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## Collaborative Learning: An Assessment of the Students' Essay Writing Skills

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**Abstract:** *The present experimental study aimed to assess the students' essay-writing skills at the graduate level. Writing is highly pertinent among all four English language skills related to communication. The results of the students who were taught in the classroom through collaborative learning techniques were compared with the results of the students who were taught through traditional methodology. Female students at the graduation level from a government college in the Chakwal district of Punjab province were considered the population of the present study. A simple random sampling technique was used to select 30 students. The sample of 30 students was divided into experimental and control groups by dividing 15 students in each group. The traditional methodology was used to teach the students of the control group, whereas the collaborative learning technique was used to teach the treatment group students. Both groups were observed twice. The results were analyzed using the independent sample t-test. The findings revealed that the students of both groups performed almost the same in the pretest, whereas a significant difference was observed in the mean score of both groups in the post-test. It was recommended that the traditional teaching methodologies be replaced with collaborative learning techniques.*

**Key Words:** Collaborative Learning, Essay Writing, Traditional Methodology, Experimental Study

### Introduction

English as an international language is gaining popularity in Pakistan daily, and the significance of teaching English in Pakistan is also increasing persistently. The very language is taught as a compulsory subject in Pakistan until graduation in all the educational institutions. English language learners are supposed to master and have a sound grip on all four English language communication skills, i.e., reading, writing, listening, and speaking (Ahangari & Samadian, 2014). Though there is no doubt that all these four skills are highly significant for efficient and lifelong learning of the English language, writing skill is highly significant among the other three as it is considered one of the most powerful tools for expressing one's perceptions, ideas, and thoughts (Harmer, 2006). Diverse and innovative methods are being adopted worldwide to teach English language writing skills, especially in educationally and technologically developed and advanced countries. However, the most frequent and dominant method used in the classrooms of educational institutions in Pakistan is the traditional methodology (Khan & Ahmad, 2014). As a result of this traditional methodology, the learners depend on rote learning and cram the already available content. Subsequently, they regurgitate and reproduce it in the terminal examinations. The habit of rote learning, cramming, and reproducing the content curbs the learners' creativity and critical and analytical thinking. It also limits their confidence and linguistic competence in the long run (Khan & Ahmad, 2014).

Incorporating collaborative learning methodology has been strongly recommended by Kagan (1994) for teaching writing skills. The efficient and effective use of collaborative learning methods in teaching-

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earning ensues and develops the learners' communicative, linguistic, and social competence.

It is the concept used as an umbrella term for diverse educational approaches that involve a joint intellectual effort by the students or the teachers and the students. Usually, students work together in groups, mutually exploring for understanding, comprehension, solutions, meanings, or/and creating a product. The collaborative learning activities usually tend to vary, but most of them centre on and around the students' exploration and application of the course material and not simply the teachers' explication and presentation (Bolukbas, Keskin, & Polat, [2011](#)).

Collaborative learning employs small group instruction so that students can work cooperatively to optimize mutual understanding. This approach contrasts considerably with the conventional lecture-focused or teacher-centered classroom environment. While lecturing, listening, and note-taking do not vanish entirely from collaborative settings, they coexist with other techniques grounded in student participation, discourse, and active engagement with course content. Educators implementing collaborative methodology tend to view their role less as proficient disseminators of knowledge to learners but rather as experts in crafting intellectual experiences for students - functioning more as guides facilitating the emergent acquisition of skills and concepts (Liao, [2009](#)).

Collaboration is a philosophy of interaction in which individuals alone are liable and responsible for their knowledge and actions while agreeing and harmonizing with the opinions of others and respecting others' contributions to their work. Collaborative learning is the process in which students learn or try to learn together, and during this process, they share related skills, experiences, and resources to successfully achieve the objective (Zoghi, Mustapha, & Tg, [2010](#)).

Collaborative learning is a method of teaching and learning in which students team together to create a meaningful project or explore a significant question. Collaborative learning teams are believed to attain and manage to achieve a higher level of knowledge, information, and thinking and preserve the information and learning for longer than the students working individually (Khan & Ahmad, [2014](#)).

The students are the centre of the educational process in collaborative learning, and they even take responsibility for the material that has been learned. In this approach, the learners usually solve a common problem while relying on each other and accounting for their actions (Liao, [2009](#)).

In collaborative learning, small cohorts of learners are typically constituted and required to engage in sustained interaction to achieve an established objective. The student collective organizes, regulates, and directs its efforts; allocates, coordinates, and appraises individual subtasks; provides guidance and aid to other group members; and assumes responsibility as a whole for the successes and shortcomings of the team (Veronese & Chaves, [2016](#)).

The collaborative learning methodology is successfully used in subjects like English, Science, and Mathematics at the school and college level in different countries like Malaysia, Taiwan, Iran, and Bangkok. The present study aimed to assess and evaluate the effectiveness of collaborative learning on the student's essay writing skills.

## Literature Review

Harmer ([2006](#)) concluded that the students found the writing activity in groups highly effective and motivating when the topics were discussed with their peers, they had peer assessment, and they attained the group's goals. When collaborative learning was used in the classrooms, the students showed considerably better performance in writing (Kagan, [1994](#)).

