

## The Process of Writing a Text by Using Cooperative Learning

### El proceso de escribir un texto por medio del uso del aprendizaje cooperativo

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This research project was carried out in order to get ninth graders of the departmental school "El Tequendama" involved in their writing tasks and to improve their writing skills, following the process that a professional writer enables students to write cooperatively and reduces their writing anxiety. Cooperative writing enables the participation of students with a mixture of proficiency level, thus providing greater opportunities to make achievements and therefore greater opportunities to be more deeply involved in their writing tasks.

**Key words:** Teaching writing, teaching techniques, students as writers, team work

Este proyecto de investigación se llevó a cabo con el propósito de lograr que los estudiantes de noveno grado del colegio departamental "El Tequendama" se comprometieran con sus actividades de escritura y mejoraran sus habilidades escriturales. El reproducir el proceso que un escritor realiza permite a los estudiantes escribir cooperativamente y reduce la ansiedad provocada por el acto de escribir. La escritura cooperativa potencia la participación de estudiantes con niveles bajos de dominio, brindándoles mayores oportunidades de lograr mejores resultados y por tanto mayores oportunidades de comprometerse con sus actividades de escritura.

**Palabras claves:** Enseñanza de la escritura, técnicas de enseñanza, estudiantes escritores, trabajo en equipo

## INTRODUCTION

In my experience as a teacher in the departamental school "El Tequendama", I noticed that students neglected the foreign language writing classes and I did not know how to help them to foster their engagement and participation in these classes and, at the same time, to improve their writing skills.

Before the sixties and seventies writing language classes usually ignored the writing process. Teachers used to focus on the product so they attended to clarity and originality, but they did not attend to the writing process nor the writers.

Current approaches to teaching writing view it as the culmination of several steps in a long laborious process in which writers address several questions ranging from what to write about, who the audience is, how to organize the text, and how to write it? ESL teachers need to become familiar with this recent approach as it is certain that writing-as-a-process can improve students' writing skills.

This research intends to help a group of 40 ninth graders with great problems of apathy and a lack of engagement in their writing tasks. This group also showed great difficulties in their writing skills such as making incomplete and meaningless sentences, establishing incorrect topic sentences, adding ideas which do not support the topic sentence, and ordering words and ideas up so their writings were not consistent. In order to improve their writing skills, the principles of process writing were applied by using the cooperative learning technique.

On the other hand, this report reveals the implications and advantages of cooperative learning as a teaching strategy that provides students with the appropriate environment to foster concentration on the learning process itself and the process of writing a text as well as examines the advantages and implications as a teaching strategy to get students involved in each one of the stages of the writing process.

## REVIEW OF LITERATURE

This section includes relevant theoretical aspects related to my research topic: The writing process approach and cooperative learning.

The writing process approach views writing not as a result but as a process that attempts to get students writing as professional authors do, so they choose their own topics and genres, and write from their own experiences and observations. As writers, students think before deciding what to say and how to say it.

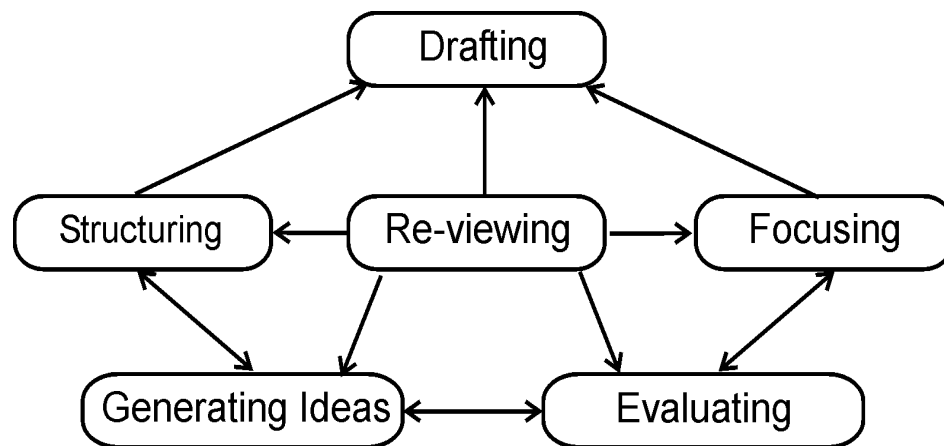
According to Raimes (1983), during the writing process, students engage in several stages that include pre-writing, planning, drafting and post-writing activities. It means that students first try to generate ideas so as to organize them by considering the purpose, audience and genre of the text, then they make word choices, adding or deleting ideas by reviewing organization, grammar, logic and verifying if there is enough information, and last they share their ideas with a real audience so this stage involves students with designing and publishing a final draft.

