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Comparing Competitive and Cooperative Content-Based Instruction in Reading and Writing Classes

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Abstract. The purpose of this study was to compare the impact of cooperative and competitive content-based instruction on EFL learners' reading comprehension and writing. To fulfill the purpose, 60 female students of SAMA School of Mashhad, Iran were selected from among a total number of 90 based on their performance on a piloted sample KET and randomly put into two experimental groups. The same content was taught to both groups during 12 sessions with different methods of competitive and cooperative teaching being used in each class. A posttest, i.e. a reading and writing section of another KET, was administered after the treatment to both groups and their mean scores on the test were compared through an independent samples t-test and an ANCOVA. The results led to the rejection of both null hypotheses with the cooperative method of instruction being more effective on EFL learners' reading comprehension and writing.

Keywords: Content-based instruction, cooperative learning, competitive learning, writing, reading

1. Introduction

The process of language learning, put simplistically, is composed of mastering the four skills of listening, reading, writing, and speaking. Among these four skills, perhaps there is the tendency to view writing as the most complicated of the skills (Hamp-Lyons & Heasly, 2006; Hedge, 1988). This is perhaps true as writing involves a number of different

abilities, some of which are never fully achieved by many students even in their native language (Richards & Renandya, 2002).

The secret behind good writing is probably attempting to produce every sentence with its clearest components. Writing is thus a process of generating a text as a communicative bridge between the reader and the writer, and learning to write is an indispensable part of language learning. Accordingly, becoming more and more aware of this necessity, English language teaching circles are paying further attention to writing (Seidlhofer & Widdowson, 1999).

Indubitably, the ability to write well is very much correlated with reading well, as Hedge (1988, p. 11) states that "students benefit from the exposure of what constitutes good writing". In a well quoted statement, Goodman (1967) writes that "reading is a selective process which involves partial use of available minimal language cues selected from perceptual input on the basis of the reader's expectations" (p. 127).

Grellet (1981) states that proficient readers do not concentrate on sentences and words. Instead, they engage upon a global understanding and then work toward the comprehension of detailed aspects of the reading. She maintains that "reading is an active skill as it constantly involves guessing, predicting, checking, and asking oneself questions" (p.8).

Among different methods of improving reading and writing, the theory and practice of cooperative learning vis-à-vis competitive learning is very much documented in the literature (e.g., Deutsch, Coleman, & Marcus, 2006; Johnson, Johnson, & Stanne, 2000; Warring, Maruyama, Johnson, & Nelson, 1985; Marashi & Baygzadeh, 2010; Shumway, Saunders, Stewardson, & Reeve, 2001).

Before the mid-1960s, cooperative learning was relatively unknown in education circles as formal elementary, secondary, and tertiary teaching which was then propelled by behaviorist thinking and social Darwinism was overwhelmingly dominated by competitive and individualistic learning (Hartup 1976; Ladd, 1991; Lewis & Rosenblum 1975).

Cooperative learning can be defined as a variety of concepts and techniques for enhancing the value of student-student interaction

(Bossert, 1988). This modality of learning has been defined as a classroom learning environment in which students work on academic tasks in small, heterogeneous groups. Accordingly, the teacher monitors groups to see that they are learning and functioning smoothly and *team spirit* is stressed with the learners engaging in learning how to learn through participation with their peers (Adams & Hamm, 1990; Kagan, 1994).

Competitive learning, in contrast, exists when one student's goal is achieved while all other students fail to reach that goal (Johnson & Johnson, 1999). Competition results in individuals achieving different outcomes; when one person is successful in attaining a goal, others are prevented from doing so. Under individualistic conditions, each person's outcome is independent of others (Deutsch et al., 2006; Lin, 1997).

Both competitive and cooperative learning have been used in different teaching settings including content-based instruction (CBI). In the CBI class, students are tested on content and not language; thus, the focus tends to be on meaning, not form. Knowing that they will be tested on content, students are not tempted to review their grammar and memorize long lists of vocabulary words; rather, they listen closely to lectures, participate in discussions, do topic-related readings, and acquire a great deal of language in the process (Krashen, 1991).

