The effectiveness of cooperative learning on EFL first-year high school students' writing skills

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This research sought to identify the effectiveness of cooperative learning on writing skills among 35 first-year students from a public high school in Loja, Ecuador. The mixed-method investigation employed the action research design throughout four phases: reconnaissance, planning, enacting, and reflection. A pre-test and post-test measured students' knowledge about writing skills before and after the action process, whilst a mixed-type questionnaire and field notes documented students' perceptions towards cooperative learning (CL). Quantitative data were analysed with descriptive and inferential statistics, and qualitative data were analysed through a thematic method. The main results revealed that students' writing skills improved after the implementation of cooperative learning. The vocabulary component obtained the highest score in the post-test while the organisation component was the lowest. Students' perceptions towards cooperative learning were mostly positive not only because it improved their writing skills, but also because it developed their social skills which simultaneously raised their confidence to give and receive immediate feedback from their peers while producing a written text.

Introduction

In a general view, the acquisition of proficient English writing skills is increasingly vital, particularly for graduates, due to the prevalent use of this language in written communication in many fields of today's world such as education or business (Maggi & Quishpe, 2020). In Ecuador, English as a foreign language (EFL) is mandatory in primary and secondary schools. For this reason, the Ministry of Education (Ministerio de Educación, 2016) has established writing competency requirements for students at the end of each school year. For example, students transitioning from lower secondary education to the first year of high school should be able to produce written pieces that may contain some minor errors but display adequate use of vocabulary and syntactical selection.

However, the researcher's practicum experience in the last school year revealed that this objective had not been effectively accomplished among first-year high school students. This specific group of learners presented some difficulties in their writing, in terms of mechanics, organisation, vocabulary, language use, and content, which hindered them from producing a basic text in the target language. This inadequate grasp of writing components, as also evidenced in other previous research, and lack of engaging activities that raise their interest in writing have impeded them from successfully accomplishing the aforementioned curricular English writing goal expected to be developed at their educational level (Shammout, 2020; Tamayo & Cajas, 2020; Yusuf et al., 2019).

This has motivated the conducting of this research which proposes cooperative learning (CL) as a pedagogical approach to tackle this issue. This approach has previously thrown positive results in enhancing students' writing skills as shown by Abeti and Beriso (2021), Hertiki and Juliati (2019), and Shammout (2020). According to these researchers, CL boosts students' writing as it allows them to practice it in a group in which they can act as their main knowledge builders, sometimes as teachers, correcting their classmates' mistakes, or as perspicacious pupils, realising their own inaccuracies and accepting their peers' feedback. This interaction of thinking and learning together in a group is described by Littleton and Mercer (2013) as "interthinking". This process joins the individual experiences with the cognitive functions of group talk (decision-making, critical thinking, problem-solving, and communication), not only creating new knowledge but also distributing it to others. This means that in CL learners begin to use the language in such a collaborative and innovative manner to connect their intellects creating an impactful tool for problem resolution, thereby surpassing the potential solitary efforts.

Finally, this teaching methodology has demonstrated efficacy in promoting a sense of responsibility, self-reliance, and acceptance of failure, as well as shared success among students (Bekhta & Belmekki, 2021; Hertiki & Juliati, 2019; Shammout, 2020; Suhaimi & Yunus, 2021). Although these previous researchers have demonstrated that CL can support the development of learners' writing skills, they suggested a need for further investigations at other educational levels, with larger samples, and longer application periods. For these reasons, our article investigates the improving of writing skills through cooperative learning among first-year students at a public high school in Loja, Ecuador. On this basis, two research questions were formulated:

1. What is the effect of cooperative learning on writing skills among first-year high school students?; and
2. What are the students' perceptions towards the use of cooperative learning to enhance writing skills among first-year high school students?

Cooperative learning (CL)

It is common to find that terms like cooperative learning, collaborative learning, and group work are used interchangeably as indicated by Anderson (2019); nevertheless, CL goes beyond just simply grouping students and assigning them tasks (Han et al., 2022). This educational approach roots in the 1990s (Adi & Hendah, 2021) relying on the noble idea of maximising the learning and potential of others rather than developing apathetic or competitive attitudes (Johnson & Johnson, 2005, as cited in Michael et al., 2022). Indeed, during CL students with diverse abilities and performance levels join into small teams and collaborate, counting on one another, to work towards a common goal (Nazari et al., 2022). During those interactions, students start experiencing mutual aid as they nurture their social and interpersonal skills (Adi & Hendah, 2021).

On this basis, Yusnani (2018) asserted that the most influential theory of learning in CL is social constructivism. According to this theory, learning is a social process in which

students acquire new cognitive abilities through intensive peer collaboration and interactions (Vygotsky, 1978). Thus, the zone of proximal development appears in CL, since peer support and interactions help learners to feel more confident to progress successfully during their learning; and, eventually, they become autonomous learners (Barrs, 2022). In addition, learners are engaged in hands-on activities, observations, discussions, problem-solving, or peer reviews that stimulate their critical thinking, and problem-solving skills and enable them to construct knowledge based on their interactions with peers and teachers (Dyson et al., 2022).

