

Learner Perceptions and Attitudes of the Effectiveness of Cooperative Learning Strategy Based Instruction on their Writing Achievements. The Case of Third EFL Students at Naama University Centre

تصورات المتعلمين واتجاهاتهم حول فعالية تلقين المعرفة الاستراتيجية للتعلم التعاوني في التعبير الكتابي لطلبة اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة اجنبية: طلبة السنة الثالثة ل م د الإنجليزية بالمركز جامعي النعمة نموذجاً

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Abstract:

Language learning strategies (LLSs) have been the focus of a huge number of foreign language studies. However, many researches in this field have not thoroughly examined its effectiveness on writing skill. This latter is considered to be the most difficult skill for the majority Algerian learners to learn as they experience negative feeling that inhibit or render their learning more difficult. For this reason, the current study investigates students perception and attitudes towards the importance of using cooperative learning strategy to improve their writing proficiency. The research has opted for a questionnaire, which is submitted to third year EFL students at Naama university center. The data gathered are analyzed and interpreted quantitatively and qualitatively. The results gained have revealed that cooperative learning is an effective strategy in teaching writing skill as it has positive impact on students writing skill and increasing their motivation to write.

Key words: EFL Learners attitudes -cooperative learning strategy- writing skill

ملخص البحث

رغم ان استراتيجيات تعلم اللغة محور عدد كبير من الدراسات في اللغات الأجنبية. الا ان العديد من هذه الأبحاث لم تدرس بدقة فعاليتها في تطوير وتنمية مهارة التعبير الكتابي لاعتباره من أصعب المهارات لاغلبية المتعلمين

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للغة الإنجليزية لأنهم يواجهون شعورًا سلبيًا يثبط أو يجعل تعلمهم أكثر صعوبة، ولهذا السبب، يحاول هذا البحث التحقيق في مدى إدراك الطلاب لأهمية استخدام استراتيجية التعلم التعاوني لتحسين كفاءتهم في الكتابة. اختار البحث استبانة قدمت لطلبة السنة الثالثة من كلية اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية في مركز جامعة النعامة بالجزائر. تم تحليل البيانات التي تم جمعها وتفسيرها كمياً ونوعاً. وأظهرت النتائج المكتسبة أن التعلم التعاوني هو استراتيجية فعالة في تدريس التعبير الكتابي لما لها من أثر إيجابي على تنمية مهاراتهم الكتابية وزيادة دافعهم للتعلم.

الكلمات المفتاحية: مواقف متعلمي اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية - استراتيجية التعلم التعاوني - مهارة الكتابة



I. Introduction

World- wide changes resulting from the Globalization , have imposed educational reform as a major condition for human development and educational reform which concerns foreign language teaching/learning . At present, the English language is the dominant international language and indispensable key to the changing world of science, technology and communication. It is no longer the property of the English speaking countries alone. Instead, it has become a sort of universal language: a vehicle that is used globally and will lead to more opportunities. It belongs to whoever uses it for whatever purpose or need.

Being aware of such great importance, Algeria has brought in changes into her educational system so as to achieve the desired goals .Likewise different approaches to Foreign language teaching has been adopted since independence. Their aim is adequate teaching/learning of foreign languages among them English. Therefore, teaching and learning English as a Foreign Language (EFL) is one of the most significant subject in education. In general, the main goal of teaching language is developing its four language skills: listening, speaking, reading and writing. This latter is one of the four skills that require special attention, more practice and more constructive feedback as it is a productive language process. Besides, it is one of the most necessary means on which language learning/teaching is based since most formal evaluation is done in writing. Therefore, writing proficiency plays a great role in conveying writing accurately and effectively

Although, writing is considered to be the most important skill, it is also the most difficult. Since it needs appropriate vocabulary, a good mastery of Grammar rules and a good awareness of the writing process.

Nevertheless, what is actually observed is that by the end of general education and after an English learning experience of seven years in the middle and in secondary school and two years at the university level, Algerian learners are unable to express themselves in English neither fluently nor accurately. The majority of them faced difficulties to write proficiently due to the negative feelings that inhibit or render learning more difficult. This difficulty lies not only in generating and organizing ideas, but also in translating their ideas into readable text. A situation that arises many enquiries about the real causes and the source of learners' difficulties as well.

For the above reasons, writing has to be carefully taught in order to ensure learners awareness and involvement in the learning process. Success in writing, therefore, is teacher' responsibility to draw learners 'attention on the importance of language learning and thus, learning how to write in English so as to become better learners and consequently fluent writers. Cooperative learning is a strategy that teachers are advised to implement in their classroom to improve their EFL learner's level in the writing process. Therefore, this research paper endeavors at exploring the following research question:

To what extent does the use of cooperative learning strategy improve learners' writing performance and achievements in an EFL setting? ? and what are students 'attitudes towards its use in EFL writing Class? .

