

GROUP WORK ROLE FOR EFL STUDENTS' ACADEMIC WRITING DEVELOPMENT AN EXPERIMENTAL APPROACH

دور العمل الجماعي في تطوير مهارات الكتابة الأكاديمية لدى طلاب اللغة الإنجليزية كلفة

نهج تجريبي أجنبية

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Abstract:

The ability to write effectively is one of the basic skills that students need to master. However, it is believed that students' academic writing skills in English are inadequate. How students learn academic writing is therefore essential to investigate, group work is one important factor of improving writing. The present research paper aims at investigating the effects of group work on students' academic writing production. Group work was hypothesized to develop second year students' academic writing achievement. In testing this hypothesis, an experimental approach was applied to a sample of twenty students studying at the department of English, University of Batna 2, and a questionnaire was distributed to experimental group students. The results showed that students who wrote in groups performed better than those who wrote individually and experimental students have a positive attitude toward using group work. Such results may take as a ground to enhance the teaching of academic writing in EFL context

Keywords: ability, academic writing, EFL, group work.

ملخص:

القدرة على الكتابة بشكل فعال هي واحدة من المهارات الأساسية التي يحتاج الطلاب إلى إتقانها. ومع ذلك، يُعتقد أن مهارات الكتابة الأكاديمية للطلاب باللغة الإنجليزية غير كافية. لذلك فإن كيفية تعلم الطلاب للكتابة الأكاديمية أمر ضروري للبحث، والعمل الجماعي هو أحد العوامل

المهمة لتحسين الكتابة، ويهدف بحثنا هذا إلى التحقيق في آثار العمل الجماعي على إنتاج الطلاب للكتابة الأكاديمية. تم طرح فرضية العمل الجماعي لتطوير إنجاز الكتابة الأكاديمية لطلاب السنة الثانية. لاختبار هذه الفرضية، تم تطبيق نهج تجريبي على عينة من عشرين طالبًا يدرسون في قسم اللغة الإنجليزية بجامعة باتنة 2، وتم توزيع استبيان على طلاب المجموعة التجريبية. أظهرت النتائج أن الطلاب الذين كتبوا في مجموعات أدوا بشكل أفضل من أولئك الذين كتبوا بشكل فردي وأن الطلاب التجريبيين لديهم موقف إيجابي تجاه استخدام العمل الجماعي. قد تتخذ مثل هذه النتائج قاعدة لتعزيز تدريس الكتابة الأكاديمية في سياق اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية. كلمات مفتاحية: اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية، العمل الجماعي، القدرة، الكتابة الأكاديمية.

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1. Introduction

Writing is among the most essential skills that students of English as a foreign language need to learn. It is a powerful means of communication by which students learn better to express themselves and gain competence of communication in written settings. Investigating students' poor writing production stems from a personal interest motivated by my experience in teaching writing for more than seven years where it is witnessed that the majority of the students encounter problems with paragraph and essay writing. These observations are backed by sample of students' exams papers, which indicated that students' level of English writing skills is not as high as it needs to be.

As far as academic writing is concerned, group work stands out as an essential element in the practice of writing academically, particularly in EFL classes. Collaboration learning is required in the classroom tasks. It will improve students' responsibility, getting positive affective atmosphere, and developing students' language learning through giving students opportunities to use language by interacting with each other.

Academic writing in English is a skill that is mostly learnt in University, and thus it is essential to investigate how academic writing and group work are experienced in the curriculum and the perspectives towards it. There are many different approaches to group work practices. In this

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issue, there are many variations on how group work can be integrated. With so many different ways of implementing group work activities, some ways may be more effective than others.

The present paper aims to contribute to the research of foreign language academic writing in Algeria. It is various from most of the other researches stated, since it uses experimental design. This permits to draw specific conclusions regarding to the topic. To the author's best knowledge, limited research in Algeria has focused on the specific topic of group work as a teaching strategy on academic written English at tertiary level, and the current study thus aims to fill that gap.

