Exploring English Teachers' Cooperative Practices in Teaching Writing Skills

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Abstract

Cooperative language learning (CLL) is considered one of the communicative approaches in which students participate in collaborative learning activities in actual classroom settings. This research aims to examine English instructors' cooperative practices in instructing writing skills. I employed the narrative inquiry to explore the teaching and learning stories of teachers through their lived stories. This research study seeks to add to the discourse of cooperative practices in English language classrooms to enhance the writing skills of learners in the context of Nepal. Four English instructors from four public secondary schools in Rupandehi district were purposefully selected as participants for this study. The in-depth unstructured interview was used as a tool for collecting data. I adopted social constructivism as a theoretical framework. This study uncovered that the teacher participants used CLL activities such as think-pair-share and group work activities to energize, optimize and enhance students' writing skills. Moreover, CLL increases learners' insights and confidence by enhancing their creativity and critical thinking ability in writing through teamwork and makes them more responsible and accountable for learning themselves through their active engagement in various cooperative activities. The study reveals teacher participants' effective practices of cooperative language learning in generating and creating fresh information to offer a solution to the assigned writing tasks and make learning successful. Teamwork, group work and think-pair-share activities contribute to the learners' success in writing skills.

Keywords: Classroom management, group and pair work, ICT, think-pair-share

Introduction

English Language Teaching (ELT) around the globe has been changed along with different methods of instructional delivery. In the Nepali context, teaching English remains dominated by a conventional textbook-laden, teacher-centred, classroom-based style of instruction in which knowledge is transmitted directly to the learners. Teachers usually provide readymade information to the students so they always remain passive. The knowledge presented by teachers is usually unchallengeable and students have to accept it (María & Luisa, 2016). This type of chalk-and-talk method of teaching seems ineffective in ensuring quality learning. I intend to explore English teachers' cooperative learning experiences in teaching writing skills.

Cooperative language learning (CLL) is a learner-centred instructional method in which, in small groups, everyone with learners of various levels of capacity works together to achieve a common mutual goal under the guidance of the teacher. In CLL, students are active in the development of learning rather than being passive recipients of the result of any supplied knowledge, which enhances the quantity of student engagement and discussion in the target language (Azizinezhad et al., 2013; Nadif & Benattabou, 2021)). Learners' involvement can be increased by maximizing their talking time in CLL.

Literature Review

In the CLL method, students collaborate in pairs or groups with shared learning objectives (Zhang, 2010). It creates a favourable atmosphere for interactions between students and teachers and student-to-student on an issue inside and outside the classroom setting. Thus, teachers and learners can learn better in sustained and meaningful ways when they do something together. It develops both content knowledge and social skills of the learners working cooperatively and collaboratively. Cheong (2010) asserted that in CLL, learners have access to various learning contexts, collaborating within and occasionally beyond the school setting (as cited in Qutoshia, & Poudel, 2014). Students can discuss together and transmit their information to each other in developing ideas to write during the teaching-learning process. This study may contribute to enhancing the writing proficiency of learners.

Explaining things and readymade answers to writing tasks by the teachers do not support learners in writing. Until and unless students have extended participation in educational endeavours, they cannot develop in-depth knowledge and social skills; communication and critical thinking, innovation and teamwork in writing skills. Cooperative learning (CL) maximizes the use of collaborative tasks involving

small groups of students in the learning environment, going beyond just assigning assignments and placing students in groups (Jacobs & Hall, 2010). Therefore, it is essential to involve them in cooperative activities to achieve their common goal.

In this regard, Sijali (2017) explored the efficacy of CLL for enhancing learners' ability level in English. The study indicated that is more effective than the conventional way of teaching in enlightening students' proficiency in English. Similarly, a research study conducted by Erdogan (2017) in Turkey indicated that cooperative writing activities supported the learners to feel confident and comfortable and decreased their writing anxieties. Nevertheless, it did not address the issues of secondary-level English teachers in teaching writing skills.

