The Effect of Cooperative Work in Writing Activities on Developing the Arabic Linguistic Competence of the Tenth Grade Students at Housha Secondary School for Boys in Jordan

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Abstract

This study aimed at investigating the effect of cooperative work in writing activities on developing the Arabic linguistic competence of the 10th grade students at Housha Secondary School for Boys in Mafraq city in Jordan. The purposeful sample included the 15 10th grade students who were pre and post tested in writing. They were asked to do the writing activities in Arabic composition in groups of three in each one through the whole second semester during the academic year 2014/2015. The writing products of the students were corrected and the researcher used descriptive statistics to find out the means and standard deviations for both tests; T-Test was also used to determine the statistical significance. The errors in using the components of the linguistic competence were counted in each test and percentages were calculated for the purpose of comparison. The results showed that there was a statistically significant difference between the writing performance of the participants in the pre and post tests which means that there was a positive effect of cooperative work on developing the Arabic linguistic competence. Moreover, the number of errors related to the linguistic competence decreased in the post test due to the strategy of peer work. The researcher presented some recommendations and implications based on the given results.
Keywords: Cooperative work, Writing activities, Linguistic competence, Housha Secondary School for Boys.

1.1 Introduction

Writing skill can be described as the accumulative and final harvest of gaining and acquiring other skills such as reading, listening, and speaking, thus it can be a heavy task and a difficult job for beginners. As a productive skill, writing can represent a challenge for learners since it requires that formal, content, and cultural schemata are obtained and presented appropriately, cohesively, coherently, as well as accurately.

Tribble (1996) states that there are different views on the stages that writers go through in producing a piece of writing, but a typical model identifies four stages: prewriting, composing/ drafting, revising, and editing . Thus, writing is considered a systematic process in which successive steps should be applied; this includes writing in L2 as well as in L1 where writers employ various micro and macro skills.

Grammatical competence refers to sentence- level grammatical forms, the ability to recognize the lexical, morphological, syntactical and phonological features of a language and to make use of those features to interpret and form words and sentences. Grammatical competence is not linked to any single theory of grammar and does not include the ability to state rules to usage. One demonstrates grammatical competence not by stating a rule but by using a rule in the interpretation, expression, or negotiation of meaning (Savignon, 1991).

Rollinson (2005) believes that once the peer response process is underway, the writers' perception of the value of the enterprise is likely to change if she begins to receive useful feedback, or finds that commenting on essays is helping her to be more critical of her own writing. This kind of feedback which aims at developing the writing skill of the learner can be a useful and instructive strategy.

Strong positive effects have been found in studies where students used a set of criteria or a checklist of questions supplied by their teachers when engaging in peer editing and review of compositions. These studies indicate rather clearly that engaging young writers actively in the use of criteria, applied to their own or to others' writing, results not only in more effective revisions, but in superior drafts (Omaggio, 2001).

Brown (2001) emphasizes that another effective way to generate ideas is to work in a small group where you share your brainstormed ideas with the rest of the group members. By doing this, each of you will have an opportunity to further expand your own ideas.

Peer feedback can also help develop learners' editing skills, and establish a social context for writing. More importantly, peer feedback internalizes the notion of "audience" into the minds of students writers, because it provides students with a more realistic and tangible audience than their teacher, which is turn assists them in producing "reader – oriented" texts (Lundstorm and Baker, 2009; Hinkel, 2004; Storch, 2004; Hyland, 2000; Reid, 2000; Ferris & Hedgcock, 1998; and Chaudron, 1984).

Yarrow and Topping (2001: 262) confirm that peer feedback plays a significant role in "increased engagement and time spent on – task, immediacy and individualization of help, goal specification, explaining, prevention of information processing overload, prompting, modeling and reinforcement". The literature also suggests that peer feedback is more authentic and honest than a teacher's response, and it gives students the

opportunity to realize that other students experience similar difficulties to their own, and it can also lead to less writing apprehension and more confidence.

Hyland (2000) also adds that peer feedback encourages more students participation in the classroom, giving them more control and making them less passively teacher – dependant. Ferris and Hedgcock (2005), Saito and Fujita (2004), and Storch (2004) add that peer feedback helps learners become more self – aware, in the sense that they notice the gap between how they and others perceive their writing, thus facilitating the development of analytical and critical reading and writing skills, enhancing self – reflection and self expression, promoting a sense of co-ownership, and hence encouraging students to contribute to decision – making, and finally, it fosters reflective thinking.