Furthermore, CBI refers to an approach of second language acquisition which highlights the importance of content "in contrast to other approaches or methods which are centered around the language itself. Nevertheless, the approach does aim to develop the students' language and academic skills but the skills are developed subconsciously through the content dealt with" (Richards & Rodgers, 2001, pp. 204-205).

Curtain and Pesola (1994) use the term in a more restricted way, limiting it to only those "curriculum concepts being taught through the foreign language [...] appropriate to the grade level of the students" (p. 35). Krueger and Ryan (1993) go further and distinguish between CBI and form-based instruction, and argue in favor of the term *discipline-based* which, according to them, is more appropriate manifestation of the integration of language learning with different academic disciplines and contents. CBI has been reported in the literature extensively (e.g.,

Crandall & Tucker, 1990; Krashen, 1982; Mohan, Leung, & Davison, 2001; Snow, 2005; Stoller, 2004) with examples in the Iranian context (e.g., Marashi & Hatam, 2009).

While the majority of studies which have examined the consequences of cooperative and competitive learning methods on interpersonal relationships have also reported that more cross-ethnic friendship choices are made by learners in cooperative conditions than those in competitive or individual conditions (DeVries, Edward, & Slavin, 1978; Slavin, 1979; Warring et al., 1985; Ziegler, 1981), there are also some reports with mixed results not necessarily in favor of cooperative learning categorically (e.g., Marashi & Dibah, 2013).

With the abundant literature of studies conducted both on CBI and competitive/cooperative learning and also the overarching importance of the two skills of reading and writing in an ever-increasingly growing application of the two skills in communication technology and global media, the researchers were interested to see whether the reading and writing skills of EFL learners could be influenced differently by the use of competitive or cooperative language learning in CBI settings. Henceforth, the following null hypotheses were raised:

H_{01}: There is no significant difference between the impact of competitive and cooperative content-based instruction on EFL learners' reading.

H_{02}: There is no significant difference between the impact of competitive and cooperative content-based instruction on EFL learners' writing.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

The participants of this study were 60 female students aged 12-13 years, studying at SAMA Junior High School in Mashhad, Iran. They were selected from among a larger existing group of 90 students based on their performance on a language proficiency test which itself had been piloted among 29 students beforehand. The 60 students whose scores fell one

standard deviation above and below the mean were chosen and divided randomly into the two experimental groups.

2.2. Instruments and materials

2.2.1. Key English Test (KET)

A sample KET was first piloted and subsequently administered in this study prior to the treatment for the participant selection process.

2.2.2. Posttests

The reading and writing paper of another sample piloted KET were used in this study as the posttests for both groups at the end of the treatment. The original reading paper was piloted a priori of course.

2.2.3. Textbooks

SAMA has published three books of science, math, and computer science which include a large number of technical words written in a simple way for the students. These books have six chapters and each chapter has some lessons that are followed by 4-5 questions in the form of multiple-choice, fill-in-the-blank, and explanatory items. There are also some shapes that are used for students' brainstorming technique. The science course book was used in this study.

2.3. Procedure

At the beginning of the study, the already piloted KET was administered to 90 elementary EFL learners from among whom the 60 participants of the study were chosen and assigned randomly into two experimental groups. In the treatment process, both experimental groups underwent 12 sessions of 90 minutes held twice a week; a total of 60 minutes of each session was allocated to teaching reading and writing. Four units of the course book which comprised four titles for reading and writing were taught to both groups.

The teaching materials and the time which was allocated for the treatment and also the teacher (one of the researchers) were exactly the same in both classes with only the method of teaching being different in each treatment class. In the cooperative method, the emphasis laid on

group work and alliance in class performance, while in the competitive class, every learner was responsible for her own performance without the help of other students.

In the cooperative group, the class began with the students' being put into groups of three with everything which was taught to them being practiced among the group members. Each member of the group sought for outcomes that were beneficial to others. The group members were not the same all along the term as the teacher tried to teach the learners to work cooperatively with different individuals rather than a specific group.

