The Effect of Cooperative Learning Approach on English Writing Skills among Chinese Non-English Majors

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Abstract: This study aimed to investigate whether cooperative learning approach is effective in improving writing skills of non-English majors in China. The participants in this study are 305 non-English majors ranging from freshmen to sophomore in Anhui Sanlian University. The study adopted the quantitative research method and used questionnaires to collect data of students' writing skills. The results of the study revealed that cooperative learning approach exerted a positive effect on writing skills of non-English majors in terms of mechanics, vocabulary, sentence and paragraph in the context of Chinese environment.

1. Introduction

In China, non-English majors make up a large part of English learners in higher education. However, writing has been the most difficult part in English language learning, especially for non-English major students. However, in college English teaching, writing is not a separate course, but integrated in the whole course of College English. Thus the time in teaching writing is insufficient and students can not receive much training on writing skills. Moreover, most teachers teach writing in a traditional way with a lack of interaction in writing classes, as a result, students do not have much motivation in learning writing, which may contribute to students' poor performance in writing part in college English test. In writing classes, it was also found that cooperation in students' writing process was neglected. Therefore, how to find an effective teaching approach to writing has become an urgent problem. This study aimed to investigate whether cooperative learning approach is effective in improving non-English majors' writing skills, hoping to provide practical inspiration for writing teaching.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Cooperative Learning

Salvin, Johnson and Johnson were the earliest American scholars who studied cooperative learning. According to Slavin, cooperative learning happens when students work in small groups to help one another learn and are given rewards based on the group's performance [1]. While Johnson

and Johnson defined cooperative learning as using groups in teaching so that students work together to promote their own and others' learning to the greatest extent [2]. Chinese scholar Wang Tan emphasized that in cooperative learning, students should be promoted in a heterogeneous group so that common learning goals can be achieved through mutual help and cooperation [3]. In the author's view, cooperative learning is a strategy, in which students with different language proficiency form heterogeneous groups and work together to achieve common goals in group tasks.

Cooperative learning can bring many advantages to language learners. Cooperative learning can help students actively engaged in the whole learning process and make classroom student-centered [4]. They feel more comfortable with the encouragement and support from each other, thus feeling less stressed and anxious [5]. In addition to improving students' academic achievement, cooperative learning can also help improve students' skills of solving problems, critical thinking, and interpersonal skills [6].

Many researchers have studied the effectiveness of cooperative learning on improving students' writing skills. The study of Munawar and Chaudhary proved that cooperative learning can help improve 7th grade students' writing ability [7]. By comparing the writing performance of EFL learners in cooperative and individual writing classes, Snyder et al. proved that cooperative groups performed better than individual groups in fluency and accuracy [8].

However, Chinese studies on cooperative learning were not brought into focus until the first introduction of cooperative learning by Wang Tan, whose studies on cooperative learning have provided useful pedagogical inspirations for the following studies and teaching on writing. In recent years, some researchers have turned to focus on investigating the effect of cooperative learning on students' writing skills. Wu and He explored the impact of cooperative learning on EFL writing and proved that cooperative learning could help students reduce writing anxiety, avoid writing errors, and improve students' writing strategies [9]. Su and Zhou found that compared with individual writing, cooperative writing can increase students' frequency of using strategies like goal setting, organizing and transforming [10]. Wang conducted an experiment among English majors and proved that cooperative learning can enhance students' engagement in writing class [11].

In view of related studies at home and abroad, cooperative learning may exert positive influence on students' writing performance. However, few studies are related to non-English majors, which is the research gap. Therefore, this study aimed to find out how cooperative learning may affect writing skills in the context of Chinese environment, hoping to provide inspirations for writing teaching and learning.

2.2. Writing Skills in Chinese EFL Context

Writing is a highly productive skill used to express one's ideas, thoughts and feeling in written form [12]. Brown et al. made a detailed analysis of five components of writing: vocabulary, grammar, content, mechanics, and organization. Content is concerned with how to develop ideas logically; organization means clearly organizing title, introductory paragraph, body, and conclusion together. Vocabulary is about the accurate use of vocabulary and word of choice. Grammar is about how to use all the language rules. Mechanical skill is about capitalization, punctuation, spelling, and other formats [13]. Based on the above opinion, the author mainly analyzes non-English majors' writing skills from aspects of mechanics, diction, sentences and paragraphs.