For the sake of investigating the question stated above, a range of concepts should be considered; they are summarized in the following lines.

1. Writing Skill Defined

Acquiring a language involves four main skills ordered according to the way they are acquired and taught i.e. Listening ,Speaking, Reading and Writing .This latter is one of the basic language skills. Yet it is called forth and last communicative skill, whether in the first or in the second language because of its relative difficulty and because of its consolidating role in language learning.

Therefore , Writing is considered to be a complicated process which involves a number of cognitive and metacognitive activities, for instance; brainstorming, planning, outlining, organizing, drafting, and revising. Cognitive aspects of writing have received a particular attention, as investigators have attempted to understand the thought processes underlying the compositions of students (Flower & Hayes, 1981). Writing requires active thought in the sense that the writer/ learner should think about facts, organizing them according to his needs and keeping in mind his purpose.

Then, think about facts he will need to select which one are relevant for his purpose and finally organizing them in coherent manner. The essential idea is that: **“Writing involves knowledge about language, knowledge of the context in which writing happens and especially the purpose and skills in using language”**. Badger,& white (2000, pp. 57-58)

Similarly, Byrne (1988) puts it this way: **“Writing requires some conscious mental effort: we think out sentences and consider various ways of combining and arranging them. We reread what we have written as a stimulus to further writing....the reason for this is that we are writing for a reader.”(p.1).**

From the above definition, Byrne(1988) argues that writing is neither easy nor spontaneous in the sense that writing is almost a thinking process where number of mental operations comes into play. Similarly, Hadley (1993) states that writing requires composing, which implies the ability either to tell or retell pieces of information in the form of narratives or description, or to transform information into new texts, as in expository or argumentative writing. Therefore, it is best viewed as a continuum of activities that range from the more mechanical or formal aspects of writing down on the one end to the more complex act of composing on the other end.

2. Writing Difficulties

It has always been argued that learning to write fluently and expressively is the most difficult of the four basic skills of all language users whether the language in question is first, second or foreign language. Therefore, why is writing found to be difficult skill to learn?

Writing is difficult skill because of the mental and physical effort on the part of the writer/learner as it is an activity of transforming thought into language. In effect, Byrne (1988) explains that the difficulty in writing stems from three kinds of problems: The first one, he called psychological. It is caused by lack of interaction and feedback between the reader and writer. In the same context Rivers (1968) states:

When we communicate a message orally, we know who is receiving the message. We know the situation including the mood and tone it requires of us...we receive feedback from the interlocutors or audience....which makes clear that the message is being received and if it is comprehended. With spoken messages many thing are visible...which cannot be taken for granted in writing. (pp. 291-292)

The second consists of linguistic problems .Byrne (1988) argues that in speech, grammar mistakes can be tolerated because of the spontaneous nature of the medium which prevent us from fully monitoring what we are saying in particular. However, in writing, writers have to express themselves in clear and more grammatical manner in order to compensate for the absence of certain features of spoken language such as body language; prosodic features and immediate feedback between the interlocutors. Moreover, the writer has to handle many things at the same time content, organization, grammar, syntax, mechanics, word choice, purpose, audience and writing process.

Returning back to writing problems, the third category is labeled under the name of cognitive. The reason is that writing has to be taught through formal instruction. In other words, while speaking is part of child's world since he does it naturally and without prompting, writing seldom enters naturally into his world .Tribble (1996) states that **“writing normally requires some forms of instruction. It is not a skill that is readily picked up by exposure”** (p.11). Similarly white & Thomas (1981) states that : **“Writing is not a natural activity. All physically and mentally normal people learn to speak a language yet all people have to be taught how to write”** (p.2)

All these difficulties make learning to write fluently and expressively the most difficult skill for all language users regardless of whether the language in question is first, second or foreign language.

3. Learning Strategies

As having mentioned by Wenden (1986), there is an old proverb, which states: **“Give a man a fish and he eats for a day. Teach him how to fish and he eats for a life time”**. Applied to the language teaching and learning field, this proverb might be interpreted to mean that if students are provided with answers, the immediate problem is solved. But if they are taught the strategies to work out the answers for themselves, they are empowered to manage their own learning. Yet what is meant by the term strategy?