The general method of teaching was the same for all chapters and the teacher and students' duties in the class were the same in every session. Each session, the teacher tried to set up a friendly atmosphere through some techniques such as asking the students to introduce themselves to each other the very first session. They were supposed to be facing the other student instead of the teacher while introducing themselves to one another. Competitiveness was de-emphasized in each group while group work was encouraged.

In the competitive group, students believed they could achieve their goal only individually. So, they tried to be better than one another. The teacher taught and the students tried to take notes for themselves and learn the materials of instruction in a competitive atmosphere as every student sought to be the top student of the class. In this class, there was no group work at all.

A summary of one sample chapter of the cooperative group is as follows: The book had six chapters with each one lasting three sessions to be covered. Each chapter consisted of some texts with colorful pictures that were followed by a few questions in the form of multiple choice, fill-in-the-blank, and open-ended responses.

At first, the teacher wrote the title of the lesson (e.g., *Plant Lives*) on the board and then asked the students to brainstorm on the title. After brainstorming, the teacher circled the technical words and tried to explain the text. Subsequently, the students were asked to look up the words related to the picture that went with each lesson in their picture

dictionaries and discuss them together while taking notes about everything related to that lesson.

Afterwards, the teacher wrote the summary of the lesson and put a suitable picture on the board with the students taking notes. Next, they tried to read the texts aloud and their pronunciation mistakes were corrected by the teacher. The learners were given time in class to answer the questions about the lesson in groups. The learners subsequently read aloud their answers for each other in each group and someone else in the group wrote the answers on the board; this would allow every person in a group to be involved.

Next, each group was assigned to read the text again, and write one to two paragraphs about this text. The teacher checked these writings and provided feedback to the groups.

The same procedure was conducted in the competitive group with the foundational difference that every step was implemented not in groups but individually. In this group, compared with the cooperative one, there was no cooperation in class and the teaching was conducted in a competitive atmosphere with every learner feeling that she should be the only winner of the class. Every learner had to answer the questions individually. Finally, at the end of the study, the two posttests were administered to both groups.

3. Results

A chronological order is applied in reporting the data analysis, hence, the participant selection process, the posttests, and the hypotheses testing are described one after the other.

3.1. Participant selection

3.1.1. Descriptive statistics of the KET administration

Following the piloting through which the reliability of the test scores gained by the participants was 0.81, and having established the inter-rater reliability of the two raters who had participated in the scoring of the writing papers ($r = 0.894$, $p = 0.000 < 0.01$), the researchers administered the KET to 90 students with the aim of selecting 60 of

them for the study. The descriptive statistics of this process are presented below in Table 1 with the mean and standard deviation being 37.37 and 6.46, respectively.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics for KET

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
KET Administration	90	20.0	50.0	37.367	6.4572
Valid N (listwise)	90				

3.1.2. Assigning the participants to two groups

The next step was to randomly divide the 60 participants into two experimental groups: Group 1 undergoing the cooperative CBI instruction and Group 2 the competitive CBI instruction. Table 2 shows the descriptive statistics of these two groups' scores based on their writing and reading scores in the previously administered KET. As the table shows, the mean and the standard deviation of the cooperative group in the writing test were 17.20 and 2.25, respectively, while those of the competitive group were 12.50 and 3.14, respectively. Besides, in the reading test, the mean of the cooperative group stood at 20.13 and the standard deviation was 4.47, while those of the competitive group were 20.30 and 3.45, respectively.

Table 2. Descriptive statistics of the KET writing and reading scores of the two groups at the outset

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation	Skewness	
	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Std. Error
KET Pre-Writing Coop	30	12	20	17.20	2.250	-.790	.427
KET Pre-Writing Comp	30	6	18	12.50	3.138	.011	.427
KET Pre-Reading Coop	30	18	35	20.13	4.470	-.387	.427
KET Pre-Reading Comp	30	16	31	20.30	3.446	-1.074	.427
Valid N (listwise)	30						

To make sure that the two groups manifested no significant difference at the outset in terms of their reading and writing, the means of both groups had to be statistically compared. The distribution of both groups in the writing test manifested normality with their skewness ratios $(-0.790/0.427 = -1.85;\ 0.011/0.427 = 0.026)$ falling between the acceptable ± 1.96 range; thus, running an independent samples *t*-test was legitimized. As is evident in Table 3 below, with the F value of 3.902, the significance level is 0.053 which is larger (albeit slightly) than 0.05; however, the variances of the two groups were not significantly different. Therefore, the results of the *t*-test with the assumption of homogeneity of the variances are reported here.