Review is understood as diverse steps of self, peer and teacher assessment in order to improve the final writing and present it to the audience. As White and Arndt (1991) assert, it is seen as a cyclical process. Consequently while students are revising, they might have to return to the prewriting step to develop and expand their ideas. The diagram proposed by White and Arndt (*ibid.*) (Figure 1) shows the nature of the writing stages.

Learning to write is a natural process via cooperative learning because it provides the social structure for students to work cooperatively as teams and enhances their academic achievement. In this case, the achievement is the improvement of the writing skills.

According to Kagan (1994), on a cooperative team each member of the group has a unique contribution to get the goal (positive interdependence) so each one is responsible for a role, or a task (individual accountability). This way of working gives students equal chances to participate

**Figure 1.** The writing process (White and Arndt, 1991).



(equal participation) and major opportunities for providing each other with feedback, challenging conclusions, and teaching and encouraging each other (simultaneous interaction).

The positive interdependence develops trusting and respectful relationships among group teammates, so they feel more comfortable and secure writing because they feel part of a group of writers in the classroom. Cooperative learning builds up the students' needed confidence in their knowledge about writing because they realize that they do not have to write alone so they feel less terrified of writing a text.

Moreover, cooperation enables the participation of students in a classroom with a mixture of proficiency levels, ages and interests. Cooperative work provides major opportunities to gain achievements. As Kagan (ibid.) claims, "Cooperative learning promotes higher achievement than competitive and individualistic learning structures across all age levels, subject areas, and almost all tasks".

This mixture of levels allows "weaker" writers the benefit of working with teammates who are "stronger" writers. When strong and weak students share the same goal, both are favored. As strong students explain how the task is and clarify organization mistakes or language problems to weaker students, they improve their own knowledge. As weaker students are guided in filling their gaps, they strengthen their attitude and view about writing.

Each one of the stages of the writing process requires that students work with a group of peers to converse and to collaborate until they can together compose a writing that represents the views of all the teammates. This kind of collaborative task embraces retrieving information from various sources, exploring the topic by means of prewriting activities (discussion, reading, brainstorming and list making, among others), planning, giving feedback and editing a final text (Raimes, 1983).

On the other hand, cooperative learning as a writing process approach changes the traditional role of the teacher. As Kagan (ibid.) claims, cooperative classrooms change the view of the teacher from evaluator to adviser so the correction is not an evaluation but feedback.

In conclusion, cooperative learning and the process approach of writing can work together in the achievement of a common goal when writing a text. Both promote self-confidence, low levels of anxiety, high opportunities to make achievements and, also, both are stressed on the reflection of how students can improve their concentration on a specific learning task.

## METHODOLOGY

I developed a case study because it allows the researcher to examine a particular issue, understand it and describe it. My particular issue was the low

level of interest and engagement in writing tasks as was mentioned before.

About this type of research, Nunan (1997: 8) says that "case studies center on a single individual number or limited number of individuals, documenting some aspect of their language development, usually over an extended period of time" Thus, I focused my investigation on a group of ninth graders who rejected doing writing tasks and it was carried out in a professional context over a period of observation of three hours per week, for three months. In this study I was the only teacher involved so I was both participant and observer.

Subsequently, this case study let the researcher organize and collect a wide range of information, then analyze it in search of patterns and themes found among the data. This information was gathered through different instruments such as surveys, classroom observation and field notes.