In general, a strategy is a tool, plan, or method used for accomplishing a task. Learning strategies are defined by O'Malley and Chamot (1990) as **“special thoughts or behaviors that individuals use to comprehend, learn, or retain new information”** (p.1). Oxford (1994) also defines them as **“actions, behaviors, steps, or techniques students use, often unconsciously, to improve their progress in apprehending, internalizing, and using the L2”** (p.1)

A substantial body of research suggests that training students to use language learning strategies can help them become better language learners. Early research on “good language learners” (Naiman, Fröhlich, Stern, & Todesco, 1996) suggested a number of learning strategies that successful students employ when they learn a second or a foreign language. A study of O'Malley and Chamot (1990) suggested that effective L2/FL learners are aware of the learning strategies they use and why they use them. Richards, Platt, and Platt (1992) presented a specific definition of strategy training and outlined three different approaches:

[It is] training in the use of learning strategies in order to improve a learner's effectiveness. A number of approaches to strategy training are used including: 1) Explicit or direct training: learners are given information about the value and purpose of particular strategies, taught how to use them and how to monitor their own use of the strategies. 2) Embedded strategy training: the strategies to be taught are not taught explicitly but are embedded in the regular content of an academic subject area, such as reading, math or science. 3) Combination strategy training: explicit strategy training is followed by embedded training”. (p. 355)

4 .Cooperative Learning Strategy and Writing Skill

Basically, cooperative learning is being recommended as a solution to numerous pedagogical problems. In this sense, Jolliffe (2007) explained: “To become cooperative, groups must work together to accomplish shared goals. They need to discuss work with each other and help each other to understand it” (p. 4).

Hence ,what is meant by cooperative learning strategy?

Cooperative learning has become the concern of extensive researches, which led to the fact of having a large and sprawling literature on it. In an attempt to define cooperation, Slavin (1980) stated that “ **The term refers to classroom techniques in which students work on learning activities in small groups and receive rewards or recognition based on their group's performance” p. 315**. Years later, Slavin (2011) defines cooperative learning as: “**instructional methods in which teachers organize students into smaller groups which then work together to help one another learn academic content”** (p. 344

Accordingly, Johnson et al (1991) added that:

Cooperation is working together to accomplish shared goals. When engaged in cooperative activities, individuals seek outcomes that are

beneficial to themselves and to all other members of the group. Cooperative learning is the instructional use of small groups so that students work together to maximize their own and each other's learning. (p. 3).

Similarly, Johnson and Johnson (1987) clarifies that Cooperative learning : **“In the process of working together to achieve shared goals students can come to care about one another on more than just a professional level. Extraordinary accomplishments result from personal involvement with the task and each other.”**(p. 67)

In same line of thought ,Artz & Newman also (1990) claim that **“cooperative learning is working together as a term to solve a problem, complete a task or accomplish a common goal”** (p. 445).

All the previous definitions demonstrate that cooperative learning is one of instructional methods in teaching and learning process .Its key factors is putting students in-group to work together and to help each other. The main premise of cooperative learning strategy ,therefore, centers around the idea that students benefit much more when working cooperatively both socially and academically on one side and both formally and informally on the other side (Jolliffe, W., & Hutchinson, H. 2007) . In other words, the main feature of this method is improving learning in groups by making student's cooperation and interdependence including raising their motivation and self-confidence , higher academic outcomes and increasing positive relationships with the group members. Olsen & Kagan (1992)

It is essential to take some pedagogic decisions to introduce strategy-based tasks in the teaching of writing to induce students to use writing strategies effectively and to change their behaviour from passive behaviour to a more reflective one to produce effective and efficient writers . One of the valuable suggestions of educational psychology concerns the idea of putting students together in cooperative groups, to help and assist each other along (Johnson & Johnson, 2008).

Although EFL teachers' main aim is to develop the writing abilities of each individual learner, an efficient strategy consists in making learners working either in pairs or in groups for brainstorming a topic, or for discussing the organization and the logical sequencing of ideas. This strategy enables the poor writers to benefit from the best ones and so gradually develops their own writing skills. Similarly, Zhang (2012) mentioned that:

Even though these three goal structures are effective in helping students learn concepts and skills in some conditions, students can learn to interact more effectively and positively in cooperative

learning process. Compared with competitive and individualistic goal structure, therefore, cooperative goal structure should be the best choice of our life, schooling, family, career, etc. (p. 1)

Since Writing in FL is a complex activity in different area, it is always advisable to facilitate this activity by implementing different strategies. Adopting cooperative learning inside writing classes is one of the beneficial strategy which provide the opportunity for students to work together, exchange information and develop and understand their ideas. Many researchers suggested the importance of implementing cooperative learning strategies in writing classes Bashyal (2009) stated the benefit of the cooperative strategy "... helps in producing a good product because the writers in a small number of groups can discuss at each other and reach to the conclusion after synthesizing the ideas of all". (p.16)

According to Halkett, (2010) cooperative writing activities have one of three aims:

- ✓ Focus on 'messages' and targeted communication functions. Objectives embodied in process of cooperative writing and the communication tasks (e.g., brainstorming, speedwriting, story sequences, and jigsaws.
- ✓ Provides structure for student interaction
- ✓ Encourages 'positive interdependence'. (p. 1)

If teachers want to use cooperative learning in their class, they should take into consideration that this strategy is not just a matter of grouping individual learners to sit near each other. By doing so the groups would not be cooperative ones. While each member does individual work or only one member does a common work for the whole group,. Similarly, Jolliffe (2007) explains: "to become cooperative, groups must work together to accomplish shared goals. They need to discuss work with each other and help each other to understand it"(p.4)

II. Methodology

In the current study, the population chosen is the third year LMD students at Ahmed SALHI university center from which a sample of fifty (50) students is studied. This sample contains 11 males (22 %) and 39 females (78 %), their age ranges between 21 and 26 years.

The researcher has opted for a questionnaire submitted to the sample. This questionnaire is composed of three sections which consist of fifteen open ended and multiple choice questions to collect valid and reliable quantitative and qualitative data. The questionnaire is divided into three sections:

- Demographic information: age and number of years of learning English
- students ' actual level in English in general and writing skills in particular and their problems in writing
- students ' perception about the strategies used by teachers to overcome these difficulties And their attitudes towards the use of cooperative learning to overcome EFL writing problems.

III. Results

The following charts summarize the main results collected through the questionnaire:

Question 2 . How do you evaluate your level in English?

Answer Number Per

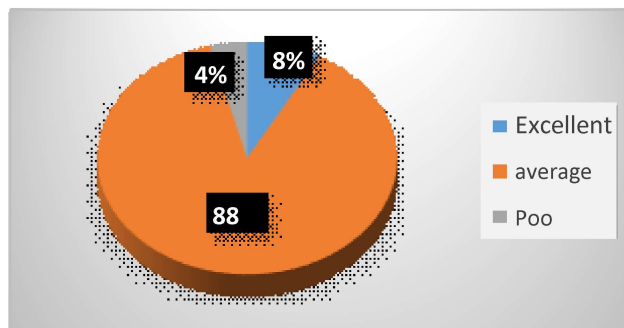


Figure 1: Students' Evaluation of their Level in English

As it can be seen from figure 1, (88%) of the sample, evaluate their level in English as being average, only (8 %) of students claimed that their level in English is excellent, while (4%) have a poor level in English.

Question 3: How is the writing skill important to you?

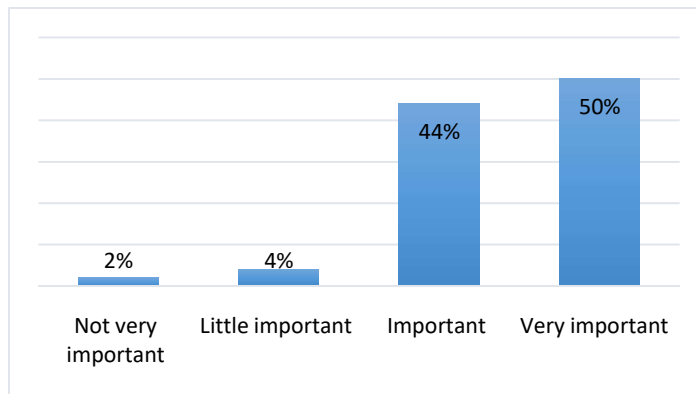


Figure 2 : Students perceived importance of writing

The above figure represented the importance of the writing skill for EFL students. The question asked students to rank the importance of the writing skill. Only one student (2 %) stated that writing is not very important. According to (4 %) writing has a little importance. (44%) mentioned writing is important. The high percentage of respondents (50%) considered that the writing skill is very important to them.

➤ **Question 4 :** How do you consider your ability in writing English?

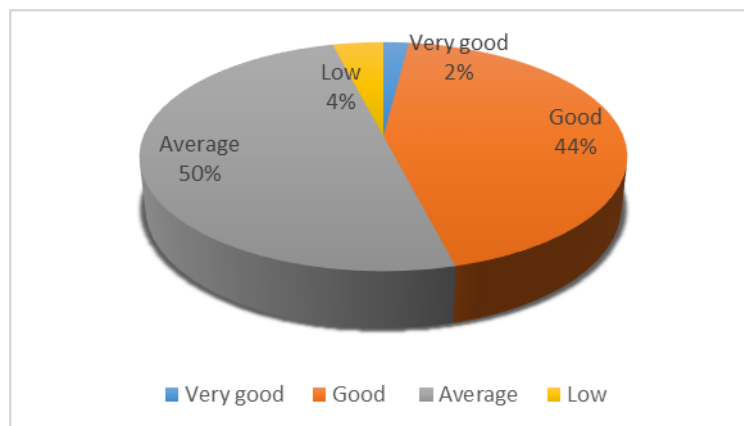


Figure 3 : Students Evaluation of Their Writing Abilities

As this figure shows, participants were asked to determine their English writing proficiency level. Only 2% believed they had a very good writing ability. whereas 4% confess that their writing ability was really low. However, 50 % of students consider their level as average, and 44 % of respondents affirmed they had a good writing level.