The results ($t = 6.668$, $p = 0.000 < 0.05$) indicate that there was a significant difference between the mean scores of the two groups at the outset in the writing. Hence, an ANCOVA would have to be run to test the hypothesis regarding the writing of the participants.

Table 3. Independent Samples t-test for the experimental groups' mean on the KET writing section at the outset

	Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		***t*-test for Equality of Means**						
								95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
	F	Sig.	*t*	Df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	Lower	Upper
Equal variances assumed	3.90	.053	6.668	58	.000	4.700	.705	3.28	6.111
Equal variances not assumed			6.668	52.5	.000	4.700	.705	3.28	6.114

The same procedure had to be run for the reading. As is evident in Table 2 above, the skewness ratios of the two groups in the reading part fell outside the acceptable range (-0.387 / 0.427 = -0.91; -1.074 / 0.427 = -

2.52); hence, a nonparametric Mann-Whitney test had to be run. Tables 4 and 5 show the results for this statistical procedure.

Table 4. Mann-Whitney test: Ranks

Group	N	Mean	Sum of ranks
Cooperative PreReading	30	31.43	943.00
Competitive PreReading	30	29.57	887.00
Total	60		

Table 5. Mann-Whitney test: Test statistics

	Score
Mann-Whitney U	422.000
Wilcoxon W	887.000
Z	.479
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	.632

a. Grouping Variable: Group

According to Tables 4 and 5, the results of the Mann-Whitney test indicated that at the 0.05 level of significance, there was no significant difference between the mean rank of the cooperative group (31.43) and that of the competitive group (29.57) on the reading test (U = 422.00, N_1=30, N_2=30, p=0.632>0.05); consequently, any probable differences at the end of the treatment could be attributed to the effect of the treatment.

3.2. Posttests

3.2.1. Reading posttest

Following the piloting of reading posttest in which the reliability of the test stood at 0.80, the reading posttest was administered with the descriptive statistics being reported in Table 6 below. As shown in the table, the mean and standard deviation of the cooperative group were 20.47 and 2.46, respectively. In the competitive group, however, the mean was 17.93 while the standard deviation stood at 2.88.

Table 6. Descriptive statistics for the reading posttest in both groups

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation	Skewness	
	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Std. Error
Coop Reading	30	26	35	20.47	2.460	.311	.427
Comp Reading	30	23	34	17.93	2.888	.033	.427
Valid N (listwise)	30						

3.2.2. Writing posttest

The writing posttest was given to both groups with the descriptive statistics of this administration appearing in Table 7 below. As displayed in the table, the mean and standard deviation of the cooperative group were 16.07 and 2.68, respectively. In the competitive group, however, the mean was 14.77 while the standard deviation stood at 3.04.

Table 7. Descriptive statistics for the writing posttest in both groups

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation	Skewness	
	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Std. Error
Coop Writing	30	9	20	16.07	2.677	-.777	.427
Comp Writing	30	7	19	14.77	3.036	-.345	.427
Valid N (listwise)	30						

3.3. Testing the null hypotheses

3.3.1. Testing the first null hypothesis

Going back to Table 6, the skewness ratios of the scores of both experimental groups on the reading posttest fell within the acceptable range (0.311 / 0.427 = 0.73; 0.033 / 0.427 = 0.078). Thus, running an independent samples *t*-test was legitimized. As is evident in Table 8 below, with the F value of 0.725 at the significance level of 0.398, being larger than 0.05, the variances of the two groups were not significantly different. Therefore, the results of the *t*-test with the assumption of homogeneity of the variances were reported here.

