative—were employed to evaluate the data. Topic, vocabulary, structure, grammar, and mechanics were utilized to evaluate the students' writing. The use of cooperative writing strategies might have increased students' self-esteem and enhanced their writing skills.

Research Gap

All of the aforementioned research indicated that when it comes to writing, cooperative learning could be a great way for students to get involved and improve their skills, especially in the writing skills of EFL students. However, they mostly look over students' positive perceptions towards cooperative learning method rather than explore about the negative effects that this approach brings. Therefore, this study not only focused on exploring students' perceptions of writing skills, but also try to explore other perceptions, possibly negative perceptions, rather than just positive perceptions.

Methods

Pedagogical Setting & Participants

The participants in this study were fourteen junior non-English major students from a university in the Mekong Delta. The selection of participants for this study consisted of two phases. Initially, 15 students were selected to participate in the research project. In the next stage, a

questionnaire was sent to each of them to collect information about their feelings about learning English with Cooperative Learning. Based on the responses in the questionnaire, 14 official results were collected because 1 student was unable to participate. These fourteen participants consisted of 3 males and 11 females. These participants provide equal representation of the group of non-English major students. All participants are students with more than 8 years of learning English.

Data collection process

Data was mainly collected from a questionnaire. The questionnaire has 27 items, divided into 2 sections. All of the questions in the questionnaire are in the form of multiple choices. The first section, which consisted of 5 questions, collected the students' perceptions about learning English, the purposes of learning English, and some of the difficulties that made them less likely to participate in the class. In the second section, the participants were encouraged to choose answers that talked about their perceptions of cooperative learning when learning English.

The questionnaire was designed in Vietnamese, although students are quite fluent in English, since the author wanted the students to understand better and choose answers faster. For that reason, the questionnaire used and attached in this paper has been translated from Vietnamese into English.

As for the quantitative data, the study will use the SPSS software to help the researcher gather and analyze the data easier.

Results/Findings and discussion

The first part of the questionnaire consists of 5 items (from question 1 to 5) related to students' perceptions when learning English.

In general, the participants love English. They usually actively participate in English classes for many different purposes such as getting more degrees, knowing more about English or improving skills (Graph 1 and Graph 2).

| *Graph 1: Students' perceptions when learning English* | *Graph 2: Students actively participate in English classes* |
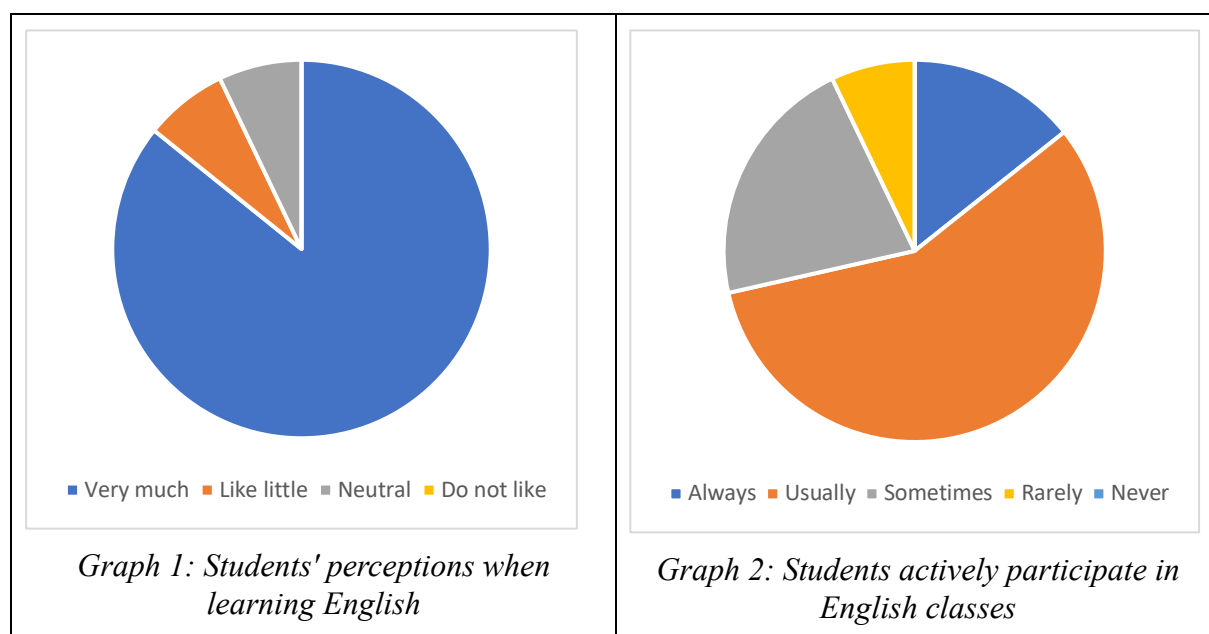
In Table 1, with the low rate of 14.3% of students want to get more English degrees and 0% of participants want to learn English to pass exams during the school year, it shows that every English student has an eagerness to learn and desire to improve skills (50%).