Question 5: How much do you feel interested in writing English in the classroom?

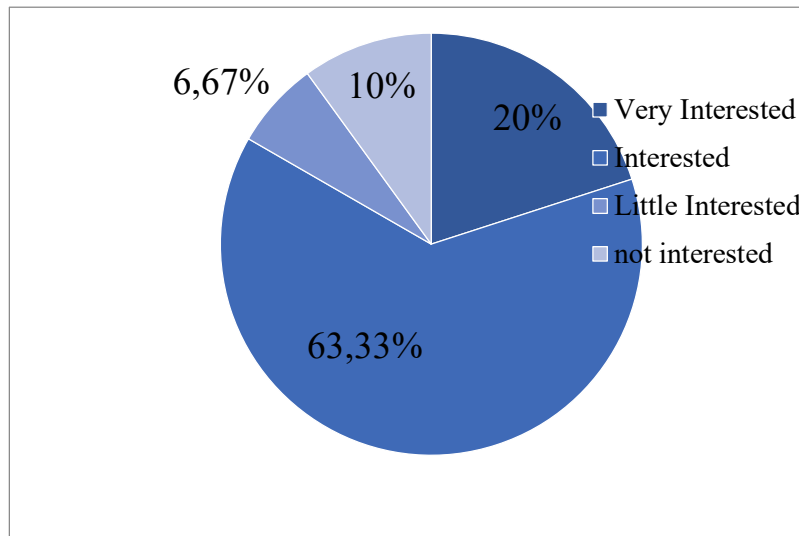


Figure 4: Students 'Interest in Writing in English

Learners were asked about their interest in writing in English. Therefore 20 % had a very high interest in writing in English in class. About 63, 33% of students report that their interest in writing in English is normal; those students may consider the writing skill as important as the other language skills (listening, reading, and speaking). However, 10% of students had low interest in writing, and students who were not interested in writing in the class represented the lowest percentage and they are about 6.67%.

Question 6: Do you face difficulties when you write in classroom?

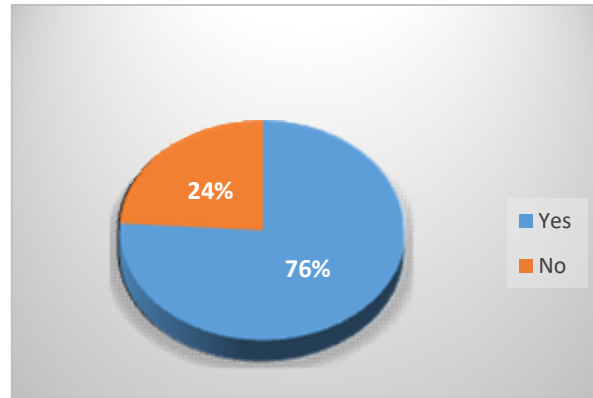


Figure 5: Students' Difficulties in Written Expression class

As regards students difficulties in writing , the majority of students i.e. 76 % face difficulties in writing while just 24 % do not.

Question 7: If your answer is “yes”, what makes you unwilling to write in the classroom?

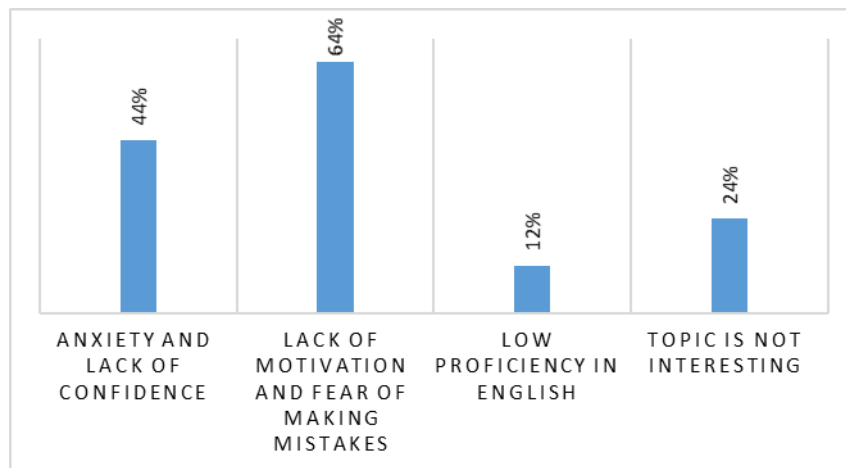


Figure 6 : Reasons of Students' Writing Difficulties

As the previous figure shows, 64 % opted for the option «lack of motivation and fear of making mistakes" and this hindering them from writing in the class. However, about 12% of students affirm that low proficiency in English prohibit them from writing in the class.44% of Our participants state that anxiety affects their self confidence in a negative way thus this pushes them to do not write. Whereas, 2 % of students report that the problem lies in the topic if it is not interesting.

