COOPERATIVE LEARNING TO IMPROVE
ENGISH DESCRIPTIVE WRITING FOR
PRIMARY SCHOOL PUPILS

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"I hereby declare that I have read this project paper and in my opinion this project paper is sufficient in terms of scope and quality for the award of the degree of Master of Education in Teaching of English as a Second Language (TESL)"

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DECLARATION

I declare that the work in this dissertation is my own except for quotations and summaries which have been duly acknowledged.

05.04.2010

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To my dear husband and children

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ABSTRACT

Cooperative learning (CL) been practiced throughout human history and is a part of educational practice. Its effectiveness has been documented through numerous research studies. It is commonly accepted that cooperative learning is the best alternative for all pupils because it calls for active interaction between pupils of diverse abilities and backgrounds and produces more positive pupil outcomes in academic achievement, social behavior, and affective development. However, many English primary school teachers in Malaysia still find it difficult to incorporate this system of instructional method in their classroom. This study featured an activity-oriented brainstorming technique to find out if CL will improve the performance and motivation of pupils in descriptive writing. The pupils' performances and motivation were assessed through pre-tests, post-tests, brainstorming observation checklist and questionnaire. The study showed that pupils who were thought descriptive writing using CL showed significant improvement in post test scores. The significant achievement of the pupils was contributed by the high usage of Kagan's 5 elements of CL and also the DOVE brainstorming guidelines. The study also showed that CL motivates the pupils. In ensuring that the use of CL is effective in teaching the pupils, educators must train the pupils in CL skills. The study recommended that the Kagan's five CL elements and also the DOVE brainstorming guidelines are used for enhancing the interaction of pupils to effectively implement CL.

ABSTRAK

Pembelajaran koperatif telah dipraktikkan di dalam sebahagian besar sejarah manusia sebagai salah satu amalan pembelajaran. Keberkesanan pembelajaran koperatif ini telah direkodkan melalui pelbagai kajian. Kaedah pembelajaran ini secara lazimnya di terima sebagi alternatif terbaik untuk semua murid kerana ia menggalakkan interaksi aktif di kalangan murid yang terdiri dari pelbagai kebolehan dan latarbelakang. Kaedah ini menghasilkan keputusan yang baik dari segi akademik, kelakuan sosial and juga perkembangan efektif. Namun begitu, ramai guru-guru sekolah yang masih mengalami kemusykilan untuk melaksanakan kaedah pembelajaran ini di dalam kelas. Kajian ini melibatkan penggunaan kaedah pencetusan minda dalam menjalankan aktiviti untuk mengkaji samada pembelajaran koperatif dapat meningkatkan prestasi dan motivasi murid di dalam mempelajari penulisan deskriptif.. Prestasi dan tahap motivasi murid telah diukur melalui ujian sebelum dan selepas kaedah pembelajaran ini diaplikasikan, penelitian semasa pencetusan minda dan juga maklumbalas soalan dari murid. Kajian ini telah menunjukkan bahawa murid-murid yang telah diajar pelajaran penulisan deskriptif dengan kaedah pembelajaran ini telah menujukkan prestasi yang memberangsangkan Keputusan ini dicapai hasil dari kejayaan murid – murid dalam mempraktikkan lima kaedah pembelajaran koperatif yang diperkenalkan oleh Kagan. Kajian ini juga telah membuktikan bahawa pembelajaran koperatif meningkatkan motivasi murid. Kajian ini mengesyorkan agar para pendidik memastikan bahawa murid dilatih untuk menggunakan kaedah pembelajaran koperatif ini dengan aktif berdasarkan elemen-elemen pembelajaran koperatif dan juga panduan pencetusan minda DOVE.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

CL	Cooperative Learning
DOVE	Guidelines for brainstorming as a protocol for CL activities involving deferring judgment on any one else's ideas or comments (D), opting for the unusual and creative (O), generating a vast number of ideas (V) and expanding on the ideas by piggy backing off others (E)
ESL	English as a Second Language
EBC	Education Broadcasting Corporation
ETEMS	English for Teaching Mathematics and Science
KBSR	The Malaysian New Primary School Syllabus, 1983
LAD	Language Acquisition Device
MOEW	Ministry of Education, Wellington
SLA	Second Language Acquisition
UPSR	'Ujian Penilaian Sekolah Rendah'
VCAA	Victorian Curriculum & Assessment Authority

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CHAPTER ONE

BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

1.1 Introduction

Learning of the English language is essential in the primary schools in Malaysia. The Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Education, Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin recently acknowledged the importance of English although the decision to abolish ETEMS (English for Teaching Mathematics and Science) has been made and assured that English language will not be relegated to a secondary position (Regina, 2009).