A study was conducted by Ekawat ([2010](#)) in Bangkok to explore the effects of cooperative learning on EFL university students' summary writing. The study's findings showed that after the intervention of the cooperative learning method, the participants produced fewer grammatical errors and more accurate statements.

Another study on Malaysian students by Ismail ([2006](#)) concluded that cooperative learning had significant positive effects on the students' writing skills. The skill was divided into five components:

grammar, vocabulary, content, organization, and mechanics. Consequently, the student's writing performance was enhanced through the positive effects of cooperative learning.

The studies conducted by Chen (2006) in Taiwan, Khan & Ahmad (2008) in Pakistan, and Ahangari and Samadian (2014) in Iran hard found a significant effect on the student's writing skills of the Taiwanese, Pakistani, and Iranian EFL/ESL learners respectively.

## Research Methodology

Female students at the undergraduate level from a government college in the Chakwal district of Punjab province were considered the population of the present study. All the students belonged to the age group of 17-19 years. As a compulsory subject, English was studied by all of them in their schools till the higher secondary level. A simple random sampling technique was used to avoid personal biases, and a sample of 30 students was selected from 112 students.

The study was experimental. The randomized pretest-post-test control group design was used. Random assignment was used to form the groups. Using the random assignment, the sample of 30 students was divided into experimental and control groups by dividing 15 students in each group. Based on the respective English teachers' perceptions and the results of the class tests, the experimental group was further divided into three heterogeneous groups. The traditional methodology was used to teach the students of the control group, whereas the collaborative learning technique was used to teach the treatment group students. Collaborative learning served as an independent variable, whereas the students' essay writing skill was the dependent variable in the study. Both the groups were observed or measured twice. The first measurement was a pretest, whereas the second was a post-test. The measurements were collected at the same time for both groups. Pretests and post-tests served as data collection tools for this study. All 15 students in the treatment group were taught through the collaborative learning technique.

In contrast, the students in the control group were taught as usual by the subject teacher in the same period of the college timetable. The chance of mixing the experimental group students with the control group students was minimized. The treatment group received the treatment from November 14, 2016, to November 30, 2016; during this period, 15 collaborative learning sessions were held. The control and experimental groups were post-tested at the end of the experiment. English language experts and the class teachers were involved in constructing the data collection tool in the form of a pretest and post-test.

As a pretest, a narrative essay was written by the students on the topic of 'Pleasures of College Life,' and an argumentative essay was written by them on the topic of 'Are we Happier than our Forefathers.' The students were given 45 minutes each, and a 300-350 word limit was set. As a post-test, the students wrote a narrative essay on 'Wasteful Expenditure on Ceremonies' and an argumentative essay on the topic of 'Mobile Phone: A Curse or a Blessing.' The students were given 45 minutes each, and a 300-350 word limit was set. Both the tests were made equivalent in this way. At the end of the post-test, each student of both groups was evaluated on their writing skills. The students were evaluated on the five writing components, i.e., grammar, vocabulary, content, organization, and mechanics.

The students' pretest and post-test essays were analyzed using the five writing components, i.e., grammar, vocabulary, content, organization, and mechanics. The pretest was comprised of 50 marks, and so was the post-test. The narrative and argumentative essays were worth 25 marks each in both the pretest and the post-test. Ten marks were allocated to each of the writing components. The pretest and post-test results were analyzed through SPSS (Statistical Package for Social Sciences), and the independent sample t-test was used in this regard.

## Data Analysis and Interpretation

The pretest and post-test scores were analyzed through SPSS using the independent sample t-test.

**Table 1**

*Comparison of the pretest results between the students' experimental and control group*

Writing Skill Component	Group	No.	Mean	Standard Deviation	Mean Difference	Sig. (2-tailed)	t-value
Grammar	Control	15	4.23	1.10	.04	.908	.11
	Experimental	15	4.27	1.11			



Writing Skill Component	Group	No.	Mean	Standard Deviation	Mean Difference	Sig. (2-tailed)	t-value
Vocabulary	Control	15	4.67	1.06	.06	.818	.23
	Experimental	15	4.73	1.17			
Content	Control	15	4.77	1.04	.14	.670	.42
	Experimental	15	4.63	1.35			
Organization	Control	15	4.77	1.16	.04	.915	.10
	Experimental	15	4.73	1.23			
Mechanics	Control	15	4.77	1.13	.14	.666	.43
	Experimental	15	4.63	1.24			
Overall	Control	15	23.20	4.45	.20	.876	.157
	Experimental	15	23.00	5.38			

The above table shows that on the grammar component of the English language writing skill, the control has the pretest mean score of 4.23, whereas the experimental group has 4.27 as the mean score. The t-value is .11, whereas the level of significance is .908.

On the vocabulary component, 4.67 is the control group's mean score, and 4.73 is the mean score of the experimental group. The t-value is .23, whereas .818 is the level of significance.

The control group's mean score is 4.77, while the experimental group has 4.63 as a mean score on the content component. The t-value is .42, and the level of significance is .670.

