

## **'How to change things when change is hard' How to motivate Libyan College Students of English through the use of group work**

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**Abstract:** *There is strong research evidence supporting the use of cooperative learning as a learning strategy in enhancing learning outcomes of all students. It proved to have positive educational values which make it significant to be applied in the EFL classroom.*

*Using action research and classroom research gathered data; this study investigates the benefits of using cooperative learning in the Libyan context. Light will be shed on the significance of using group work which could make a difference in the learning process of Libyan college students of English. The findings of the study show that using group work can promote students learning and help them to be more motivated and participate actively in the writing class.*

**Key words:** *cooperative learning, students' motivation, group work*

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### **I. Introduction**

Writing in the first language is a difficult task that needs a great range of knowledge and practice. To write in the second language is even more difficult for EFL students. In addition to the knowledge and skills required for writing, they need to have linguistic knowledge, and more importantly, the motivation to write in English (Kroll, 1991:140) and (Pitt, 2005:97). As a consequence, teaching academic writing in EFL/ESL contexts is described as challenging (Daoud, 1998:391). As teachers have to deal with many challenges including students mixed level and low motivation.

This paper will investigate the benefits of using cooperative learning techniques such as group work for motivating college students in thoughtful, participatory classroom tasks.

### **II. Literature Review**

From the literature review, there is increase amount on research that stress students can learn from working with each other. Much of the research on effective forms of collaboration focuses on students. less often studied the English writing teachers' classroom practice that enhance students' collaboration.

Cooperative learning can be defined as a social process in which knowledge is acquired through the interaction between the group members (Cohen, 1994). Cooperative learning tasks require that teachers focus on the formation of the group, the assessment of student work, and the design of group tasks (Ventimiglia, 1994). Students diverse in levels, skills, and interests will be required to collaborate with each other in activities directed toward group achievement. Principles for encouraging success in a cooperative learning in the classroom include distributing student leadership, grouping heterogeneously, facilitating social skills acquisition, and allowing for group autonomy (Parrenas & Parrenas, 1993). Furthermore, Kohn (1992) mentioned that, in cooperative environments, learning doesn't happen to individual group members, but through them as well. Based on this, using cooperative learning in which students work together in the language classroom is considered as an advantageous.

While realizing the many benefits of cooperation to language students, group learning is useful for the teachers as well. An understanding and careful application of the group work in the class may help the teachers mainly who teach large classes which is the case of many EFL contexts to reduce the amount of correction. Boughey (2008:86-101) tried to overcome the problem of large numbers that EFL teachers claim it affects their choice of procedures such as group work. He used group work to teach academic writing to university level students in South Africa. In the findings from the study, Boughey (2008:133) states that the group work was good technique to introduce many information and practices to students which might be difficult to be explained to them individually.

Although cooperative learning has many benefits, it is not that easy to apply it mainly in EFL classrooms including the Libyan Classrooms. In the EFL classrooms, teaching is teacher-centered. There is familiar practice of teacher lecturing or asking a question, a student answering while the rest of the class is passive, waiting for their turn, ( Fareh: 2010:3620).

As a consequence, there has been limited research on how to apply it in EFL contexts. For example, with regard to group work, a number of suggestions have been offered about using it in the classroom. Yet, most of the previous studies did not investigate how to use it in contexts which are characterized by the traditional methods of teaching such as the Libyan context and whether it makes a difference in students' motivation and learning. Most crucially, there is almost no evidence about the extent to which group work helps students to improve their writing over time. The effect of group work on college students' motivation and writing has not been extensively studied.

Consequently, the concern of this paper is investigating the extent to which using group work in the Libyan context will motivate students' to write and work with each other.

### **III. Methodology**

#### **3.1 Context**

In the college of Arts in Sabratha where I teach, it soon became clear that third year English students are not highly motivated to write. As a result, their participation was poor; and as a consequence, their level of writing in English was mostly low. This highlighted the need to promote more effective ways for them to learn. I decided that group work could be used to bring back the desire to write and work harder to improve their level. So students were divided into groups of five. I gave them instructions about how to work together such as dividing the roles among them. I have used variety of activities and topics to engage them in the group discussion and to encourage them to prepare and generate ideas.

#### **3.2 Research design**

Since no research related to how to motivate Libyan university students' to learn writing and being more active students, was available to inform this inquiry, an action research approach was considered. According to Cohen (2007: 299) action research is a flexible and responsive approach to improve education by changing it.

Along with the action research, in this inquiry I used focus group as it allowed me to discuss with the students their opinions about their work in groups.

#### **3.3 Data analysis procedures**

The focus group data were analysed with reference to the research question mentioned above. During the discussion some notes were taken. I looked for answers related to students' opinions about the activities that are used in the class as well as whether they are interested about working in groups. The data were initially coded under the broad heading then gradually modified into sub-categories referring, for example, how students conceive their work together as a group.

### **IV. Findings and discussions**

A focus group discussion was held with third year writing students to discuss the methods of teaching being used so far and whether they are aware of the changes in their motivation and behaviours if any. The main questions were: what do they think of using group work in the class? Did you notice any changes in your level and behaviours? If yes, give examples.

Students' answers show that their work in groups helped in building their self confidence in their ability to speak and write in English. The group work helped to reduce the anxiety and shyness of some students. According to Slavin (1995), group work provides a non-threatening learning environment which encourages students to communicate and enhance their skills.

S6. 'the last advantage which is the important one, its when we speak English in the group. This way it helps us to improve our language especially shy people it's useful way to them'.

S1. 'Working in groups makes the students more active in the class and they participate more'.

Furthermore, many students reported that they were able to learn from their classmates and complete tasks that they could not normally do on their own. According to Hedge (2005) group work helps students to learn from each other's strength. The discussion with students showed that these students felt more positive about their learning and gained self confidence.

S5' if they are discussing a new topic, they may know some ideas from their colleagues that they don't know before and this will help them to discover many information that would be useful for them. Moreover, working in groups helps you to know how to deal with others and accept their viewpoints

S12. 'people who work in group can help each other and share their information and point of view and working in a group makes you learn how to take care of others and how to be responsible of what you should do and learn you how to be trust of your self and your abilities. It will help the group to finish their work quickly.

Group work has been proved to be an effective teaching strategy to both the teacher and students. It promotes learning to take place and improves students' communication skills (Jacobs & McCafferty, 2006). For the writing teacher, group work is a useful technique for EFL teachers as it enables them to present information and comment on students writing in groups Boughey(2008:86).

Observation of the group work definitely showed that both the use of group work has been enthusiastically received by students. Students were interacting more, were more mentally and physically engaged and produced more authentic work. Cooperative learning can move students' interaction with the English language forward while simultaneously serving as a useful strategy to teach them how to work together, share knowledge and writing.

S7' it helps students to save time and answer quickly, and we cannot forget that students are having fun at the same time'

S7' it encourages the students to attend all the lecture with exciting and amazing feeling'.

## **V. Concluding remarks**

Although it is not always the case, teaching can be an interesting task in the EFL classroom. The key is to use variety of activities. This study showed that students can be motivated by using group work, mainly when it is combined with interesting tasks. The success students experience with working with each other will help them to gain confidence as language learners. With clear goals and guidelines, group work offer students the opportunities to not only learn English, but also to actively participate in that learning.

Based on the findings of this research, it is recommended to apply this teaching strategy in the Libyan classroom at the college level to motivate students and improve their level. It is recommended as well to provide both the college teachers and students with training sessions on how to teach and learn through cooperative learning.

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