In EFL contexts, CL has promoted positive effects mainly in two broad areas: learning environment and learning quality (Chen, 2021; Keramati & Gillies, 2022; Shammout, 2020; Suhaimi & Yunus, 2021). For instance, after implementing CL in a language classroom, Keramati and Gillies (2022) observed a more communicative, engaging, secure, and dynamic environment with interactions being more consensual rather than confrontational. Moreover, they concluded that immersion in several viewpoints during teamwork enabled learners to build new ideas upon their classmates' understanding.

Principles of cooperative learning

Just as the terminology for cooperative learning can sometimes vary (Anderson, 2019), the names of the principles that underline it may also differ from study to study. For example, Johnson and Johnson (2019) studied these principles in the form of elements such as positive interdependence, individual accountability, face-to-face interaction, social skills, and group processing. Likewise, Kagan and Kagan (2009) presented the acronym PIES to name four basic CL principles as positive interdependence, individual accountability, equal participation, and simultaneous interaction. Our research adapts the four principles named by Kagan and Kagan (2009) in order to integrate the principle of social skills advocated by Johnson and Johnson (2019).

Positive interdependence
This principle encompasses the tenet that in order to fulfill a task all members' participation is required, since each of them executes a specific role that cannot be performed by any other member of the group (Lans et al., 2022). This means that learners in a group depend on each other to succeed (Kagan & Kagan, 2009).

Individual accountability
When working in groups, students must know that they cannot hide behind their classmates' efforts (Johnson & Johnson, 2019). That is to say, learners are individually responsible for displaying and improving their own learning results during CL (Gökçe, 2020).

Equal participation
Sometimes this principle has been defined as the heart of CL (Chophel & Norbu, 2021) since, when applied, it guarantees learners have the same number of opportunities to fully participate or take part in the development of the group activities. It avoids the predominance of one or two members and secures learning for all (Jacobs & Chau, 2021).

Simultaneous interaction
As noted by Guaranga Lema (2022), this principle is responsible for making CL classrooms more student-centred, as it is expected to increase student talk and reduce teacher talk (Kagan & Kagan, 2009). For that, Guaranga Lema (2022) explained that through CL, learning productivity increases since students find themselves participating most of the time whereas teachers just give support and guidance when necessary.

Social skills
This CL principle has to do with the set of social abilities that members of a group utilise to have the task and goal fulfilled (Johnson & Johnson, 2019). Concerning social abilities, Kagan and Kagan (2009) listed these skills, including active listening, asking for help, caring, conflict resolution, consensus-seeking, patience, leadership, acceptance of rejection gracefully, polite disagreement, and perspective-taking. These skills not only influence the learners' academic outcomes but also help students to establish new or solid relationships with their team members. For that, they need to be properly modelled and scaffolded by the teacher (Maksum et al., 2021)

Cooperative learning strategies

Cooperative learning strategies also known as structures are step-by-step procedures that describe sequenced events for group interaction. Some of their characteristics are that (1) they are content-free which means that they can be adapted to any learning subject matter; and (2) they are structured in such a way that they involve the principles of CL (Chophel & Norbu, 2021). Some examples include jigsaw, think-pair-share, roundtable, timed-pair-share, and numbered-heads-together.

Jigsaw
Michael et al. (2022) explained that this strategy consists mainly in dividing students into a "home group" and an "expert group". After introducing a topic, students in their home groups are assigned a segment of the whole theme which they need to research about and become experts on it. Later, they visit other groups (expert groups) to share their knowledge and write new insights from those groups. Then learners return to their home group, share with their classmates the new concepts obtained, and consolidate their learning.

Think-pair-share
In this strategy, students are prompted to consider multiple possible answers to a question. They are given individual thinking time to later discuss and expand their thoughts with a partner. Finally, students share their ideas with the whole class (Sari & Susiani, 2021).

Roundtable
It involves students responding to a prompt or question. After discussing the questions, students have to work in teams to write, draw, or build something on an individual sheet of paper. The paper is then passed around the group for others to contribute answers until a consensus is reached. Finally, learners share their thoughts with the class, giving everyone an equal opportunity to voice their ideas (Romadhoni et al., 2022).

Timed-pair-share
It is a useful strategy for asking for opinions and interpersonal interpretations, encouraging participation and listening skills, especially for shy students. Students are paired, given a time limit for each member to speak and listen, and then share their ideas with the class. (Agarwal & Nagar, 2010 as cited in Teanga Aguilar, 2022).

Numbered-heads-together
It is a strategy that enhances students' interaction and motivation. Bachtiar et al. (2018) emphasised the intentional formation of groups with varying levels of performance. Each team member is assigned a number, and the teacher presents a topic and questions for group discussion. A number is then called out, prompting corresponding students to respond. This encourages interdependence and accountability, allowing higher-performing students to support weaker peers as they do not know who is going to be called.

Basic components of writing

Various components contribute to the elaboration of effective and high-quality writing (Yusuf et al., 2019). For that, this study gives particular attention to content, organisation, vocabulary, language use, and mechanics.

Content
It outlines the relevance of information in a text. Sakkir and Dollah (2019) emphasised two important qualities of well-crafted content: completeness and unity. Completeness is achieved through a topic sentence, supporting information, and a conclusion. Whereas unity refers to coherence between sentences, with all ideas related to the main idea or purpose of the text. In other words, every insight presented in a written text must be connected and pertinent to the text's central idea.