Table 8. Independent Samples t-test for the experimental groups' means on the reading posttest

	Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		***t*-test for Equality of Means**						
								95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
	F	Sig.	*t*	Df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	Lower	Upper
Equal variances assumed	.725	.398	3.702	58	.000	2.533	.684	1.16	3.903
Equal variances not assumed			3.702	56.9	.000	2.533	.684	1.16	3.904

The results ($t = 3.702$, $p = 0.000 < 0.05$) indicate that there was a significant difference between the mean scores of the two groups in the reading posttest with the cooperative group who gained a higher mean outperforming the competitive group significantly. Hence, the first null hypothesis of this study was rejected meaning that content-based instruction in a cooperative setting had a significantly better impact on EFL learners' reading compared to content-based instruction in a competitive setting.

Following the rejection of the null hypothesis, the researchers were interested to determine the strength of the findings of the research; accordingly, effect size was also estimated to be 0.83. According to Cohen (1988, p. 22), a value exceeding 0.8 is generally considered a large effect size. Therefore, the findings of the study may be considered strong enough for the purpose of generalization.

3.3.2. Testing the second null hypothesis

In order to test the second hypothesis, that is to check any significant difference in the writing of the two groups as a result of the treatment, an ANCOVA was run on both groups' scores of the writing pre- and posttests. Firstly, the descriptive statistics of the two groups' scores on these two tests are presented in Table 9.

Table 9. Descriptive statistics of the two groups' scores on the writing pre- and posttests

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation	Skewness	
						Statistic	Std. error
Pre Coop	30	12	20	17.20	2.250	-.790	.427
Pre Comp	30	6	18	12.50	3.138	.011	.427
Post Coop	30	9	20	16.07	2.677	-.777	.427
Post Comp	30	7	19	14.77	3.036	-.345	.427
Valid (listwise)	28						

As is evident from Table 9, all scores in the four groups enjoyed normality of distribution (-1.85, 0.026, 1.81, & -0.81). Next, the Levene's test for homogeneity of variance was run which proved the variances were not significantly different ($F_{(1,54)} = 0.304$, $p = 0.583 > 0.05$). As one covariate was used in this study (writing pretest), the assumption of the correlation among covariates did not apply in this case. The next assumption is that of linearity between the dependent variable and the covariate. As displayed in figure 1 below, the relationship between the two appears to be very much linear.

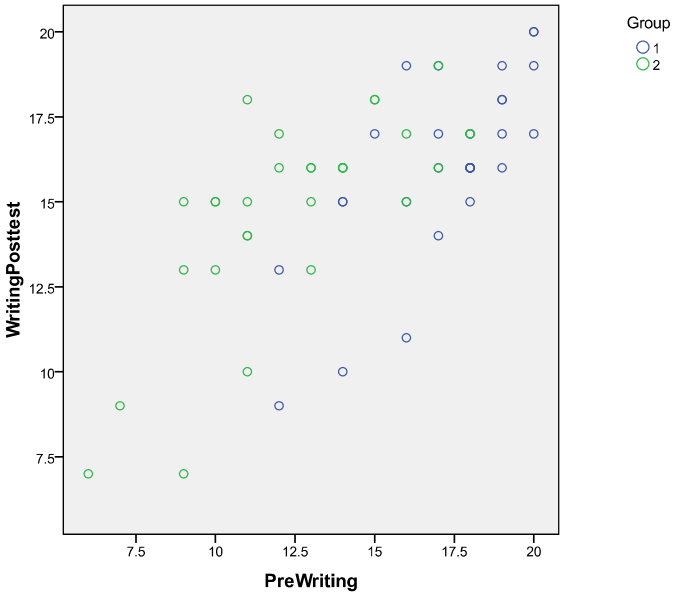

Figure 1. Linearity of the dependent variable and covariate

The last step was determining the homogeneity of regression slopes. Table 10 below shows that the interaction (i.e. Group*Prewriting) is 0.435 which is larger than 0.05. Thus indicating that the assumption of homogeneity of regression slopes has not been violated.