Question 8: In written expression session which of the following do you prefer? Please , justify your answer

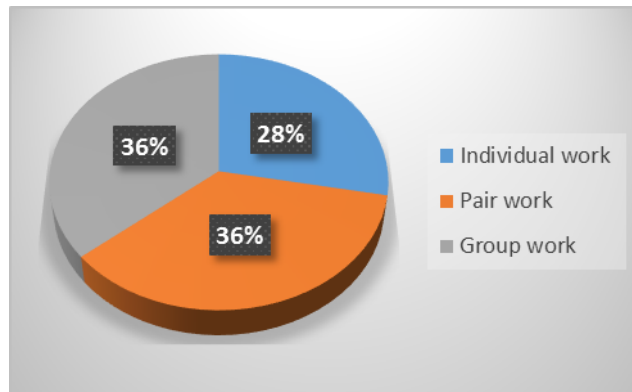


Figure 7 : Students' Preferences in Written Expression Sessions

The results obtained show that most students prefer to work in groups and in pairs during a written expression session and they are about 36% respectively . Whereas, The rest of students who are 28 % like to work individually. Students' preference to work in groups or pairs may be referring to the fact that students seek the opportunity to express and exchange their ideas with their classmates

Question 9 : . How often does your teacher ask you to work cooperatively?

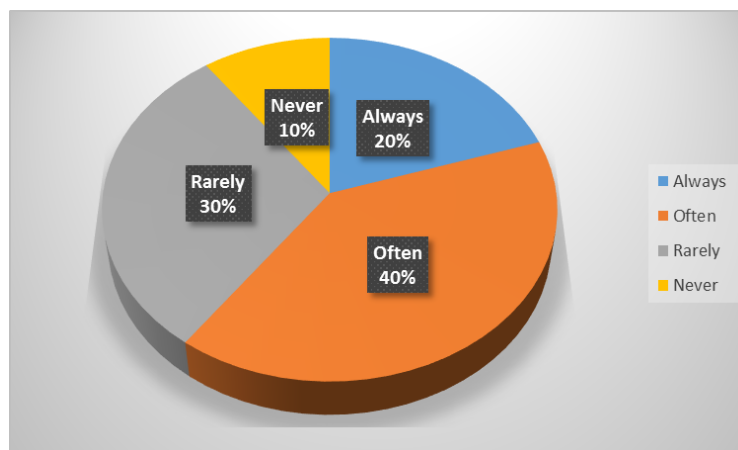


Figure 8 : Students' Perceptions About The Frequency Of Writing Cooperatively In Class

It is noted, that 40% of students maintain that their teachers often set them to work in groups; the other subjects, however, opted for the other options. In fact, 30% of them say that their teachers rarely ask them to work in groups, while 20% of them report that they do always work in groups. However, 10% of learners state that their instructors never asks them to work in groups.

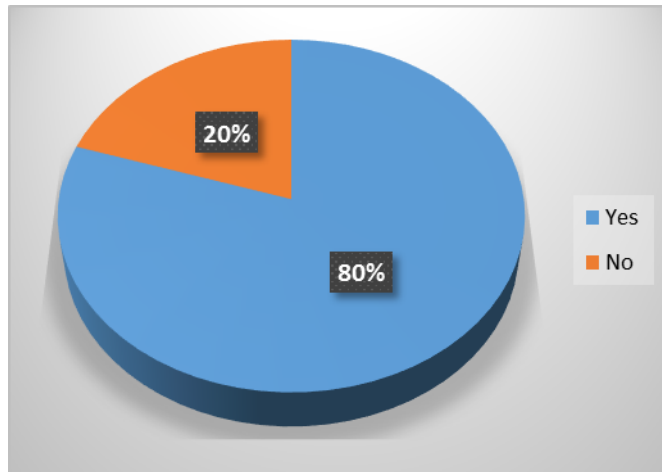
Question 10: Does cooperative learning motivate you to write?

Figure 9 :The cooperating learning strategy and students motivation to write
The aim of this question is to see students 'motivation when cooperative learning strategy is used .Hence 80% are motivated to write cooperatively while 20 % are not

Question 11: In what way this manner of learning (learning cooperatively) aids you?