Surveys were applied on two occasions of the research: At the beginning (Appendix 1) in order to discover the cause of the ninth graders' lack of participation and engagement and at the end (Appendix 2) in order to know if team work increased their engagement in the writing process. Classroom observation was carried out by using checklists (Appendix 3) and later my own field notes to observe students' behavior and attitudes to the writing process and team work (Appendix 4).

The diagnostic stage consisted of applying the first survey and my field notes where I described each class from July 27 to November 5, 2004. The Second stage consisted of having the field journal and applying the final survey. Here, I named the categories according to the patterns found by using the instruments mentioned above and my interpretation. So I established a close relationship between them, and finally, I displayed my findings.

## RESULTS

The diagnostic stage suggested that the lack of participation and engagement of the ninth graders was due to their fear of making mistakes, the low interest in the English language and that only a few

participated in order to get good grades. It also suggested that students preferred to work in pairs or in small groups than work individually. These results supported my hypothesis based on Kagan's theory (1994): Working cooperatively, students will strengthen positive attitudes towards learning the writing process and will increase motivation and the self-esteem they need to get involved in their writing task so they will improve their writing skills.

According to Johnson and Johnson (1984), cooperative teams increase students' self esteem and motivate students to participate in their learning process. To illustrate this assertion, a ninth grader wrote in the last survey about cooperative team, *el que no participaba ahora sí lo hace (the one who did not participate, now does it)*.

Additionally, in the process of writing a team's presentation for the whole class a student said: *Todos aprendimos del tema porque los que entendían más nos explicaban a los que teníamos dudas para que pudiéramos cumplir con nuestro trabajo. (Everybody learned the topic because the ones who understood more helped those who had doubts. Thus, the team could complete the task)*. As can be seen, when students share their success with their groups, the individual's and the group's self-esteem are enhanced.

From the data taken from the field journal, I identified three main categories and these were related to the development of the classes before and during the application of cooperative learning techniques and the writing process.

1. Whole class
2. Cooperative commitment
3. Becoming a writer

*The Whole Class* category is understood as a class activity in which students sit down in lines in front of the teacher and listen to his/her explanation. Here, as Kagan (1994) asserts, there are very few opportunities to take turns and participate. The last word is had by the teacher and students are passive subjects in the process of learning.

The results of an analysis of the field journal suggested that *Whole Class* environment gives

students less opportunities to express themselves and fewer opportunities to make achievements so they tend to be disruptive (Appendix 4).

*The Cooperative Commitment* category refers to the dedication that cooperative learning and each one of its elements get from the students. A real cooperative team has to fulfill four elements (Kagan, 1994) in order to promote higher achievement and class attendance, to create an active and involving learning environment and to develop adequate social skills. Interpersonal relationships are especially important because they build self-esteem and reduce classroom anxiety (ibid.).

The information that was taken from the field notes, the team checklist and the last surveys evidenced that roles allowed having a more expanded knowledge about the topic, and gave equal participation to each team member concerning interaction (positive interdependence). The following excerpts exemplify the point:

*Con cada cargo (función) teníamos que cooperar.*

*We all had to cooperate according to our roles.*

*Al tener una función debíamos cumplirla y por lo tanto participar más activamente. We had to fulfill our work depending on our specific roles, so we had to participate more actively.*

*Todos opinaban lo que querían porque se sentían con responsabilidades y además no sentíamos tanto temor a equivocarnos como en las clases usuales.*

*We gave our opinion because we felt responsible for it. Besides, we did not feel afraid of making mistakes, as in the usual lessons (self-confidence).*

*El encargado repartía lo que debían averiguar y cada uno investigaba mejor un aspecto del tema central.*

*There was one in charge of assigning the topics, and the others searched about one of the aspects related to the main topic (individual accountability).*

Problems emerged during the team building because of their heterogeneity. Most of the teams expressed their inconformity by talking to the

teacher and by gestures of disapproval. So some of them had personal conflicts that affected the group task. Despite these problems, team work was positive because it created chains of friendship among the members of the group and allowed them to work in a more spontaneous and committed way. Some students in the final survey said *nos conocimos más y descubrimos esa parte que no habíamos visto. (We learned more about each other, and we discovered that part we had not seen before), y compartimos con personas que casi nunca lo hacemos. (We worked with classmates we seldom do).*

*The Becoming a Writer* category refers to the process of writing a text by using cooperative learning. So I will clarify the troubles and advantages in each of the stages of the writing process. Students had difficulties in establishing connections among each one of the stages of the writing process (Pre-writing, planning, drafting and post-writing).