Table 1. The reason students take English classes

Items	Answers (%)				
The reason you take English classes is:	Because I want more degrees	Because I want to pass the exams during the school year	Because I want to improve my skills	Because I want to know more about English	Another idea
	14.3	0	50	28.6	7.1

However, in the learning process, they face many difficulties such as: students do not understand what the teacher has explained to them (14.3%), they are shy to speak up (7.1%) or are afraid of giving wrong answers (21.4%). Especially, the biggest reason is that students think they do not have enough knowledge of English (57.1%). Thus, all of these students want teachers to provide them spaces where they can actively explore the knowledge they are going to learn (Table 2).

Table 2. The reason students rarely participate in class

Items	Answers (%)				
The reason why you rarely participate in class is:	Because I'm afraid I'll give the wrong answer	Because I'm shy	Because I think my knowledge of the language is not enough	Because I don't understand what the teacher explained	Another idea
	21.4	7.1	57.1	14.3	0

Finally, the Graph 3 shows that there are only 21.4% of the participants want to do activities individually. Most of them prefer to work with the whole class (28.6%) or in small groups (50%). Participants prefer working in groups since there is less anxiety due to the division of focus among the group members. The group presentation's results in a cooperative classroom reflect the group's collective efforts.
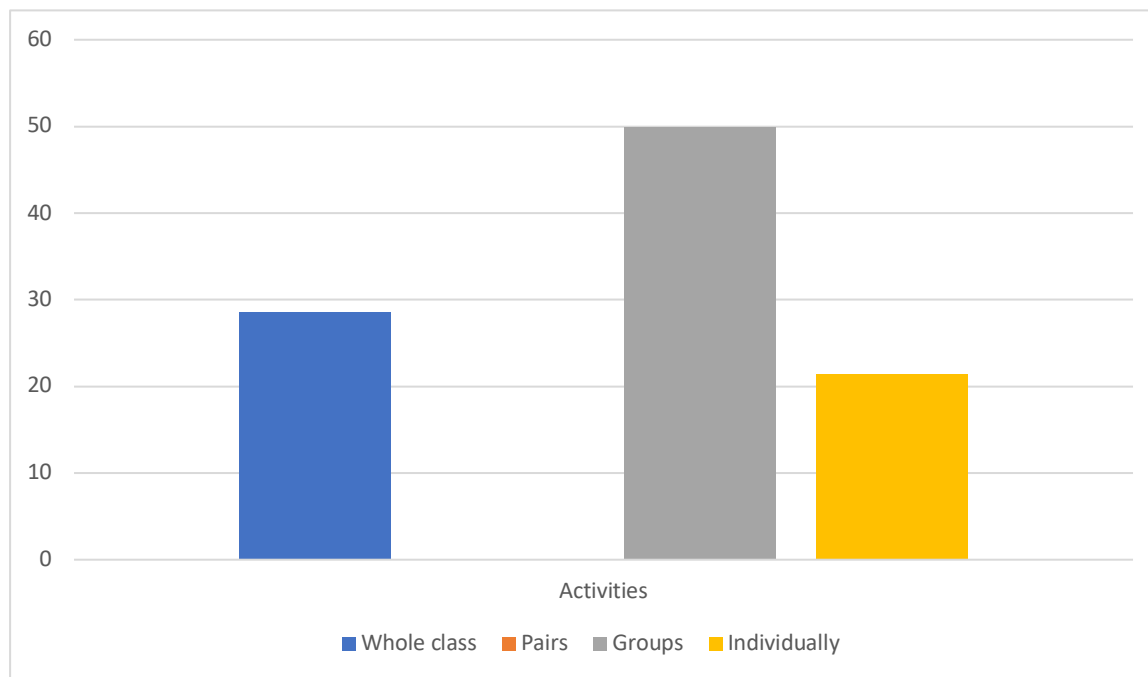
Graph 3. The kinds of activities students want to participate

The second part of the questionnaire consists of 21 items (from question 7 to 27) related to students' perceptions of cooperative learning in English class, as presented in Table 3, Table 4 and Table 5. The outcomes back up the advantages of using cooperative learning in the classroom shown that participants are generally in agreement on the advantages of cooperative learning (the percentage of students chose "Agree" and "Totally agree" always above 50%).