Organisation
According to Mirnawati (2021), good writing organisation requires clear and logical sequencing of ideas in well-structured sentences to facilitate easy comprehension. Klimova (2011) added that factors like fluency, clarity, and logical sequencing contribute to readability and proper understanding of the text. Therefore, organisation is fundamental in conveying the intended message without it being biased.

Vocabulary
It is a decisive writing component for successful information transfer since the message depends on the kind words chosen to be understood (Toba & Noor, 2019). Moreover, vocabulary serves a dual purpose such as facilitating information transmission and eliciting a reader's response through correct word choice (Sakkir & Dollah, 2019). As a result, word richness and mastery of word form are factors to consider in this component (Klimova, 2011)

Language use
It refers to how accurately words, phrases, and grammar are selected and combined by writers to convey their thoughts in a context provided. Shanorra et al. (2021), described

this component as the "correct usage of the rules of language or grammar that focuses on verbs, nouns, and agreements" (p.2). Toba and Noor (2019) added some other elements to consider in this writing component such as numbers, word order function, articles, adverbs, tenses, and prepositions. Therefore, by having a strong grammatical foundation and using it to choose the correct language particles and phrases to fit a context the writer can form new clauses (subject, predicate, object, complement, and adjunct), that later can be transformed into complete sentences (syntactical unit consisting of more than one clause) (Afrianto et al., 2020).

Mechanics
It refers to the proper use of punctuation, spelling, and capitalisation to enhance text comprehensibility (Shanorra et al., 2021). Correct mechanics, including punctuation, endow written language with depth and clarity, functioning similarly to the variations in tone and pauses used in verbal communication. Inadequate mechanics lead to monotonous and challenging-to-comprehend text that may convey unintended meaning (Ginting, 2018). Thus, using appropriate mechanics is essential for unambiguous communication.

The process of writing

To ensure a final polished written product, writers are required to go through various stages such as planning, drafting, revising, editing, and publishing. Harmer (2015) developed this process under the name of "The process-based approach" Although it may seem like a rigorous step-by-step procedure, he describes it as a cyclical and flexible process. In other words, "Instead of performing the various stages… in a purely linear way… we loop backwards and forwards… that is we rewrite, re-edit, review, etc. … more than once" (Harmer, 2015, p. 364).

Planning
This stage is not about writing at all, but determining what, why, and how to write (Dewi, 2021). It requires projecting oneself into the future, establishing a standpoint, and ensuring idea coherence. Thus, utilising strategies like brainstorming, think-pair-share, and group discussions is pivotal for learners to start generating ideas (Suprapto et al., 2022).

Drafting
It is the learners' first attempt at writing their planned ideas in an organised manner (Suprapto et al., 2022). During this phase, students concentrate on their selection of vocabulary, adherence to grammatical rules, and the elaboration of intricate concepts in an approximation of the desired format as claimed by Sarmiento and Ortega-Dela Cruz (2021).

Revising
This stage supports learners in handling difficult terms with which they are struggling through an intended correction aiming to improve their writing quality (Latif, 2012). Therefore, learners must be guided throughout and provided with materials and activities that could help them to identify those mistakes. Such activities may include color coding

or peer revision in which pupils provide feedback in the form of comments, suggestions, and advice to one another (Dewi, 2021).

Editing
It is the longest stage in terms of time because it requires learners to think again going back to redrafting, revising, and re-editing. This writing component holds a special focus on looking at key parts such as sentence structure, word choice, grammar, and mechanics (Latif, 2012). Moreover, it is essentially carried out with teachers' assistance in case of changing the focus and considering new prompts to insert them into the text (Harmer, 2015).

Publishing
This is the last but not the least stage in the writing process. It involves presenting the written product after the corresponding corrections have been made, so the audience can finally read it (Suprapto et al., 2022).

Method

This study utilised a mixed method design to gain a deeper understanding of the variables under study such as cooperative learning and writing skills. Quantitative data were collected through a pre-test and post-test that measured students' writing skills (Appendix 1). Qualitative data were gathered through a mixed-type questionnaire and field notes (Appendix 2) which registered participants' perceptions, comments, and reactions towards the use of CL to improve their writing (Gay et al., 2012).

This study was an action research design following the four-stage model presented by Kemmis et al., (2014) which included reconnaissance, planning, enacting the plan, and reflection. In the first stage, reconnaissance, 35 first-year high school students (14 to 18 years old) enrolled in the 2022/2023 school year were selected using a convenience sampling technique since it was practical in terms of researcher's mobility, access to the institution, and open consent from the educational institution (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). During this stage, the pre-test was administered, previously pilot tested, and validated by two university professors with more than 20 years of experience teaching EFL students. After the administration of the pre-test, which aimed to measure students' issues on writing skills, an action plan was developed. This comprised a total of 10 lesson plans that integrated the cooperative learning methodology (principles and strategies). These lesson plans were monitored and revised by the university professor. Moreover, field notes documented outstanding events during the lesson. As stated by Creswell and Creswell (2018), field notes contain descriptive and reflective notes. The former allowed the researcher to register the actual event(s) during the implementation of CL, whereas the latter offered an opportunity to explain and understand why that event occurred.