Results from UPSR (Ujian Penilaian Sekolah Rendah) examination still show weak performance in the English subject despite numerous language enhancement initiatives undertaken by the government such as 'Extra English Tuition' and 'ETEMS'. Therefore, the usage of Cooperative learning (CL) can be explored to investigate whether CL can enhance the teaching of English in Malaysian Primary Schools.

Cooperative learning has been practiced throughout human history and is a part of educational practice. Its effectiveness has been documented through numerous research studies. This concept has been studied in the United States since 1970's (Kessler, 1992). CL is claimed to be an effective teaching method in foreign/second language education (Johnson, 1988; Kagan, 1990; Slavin, 1985) and locally in Malaysian institutes of learning (Tok, 2006).

It is commonly accepted that cooperative learning is the best alternative for all pupils because it calls for active interaction between pupils of diverse abilities and backgrounds and produces more positive pupil outcomes in academic achievement, social behavior, and affective development. However, many English primary school teachers in Malaysia still find it difficult to incorporate this system of instructional method in their classroom.

With numerous positive achievements by many researchers in using CL in English language enhancements, this project aims to study the application of CL to improve the English descriptive writing of pupils by conducting a quasi-experimental study in a primary school. In what follows, the problems in ESL teaching of descriptive writing in Malaysia will be stated. Then the purposes, along with the research questions, and the alternative hypothesis and null hypothesis of the study will be discussed. Finally, the definitions of terms used in the study will be stated.

1.2   Statement of the Problem

In the past few decades, the communicative language teaching, or the communicative approach, has been acknowledged as the main stream in ESL teaching (C. Murcia, Dörnyei & Thurrell, 1995). The focus of language teaching also expands from the teacher-centered manipulation of discrete grammatical structures to the pupil-centered acquisition of communicative competence (Murcia, Dornyei & Thurrell, 1995). Experts in communicative approach suggest that contextualized and meaningful communication is the best possible practice that language learners can engage in (Savignon, 1983).

However, such approach has not established a foothold in the English education in Malaysia. Conventional teacher-centered teaching is still widely practiced in English writing classrooms in Malaysia. The teacher controls the floor by delivering the lesson throughout the classroom session, and the pupils simply sit and listen. Numerous studies and educational reports have pointed out that the solitary models of the traditional teaching method tend to make pupils overly passive and indifferent to what is being taught (Hamm & Adams, 1992).

The Malaysian New Primary School Syllabus (KBSR) launched in 1983, demands for the creation of opportunities for individual expression (for example, through music, art and writing), the facilitation of understanding, and the employment of a variety of means to obtain knowledge. Although the original intention was to increase teacher-pupil contact and rapport, the KBSR has not been effective mainly because of an impractical teacher-pupil ratio (1:50 in many schools) (Rajeswari, 2003). Since student-centered teaching is not practical in Malaysia, an alternative such as CL can probably work.

Up to year three, the pupils in Malaysian Primary schools are given 'guided' descriptive writing where sentences are given and pupils are only required to fill in the blanks. Descriptive writing in essay format is only introduced to pupils in Malaysian primary schools in year four and at this point of time, many pupils have difficulty in acquiring the descriptive writing skills.

1.3   Purpose of the Study

Concerning the difficulty faced by pupils as mentioned above, and based upon Brown (2001) belief that "cooperative learning is embraced within a communicative language teaching framework," this study features the activity-oriented brainstorming technique to find out if CL will improve the performance and motivation of pupils in descriptive writing.

1.4   Research Questions

The present study attempts to answer the following research questions:

i)   What is the relationship between CL approach and pupils achievement in Learning Descriptive Writing?

ii)   What are the effects of CL on the motivation of the pupils in the experimental group towards learning English?