In the context of Nepal, Saphari (2018) conducted research on practices of cooperative learning in Kailali district. The study found that cooperative learning was quite effective. Group work and pair work are two effective ways it may be employed in the CL process. Due to time constraints, a lack of physical resources, and classroom management issues, it was challenging to implement CLL. Likewise, Yusuf et al. (2019) explored the efficiency of cooperative language learning to improve and enhance students' writing skills. The study showed that cooperative learning techniques assist them in improving their writing skills by engaging them in writing activities. So, cooperative learning techniques engage learners in writing and provide a choice of competitive activities in the class by promoting cooperation in pairs or groups. The study indicated the need for cooperative language learning in teaching writing in a comfortable and less threatening atmosphere.

Alroomi (2023) found that teaching with the CL technique had a favourable impact, with students expressing a willingness to adopt CL approaches in writing and spoken classes. Furthermore, it is a more efficient method of increasing student involvement and providing relevant input and output to students. A recent study by Hamriati et al. (2024) found that both teachers used the think pair and share cooperative learning model. It is beneficial in boosting the improvement of critical thinking skills, expressing ideas, improving student engagement in discussions, and providing more opportunities for group members to contribute. However, during implementation, teachers were inconsistent with the given time; very few students were not able to submit their argument conclusions. So, teachers had to exercise discipline in managing time during instruction to ensure that all students had an opportunity to contribute their discussion conclusions.

Writing skills have become a challenging issue for many teachers and students as students' fluency and competency in writing abilities determine their achievement in both the classroom and in society. In the Nepali context, English teachers have been teaching writing skills at the school level in Nepal for years

but it does not seem to be effective as the teachers dictate essays, stories, letter writing, report writing and question-answers to the students without engaging them in cooperative activities. As a result, they only memorize writing-related tasks just to pass the examinations. CLL is the most widely used and preferred method in language teaching worldwide (Wolfensberger & Canella, 2015). Despite its widespread recognition, use and effectiveness in foreign contexts, CLL has not been widely implemented in the Nepalese context. It is less explored and updated through research works regarding how teachers practice CLL and implement it in teaching writing skills in the Nepalese context. There is a theoretical, contextual, and thematic gap in the same discipline as the available research says nothing about this. The results of this study can contribute to my colleagues, teachers and students in teaching and learning English in general and teaching writing skills in particular.

The primary objective of the research is to explore cooperative learning practices of English language teachers in teaching writing skills. The study has responded to the following research question: How do English instructors practice cooperative language learning in teaching writing skills?

As a theoretical foundation for my research, I used social constructivism, which is particularly relevant to this topic. It creates an enjoyable learning setting since knowledge is socially and culturally formed via interaction (Vygotsky, 1978). The fundamental idea of social constructivism is that knowledge is actively generated by learners via communication with peers and teachers, rather than by the instructor. Learners actively generate knowledge rather than passively acquire information (Jonassen, 1991). So they construct new knowledge by being active themselves. However, social constructivists claim that knowledge is the result of collaborative production in a sociocultural framework mediated by language; learning is promoted via interactive processes of information exchange, negotiation, and discussion (Wang, 2008). By interacting and sharing ideas and experiences, we not only solve problems but also create new discourse.

In the process of learning, learners construct knowledge with the support of their teacher or their peer's scaffolding. Understanding learners' zone of proximal development (ZPD) is extremely beneficial in improving instruction and learning activities, more effective, more efficient and better. To Vygotsky (1978), by scaffolding pupils can achieve activities which they are unable to accomplish by themselves. Vygotsky's social interaction theory shows that peer assistance is crucial for group learners to acquire new knowledge and skills effectively (Lin, 2009). Learning takes place when learners interact with each other.

Methods and Procedures

This study used the narrative inquiry method as it is connected with the lived experiences of an individual and with the life stories. One of the few human endeavours that is extensively accepted as a fundamental facet of existence and a vital mode of human expression is the tale (Kim, 2016). This study aimed to investigate the CLL techniques used by English language instructors when instructing writing abilities in language classrooms through their lived narratives.