The enacting plan stage lasted a total of 40 hours for 10 weeks, 4 hours per week in which each student of the groups gave and received peer feedback to guarantee individual accountability. In the beginning (the first four weeks), less complex cooperative strategies

such as think-pair-share and timed-pair-share were used during the planning and drafting writing stages to let students familiarise themselves with working in groups and content. In the following two weeks, the roundtable was presented to learners to primarily brainstorm, edit, and correct their written texts. For the subsequent two weeks, numbered heads-together worked on reviewing and editing content; thus, students were able to identify and correct writing inaccuracies. Lastly, the jigsaw strategy was integrated in the final two weeks to form home and expert groups of students who had to review the writing components, grammar rules, and vocabulary. Throughout this process of CL, students shared their experiences to enhance their writing skills. The researcher was very attentive to observing students' reactions and perceptions toward CL during the lessons. These observations became useful data to write field notes immediately after each lesson, which were further discussed with the university professor to make proper adjustments. The comments, experiences, and judgments obtained from the students were later translated from their first language to English by the researchers.

In the last action research stage, students took a writing post-test (Appendix 1) to see how much they had improved after the intervention plan. Furthermore, They filled out a mixed-type questionnaire that contained closed-ended questions followed by open-ended questions in which learners had to explain in detail the reasons for having chosen a determined item from the previous close question related to their perceptions about the use of CL (Appendix 2). It is worth mentioning that students used their mother tongue to answer the questionnaire more clearly and confidently. Likewise, the researchers translated this information, and because of the limited length of this article, the students' first-language responses were not presented.

Even though the pre-test and post-test were the same, none of the students was informed about this detail to avoid a potential practice effect. The pre-test and post-test instrument had six closed-ended questions to measure students' writing skills in terms of mechanics, organisation, vocabulary, and language use, and one open-ended question to measure the content component in which they needed to write about their role models (Appendix 1). Likewise, the field notes and questionnaire (with 11 statements) explored students' perceptions towards the use of cooperative learning to enhance their writing skills, during and after the intervention plan, respectively. Students' perceptions were focused on the basic principles of CL such as positive interdependence, individual accountability, equal participation, simultaneous interaction, and social skills to determine how they perceived the impact of this approach on their writing (Appendix 2).

Descriptive and inferential statistics were used to discriminate quantitative data. The descriptive statistics involved central measures of tendency such as the mean average and standard deviation for the pre-test and post-test (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019), whereas from inferential statistics, the Wilcoxon test for non-parametric data was utilised to statistically corroborate or contrast the writing enhancement in the two related periods, pre- and post-intervention (Wilcoxon, 1945). To examine the qualitative data, thematic analysis was utilised. Through this analysis, the researcher found similar patterns and essential features in the students' responses to the open-ended statements of the questionnaire and the observational data from the field notes (Creswell, 2019). In this way,

the researcher corroborated, contrasted, and compared the statistics with first-hand information from the participants of the research. In doing so, the mixed methods nature of this study was fully achieved.

Results: Quantitative data

Research question 1:   What is the effect of cooperative learning on writing skills among first-year students at a public high school in Loja?

Pre-test and post-test results

Table 1 briefly illustrates the score fluctuations in the participants' writing skills by comparing the mean scores they obtained in the pre-test (before the plan of intervention) and the post-test (after the intervention).

Table 1: Mean score differences between the writing pre-test and post-test.
SD = Standard deviation, X = Mean difference between pre-test and post-test

Writing components	Mean				Difference		p
	Pre-test	SD	Post-test	SD	X	SD	
Mechanics (2)	0.77	0.53	1.66	0.31	0.89	0.22	0.00013
Organisation (2/2)	0.81	0.57	1.47	0.38	0.66	0.19	0.00013
Vocabulary (2/2)	0.63	0.42	1.54	0.33	0.91	0.09	0.00020
Language use (2/2)	0.72	0.43	1.61	0.33	0.89	0.09	0.00014
Content (2/2)	0.14	0.37	1	0.49	0.86	-0.11	0.00013
Total (10/10)	3.07	2.31	7.28	1.84	4.21	0.48	0.00073

Table 1 reveals that in the writing pre-test, most students got low grades. This can be seen in "mechanics" with 0.77/2 in which students struggled with punctuation, capitalisation, and spelling. In "organisation" (0.81/2), students presented difficulties in structuring well-ordered sentences. Likewise, the learners faced some difficulties in "vocabulary" (0.63/2) in terms of word use and meaning. Regarding "language use" (0.72/2) some challenges were identified in verb agreement and adverb placement; whereas, in "content" (0.14/2) the learners found it demanding to provide relevant and related sentences to the topic provided (role models). In consequence, before the intervention plan with cooperative learning, the mean score obtained was 3.07/10 with a standard deviation of 2.31 which showed a low-level performance of students in English writing.