In Chinese EFL context, writing is not only important but rather challenging for non-English majors. How to improve students' writing has become a great concern. Many researchers have focused on error analysis college students made in their writing. For example, Sun investigated the writing ability of college students in terms of vocabulary, sentence, content and coherence. The results showed that students have a poor vocabulary and tended to use more simple sentences than

complex sentences. Besides, most students' writings were not logically connected [14]. Li had a similar result that students vocabulary was insufficient and some sentences were incoherent [15]. Zhao analyzed discourse errors in students' writing from aspects of structure, development and content and found problems like lack of concluding sentence, not well-written main idea and improper cohesive words between the sentences and paragraphs [16]. Chinese non-English majors had many problems in writing and their language foundation is not solid. Therefore, how to find an effective teaching approach to improve non-English majors' writing skills needs to be further explored.

3. Method

3.1. Design

This study aimed to investigate the effects of using cooperative learning approach to improve writing skills among Chinese non-English majors. This study used questionnaires through an APP-Wenjuanxing to collect data of students' writing skills. The questionnaire survey was conducted among non-English majors from Anhui Sanlian University who have experienced cooperative learning in college English classes. SPSS 26.0 was employed to process the collected data. By analyzing the data, the author intended to find out whether cooperative learning approach is feasible in improving students' writing skills.

3.2. Participants

A total of 305 non-English major students ranged from freshmen to sophomore in Anhui Sanlian University were invited to participate in this study. 61.6% of them were sophomores, while 38.4% were freshmen. As to gender, the number of females is slightly larger than that of males, with 173 females and 132 males. A random sampling was used in the distribution of the questionnaire. The participants had different professional directions, with 180 majoring in Computer Engineering and 122 Marketing.

3.3. Instrument

The research instrument used in this study was a questionnaire to investigate students' writing skills and find out what skills they had acquired and what skills they needed to improve. The questionnaire was divided into 4 subdomains: mechanics, vocabulary, sentence and paragraph. It used a five-point Likert Scale where 5 is the highest as "sometimes", 4 as "seldom", 3 as "usually", 2 as "sometimes", and 1 as "never".

3.4. Procedure

Data for this study were collected from questionnaires. In order to make sure the validity and reliability of the study, the author consulted some experts and made a pilot study. The author also clarified the requirements of the study to other teachers who would collect the data. Then large scale questionnaire was conducted among non-English major students majoring in Marketing and Computer Engineering. The final collected data were engaged in statistical analysis by the tool of SPSS 26.

4. Findings

Table 1: Writing Skills in terms of Mechanics

Indicators	WM	VI	Rank
1. I can use punctuation correctly.	3.09	Often	2
2. I can capitalize words correctly.	3.25	Often	1
3. I can spell words correctly.	2.60	Often	3
Composite Mean	2.98	Often	

Table 1 presents the participants' level of writing skills on mechanics. The composite mean (M=2.98) suggests that they can use mechanics correctly in their writing and make few mistakes on mechanics.

The items "I can capitalize words correctly" (M=3.25) and "I can use punctuation correctly" (M=3.09) indicate that the participants can often capitalize and punctuate their writing correctly. Because in English and Chinese punctuation are almost the same in writing and capitalization rules in English writing are not complex, respondents made few errors on punctuation and capitalization [17]. However, students are likely to make spelling mistakes, because they may not use strategies to remember words, such as word-formation rules, which increase their difficulty in memorizing words.

Table 2: Writing Skills in terms of Diction

Indicators	WM	VI	Rank
1. I can pay attention to the word class.	2.69	Often	1
2.I can correctly use the words I know to express my thought.	2.61	Often	2
3.I can properly use English collocations I know.	2.56	Often	3
4.I have plenty of variety in choice of words.	2.43	Sometimes	4
Composite Mean	2.57	Often	

In table 2, the composite mean of writing skills in diction (M=2.57) means that participants' writing skills in diction was at medium level and needs to be improved.

The ranked first item is "I can pay attention to the word class"(M=2.69), which suggests that the respondents can often recognize word class and use them correctly in writing. Then weighted mean of the items correctly using words (M=2.61) and properly using English collocations (M=2.56) infer that the respondents are still weak in using right words and collocations. It may be caused by college students' insufficient vocabulary and neglect of accumulating collocations. Thus, students should consolidate their language foundation. The ranked least item is having various choices of words (M=2.43), indicating that the respondents' vocabulary breadth was limited. The vocabulary college students have mastered could not meet the requirements, thus directly influences students' writing level.