Table 3. Students' perceptions about the benefits of cooperative learning in English class

No.	Items	Answers (%)				
		Totally disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Totally agree
7	In class, you are working on skills of dialogue, listening and debate.	0	14.3	7.1	42.9	35.7
8	When working in groups, you want to share ideas so that the whole group knows what is being done.	0	0	0	50	50
9	The help of classmates is very important to complete the task.	0	7.1	0	21.4	71.4
10	Team members must exchange and interact in assigned tasks.	0	0	0	28.6	71.4
11	Each team member must participate in the group's tasks.	0	0	0	21.4	78.6

From the results of questions 7 to 11, cooperative learning fosters an active, participatory, and exploratory learning environment because it calls for students to interact, exchange ideas and information, look for supplementary information, make decisions about the results of their review, and present their work to the class. (Table 3)

Table 4. Students' perceptions about group work in cooperative learning in English class

No.	Items	Answers (%)				
		Totally disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Totally agree
12	You make decisions by consensus among team members.	0	0	7.1	57.1	35.7
13	You cannot complete a task without the contributions of your classmates.	7.1	14.3	14.3	35.7	28.6
14	There needs to be interaction between the group members to perform the task.	0	0	14.3	7.1	78.6
15	Each member must make efforts in the group's tasks.	0	0	0	28.6	71.4

The results of second series of questions (12 - 15) show that cooperative learning is a high standard of responsibility. To be effective in their groups, students must come prepared to meetings with finished work. For the cooperative team to effectively serve as a challenge about their roles as team members, they must also comprehend the material they will be contributing to their team. (Table 4)

Table 5. Students' perceptions about the difficulties in cooperative learning in English class

No.	Items	Answers (%)	0	0	21.4	71.4
		Totally disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Totally agree
16	It is important to share documents, information, etc. to perform tasks.	0	0	0	28.6	71.4
17	Each team member should try to participate, even if they don't like the task at hand.	7.1	0	0	35.7	57.1
18	It's easy for your team to come to an agreement in the face of differing opinions or conflicts.	0	28.6	7.1	35.7	28.6
19	The better each team member does his or her task, the better the team will achieve.	0	0	0	14.3	85.7
20	Each team member must do his part to complete the task.	0	7.1	0	21.4	71.4
21	Working together with class members allows you to expand your knowledge of the subject.	0	0	0	28.6	71.4
22	Discussion will help you better understand the assigned topics/tasks.	0	0	0	28.6	71.4
23	Working together allows you to better identify the most important aspects of information.	0	0	0	42.9	57.1
24	Working together enriches the vision of the topic by the input of all team members.	0	0	0	21.4	78.6

Table 5 shows the rest of the results which illustrate weaker foreign language students do better when grouped with strong students, while stronger students reinforce their willingness to assist others. A good performance also increases one's self-confidence and interest in harder material. Sharing achievement with the group boosts everyone's and the group's self-esteem. Despite the advantages, in question 21, it shows us that in cooperative learning, there is a disadvantage. Nearly 30% of participants said that it would be difficult for them to come to a consensus if they had different or conflicting opinions when working in small groups.

Discussion

The main aim of the questionnaire was to explore how junior non-English major students perceive learning to write when it is done in a cooperative learning environment. Data were analyzed in light of Aldana (2005), Li and Vandermensbrugghe (2011), Siddique and Singh (2016) and Nair and Sanai (2018) for the idea that the cooperative learning approach can be used to apply the ideas of process writing. Besides that, the results also prove there are some learning anxiety ratings before and after taking part in cooperative learning activities like that in the research of Suwantarathip and Wichadee (2010). It also has the same findings with that

of Ghufron and Ermawati (2018) about the benefits and drawbacks of cooperative learning in EFL writing classes. Findings from the study were presented in this article shows that cooperative learning approach encourages students to become active participants in a writing class more than other approaches.

Conclusion

Cooperative Learning approach allows EFL students to become active participants in class and cooperate to realize learning potentials that would be impossible to accomplish through traditional study individually. Cooperative Learning may make students feel less alone as well as help them become more productive. It is a way that encourages students to continue their Cooperative Learning process outside of the classroom and in the larger society. The present study, given its limited scope and scale, features unavoidable limitations. One of the limitations is that due to the time restrictions, the number of student participants was limited to only 14 students. The students, as such, might not represent the whole student population in the region or country.

Further Implications

Students now have a positive perception of their own mission and the importance of teamwork, which is the first step towards achieving the best results in the future. In order to fully involve students in their learning process, this teaching method must be taken for a long period. Additionally, it takes time for a new technique to be absorbed and implemented. Based on the limitations of the current study, a recommendation for more research is given. It is advised that future research should use bigger sample sizes to increase the validity and reliability of the findings.

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Biodata

Phan Thi Thuy Quyen works as a freelance private English tutor in Vietnam. She has been teaching English for five years. Currently, Quyen is studying Master's degree at Tra Vinh University (TVU). In the teaching process, she finds that applying teaching methods and techniques brings many benefits to teachers and students. However, her students still face difficulties learning English as a second language. Therefore, the research topics that she is interested in are teaching methods, teaching techniques, and teaching curricula.