Four participant teachers were selected purposively from four public schools in Rupandehi district. Out of them, one was a male and the other three were females who had been practising cooperative teaching in their classrooms. A modest population size is helpful for accurate data analysis. Following notification and obtaining participants' permission (Creswell, 2014), time was fixed for an interview. Then their views were taken by conducting in-depth interviews in their first language to uncover their cooperative learning practices in teaching writing skills. With their permission, the participants' opinions were documented, and their pseudonyms were used to maintain their privacy and confidentiality. Later, the instructor interviews were conducted after data saturation had been attained (Trotter, 2012). Their experiences and practices inside and outside the classrooms were meaningful and helpful in analyzing their views and practices in teaching and learning writing skills cooperatively.

Results and Discussion

Teachers' Practices of CLL in Teaching Writing Skills

Cooperative language learning increases students' participation in teaching learning activities and provides them opportunities to engage in active communication between students and teachers. Learners are involved in the target language interaction through modes of interaction like think-pair-share, group work, pair work, cooperation, full class interactions, etc. (Ur, 2008). Interaction facilitates and enhances the logical capacity of the students. In this context, Dinesh shared, "After getting the practical ideas from training and workshop seminar, I engaged my students to think over the assigned tasks; shared with their friends. They got input when they wrote on the topic collaboratively in a pleasant atmosphere."

His life story showed that he shifted from his teacher-centred teaching to learner-centred teaching forming different groups or pairs and asking the learners to think over the problem and share their ideas. While working together, they build rapport with each other share their ideas and learn social and teamwork skills. Students' linguistic, mental, and social skills are stimulated through cooperative

interactive assignments and create powerful learning opportunities reducing learning anxiety in a less threatening learning environment (Azizinezhad et al., 2013; Nadif & Benattabou, 2021).

When he makes students work in pairs, groups and think-pair-share, they think critically and creatively. His practice is similar to Johnson and Johnson's (1999) idea of CLL. They organize, oversee, and assess their education since they are its directors themselves with little guidance from the teacher. There is the direct and active involvement of the learners. In this line, Manju asserted, "I worked with the students on the task they shared ideas related to it. Then I exchanged their writings and asked them to edit spelling, punctuation, grammar and format. From peer correction, they got input and feedback from each other." From her lived experience, it is clear that Manju involved her students in correcting their pairs' writing to develop their writing proficiency. She used group work and made the class interactive. Hence, CLL generates interactive language, affective climate, learner responsibility autonomy and individualized instruction (Brown, 2001). Students play a more active role in group decision-making and receive less instruction from teachers as sources of knowledge. He facilitates the students to explore new ideas to complete the assigned task. They get input and feedback from each other.

It is believed that students' learning becomes permanent when they involve themselves directly in learning. Caicedo Trivino (2016) also asserted that the use of CLL in teaching writing engaged students to express their ideas and supported them to be independent for the improvement in their vocabulary, use of certain grammatical structures and style correction.

Dividing Students into Groups and Pairs

Learning and working together in groups or pairs increases students' active engagement. Engaging students requires great effort on the part of the teacher. When the students are in groups and pairs, they feel more secure (Brown, 2007). Through group and pair work, students can have more chances to use language in the classroom. Students play a more participatory and decision-making role in the group, and the instructor's position as a source of information is diminished (Harmer, 2009). Group and pair works generate interactive language and promote learner responsibility and autonomy in learning language. Emphasizing learners' active involvement in learning, Benjamin Franklin declared,

"Tell me and I forget

teach me and I remember

involve me and I learn"

The above proverb is associated with learners' involvement in cooperative activities. They explore meaning by interacting in the assigned task with their friends collaboratively. Before teaching writing skills, they divide the students into different groups and give them a task. Dinesh asserted, "Forming different pairs or groups, I made them work and speak more. When I started speaking less and let my students communicate more, there was an apparent shift in my classroom." His narratives explored that he made learners work collaboratively. As a facilitator, speaking less he guided the students to generate new ideas. His experience is in harmony with Munawar and Chaudhary (2019). They claimed that supportive learning procedures have a significant sustainability outcome on the achievement of students to engage them in writing activities and improve their writing skills in the classroom.