After the application of cooperative learning, Table 1 illustrates that students' writing performance increased. The "mechanics" component (1.66/2) showed an increase of 0.89 in comparison to the pre-test. "Organisation" (1.47/2) indicated a growth of 0.66 while "vocabulary" (1.54/2) showed an exponential gain of 0.91. On the matter of "language use" (1.61/2), it unveiled a progress of 0.89 whereas in "content" (1/2), students numerically improved by 0.86 points from their initial score in the pre-test. Thus, in the writing post-test results, the standard deviation was 1.84 and the mean writing score was 7.28/10 which represented a gain of 4.21 points in comparison to the average score from

the pre-test. Finally, the total p-value of 0.00073 obtained from the Wilcoxon's test was less than 0.05 ($p \leq 0.05$) which revealed a statistically significant change between pre-test and post-test scores.

Results: Qualitative data

Research question 2: What are the students' perceptions towards the use of cooperative learning to enhance writing skills among first-year students at a public high school in Loja?

Questionnaire results

Qualitative information gathered through elaborated open-ended questions which appeared after close-ended questions in a mixed-type questionnaire and field notes helped to corroborate quantitative results. Within this framework, statements of the questionnaire were organised into the five principles of cooperative learning studied in this research such as "positive interdependence", "individual accountability", "equal participation", "simultaneous interaction", and "social skills." By doing so, all aspects of this instructional approach were evaluated by the participants (quoted responses have been translated into English).

Positive interdependence

Statement 1: Organising the groups heterogeneously helped me to successfully accomplish writing tasks
Most of the participants perceived that grouping with students of different proficiency levels (high, medium, and low achievers) was helpful for them to accomplish writing tasks. For instance, Student 5 wrote:

> Grouping with a friend who knew English language … facilitated the development of writing tasks since he easily explained the activity to me and as not inconvenienced to explain it again if we did not understand at first (Student 5).

Indeed, from the field notes, the researcher observed that group members tended to help each other. That is to say, high achievers tended to perform as tutors inside their groups which helped low and middle achievers to dissipate their doubts through immediate feedback. This "positive independence" established was suitable for all learners, especially for those who required more assistance, as they got immersed in a variety of ideas when writing and getting ongoing feedback from more advanced peers. In consequence, brainstorming, word searching, and translation writing activities performed during the planning stage were boosted through this mutual support that the students experienced; thus, enhancing students writing skills in its first stages.

Statement 2: Select the role you like performing the most and the least while working in groups.
In this statement, students had to select from four specific cooperative roles that included (1) recorder; (2) gatekeeper; (3) quiet captain; and (4) checker. The first, helped learners to write their classmates' ideas, gatekeepers tended to guarantee equal contribution in the

groups, quiet captains controlled the noise level, and checkers verified whether their classmates' contributions were correct and accurate. Interestingly, most students selected the role of "recorder" as their favourite one whilst "checker" was the least selected.

> Being the recorder helped me to memorise more words and expanded my vocabulary since I was writing almost the whole time, also, it gave me the sense that I was contributing more and being more valuable for the group (Student 7, personal communication, 12 January 2023).

> I didn't enjoy being the checker since I was just supervising what my classmates were writing and I didn't have much to do (Student 7, personal communication, 12 January 2023).

This group role distribution allowed students to count on one another, be helpful during all the writing stages, working on brainstorming, error correction, and content edition as they required each other's effort to do these activities on time. The field notes also registered that students were more engaged, active, and motivated when acting as "recorders," while "checkers" were more relaxed leading group activities. This is likely why the "checker" role was less popular, as it did not provide the same sense of accomplishment as being a "recorder".

Individual accountability

Statement 3: I liked that the teacher evaluated each member individually rather than as a group.
This statement evaluated the students' perspective on being academically assessed for their individual efforts in the group or as a whole while developing writing tasks. In this regard, a similar pattern was found in students' answers, most agreeing with the statement:

> Sometimes knowing that the teacher was going to assess you individually and not as a group we had to study and help our other members to understand the content. In that way, we learned even more (Student 27, personal communication, 12 January 2023).

> I liked it because sometimes not all the members helped to do the work, so they needed to prepare and study afterward anyway (Student 15, personal communication, 12 January 2023).

From the field notes, it was documented that even after finishing the tasks, some groups took extra time to review their work, asking their peers for feedback since they wanted to ensure equal knowledge and avoid obtaining low scores. This sense of personal responsibility was crucial for students throughout all the writing phases as, although being in groups, each of them needed to work on their own written pieces and review class content which provided them with strong knowledge foundations.

Statement 4. Assessing my partners in pairs or groups helped me to reinforce content and see how much I and my teammates knew.
In response to this statement, most students showed a positive perspective since this principle encouraged them to rehearse their knowledge of writing while identifying possible areas of improvement in their teammates.

> To be honest, listening to my classmates' answers helped me to reinforce content, since when they were wrong, I could correct them, so that, I can say that thanks to their mistakes I learned even better (Student 6, personal communication, 12 January 2023).

The field notes supported this testimony, as classmates would remind each other of previous conversations when discussing their work, indicating productive teamwork focused on moving forward together. Therefore, this principle benefited learners in realising their own and partners' writing mistakes which were found, in this research, most useful during the editing and drafting writing stages.