Table 3: Writing Skills in terms of Sentences

Indicators	WM	VI	Rank
1. I can write simple sentences.	2.85	Often	1
2. I can use a variety of sentence patterns.	2.48	Sometimes	3
3. I can use a variety of clauses.	2.37	Sometimes	4
4. I can use all tenses and voices correctly.	2.50	Often	2
Composite Mean	2.55	Often	

In table 3, it can be inferred from the composite mean of skills in writing sentences (M=2.55) that the participants can often write correct simple sentences, but had difficulty applying complex sentences.

The results presents that the item writing simple sentences (M=2.85) ranked first. The respondents often used simple sentences in their writing. Due to students' poor English language foundation, they tended to use more simple sentences than complex sentences. The item "I can use all tenses and voices correctly" (M=2.50) shows that the participants seldom make mistakes in tenses and voices, which are necessary grammar for effective writing. The verbal interpretation of using various clauses and sentence patterns is "sometimes", which reflect that the participants have difficulty writing complex sentence structures. Students may not be sure of writing correct complex sentences. In order to avoid making errors, they chose to use simple sentences.

Table 4: Writing Skills in terms of Paragraphs

Indicators	WM	VI	Rank
1. I can write a clear topic sentence and supporting sentences.	2.49	Sometimes	1
2. I can write a good conclusion.	2.47	Sometimes	2
3. I can use the way of developing a paragraph.	2.31	Sometimes	4
4. I can pay attention to the coherence between paragraphs.	2.46	Sometimes	3
Composite Mean	2.43	Sometimes	

Table 4 reflects students' skills in writing paragraphs. The verbal interpretation is "sometimes", which suggests that the participants' level of writing effective paragraphs was relatively low.

The item "I can write a clear topic sentence and supporting sentences" (M=2.49) ranked first, and it was followed by the item "I can write a good conclusion" (M=2.47). They indicate that the participants can write a topic sentence and supporting sentences, but developing an effective ending was a challenge for them. Using the methods of developing a paragraph (M=2.31) ranked least, which indicates that many participants were not able to develop paragraphs effectively. Lacking of teaching strategies and adequate practice on developing a paragraph may be the main reason for students' poor performance.

5. Discussion

The majority of the participating non-English majors are female, sophomore and majoring in Computer Engineering. After implementing cooperative learning approach, they can better apply writing skills in the subdomains of mechanics, diction, sentence and paragraph.

Firstly, the respondents can master writing skills of mechanics well, but spelling mistakes should be paid attention to. Due to illogical connection between sound and symbol, some students may memorize each word separately, which may lead to incorrect spelling [18]. Teachers can organize more cooperative group work such as spelling games to consolidate words spelling and reduce spelling mistakes. Secondly, the students can often master basic writing skills on diction, but they were weak in words of choice in writing practice. Teachers can assign more reading tasks on listed famous novels and newspapers to improve students' vocabulary competence in depth and breadth and help students know how to use different words in different contexts. Thirdly, the students can often make simple sentences and use tenses and voices correctly, but writing correct complex sentences is difficult for them. More exercises of sentence transformation such as changing simple sentences into compound or complex sentences can be arranged in writing class. Finally, the students can write a complete paragraph and express their ideas clearly and logically, but can not do well in writing concluding sentences and developing an effective paragraph. The teacher should train students strategies in developing an effective paragraph to enhance students' writing skills.

In summary, it is advisable that the students in this study should further improve their writing skills. Besides, the teacher should provide more chances and find more ways to create an

environment for students to practice their writing skills. More cooperative writing activities should be organized for students to cooperate with each other to enhance their writing skills.

6. Conclusions

The results of this study revealed that cooperative learning approach exerted a positive effect on writing skills of non-English majors in terms of mechanics, vocabulary, sentence and paragraph in the context of Chinese environment. Therefore, cooperative learning approach should be implemented in college English writing class. Regarding the limitations, this study only took non-English majors in Anhui Sanlian University as an example to test the effectiveness of cooperative learning on writing skills. Therefore, the findings may be not generalizable to other contexts.

Acknowledgments

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