Reetu asserted, "In pairs or groups, my students feel comfortable and easy to share ideas with their partners without hesitation confidently." Through these cooperative activities, students feel comfortable and easy to learn from each other and construct new knowledge. Group efforts encourage the other group members to contribute and keep one another on task working towards their common goals. Working in groups, with every participant a specialist in their respective subject, offers students an environment in which to study and practice (Aktaş et al., 2022). Interaction, active discussion, cooperation, participation and good relationships among group members make learning effective. Regarding this, Erdogan (2017) claimed that cooperative writing activities support students to feel confident and comfortable and decrease their writing anxieties. I also believe learners feel comfortable and construct new knowledge through cooperative activities when they are free from anxieties.

Gita narrated her story of using CLL in these words; "My shy and uninterested students work together to solve the problems. They improve their writing proficiency as they are motivated to work together confidently in pairs and groups with the feeling of intimacy." Gita claimed that an atmosphere of cooperation and mutual helpfulness motivates even shy and uninterested students to work confidently. They can learn how to work collaboratively and cooperatively to accomplish the task. It encourages them to participate in solving the problem and promotes enthusiasm among students and engagement between them (McCafferty, 2006). Hence, CLL helps students increase their participation since they can share ideas and increase their self-confidence. Thus, they feel comfortable working in groups and exploring more ideas on the assigned task.

The idea of Gita is in harmony with Yumi and Erina (2015) who explored that cooperative learning has an affirmative effect on learning English. It also increases a strong sense of self-confidence in writing and influences their attitude towards

writing ability. When peers encourage one another during the process of learning, students learn more efficiently and effectively (Keshavarz et al., 2014; Li, 2009). Like Gita, Manju had a similar experience. She stated, "I facilitate my students by providing a problem and making them interact with the problem." Gita stated that CLL provides a natural atmosphere to the learners in learning language through the use of think-pair-share and group undertakings through communication strategies. Her view is in harmony with Gass (1997) and Long (1996) who stated interaction offers students the chance to obtain clear feedback and suggestions (as cited in Muho & Kuran, 2014). As a teacher, I also believe students who engage in interaction are more inclined to take ownership of their education. Group idea sharing gives them the chance to hone their social skills, teamwork and collaboration, interaction and critical thinking, creativity, management, and presenting skills. His perspective is supported by social constructivism theory, which holds that learning occurs most effectively when activities are completed collectively and experiences are shared (Johnson & Johnson, 1989).

In this line, Reetu asserted, "There is a feeling of cooperation rather than competition among the members of a group in CLL." Since there is competition among the groups but not with individual learners, every group member shares the same objective. They therefore provide a mental contribution to their group. It can be compared to competitive learning, when students compete with one another to meet academic objectives. Studies reveal that compared to competitive or individualistic learning, cooperative learning has advantages for higher-order thinking, more frequent development of fresh concepts and solutions, and greater transfer of knowledge between contexts (Johnson & Johnson, 2000). Therefore, learning is not only the transformation of knowledge from the teacher but it is the reconstruction of experiences from learners and teachers.

Classroom Management in Cooperative Learning

In class management, managing time, space discipline, resources and instructional materials addressing learners' multiple intelligences and managing interaction with equal sharing of tasks among members of the group is vital. Successful application of CLL requires proper seat arrangement to suit group and pair works. Moreover, teachers must have the required skills to conduct such activities.

Regarding this, Manju shared, "In my class, there are large numbers of learners with multi-level intelligence. I divide groups having both talented and weak students so that they can share ideas and get benefit from each other." Her narrative revealed the fact that she addressed learners' multiple intelligences providing opportunities for both talented and weak learners to work cooperatively

and collaboratively. They could share knowledge. Manju's narrative of CLL is in harmony with (Kagan, 1994). He emphasizes that addressing various intelligences effectively may be achieved through cooperative learning. In groups, learning is effective as the bright students support the weaker ones and vice-versa.

Dinesh claimed, "In my school, the seating arrangement is suitable for face-to-face interaction. So, I organize group activities and maximize their interaction." His life story of teaching showed that he maximized interaction through group activities. The more teachers talk, the less opportunity there is for the learners (Scrivener, 2005). It is therefore, the teacher needs to balance teacher talking time and student time. The efficacy of CL and the ZPD idea of peer-guided learning depends on how the classroom furniture is arranged (Vygotsky, 1978). Teachers need to approach their work with a clear vision, professionalism, enthusiasm, commitment, planning, and managerial skills in implementing cooperative activities.