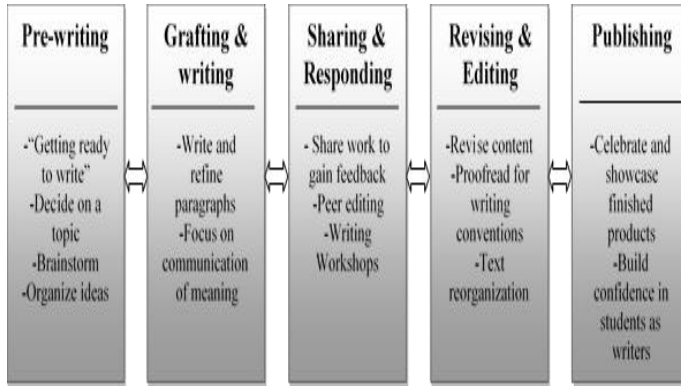
2. Theoretical Framework

2.1 Academic Writing in the EFL Classrooms: Definition and Importance

Academic Writing is one of the main skills for using language, through which students can convey their thoughts. This gives the meaning that academic writing is a formal type of writing and it is usage throughout the academic career. Writing is a productive skill, which take various forms

Learning to master academic writing skill means being aware of all its features for example, formality, objectivity, precision, explicitness, accuracy and hedging. Academic writing is of utmost significance as it aids students to communicate their thoughts well in an organized, precise, objective and structured way. In support of the point, it is said that the lack of writing practice is most affected by and negatively, statistically correlated with certain key social roles determinants (Bader, 2007). When students learn how to write academically, they will take part in various steps of writing. According to (Bereiter & Scardamalia, 1982), the process of writing takes five stages.

Fig.1. the Writing Process



(Bereiter & Scardamalia, 1982, p. 24)

2.2 Group Work to Academic Writing Skill

In this era of globalization, there is a well of information about the shift in education from traditional whole-class approach to a more communicative classroom. Collaborative learning has become a focal concern in this time of pedagogical change; group work remains an essential aspect of collaborative learning practice. Group work is learning task, which involves a small group of students working together.

One of the best way through which students improve their writing skill is by getting engagement among each other. Collaborative learning through group work has been identified as a fruitful approach to boost a better learning environment. Students who participate in collaborative activities and are interacted with their classmates gain better learning outcomes.

The tendency to integrate group work writing tasks in the classroom seems to hold true across many teachers and certainly is the case in Algerian universities. However, teachers must be aware of how best to use groups effectively. There are several procedures of employing group work activities. Each step offers its benefits, as well as possessing fruitful ways, which might result in effective student participation and academic achievement. Those steps as follows: teachers' decision and willing to use group work activities, students' acceptance of the group work idea, and teachers' way of group work tasks evaluation.

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Group work can be integrated in the classroom through a myriad of writing tasks with which students can practice the writing skill. It can guide students to synthesize, edit and revise to produce good and correct writing. Roberts (2013) provided some activities of group work for the academic writing development. These writing activities are brainstorming, think pair and share and information gap. In the light of what has been raised above, group work is an essential element in learning process that can raise students' language performance and improve their writing quality. Therefore, the problem object of the present study can be expressed in these research questions:

- What are the students' attitudes to the practices of writing and group work tasks?
- How does group work as a teaching strategy effect the improvement of students' academic writing?

Moreover, the following hypothesis guided the study:

- Group work writing activities will be more functional as a teaching strategy that help foreign language students of Batna 2 University to boost their academic writing.

3. Method and Tools

3.1 Participants

To answer the research questions mentioned above, it was decided to conduct a mixed method approach. The study was an experimental design using two groups of second year EFL students. Group 1, the experimental group, consisted of 20 students (3 boys and 17 girls) whereas Group 2, the control group, consisted of 20 students (9 boys and 11 girls). The writing papers were scored under five elements (content, organization, vocabulary, language use, and mechanics) ordered from -very poor, fair to poor, good to average, excellent to very good (Weigle ,2002)

The sample consists of two randomly assigned groups of second year students who share some common features:

- Students of both groups had almost similar educational background
- They share the same English learning experience (one year as EFL

students)

- They aim to use English in their academic and workplace settings.

The other tool of the present study was a quantitative approach adopted in order to investigate experimental students' perceptions to the practices of writing and group work activities after the treatment. This was done via a post experimental questionnaire. A likert rating scale was used to let participants give their personal views regarding the items mentioned through the statements that were given.

3.2 Materials and Procedure

As instructional materials to conduct the present study, various essays writing have been used during the experiment. For the pre-test and post-test, the researcher asked students to write about "Should Universities ban the use of technology like Chat GPT in education? For the experimental group, the students were asked to work in groups of four members to write an essay, while for the control group; the participants worked individually. During the treatment, all participants had been set on an experimental progress tests procedure in the second semester of the academic year 2023-2024.