Equal participation

Statement 5: I had equal opportunities to participate and contribute during the group activities.
This cooperative principle guaranteed that students contributed equally during teamwork which promoted idea negotiation and facilitated writing-task fulfillment. In our field notes, the students' reactions towards this principle were noticed when observing students who performed the role of gatekeeper in the groups. These students effectively integrated the other members into the writing tasks but also ensured that each classmate participated in group discussion and decision-making. This helped learners to obtain or remember more words, phrases, and writing rules for polishing their written works.

Statement 6: Select the technique you liked the most and the least while working in groups to guarantee equal participation
In this statement, the learners needed to choose from four different techniques used to warrant equal contribution in the groups such as (1) taking turns; (2) time distribution; (3) think and-write time; and (4) exercise division. The first technique aided students to determine the order in which each one was going to express their opinion. The second technique allowed them to indicate how much time each student would contribute. The third one enabled learners to order their thoughts, write and analyse them before sharing them with the group. Finally, exercise division made students distribute the writing exercises equally to finish their tasks faster. In this sense, taking turns and think-and-write were students' favourite techniques.

> They were my favourite techniques since we could organize our ideas better and we also made sure that what we were going to share was right (Student 16, personal communication, 12 January 2023).

Furthermore, in the field notes, it was recorded that during group activities learners numbered themselves to indicate their participation order. For instance, during pair work, student number 1 shared their answer first while student number 2 recorded their partners' ideas; later, they switched roles. In larger groups, the gatekeeper usually distributed the participation chances equally. This demonstrated the principle of equal participation, noted in both the students' comments and researchers' observations which endorsed learners' vocabulary and content components during the writing stages such as planning and editing.

Simultaneous interaction

Statement 7: What I liked about cooperative learning is that I could speak more than I did in a traditional classroom

Students' comments on this statement were positive as most of them indicated that their speaking opportunities during CL increased in contrast to a traditional educational setting. Indeed, according to the observations gathered in the field notes, the researcher noted that students frequently shared their opinions, even when not prompted. This invited them to actively participate during the instruction. Of course, it also created background noise, but this was considered healthy since conversations were not off-topic. Moreover, it allowed learners to provide others with constructive feedback on their writing mistakes and brainstorm new ideas. As a result, as the intervention progressed, students became more and more confident, actively engaged in the class rather than passively listening to the teacher.

Statement 8: Working simultaneously with my classmates kept me engaged in the writing activities

According to students' responses, interacting simultaneously in the groups helped to keep them engaged in the development of writing tasks, which increased group work productivity and learning growth.

> Working in groups kept me engaged since many ideas were coming and going from my classmates that were interesting to hear while working (Student 18, personal communication, 12 January 2023).

These findings agree with our field notes, which described group writing activities, as picture-description, spaces where laughs, discussions, and sometimes soft-controlled arguments took place. All these events helped learners to stay motivated towards completing the writing task which remained a common factor, helpful during all the writing stages. Nevertheless, there was one student who described these group interactions as unfavourable and distracting.

> I was more worried to finish the activity and sometimes the noise caused by my group or others distracted me (Student 2, personal communication, 12 January 2023).

Social skills

Statement 9: Working in groups helped me to build stronger relationships with my classmates

While working in teams, this principle assisted students in generating ideas, increasing vocabulary, making their first drafts, reaching consensus, and creating a more friendly environment which resulted in stronger friendships and new ones that fostered the development of writing tasks.

> In the end, I made new friends since I got to work with some classmates that I didn't even get along with, but we ended up building a friendship (Student 7, personal communication, 12 January 2023).

> We reinforced our friendship because we talked more in groups either about the topic or something else so I got to know them better (Student 9, personal communication, 12 January 2023).

The field notes recorded that students' social skills improved throughout the intervention, in contrast to their initial reluctance towards working with certain classmates. Moreover, in the beginning, some learners openly shared with the researchers the reason behind their dislike for group work. Some of them said that most of the time, before the intervention, individual activities were given; and for that reason, they were not accustomed to working collaboratively.

Statement 10: I developed the following social skills the most while working cooperatively
In this statement, students had to choose from a set of eight different social skills that they were expected to nurture while experiencing cooperative learning. These skills encompassed (1) polite disagreement; (2) leadership; (3) consensus-seeking; (4) conflict resolution; (5) perspective-taking; (6) patience; (7) asking for help; and (8) active listening. All of these skills were intended to assist learners in knowledge transfer, especially during the editing stage since it was the phase that required learners to identify, correct, and provide feedback to their classmates on their writing errors. Interestingly, a similar pattern in students' answers placed the social skills of patience, active listening, and asking for help as the ones which they perceived developed the most during CL.

> I feel like I developed more my social skill of asking for help since I looked for different alternatives to share them with my group (Student 33, personal communication, 12 January 2023).

> When asking for help I got to know that my classmates had interesting ideas that couldn't haven't thought of by myself (Student 27, personal communication, 12 January 2023).

The field notes indicated that certain reserved learners who were initially reluctant to participate in class by raising their hand and sharing their answers, ultimately surpassed their peers in terms of questioning and responding. This developed social spirit helped raise students' confidence and contribute more to the writing tasks assigned

Discussion

What is the effect of cooperative learning on writing skills among first-year high school students?