1.5   The Alternative Hypothesis

As a result of the intervention strategy of CL during the period of January to March 2010, the Primary four pupils in the experimental group will experience an increase in their achievement and motivation in learning descriptive writing as compared to the year four pupils in the control group.

1.6   The Null Hypothesis

As a result of the intervention strategy of CL during the period of January to March 2010, the Primary four pupils in the experimental group will not experience an increase in their achievement and motivation in learning descriptive writing as compared to the year four pupils in the control group.

1.7   Significance of the Study

This study benefits the participating school, the subject teacher as well as the pupils involved in the study. The participating school will benefit because the results will be a guideline for the teachers to determine the effective way which can benefit the pupils in acquiring the descriptive writing skills.

The subject teacher will benefit since he/she is actively involved in the study. The teacher can discover some of the problems faced by the pupils and continue to rectify the problems. The pupils can gain a lot of benefits because CL approach can give pupils the chance to develop positive and productive relationships. It gives pupils opportunities to learn from one another rather than receive information from the teacher or text alone.

1.8   Limitations of the Study

The study is limited in several aspects. Firstly, the size of the sample is small. The study was conducted only in two Year four classes in a primary school. Therefore, the

generalizability of the results is also limited by the small scale of the study. There might be extraneous variables that can invariably affect the findings such as the cultural and educational background of the pupils, thus affecting the reliability of the findings.

1.9 Related Definitions

The terms defined in this section include:

- Cooperative learning
- Conventional teaching
- The New Primary School Syllabus (KBSR)

1.9.1 Cooperative Learning

According to Tsailing (2002), cooperative learning is defined as a system of concrete teaching and learning techniques, rather than an approach, in which pupils are active agents in the process of learning through small group structures so that pupils work together to maximize their own and each other's learning. (Johnson, 1986; Kagan, 1986; Slavin, 1988) described cooperative learning as a large group of instructional strategies in which pupils collaborate in order to reach a common goal.

From the definitions given by the above researchers, it can be summarized that CL is a teaching strategy in which small teams, each with pupils of different levels of ability, use a variety of learning activities to improve their understanding of a subject. Each member of a team is responsible not only for learning what is taught but also for

helping teammates learn, thus creating an atmosphere of achievement. Pupils work through the assignment until all group members successfully understand and complete it.

1.9.2　Conventional Teaching

Conventional method of teaching English in Malaysian schools here refers to the method that incorporates lectures by ESL teachers on English language skills such as grammatical rules and sentence structures to a class in whole without much teacher-pupil and pupil-pupil interactions.

1.9.3　Descriptive Writing

MOEW (2005) described descriptive writing as a style of writing which can be useful for a variety of purposes such as to engage a reader's attention, to create characters, to set a mood or create an atmosphere and to bring writing to life. The language used in descriptive writing aims to show rather than tell the reader what something/someone is like and relies on precisely chosen vocabulary with carefully chosen adjectives and adverbs.

1.9.4　The New Primary School Syllabus (KBSR)

The New Primary School Syllabus (KBSR) introduced by the Malaysian Education Ministry in 1983 adopts a double-pronged approach to satisfy the educational requirements of the Malaysian pupils: one is to raise the literacy level of the pupils,

and the other is to develop their cognitive and thinking skills. By this means, it hopes to provide the pupils with an all-rounded individual development which will help them operate efficiently within the social structure of this country.

The KBSR is divided into 2 Levels; Level I comprising Standards 1 to 3, and Level II, Standards 4 to 6. The former emphasizes the basic communication skills, that is, reading, writing and arithmetic. Children are taught to listen, say aloud, recognize and form symbols, numbers and the alphabet, and to use all these in writing. They are also taught basic counting, and the mathematical skills of addition, subtraction, division and multiplication.

Level II strengthens and builds upon these basic skills: the emphasis here is on using these skills for thinking and communication, especially logical reasoning, and understanding social and current issues. However, what should be noted is that, in both levels, there is an implicit demand for the creation of opportunities for individual expression (for example, through music, art and writing), the facilitation of understanding and the employment of a variety of means to obtain knowledge.