*The Prewriting Stage* refers to the stage in which students ask themselves, "How do we write this? How do we get started?" Data gathered from field notes show that in this stage of the writing process students found the different techniques they learned to be useful. *Most of the students brainstormed but when I, the teacher-researcher, helped them develop ideas, they found that depending on the purpose there were other techniques they could apply for getting started such as graphic organizers.* In the final survey a student said, *ahora tengo más ideas sobre cómo escribir sobre un tema (Now, I have more ideas for writing about a specific topic).* Another claimed: *Así es mas fácil empezar a escribir (This way, it is easier to start writing);* and another affirmed, *Esta forma de escribir me ayuda en otras materias. (This writing exercise helps me for the other subjects).* Most of the students gathered information by interviewing other students, relatives and neighbors.

*The Planning Stage* refers to the organization and form of the information gathered in the pre-writing stage. The field notes evidenced some great

difficulties in organizing the information because they did not organize them according to the purpose, audience, genre or the main idea they had planned.

*The Drafting Stage* consists of putting ideas into sentences and paragraphs. In this stage, one of the most important actions is reviewing and this was one of the major problems that students faced. The problem resides in the misconception of the reviewing stage due to the fact that it is seen as the correction of the writing mistakes and the indication that students have not succeeded. This misconception is held not only by the teacher but by the students. Field notes support this mistaken belief when students' attitudes towards reviewing are examined. They looked reluctant to make global changes in their writings such as adding or deleting ideas, rewriting the text or starting again. They usually asked the teacher to correct grammar, spelling or word choice instead of giving comments about the structure and meaning of the text.

As a means of giving feedback both verbally and in writing, assessment focusing on processes, product, and attitudes was used. This information was gathered by means of checklists in order to get information about the team's progress in the writing process, abilities, and interests. The results of this tool suggested that assessment gives writers the occasion to improve writing because it allows writers to find mistakes and correct them. It also allows students to prepare for a real audience. Checklists also revealed that there were some problems with the performance of the teams such as the interpersonal relations among team participants. Some groups manifested intolerance and disrespect, but as the time passed, they were getting along better.

*The Post Writing Stage* refers to the act of sharing writings. Publishing students' writings helps them to build an awareness of the function of writing. In this stage I could notice that the attitudes were more gratifying than those in the last two stages. Students feel that their final product was the reward for their effort. That was why their emphasis on the decoration of their

writings and the place they published them was vital (English wall).

In conclusion, the categories that emerged from the data collection showed that the use of cooperative learning in connection with the writing process approach provides students with the right environment to write a text because of the advantages both promote such as reduction of writing anxiety, greater possibilities to get started, improvement of writing skills and the development and practice of building trust, leadership, decision-making, communication, and conflict management skills.

### CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

The results of this research were similar to the expectations. So after applying cooperative learning in the writing process classes, my ninth graders improved their attitudes toward the writing task and obtained a higher level of proficiency in their writing skills. Moreover, writing which follows a process created the students' awareness of writing communicatively, which means to write for a real audience.

The results and the theoretical framework both support the benefits of applying cooperative learning in the classroom and both coincide in that these are expanded into various issues such as the ones described below.

First, cooperative learning creates an environment of active, involved and exploratory learning because it asks students to interact with each other, share ideas and information, search for additional information, make decisions about the results of their consideration and present their findings to the rest of the class.

Second, cooperative learning demands a high degree of responsibility. Students need to attend meetings prepared with assignments completed in order to function within their groups. They also must understand the material which they are going to contribute to their groups so that the cooperative team functions as a challenge regarding their responsibilities as a group member.