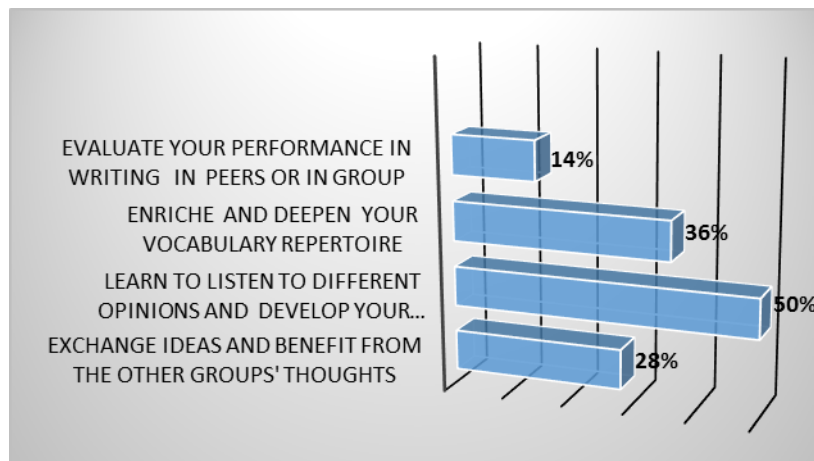


Figure 10 : Students' Perception of the Benefits of cooperative learning Activities

Figure 10 indicates that a high portion of students (50%) claimed that they learn to listen to different opinions through cooperative learning. (36%) of them viewed, that cooperative learning helps them enrich and deepen their vocabulary repertoire. A portion of (28%) showed that cooperative learning is helpful to exchange ideas and benefit from the other groups' thoughts. While (14%) of them chose evaluating their written performance by the group mates, peers.

Question 12: How do you rate your writing when working in group cooperatively ? Please specify why?

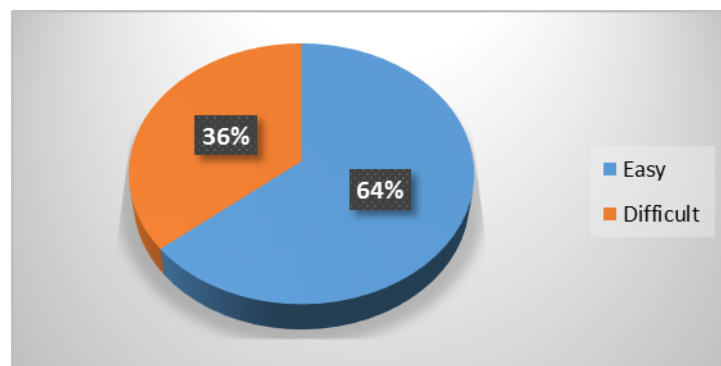


Figure 11 : Students' Evaluation of Their writing when Working in Group
The aim of this question is to evaluate student's attitude toward cooperative learning in terms of easiness and difficulty. It is noticeable from table (15)

that the highest rate represents (64%) of the informants who said that working together is an easy task, on the other hand, (36%) disagree, and they said that it is difficult to work cooperatively.

Question 13 : Do you think that cooperative learning is a beneficial strategy which helps you to improve your writing skill? If yes explain **why?**

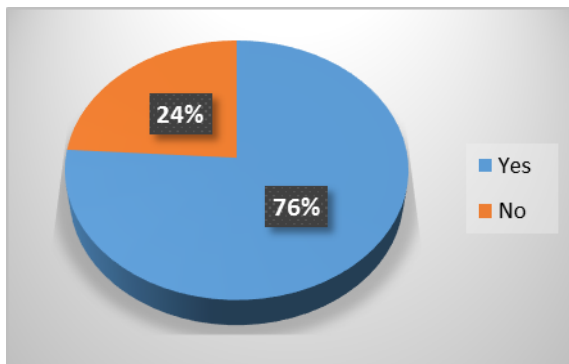


Figure 12: Students' Attitudes towards the cooperative learning strategy and its impact on students' writing

The importance of this question relies on discovering whether learners agree that cooperative learning strategy helps them to face and overcome their difficulties and improve their writing skill or not through the integration of group activities. As figure 12 shows, the majority of the respondents (76%) found that cooperative learning strategy helps them to improve their writing skill and reduce their difficulties. However (24%) of them responded negatively.

Question 14 : Does the teacher assist and facilitate for you the writing task when working cooperatively ?