As reported in the Results section, there was a statistically significant increase in the post-test after the intervention plan. This could be good evidence that cooperative learning worked very well on students' cognitive dimension regarding the different components of writing. These results are similar to findings by Abeti and Beriso (2021) who showed that the vocabulary, grammar, and sentence accuracy in their students' written compositions improved after CL. Furthermore, although all writing components increased their mean score after cooperative learning, as found in the research by Shammout (2020), it was

evidenced that the "vocabulary" aspect benefited the most and "organisation" the least since their mean differences were 0.91 and 0.66 respectively. This means that most students were able to write higher-quality sentences with fewer spelling, capitalisation, and punctuation mistakes at the end of the intervention.

However, this increase may have been due to increased exposure to writing practice, rather than to all the other language skills. For this reason, the repetitive opportunities for the students to practice writing skills helped them to be easily immersed on this specific skill for almost two months. By doing so, the other language skills might have been neglected. Therefore further research should integrate all the language skills to intensify the advantages of CL.

Even so, there are several possible explanations for attributing a positive effect to cooperative learning, because the methods we used offered learners the opportunity to work with peers with varying English abilities, either in pairs or groups, which created a conducive learning environment with low, medium, and high achievers interacting in a group (Kagan & Kagan, 2009). This aspect of CL was crucial as students could build upon their classmates' understanding while engaged in social discourse (Vygotsky (1978). That is to say, as learners worked on their writing, revising, and polishing their manuscripts or tasks in groups, they shared their mistakes, knowledge, and experiences, with group members correcting and learning from one another. By doing so, the students in need of feedback, but shy enough to not ask their queries openly with the whole class, could receive the feedback they required without leaving their heads full of doubts (Kagan & Kagan, 2009).

Another possible reason why CL improved students' writing could be its feature of promoting an active use of the target language to make decisions. This remained helpful during the planning stage having students brainstorm vocabulary related to their role models, writing rules, or during picture description exercises and making decisions on which of these would be more suitable for their text purpose. In consequence, learners related their prior learning experiences with the cognitive functions of the group to revise and build new knowledge that was immediately shared with others through the target language (Littleton & Mercer, 2013). In that way, learners' creativity was also raised since more ideas were coming and going from more than one participant in comparison to individual work (Hertiki & Juliati, 2019).

For these reasons, this teaching approach highly influenced the development of students' writing skills because they obtained a greater extent of controlled and independent writing practice through structured group interactions in which, as appreciated in this study, small classrooms were formed inside the classroom with various learners performing as teachers and students along the way. These interactions created a more communicative environment in which learners felt less anxious to participate, since they were asking and talking to people who shared the same class status (student) and had a stronger connectedness (Kagan & Kagan, 2009)

What are the students' perceptions towards the use of cooperative learning to enhance writing skills among first-year high school students?

According to the questionnaire and the field notes, most of the participants had positive perceptions towards cooperative learning to improve their writing skills. For instance, the learners described this approach as an active, engaging, and supportive one, which allowed them to overcome their fear to write. Moreover, students also declared that having more heads thinking on how to develop a task eased its complexity, boosted their socialisation by nurturing their social skills, and most importantly allowed them to reinforce and create new bonds with their classmates. These findings supported what Bekhta and Belmekki (2021), Bouchair and Kaouache (2021), and Hertiki and Juliati (2019) reported. They all agreed on the idea that CL empowered students to heighten their self-confidence, overcame differences, and established peer assistance patterns. Without these events that CL originated among this group of learners, it is likely that the writing progress evidenced in the post-test would not have been possible.

Conclusion

The results of this study strengthen the findings from previous research that suggest that CL is an effective way to enhance EFL writing skills in terms of "mechanics"; "organisation"; "vocabulary"; "language use"; "content"; and "vocabulary". In our study "vocabulary" was the writing component with the highest score while organisation obtained the lowest. Equally important, students' perceptions were mostly positive towards the use of this approach in which small classrooms, with learners participating simultaneously as teachers and pupils, were intentionally shaped within the class. What is more, CL boosted learners' social skills by raising their confidence in giving and receiving prompt feedback from peers during written text production. Therefore, it may be significant to consider CL in the development of EFL writing skills as it fosters a sense of community and accountability, which helps students feel more motivated and engaged in their writing.

Finally, the findings of this research are subject to at least three limitations. First, there was no control group; therefore, findings cannot be generalised with other academic scenarios even if working with the same issue and educational level. Second, CL is not a one-size-fits-all solution, and the effectiveness of this approach may vary depending on the group size, the task, and the individual needs of the learners. Third, the emphasis on writing skills reduced the time to expose learners to other skills. In consequence, a further study could assess the long-term effects of CL in other settings, educational levels, comparing different age categories, and other English language skills such as reading, listening, and speaking to expand the impact that CL may have on English language learning.