Throughout the second semester of the year, the teacher (the researcher herself) of the experimental group, Group 1, implemented group work strategies with students' workshops. With the control group, Group 2, the teacher simply followed the traditional way of writing (worked individually). One study unit was built according to the course syllabus. It essentially covers two main objectives: (1) to develop students' ideas in a well-structured meaningful 5-paragraph essay and (2) students will be familiar with a wide range of essay types.

The researcher spent about an eleven-week period of learning, finishing phase of the experiment, which ends the last unit in the syllabus of "comprehension and written expression course. Students are given three progress tests as a classroom activity in which they are required to write essays about different topics. Students are tested in both groups then their scores are compared to assess their range of development. To ensure the

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validity of the tests, students were not knowledgeable that they go through a special treatment for research aims in order to keep the ordinary study routine and avoid all kind of anxiety, stress or other perspectives towards the study.

4. Results and Discussion

Table 1. Scores matching of the experimental and the control groups

	Content			Organization			Vocabulary			Language use			Mechanics		
	CG	=	EG	CG	=	EG	CG	=	EG	CG	=	EG	CG	=	EG
Pre-test	1,86	<	1,87	1,25	<	1,40	1,53	<	1,60	1,20	<	1,50	1,76	<	1,85
PG1	2,00	<	2,20	1,35	<	1,65	1,30	<	1,86	1,42	<	1,45	1,80	<	1,90
PG2	1,94	<	2,40	1,50	<	1,90	1,80	<	1,88	1,20	<	1,50	1,90	<	1,98
PG3	1,70	<	2,25	1,80	<	1,95	1,80	<	2,00	1,50	<	1,88	1,90	<	2,20
Post test	1,87	<	2,70	1,80	<	1,90	1,88	<	1,92	1,32	<	1,90	2,00	<	2,45

Source: prepared by the researcher

- Evaluating students' achievement in academic writing in the pre-test revealed a relative similarity of the two groups, the EG and the CG, although the tiny difference in favor of the EG.
- Both groups by the end of the experiment, made progress. Yet, it was the EG which outperformed the CG.
- The above table revealed the superiority of the EG over the CG.
- There was a relative stability in the results achieved by the CG. The students, through their academic writings, showed no proficiency in academic writing mechanics; their academic writing may be unsatisfactory in terms of reasoning and arguments
- The EG, however, achieved better results and have done more engagement and motivation to better their academic written performance. Most of students were able to write efficient essays with

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purposeful content. The students' opinions about the different topics seemed to be shaped by their sharing and developing of ideas with their peers' in-group.

- Students from the EG were capable of using the new acquired vocabulary in an appropriate way. It was evident that students were more familiar with of the themes. They are encouraged to learn from each other between groups and create a cool learning fun

Table 2. Progress matching of the experimental and the control groups

	CG	=	EG
Pre-test	7,60	<	8,22
Post test	8,87	<	10,87
Progress	1,27	<	2,65

Alpha level: $\alpha < 0.05$, one-tailed (directional) decision

Source: prepared by the researcher

Table 3. T-test summary of post-test scores

Groups	N	t cal	t critical
Experimental	20		
Control	20	2,30	1.68

Source: prepared by the researcher

The score of the students' post-test of experimental group after the treatment was 10, 87. Furthermore, the score of the students' post-test for control group was 8, 87. The table above also shows that the score of experimental group is higher than control group ($10, 87 > 8, 87$). It proved that the treatment by using group work writing activities gave development on the students' academic writing production. With group work writing strategies, students are motivated to always and continuously learn.

Relating to the results on students' academic writing development, it is

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clear that after the treatment the outcome of post-test for both groups showed an enhancement on the students' academic writing. The pre-test of writing was prepared to ensure that the students' level at the beginning in both groups was the same. Then, the experimental phase began and was continued for 12 sessions. One treatment was integrated in the present research; group work writing activities for experimental group and writing individually for control group.

Group work writing activities provided some form of active learning and usually involved the essay writing for different topics. The results reveal that students make a lot of spelling mistakes and word choice problems because of the lack of vocabulary, while in group work this issue has been reduced as they discuss and share ideas with each other.