On the organization component of the English language writing skill, the control group had the pretest mean score of 4.77, whereas the experimental group had 4.73 as the mean score. The t-value is .10, and the level of significance is .915.

The control group's mean score is 4.77, while the experimental group has 4.63 as a mean score on the mechanics component. The t-value is .43, whereas .666 is the level of significance.

When combining all five components, the overall mean score of the control group is 23.20, whereas the mean score of the experimental group is 23.00. The t-value is .157, and the level of significance is .876.

The comparison of the pretest results between the students' experimental and control groups and the subsequent interpretation reveals that there was no significant difference in the pretest scores of both groups, which indicates that both groups were equal.

**Table 2**

*Comparison of the post-test results between the students' experimental and control group*

Writing Skill Component	Group	No.	Mean	Standard Deviation	Mean Difference	Sig. (2-tailed)	t-value
Grammar	Control	15	4.27	1.14	1.76	.000	5.18
	Experimental	15	6.03	1.47			
Vocabulary	Control	15	4.27	1.04	1.10	.002	3.33
	Experimental	15	5.37	1.47			
Content	Control	15	4.70	.91	.07	.806	.24
	Experimental	15	4.77	1.16			
Organization	Control	15	4.63	1.06	.70	.035	2.15
	Experimental	15	5.33	1.42			
Mechanics	Control	15	4.80	1.18	1.37	.000	4.71
	Experimental	15	6.17	1.05			
Overall	Control	15	22.66	3.94	5.00	.000	4.08
	Experimental	15	27.66	5.41			

The above table shows that on the grammar component of the English language writing skill, the control has a post-test mean score of 4.27, whereas the experimental group has 6.03 as the mean score. The t-value is 5.18, whereas the significance level is .000, which shows a significant difference between both groups. The higher mean score of the experimental group indicates that the group performed better than the control group.

On the vocabulary component, 4.27 is the control group's mean score, and 5.37 is the mean score of the experimental group. The  $t$ -value is .333, whereas .002 is the significance level, indicating a considerable difference between the experimental and control groups. The higher mean score of the treatment group reveals that the experimental group students showed better performance than that of the control group.

The control group's mean score is 4.70, whereas the experimental group has 4.77 as the mean score on the content component. The  $t$ -value is .24, while .806 is the significance level, which shows no significant difference between the groups on the content component. The mean score of both groups indicates that students performed almost the same on the content component.

On the organization component of the English language writing skill, the control group has a post-test mean score of 4.63, whereas the experimental group has 5.33 as the mean score. The  $t$ -value is 2.15, and the level of significance is .035, which indicates a significant difference between the groups. The higher mean score on the organization component shows that the treatment group performed better than the control.

The control group's mean score is 4.80, while the experimental group has 6.17 as a mean score on the mechanics component. The  $t$ -value is 4.71, whereas .000 is the level of significance. It indicates a considerable difference between both the groups, and the higher mean score of the experimental group reveals that students of the group performed better than the control group on the mechanics component.

When combining all five components, the overall mean score of the control group is 22.66, whereas the mean score of the experimental group is 27.66. The  $t$ -value is 4.08, whereas .000 is the level of significance that shows an overall significant difference between both groups. The higher mean score of the students of the experimental group reveals that the group performed better than the students of the control group.

The comparison of the post-test results between the students' experimental and control group and the subsequent interpretation reveals that there was a significant difference in the post-test scores. The higher mean score of the experimental group students on the components of grammar, vocabulary, organization, and mechanics reveals that the experimental group students performed better than those of the control group. The performance of the students of both groups remained almost the same on the component of content. The overall performance of the experimental group on essay writing skills was better than that of the control group.

## Conclusion

It is concluded that the student's writing skills and performance were enhanced due to the experience of the collaborative learning technique. This technique is one of the most effective techniques in comparison to the traditional methodologies of teaching, and it has proved to be so in the case of this research. Independent of the better-consolidated scores, the essays were of much better quality in grammar, vocabulary, organization, and mechanics.

The present study had one of the limitations that for the best, valid, and most reliable results, the researcher did not have sufficient time to practice the collaborative learning technique as the students who participated in the experiment had to attend to the requirements of the other courses of their respective degree program as well. Time constraints were there, so the actual needed time had to be reduced for the very activity. The students' essays might have been affected by this. If the participating students were given ample time to practice and perform the collaborative learning activity, the students might have got more benefits and shown more distinct results. The 15 sessions were too short to help the participating students improve their skills in essay writing with specific reference to the five components, i.e., grammar, vocabulary, content, organization, and mechanics. The students of the treatment group could not develop their content component of the essay writing skill as sufficient time is required to develop the very component. In addition, extraneous variables might be there, such as the students' social, educational, and cultural backgrounds, and could affect the findings invariably, thus affecting the reliability of the findings.



## Recommendations

It is strongly recommended that the cramming, rote-learning, and traditional teacher-centred methodologies of teaching English language writing skills be replaced by effective, innovative, and highly motivating learner-centred teaching strategies like collaborative learning.

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