Third, weaker language students improve their performance when they work with strong ones and stronger students reaffirm their abilities when they help others. At the same time a good performance builds higher self-esteem and interest in the subject. The act of sharing success with the group enhances both the individual's and the group self-esteem.

Fourth, anxiety is reduced because the focus of attention is distributed among the team's members. In the cooperative classrooms, the results of the team making a presentation correspond to the work of the whole group.

Even though there are advantages, both of these teaching approaches (cooperative learning and writing process approach) must be worked longer in order to get students highly involved in their process. It is not the last point because students need to be trained completely. Moreover, a new technique needs time to be assimilated. At the moment students showed a considerable change in their opinions about the writing task and a slight change in their concentration, and this is the first step to achieving the best outcomes in the future.

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**APPENDIX I: LACK OF PARTICIPATION AND ENGAGEMENT SURVEY**

1. ¿Te gusta el inglés?

- |          |                      |
|----------|----------------------|
| a. Mucho | c. Nada              |
| b. Poco  | d. Me es indiferente |

2. ¿Con qué frecuencia participas en clase?

- |               |                  |
|---------------|------------------|
| a. Siempre    | c. Algunas veces |
| b. Usualmente | d. Nunca         |

3. Expresa la opinión que te merece la siguiente afirmación: *“Las clases de inglés deberían proporcionarnos espacios donde el alumno sea quien descubra sus conocimientos”*.

- |                          |                              |
|--------------------------|------------------------------|
| a. Totalmente de acuerdo | c. En desacuerdo             |
| b. De acuerdo            | d. Totalmente en desacuerdo. |
| e. Me es indiferente     |                              |

4. Las razones por las cuales participas son:

- |  |  |
|--|--|
| a. Porque deseo obtener una buena calificación.    | c. Porque me gusta hacer conocer mis habilidades.                      |
| b. Porque me puede ayudar a pasar el año académico | d. Porque deseo resolver las inquietudes y dudas que el tema me genera |

5. Las razones de tu baja participación son:

- |   |  |
|---|--|
| a. Porque temo equivocarme  | c. Porque soy muy tímido(a)                |
| b. Porque creo que mis conocimientos del idioma son insuficientes | d. Porque no entiendo los temas explicados |

6. Indica tu opinión acerca de la siguiente afirmación, teniendo en cuenta la siguiente escala del 1 al 5, donde 1 expresa la menor preferencia y 5 la mayor preferencia. *“Me siento más activo y responsable de mi aprendizaje, cuando desarrollo actividades”*

- |                              |                           |
|------------------------------|---------------------------|
| a. Con toda la clase. _____  | c. En parejas. _____      |
| b. En grupos pequeños. _____ | d. Individualmente. _____ |



**APPENDIX 2: EXPLORING TEAM WORK PROGRESS SURVEY**

1. Escribir siguiendo un proceso, como lo hace un escritor profesional, mejoró mi forma de expresarme en forma escrita. Si \_\_\_ No \_\_\_ ¿Por qué?

2. Después de haber participado en este proyecto siento que tengo mayores habilidades para organizar la información que voy a escribir. Si \_\_\_ No \_\_\_ ¿Por qué?

II. De acuerdo con el siguiente enunciado, contesta las siguientes preguntas sinceramente:  
El trabajo cooperativo (cada uno de los integrantes del grupo tiene una función) permitió:

1. Tener un conocimiento más amplio del tema. Si \_\_\_ No \_\_\_ ¿Por qué?

2. Debatir opiniones que permitieron un mayor entendimiento del tema. Si \_\_\_ No \_\_\_ ¿Por qué?

3. Compartir ideas acerca de la organización de la información. Si \_\_\_ No \_\_\_ ¿Por qué?

4. Identificar más claramente los aspectos más importantes de la información. Si \_\_\_ No \_\_\_ ¿Por qué?

5. Que todos los integrantes del grupo participaran por igual. Si \_\_\_ No \_\_\_ ¿Por qué?

6. Enriquecer la visión del tema debido al aporte de todos los miembros del grupo. Si \_\_\_ No \_\_\_ ¿Por qué?

7. Interactuar con los integrantes del grupo. Si \_\_\_ No \_\_\_ ¿Por qué?

8. Participar más activamente. Si \_\_\_ No \_\_\_ ¿Por qué?

9. Comprometerme más con el trabajo. Si \_\_\_ No \_\_\_ ¿Por qué?

**APPENDIX 3: COOPERATIVE TEAM CHECKLIST**

1. ¿Se dieron turnos para tomar la palabra? Si \_\_\_ No \_\_\_ ¿Por qué?
2. ¿Las decisiones se tomaron teniendo en cuenta las opiniones de todos los miembros del grupo? Si \_\_\_ No \_\_\_ ¿Por qué?
3. ¿Los puntos de vista de cada uno de los integrantes fueron discutidos respetuosamente? Si \_\_\_ No \_\_\_ ¿Por qué?
4. ¿Se dieron sugerencias útiles? Si \_\_\_ No \_\_\_ ¿Por qué?
5. ¿Se motivaron las ideas propuestas por los compañeros? Si \_\_\_ No \_\_\_ ¿Por qué?
6. ¿Se presentaron problemas en la toma de decisiones? Si \_\_\_ No \_\_\_ ¿Por qué?
7. ¿Se resolvieron pacíficamente los conflictos? Si \_\_\_ No \_\_\_ Por qué?
8. ¿Respondieron a la señal de atención de la profesora? Si \_\_\_ No \_\_\_ ¿Por qué?
9. ¿Trabajaron con entusiasmo y dedicación? Si \_\_\_ No \_\_\_ ¿Por qué?
10. ¿Todos aportaron en la investigación del tema? Si \_\_\_ No \_\_\_ ¿Por qué?
11. ¿Se tomaron notas de las actividades realizadas por el grupo? Si \_\_\_ No \_\_\_ ¿Por qué?
12. ¿Definieron las responsabilidades y funciones de cada uno de los integrantes del grupo? Si \_\_\_ No \_\_\_ ¿Por qué?
13. ¿Definieron los propósitos para cada encuentro? Si \_\_\_ No \_\_\_ ¿Por qué?
14. ¿Controlaron sus reacciones emocionales manejando la ira? Si \_\_\_ No \_\_\_ ¿Por qué?
15. ¿Resumieron los resultados de cada encuentro? Si \_\_\_ No \_\_\_ ¿Por qué?
16. ¿Usaron efectivamente los recursos de investigación? Si \_\_\_ No \_\_\_ ¿Por qué?
17. ¿Manejaron adecuadamente el tiempo? Si \_\_\_ No \_\_\_ ¿Por qué?

## APPENDIX 4: FIELD NOTES

<b>Lesson Plan Two</b>		Attitudes toward whole class	Lack of interest and engagement
Date: July 29th	Topic: Pre-writing		
1. Teacher asks students questions about what writing is, its importance, and how they write.	Students show low interest in the class. They do not want to answer the teacher's questions, only five students participate actively.		
2. Students and teacher brainstorm about Love and Friendship day. Students brainstorm individually.	Some of them are doing other things and others are copying again.		

<b>Lesson Plan Five</b>		Attitudes toward traditional class. Disregarded and low level of engagement
Date: August 12th	Topic: Topic Sentence	
Teacher asks students to read the main idea of each paragraph of the reading of the last class. (They are underlined). Teacher writes on the board and explains what the topic and the controlling device are. Teacher writes other examples and asks students to identify them. Teacher explains what a paragraph is, the main and supporting sentences.	It was difficult to explain. Students were talking all the time and most of them did not pay attention to the explanation.	
Students work in groups, teacher chooses a monitor and she gives each one a sentence so each group has a sentence. The monitor has to find the three sentences missing to compose a paragraph. There are two paragraphs. Then they have to identify the topic sentence pointing out the topic and controlling device.	Most of the students were confused. The teacher had to explain again but they did not pay attention. The teacher walked by the groups and explained again. The class looked disorganized and there were some students who were not working.	