ICT in Cooperative Practices

The application of information and communication technology (ICT) to education is indispensable for improving teachers' professional skills in the 21st-century classroom. After the pandemic situation of Covid 19, teachers have adopted and integrated technology to improve their pedagogic activities. ICT has increased access to resources and information allowing teachers and learners to interact at any time. Teaching English has undergone a significant transformation due to the application of ICT at school.

Regarding this, Dinesh asserted, "I use ICT devices and make my students use them more than in the past. I share writing-related issues through e-mail. Now, they find the solution to the assigned writing tasks and share." His lived experiences of using ICT devices supported him to improve the effectiveness and efficiency of his teaching-learning activities. Integration of ICT in cooperative writing eased and helped improve students' writing performance (Franco-Camargo & Camacho-Vasquez, 2018). It can connect both teachers and students to work and learn together cooperatively.

Manju emphasized, "I used to share teaching materials rarely with my students and colleagues through ICT tools in the past but now, I am using them frequently. They support us to engage learners and teachers for collaborative learning and professional development." Manju's narratives showed that she hardly used ICT devices in sharing information with her students and colleagues in the past, however, these days, she uses it to maximize collaborative learning as well as boost her professional development. Interactive ways of teaching and learning are possible through cooperation among learners and teachers with improved ICT access to the

required information. Her lived experience is close to Wardlow and Harm (2015) who mentioned that technology created space to maximize collaborative learning by increasing engagement in learning. Thus, this shows that both language teachers and learners get benefits from practising language inside and outside the class if they use technology devices.

Gita claimed, "Sometimes, I motivate my students by playing videos of short films. The next day, I asked them to write film reviews discussing in pairs. I exchange the final version with their partner and ask them to provide and receive feedback." She asserted that her pupils' innovative and interactive instruction has been stimulated by the usage of ICT in the classroom since they are working in pairs on the assigned task that she delivers to the class with excitement. She further added, "Sometimes I make my students share their writing tasks through e-mail. They enjoy sharing and learning a lot of new things within a short time." Gita's experience revealed that she was incorporating and implementing ICT skills in collaborative activities as a part of her professional life. Learners explore new ideas via the process of e-mail interaction. Her view is in harmony with Wang and Fang (2005) who asserted that the use of the Internet supports learners to learn in cooperation autonomously.

Instructors do not transfer knowledge; rather, knowledge is generated. Learners use information that has been collaboratively produced with their peers and participate in personal meaning-making discourse via the use of constructivist tools (Akpan & Beard, 2016). According to social constructivism, students may develop their cognitive abilities and create knowledge with the help of technology, teachers, and peers I also believe these types of collaborative activities through e-mail help them develop their writing skills naturally.

Conclusion

This study aims to explore cooperative learning practices of secondary-level English language teachers in teaching writing skills. Therefore, narrative inquiry is suitable for the study as teachers creating discourse in ELT class can support their learners to construct innovative ideas, skills and new knowledge by working together cooperatively inside and outside the class. The study reveals teacher participants' effective practices of cooperative language learning in generating and creating fresh information offer a solution to the assigned writing tasks and make learning successful. Teamwork, group work and think-pair-share activities contribute to the learners' success in writing skills. Social constructivism theory holds that learning is socially and culturally created via interaction, students learn best when they work together in small groups and share their experiences. The study shows that teaching writing skills through CLL enhances students' creativity, teamwork and cooperative

skills allowing students to express their preferences. Moreover, the use of ICT supports teacher participants to feel more comfortable in creating an appropriate learning atmosphere. Thus, by engaging the students in cooperative writing activities teachers can increase problem-solving skills and critical thinking ability to improve their writing skills and make their performance better.

The small-scale nature of the study may restrict the application of its findings. Thus, a mixed-method research study must be carried out in the future covering a large area and population to bring teachers' wider practices of CLL in teaching writing skills in public schools. It is hoped that the insights of the study raise awareness on teachers to implement CLL in teaching writing skills. It will facilitate them to make teaching and learning effective reducing their learners' anxiety and providing a natural learning atmosphere in the arena of ELT.

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