Peer feedback can be employed in the form of conferencing, in the form of written as well as oral comments, or both simultaneously. It can also take many formats, some of the most common ones being: 1) to assign groups of two, three, or four students and ask them to exchange their first drafts and give comments on each others' drafts before making final versions; 2) to make students read their own essays loud, or get a colleague to read it instead, while the other students listen and provide feedback, either written or oral, on the work that they have just heard; 3) not to restrict feedback to the time after students have written their essays, because it is possible for students to use this type of feedback in the pre-writing stage by asking other students to comment on each others' outlines, or to carry out a brainstorming session (Hyland, 2003).

1.2 Questions of the Study
1. Is there a statistically significant difference on the students' total scores in the post test due to the teaching strategy (Cooperative Work)?
2. Is there a statistically significant difference in the students' post test scores on the linguistic competence due to the teaching strategy (Cooperative Work)?

1.3 Significance of the Study
Hopefully, the present study is assumed to contribute in providing Arabic language teachers with the proposition that peer work represented in group work is an effective technique that may relatively improve the learners' linguistic competence. Moreover, curricula designers may add this technique (group work) to implement the activities and tasks in the Arabic language books.

1.4 Limitations of the Study
This study is limited to the purposeful sample represented in the 15 male 10th grade students in Housha Secondary School for Boys that belongs to the North-West Badia Educational Directorate in Mafraq city in Jordan.

1.5. Definition of Terms
The following terms are operationally defined for the purpose of the study:
a. Cooperative Work: Work in which learners work together in groups of twos, threes, fours…etc. to accomplish a certain task or activity in writing.
b. Arabic Linguistic Competence: It includes sentence structure, deletion, insertion, wrong form, verb-subject agreement, verb tense, verb voice, articles, pronouns and fragments.
c. Writing Activities: Activities in which students are asked to write paragraphs about various topics during the class period (40 minutes).
d. Housha Secondary School for Boys: A public school in the village of Housha which is a small town in the northern part of Jordan. It administratively belongs to the Educational Directorate of North-West Badia in Mafraq city, Jordan.

2. Practical Studies on the Effect of Peer Work on the Linguistic Competence
Al-Sulaity (2003) conducted a study in which she investigates the effect of using the strategy of cooperative learning in teaching grammatical rules on developing the linguistic competence, and the attitude towards studying the grammatical rules by the female students in the secondary stage in Qatar. The sample consisted of (87) female students from the second secondary grade/ the literary stream in Qatar. The researcher prepared a pre-post test and a writing test that measures the grammatical control of sentences. The experimental group was taught by the strategy of cooperative learning whereas the control group was taught by the traditional way. Two months later, data was collected and analyzed using the SPSS program ; the results showed that there was no statistically significant difference between the two groups in the achievement test of the grammatical rules. On the other hand, there was a statistically significant difference between the pre and post tests in the achievement test of the grammatical test in favor of the post test. In light of the findings, the researcher recommended that curriculum units be organized in light of this strategy, and reinforcement and feedback be presented. Moreover,

she recommended that teachers be trained during service to use such strategy.

Hamer (1995) investigated the effect of using the strategy of cooperative learning on developing composition and the students' attitudes towards it. The sample consisted of (70) male and female students in the secondary stage. During six months, the participants were taught writing activities by the cooperative method. The results of the study showed that there was a statistically significant difference in the quality of writing in favor of the experimental group.

Al-Habashneh (2006) conducted a study to investigate the effect of the individual and cooperative learning based on the conceptual mapping strategy on Jordanian basic school female students' composition and attitudes. The sample of the study consisted of 77 female students distributed in three groups: one experimental (25) taught by the individual learning based on the conceptual mapping strategy, the other experimental group (26) was taught by the cooperative learning based on the conceptual mapping strategy, the control group (26) was taught by the traditional method. Means, standard deviations, ANOVA, ANCOVA and Scheffe post hoc test were performed to detect any differences between the three groups of the study. The results showed that there is a statistically significant difference at $\alpha \leq 0.05$ between the mean scores of the students performance in composition in the three groups in favor of the two experimental groups separately.

Hussain (2001) investigated the effect of using the strategy of cooperative learning in teaching grammatical rules on achievement and attitudes towards learning these rules by the first secondary students in Egypt. The study also aimed at identifying the students' types (distinguished, medium, poor) and also identifying the relation between the students' achievement in the grammatical rules and their attitudes towards studying them. The results showed that there was a statistically significant difference in the performance of the students' writing in favor of the experimental group.