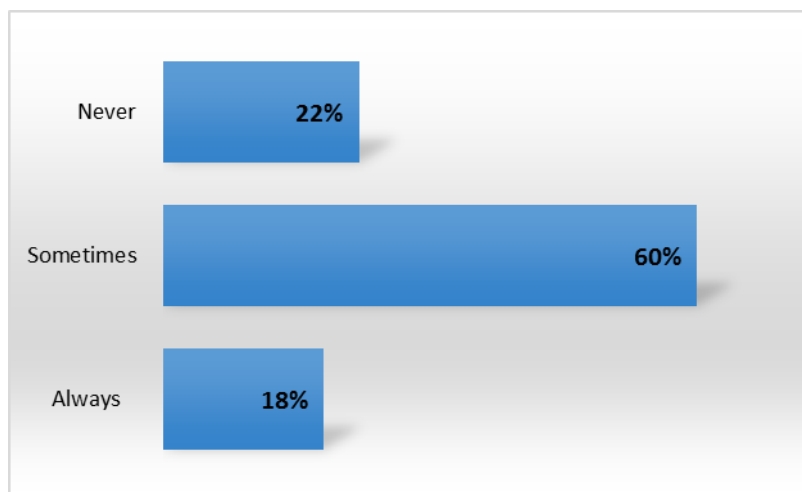


Figure 13 : Teachers' Assistance and Involvement in Solving Students' Problems when working cooperatively

The aim behind this question is to see teachers 'assistance and guidance while setting students to write cooperatively.

Question 15: what do you suggest for your teachers to help you developing your English and overcome your anxiety?

In fact, most of students' suggestions are related to the benefits of group work. They believed that in cooperative group make them exchange ideas and thoughts, respect others points of view, increase their interaction as well as they will feel more motivated than working individually. Moreover, they saw that CLL is strategy that lower their anxiety because when they work in groups they can help each other , feel free and not in front of the teacher.

IV. Data Interpretation and discussion

The data gathered through the questionnaire have displayed the following results:

- ✓ Most of third year EFL learners are really motivated to study the English language, specially its written form, in the sense that their desires, interests, and aptitude in learning writing are high. However, some learners may be motivated to learn English; they feel afraid to write it for many causes. These causes may be psychological lying in

learners' lack of motivation, anxiety, fear of making grammatical, spelling, or vocabulary errors, absence of self-confidence, or other reasons that emerge from the teachers' methodology or the learning environment.

- ✓ The writing skill is an important skill when learning a FL and our students clarified this point by perceiving the importance of the writing skill in their learning. Moreover regarding teaching this skill in the classroom, learners seem to have various attitudes towards different teaching techniques, but the most of them state that discussion in groups is the pleasant one. The teachers' role is to adapt the technique that promotes students and raise their participation in the classroom.
- ✓ The learners showed different preferences for classroom arrangements (i.e. group work, pair work, or individual work). However, the most of them agree on the choice of group work because they learn much from it, and they feel motivated when working with peers.
- ✓ Although many people in their personal lives write on their own, whether at home or at work, in language classes ,teachers and students can take the advantage of the presence of others, to make writing a cooperative activity, with great benefits to all those involved in. Therefore, when asking learners about cooperative learning strategy , most of students react in a positive way, in the sense that they have a positive attitude towards its use in the classroom; they benefit from it in varying degrees. We may conclude that according to them cooperative learning as an effective and motivational factor enhances their writing and increases their motivation to learn.

V. Conclusion

Collaborative writing is great affective and cognitive help for learners, as this lessens their anxiety and promote their risk taking(Tsui,1996).Students ,also, have to be encouraged to share their writing with each other, both at draft and final product stage; they can brainstorm ideas, organize content and then edit and revise together. Self, peer or group editing encourage independence from the teacher and enhances learners' self-confidence and self-reliance. It allows the teachers to give more detail and constructive feedback since he will deal with a small group rather than the whole class. Besides, while discussing their writing difficulties and strategies used to overcome these problems, learners are likely to learn from each other in the group or in class discussion more than with their teacher.

It worth mentioning also that, it will be more effective if teachers chooses the members of the groups themselves and try to make a mixture between the slower and faster learners in the same group. By doing so ,the best students can help the slower who nevertheless, will contribute equally(Baskolf1981).Individual students, on the other hand, will find themselves saying and writing things that might not come up with their own “ **Two heads are better than one because two can make conflicting material integrate better than one head can**”; Elbow(1981) .In such case, it is learner-centered approach in which learners work together in groups to pursue learning goals.

The cooperative learning strategy presents the following: “[...] more relaxed atmosphere, greater motivation, more negotiation of meaning and increase amount of comprehensive input”. (Olsen and Kagn 1992).

Eventually, what we wish to find out is whether learners ’ linguistic performance and communicative competence will really improve and the anxiety engendered by the foreign language learning will diminish if we generalize the use of cooperative learning strategies to the skills of Reading,Listening,and Speaking ? To help learners become more proficient users of the foreign language , this question needs to be taken into consideration in the future research.

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