Table 10. Tests of between-subjects effects (1)

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	*F*	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared
Corrected Model	275.336a	3	91.779	22.818	.000	.550
Intercept	19.836	1	19.836	4.931	.030	.081
Group	8.599	1	8.599	2.138	.149	.037
PreWriting	237.353	1	237.353	59.010	.000	.513
Group * PreWriting	2.486	1	2.486	.618	.435	.011
Error	225.247	56	4.022			
Total	14761.000	60				
Corrected Total	500.583	59				

a. R Squared = 0.932 (Adjusted R Squared = 0.929)

According to Table 11 below, the writing pretest scores (the covariate in the model) came out to be significant ($F = 61.948$, $p = 0.000 < 0.05$); thus, demonstrating that prior to the treatment, there was a significant difference between the two groups in terms of writing. With the eta squared of 0.521, the pretest covariate accounted for 52% of the overall variance. Despite the difference prior to the treatment, the effect of the treatment indeed turned out to be statistically significant ($F=10.820$, $p=0.002<0.05$). Hence, the second null hypothesis of the study which stated that CBI in cooperative and competitive settings do not bear a significant difference on learners' writing was also rejected with those in the cooperative group who gained a higher mean outperforming significantly those in the competitive group.

Table 11. Tests of between-subjects effects (2)

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared	Noncent. Parameter	Observed Power[c]
Corrected Model	272.850a	2	136.425	34.146	.000	.545	2	136.425
Intercept	33.175	1	33.175	8.303	.006	.127	1	33.175
Writing Pretest	247.500	1	247.500	61.948	.000	.521	1	247.500
Group*	43.227	1	43.227	10.820	.002	.160	1	43.227
Error	227.733	57	3.995				57	3.995
Total	14761.000	60					60	
Corrected Total	500.583	59					59	

Dependent Variable: Writing Posttest
a. R Squared = 0.545 (Adjusted R Squared = 0.529)

The partial eta squared value was 0.160 which according to Cohen (1988) is a large effect size. Furthermore, there was a moderate relationship between the pre- and post-intervention scores on the writing test as indicated by the R squared of 0.545.

4. Discussion

The results of this study revealed that the cooperative group outperformed the competitive group in a CBI setting in their reading and writing. This finding is in-line with that of many studies (as discussed earlier in this paper) which generally portray the higher effectiveness of cooperative learning.

Throughout the treatment in both groups, it was clearly observed in class on many instances that the participants in the cooperative group demonstrated more motivation and alacrity in the process of the instruction. This is perhaps true as they were encouraged to engage and work with each other in this group. This of course is synonymous with more active participation which per se means enhanced learning (i.e., what is manifested by the results of the study).

Furthermore, as a consequence of cooperation in the process of performing the activities of the class, the participants were able to adopt

a more insightful approach to the course. This was vividly traceable in both the quantity and quality of the questions they raised in class which of course is only further proof to the old saying that two brains work better than one. Such questions raised in class and the responses provided would of course consolidate and promote the participants' learning.

5. Conclusion

To conduct cooperative CBI, teachers need to be given intensive training on how to implement this method and on the benefits of doing so before attempting to make it part of the curriculum. It is a sound idea that teachers share with one another their attitudes and experiences as well in this regard. Team teaching, establishing support groups in which teachers provide help and assistance to each other, and coordinating strategies for teaching difficult students are all examples of teacher cooperation. Such initiatives need to be complemented with support networks and ready-made materials to increase the likelihood that all teachers adopt this approach to teaching and learning in a proper way.

Implementing CL approaches on a large scale takes serious commitment and resources. Without these, such approaches – regardless of their track record of success – will be doomed to failure. In simple terms, a shot-in-the-dark trial of CL will end nowhere; strategic thinking and adequate resource mobilization are required both at the managerial and implementation levels.

The findings of this research can also help syllabus designers and textbook writers to design textbooks which are conducive to cooperative learning. Cooperative tasks should be emphasized and given a significant bearing in the textbooks.

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