Abu Al-Sha'ar (1999) conducted a study in Jordan to measure the effect of cooperative style on the writing of first secondary grade female students in the schools of Irbid First Educational Directorate ,and their attitudes towards this style compared to the traditional one. The sample consisted of (100) female students distributed in two groups: experimental and control, the former taught by the cooperative style and the latter by the traditional one. The results showed that there was a statistically significant difference between the means of the performance of the two groups in favor of the experimental group.

3. Methodology (Participants, Design of the Study, Instruments, Variables, Procedures)
3.1 Participants
All the participants of the study were purposefully selected. They are the 10th grade students at Housha secondary School for Boys in the North-West Badia Educational Directorate in Mafraq city in Jordan. They take classes in writing compositions in the Arabic language material as one a branch of other parts of the whole material. The school is a public one and the students had received all their basic education at this school.

3.2. Design of the Study
The present study is a quantitative one since it aims at investigating the effect of peer work on the Arabic linguistic competence of the 10th grade students. This effect is measured statistically through descriptive statistics that show the differences between the pre and post tests' scores.

3.3 Instruments
The data were collected by using these instrument:
a. A pre-post test in which students' writing products were evaluated according to the components of the Arabic language linguistic components.
b. A scale for classifying the linguistic errors (derived from Storch's 2009) in the students' writing products. These errors relate to sentence structure, fragments, deletion, insertion, wrong form, verb-subject agreement, verb tense, verb voice, articles and pronouns.

3.4 Variables
a. Independent Variable: Peer Work.
b. Dependent Variable: Arabic linguistic competence.

3.5 Procedures
a. A letter of consent was obtained from the Educational Directorate of North-West Badia in Mafraq city.
b. The 10th grade students at Housha Secondary School for Boys were tested at the beginning of the second semester of the academic year 2014/2015 in writing composition. They were asked to write a composition about '' Causes of Pollution'', (Appendix A).
C. The students' writing products were corrected and evaluated in order to figure out the overall average of the scores. Also, the errors in the linguistic competence components were calculated in frequencies and percentages,

(Appendix B).

d. The students were divided into five groups, each one consists of three students. They were required to work together in doing the writing tasks. They discuss the given topic, exchange ideas and opinions, write the drafts, proofread and edit, and finally submit the final draft to the teacher.

e. At the end of the semester, the same students were individually tested in writing composition about the same topic of the pretest.

f. The writing products of the students were corrected and evaluated and the overall average was calculated. Furthermore, the errors in the linguistic competence components were calculated in frequencies and percentages. T-Test was used to determine any statistically significant difference, (Appendix C).

g. A comparison between the pre and post tests' scores was made. Moreover, the errors in using the linguistic competence components were compared to illustrate if there was any improvement in the students' writing due to the use of the peer work technique.

4. Results and Discussion

a. Results and Discussion of the First Question

This question asks about the effect of the technique of peer work in writing activities on developing the Arabic linguistic competence of the 10th grade students in Housha Secondary School for Boys in Mafraq / Jordan.

To determine such effect, descriptive statistics were used ;means and standard deviations of the students' scores on the pre and post tests were calculated. These results are presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Means and Standard Deviations of the Students' Pre and Post Tests

Test	N	Mean	Standard Deviation	Standard Error Mean
Pre-test	15	11.60	3.397	.877
Post-test	15	13.67	2.225	.575

Table 1 shows that the scores' mean in general is 11.60 in the pretest while it is 13.67 in the post test's overall scores. The test's total grade is 20, the highest mark was 18 and the lowest one was 5 in the pre test whereas the highest mark was 17 and the lowest one was 9 in the post test. The standard deviation of the pretest scores is 3.397 while in the posttest scores it is 2.225.

It is noticed that there is an observed difference between the participants' scores' means in the pre and post tests. To determine whether this difference is statistically significant or not, T-Test was used. Table 2 presents the results of the T-Test including the significance which is (0.005).

Table 2 : T-Test results.

Paired Samples Test

	Paired Differences		t
	Mean	Std. Deviation	
Pair 1 pre-post	2.067	2.374	3.371

Paired Samples Test

	df	Sig.(2-tailed)
Pair 1 Pre-Post	14	.005

Table 2 shows that there is a statistically significant difference between the pre and post tests since the significance degree is 0.005. The difference is between the overall performance of the students among which linguistic competence is one part.