After applying group work in the present study, it is believed that this teaching principle is one of the best way through which students practice their academic writing skill. Here some benefits of this strategy.

- Facilitated the improvement of self-engagement in learning. When students spend time meeting in groups, they develop skills, such as writing and communication (Light 2001)
- Supported students to participate actively in the writing activity (sharing ideas)
- Provided opportunities to understand through discussion and explanation in an enjoyable atmosphere.
- Encouraged positive motivational attitudes and self-confidence
- Delivered better discussion and question among students as this permits them to increase different attitudes of how they can go about writing task

The information of teaching using group work could be considered from the difference statistics of the students' academic writing production in experimental group and control group. The mean score gained by experimental group has improved from 8, 22 in pre-test to 10, 87 in post-test. While the mean score of control group in pre-test was 7, 60 becoming 8, 87 in post-test ($10, 87 > 8, 87$). Therefore, the hypothesis is accepted. In other words, there is significant enhancement on the students' academic

writing through group work tasks.

4.1. Evaluation of the Post-experiment Questionnaire

After the treatment phase, members of the experimental group are asked to answer post-experiment items, which were in form of statements. Questionnaire items were analyzed to understand experimental group students' attitudes after writing in groups. Students' questionnaires were used to confirm the value of group work to develop academic writing skills.

Table 4. Participants' attitudes towards the effectiveness of group work

Item	Strongly agree	agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Total
	N	N	N	N	N
	%	%	%	%	%
• English academic writing practices within groups in the classroom was very useful	14 70	5 25	1 5	0 0	20 100
• After experiencing group work, it was helpful to broaden my vocabulary	10 50	9 45	1 5	0 0	20 100
• Group work promoted teamwork and collaboration	9 45	11 55	0 0	0 0	20 100
• Through group work, I learned different academic writing components faster than did by myself	9 45	7 35	3 15	1 5	20 100
• Group work contributed much to my engagement in writing	8 40	12 60	0 0	0 0	20 100
• I become more confident to write in	11 55	6 30	2 10	0 0	20 100

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English					
• The group work atmosphere was friendly, enjoyable and exciting	7	13	0	0	20
	35	65	0	0	100

Source: prepared by the researcher

After analyzing the questionnaire, the conclusion obtained is that most of students were able to improve their writing ability. As stated in number one, two and three of the questionnaire statements, the majority of the students (95%) agree on the vital role of group work in enriching their vocabulary background. Thus, all the participants opined that group work was agreeable for sharing ideas and discussion, which is important for the cooperative learning. In addition, in accordance with the students' responses in item four, almost all the participants considered that group work is effective in gaining academic writing components' knowledge.

The participants agreement about this idea was divided between strongly agree and agree by the percentages of 45% and 35% respectively. They apply what they have learned in their groups that indicates that the integration of group work helped to attract students' attention and to raise their interest in attending written classes.

Subsequently, based on students' responses in number five, six and seven of the questionnaire statement. All the participants agreed that the group work strategy created friendly, enjoyable and exciting learning atmosphere, so students will feel neither bored nor nervous when writing and sharing their thoughts. On the other hand, group work also give them a sense of involvement and confidence. Therefore, they feel free to share their opinions concerning the topics to be written. After analyzing the questionnaire, the researcher found that most of the students were interested in writing by working in groups. The data also showed that students felt that group work could help them in writing skills

5. Conclusion

The phrase “More hands make for lighter work.” certainly has some merit. It has confirmed that group work adopted in teaching improved students’ academic achievement in writing. Analyses of the essay scores of students reveal that the students who were exposed to group work writing activities are able to communicate their ideas in essay writing more effectively.

It is hoped that the present research paper has contributed to the understanding of group work integration in EFL classrooms. It is essential to know how to integrate it to make use of its full potential so that finding ways to assist students to improve their language and academic writing. Group work is a veritable strategy that can reduce the gap between no production and high production students in writing if well handled.

It is recommended that teachers should be encouraged to use group work tasks in their EFL classrooms. Making this change will improve the attitude that some teachers have about group work and will enhance the writing performance of the students in their classrooms. These results add other evidence to previous studies on group work and improving academic writing production (Roberts, 2013). What can be done in the future is a research where one could investigate several universities, and thus be able to interview teachers. One could gain more insight into the topic based on research in more universities and with teachers’ perspectives also.

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