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Appendix 1: Writing pre-test and post-test (translation)

MECHANICS:
1. **Look and read the example first. Then, rewrite the sentences (a, b, c…) by making all the changes you consider necessary in punctuation, capitalisation and spelling.**
   Example

Sentence with mistakes	**Sentence after correction**
is camila comin to school today	*Is Camila coming to school today?*

Punctuation
a. By the way, what would you like to be _____
b. Four years ago I created my Facebook account _____

Capitalisation
c.   Messi is arriving to Ecuador in February._____
d.   Congratulations! you are a good student._____

Spelling
e. Bad Bunny is consider a trendsetter for teenagers._____
f. Connor is intersted in learning new languages._____

ORGANISATION
2. **Unscramble the words to form well-ordered sentences:**

Example:
her/ Annai/calling/is/mom.
Annai is calling her mom.
a. inspired you/ a soccer player?/who/to become/_____
b. enjoyed/sport classes/Ariel/taking _____
c. She/continue/acting/is going to _____
d. most important/is your/what/achievement _____

VOCABULARY
3. Fill in the blanks using the words from the "Word Bank". Be careful! There is 1 extra word, and the first word has already been given.

Paragraph	Word Bank
What's my brother like? Well, for one thing, he's extravagant and the typical rebel. Rebels (0) f freedom lovers. He's interested in (1) _____ all the different views, but he enjoys (2) _____ controversy. Recently, he decided (3) ____ more relaxed and friendly. He plans (4) _____medicine at the university. My parents think he'll become a great professional.	a. to study b. creating c. show up d. knowing e. to be ~~f. are~~

4. Match the idioms with their correct meaning by placing the corresponding letter to fill in the blank.
Example

e. *Go for it.*	0. *e* *you can do it.*
a. To be worlds apart.	1. ___ to be an energetic and enthusiastic person.
b. To do something for kicks.	2. ___ to do something for excitement or fun.
c. To have the knack.	3. ___ to have different ideas, tastes, and interests.
d. To be a live wire.	4. ___ to have a talent to do things easily.

LANGUAGE USE
5. Fill in the blank with the correct conjugation of the verb to be *am/is/are.*

Verb agreement	

1. Mark and Robby _____ playing basketball with the teacher.
  a. am
  b. is
  c. are
	3. I_____ practising because I have a show next week
	  a. am
	  b. is
	  c. are

2. What ____ you wearing today?
  a. am
  b. is
  c. are
	4. Lucia_____ jogging with Elena at the park.
	  a. am
	  b. is
	  c. are

6. Rewrite the sentence placing the adverb in the correct position of the sentence
Example
I fall asleep in class. (sometimes) __*Sometimes, I fall asleep in class.*__
a. I enjoy reading books. (always) _____
b. Camilo is sleeping. (right now) _____
c. What do you wear? (usually)_____
d. Why are they studying? (today) _____

CONTENT
7. **Write a short descriptive text about your role model by answering the questions below. Make sure that all ideas you write are in relation to the topic.**

- Who is your role model?
- How old do you think he/she is?
- What is he/she like? (use three personality adjectives to describe him/her)
- What has he/she done to impress you?
- Conclude your paragraph saying why you admire him/her or if you would like to be like him/her.

_____
_____
_____
_____
_____
_____
_____
_____

Appendix 2: Questionnaire (translation)

Positive interdependence
Statement 1: Organising the groups heterogeneously helped me to successfully accomplish writing tasks.
a) Strongly agree; b) Agree; c) Neutral; d) Disagree; e) Strongly disagree
Why do you think that happened?
_____
Statement 2: Select the role you like performing the most and the least while working in groups.
a) Recorder; b) Gatekeeper; Quiet captain; c) Checker
Why did you like/did not like that role?
_____

Individual accountability
Statement 3: I liked that the teacher evaluated each member individually rather than as a group.
a) Strongly agree; b) Agree; c) Neutral; d) Disagree; e) Strongly disagree
Why did you like/did not like to be evaluated in individually rather than as a group?
_____
Statement 4. Assessing my partners in pairs or groups helped me to reinforce content and see how much I and my teammates knew.
a) Strongly agree; b) Agree; c) Neutral; d) Disagree; e) Strongly disagree
Explain briefly the option you chose.
_____

Equal participation
Statement 5: I had equal opportunities to participate and contribute during the group activities.
a) Strongly agree; b) Agree; c) Neutral; d) Disagree; e) Strongly disagree

Statement 6: Select the technique you liked the most and the least while working in groups to guarantee equal participation.
a) Taking turns; b) Time distribution; c) Think and-write time; d) Exercise division.
Why did you like/did not like that technique?
_____

Simultaneous interaction
Statement 7: What I liked about cooperative learning is that I could speak more than I did in a traditional classroom.
a) Strongly agree; b) Agree; c) Neutral; d) Disagree; e) Strongly disagree

Statement 8: Working simultaneously with my classmates kept me engaged in the writing activities
a) Strongly agree; b) Agree; c) Neutral; d) Disagree; e) Strongly disagree
Why did working simultaneously with your classmates keep you engaged in the activities?
_____

Social skills
Statement 9: Working in groups helped me to build stronger relationships with my classmates.
a) Strongly agree; b) Agree; c) Neutral; d) Disagree; e) Strongly disagree
Why did working in groups help/didn't help me to build stronger relationships with my
     classmates?
_____
Statement 10: I developed the following social skills the most while working cooperatively
a) Polite disagreement; b) Leadership; c) Consensus-seeking; d) Conflict resolution;
e) Perspective taking; f) Patience; g) Asking for help; h) Active listening
Why or how do you think you developed this social skill while working cooperatively?
_____

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