The researcher believes that this result may be attributed to the following factors:

1. Students were encouraged to pay more attention to their writing since they deal with peers who nearly have similar experience and repertoire.
2. The low – filter atmosphere contributed to help students work freely and with less stress that is usually felt from the direction of the teacher who, from students' perspective, may form a source of fear and embarrassment.
3. Self-confidence of the students made them push their limits to prove to themselves and to their students that they can do the task and be interactive members within the group.
4. The spirit of competition among the participants assisted in leading them to more action and tendency to achieve higher levels of proficiency in writing.

b. Results and Discussion of the Second Question

This question asks about the effect of the strategy of peer work in writing activities on developing the Arabic linguistic competence of the 10th grade students in Housha Secondary School for Boys in Mafraq/Jordan.

The results show that the post test writing products of the participants contained fewer linguistic errors in some components and more errors in others although the total number of errors decreased from 63 to 45. The table below illustrates the differences in the frequencies and their percentages of the linguistic competence components in both tests. Table 2 shows that the number of the errors related to the linguistic competence components in the pretest is 63 whereas it decreases to 45 in the posttest. Nevertheless, there is a rise in the percentages of some components which indicates that according to the total number of the errors, some components of the linguistic competence have not been improved.

Table 3 : The frequencies and percentages of the errors in the linguistic competence components in the pre and post tests.

Components	Pretest		Posttest	
	Freq.	Per.	Freq.	Per.
Sentence Structure	10	15.87	8	17.7
Deletion	6	9.52	4	8.88
Insertion	7	11.11	3	6.66
Verb Voice	5	7.93	4	8.88
Wrong Form	9	14.29	8	17.7
Verb-Subject Agreement	6	9.52	3	6.66
Verb Tense	7	11.11	5	11.11
Articles	4	6.34	4	8.88
Pronouns	9	14.29	6	13.33
Total	63	100%	45	100%

Table 3 shows that in the areas of deletion, insertion, verb-subject agreement, and pronouns, there is a decrease in the number of committing errors of linguistic components and this is illustrated in the differences between the percentages of the frequencies. On the other hand, there is an increase in committing errors of linguistic competence in the areas of sentence structure, verb voice, wrong form, and articles. In terms of verb tense, the percentage did not change.

The researcher believes that these results may be attributed to the following factors:

1. Students committed fewer errors in insertion. Group work that was represented in peer cooperation, exchanging ideas, revising, editing, and proofreading encouraged students to be more aware of using words appropriately.
2. There was a smaller number of errors in verb-subject agreement. The comparison between the percentages of committing errors in both tests shows that students were more cautious to use the appropriate verb form that agrees with the main subject of the sentence.
3. Students committed fewer errors in the use of pronouns. Similarly, students tended to use the suitable pronouns and make a correct congruence between the pronouns and their referents in their writing. This development might be attributed to their frequent discussion and proofreading of their writing during doing their tasks in groups.
4. There was a smaller number of errors in deletion. As for insertion, students tended to use appropriate words without adding or deleting unnecessary items. The researcher believe that the feedback that was provided by the higher-level participants during doing the writing tasks might have assisted the students in the groups to benefit and not commit errors in this area and other areas.
5. In the component of verb tense, the percentage of committing errors remained the same which is (11.11).
6. In sentence structure, the percentage of committing errors increased from 15.87 to 17.7. The researcher believes that this rise might be due to the stressful atmosphere of the test in which students feel anxious, and they tend to rush in order to finish on time. Most of their errors might not have been committed if they had written the paragraph at home. Thus, limitation in time can be an influencing factor on the products of the students.
7. In the use of verb voice, where students use passive or active, the participants did not show improvement since the percentage increased from 7.93 to 8.88. Although this increase is not very big, it reflects the notion that there was not enough focus on this aspect during the discussion and writing of the various tasks.
8. Students made more mistakes in the use of articles in their post test.
9. The percentage of committing errors in the component of word form raised from 14.29 to 17.7. This also might be attributed to less attention to this aspect during doing the tasks, lack of time, stressful atmosphere and the resemblance of deriving word forms in Arabic language in which a word form is changed into another one by changing only a vowel.

Recommendations

Based on the results of the study, the following recommendations are presented:

1. Teachers of Arabic language, specifically writing compositions, are recommended to implement the strategy of group work in writing activities. This can develop the students' comprehensive communicative competence within which the linguistic competence is a basic and vital one.
2. Group work represented in peer cooperation might be beneficial and effective in teaching other topics. Thus, teachers should be aware of the significance and effectiveness of this strategy in teaching in which the social aspect is highly employed in doing such activities.
3. Further research on implementing the strategy of group work in writing activities and other topics is recommended.

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