

ENGLISH ABSTRACT

Critical Thinking and Cooperative learning in Teaching Essay Writing to EFL University Students

Acknowledging the complexity of teaching writing and the constant need to search for supportive methods and activities, this study attempts to investigate the teaching of essay writing to upper-intermediate Palestinian students learning English as a second/foreign language in a cooperative-learning setting as a learner-centered approach and aided by critical thinking strategies at Birzeit University, Palestine. Explored as well are pedagogical implications and students' attitudes towards cooperative learning.

The theoretical framework for this research is based on Vygotsky's social constructivist theory which emphasizes student cognitive development as being intimately linked to construction of knowledge within a social context. Within this learning context, students reflect and internalize and re-construct new knowledge as part of a constructive process. Vygotsky points out that higher cognitive functions such as analysis and synthesis, seem to develop most fully only with the support system of verbal language- particularly of written language (Vygotsky, 1962). Students as readers and writers build internal representations of various texts; engage in problem solving through reasoning and critique; and, consequently, become confident in the task of putting their thoughts into written words to produce a clear text.

The study design is a mixed method research that combines qualitative and quantitative tools, each of which is used to examine relevant aspects. It is an experimental study in which two groups (experimental and control) are randomly selected. Qualitatively, the study uses an in-depth analysis of student essays (pre, midterm, and final) collected on three different intervals throughout the second semester of academic year 2011-12, and they are analyzed for clear writing and critical thinking. The purpose is to document the development of students' writing and thinking. These essays are also analyzed quantitatively using SPSS and T-test in order to measure students' performance. In addition, an attitude questionnaire is used to study students' attitudes towards cooperative learning. Both groups are exposed to five critical thinking strategies: Instructional scaffolding, De Bono's PMI (Plus, minus, interesting), Socratic questioning, Problem-posing, and the Hegelian dialectic. However, one major

variation is that the experimental group is taught in a cooperative learning method whereas the control section is taught using a conventional method.

The Findings provide evidence that cooperative learning facilitates the execution of critical thinking strategies to promote growth in writing. The infusion and assimilation of the five critical thinking strategies in a cooperative learning environment significantly impacts students' performance in writing essays that are clear and effective. Results from the collection of students' essays indicate that the control group learners slightly developed in writing clear essays and witnessed noticeable signs of critical thinking in their essays using the conventional method whereas the experimental group learners outperformed the control group as they produced clear and effective persuasive/argumentative essays that reflected noticeable and strong signs of critical thought. Further, analysis of the attitude questionnaire for the experimental group regarding the execution of cooperative learning in the writing class also indicates that students have a very positive attitude towards cooperative learning as a teaching paradigm.

In conclusion, this study emphasizes that teaching essay writing is significantly enhanced through the infusion of critical thinking strategies within the cooperative learning framework.