USING GROUP ACTIVITIES TO CORRECT GRAMMAR MISTAKES FOR NON-ENGLISH MAJORS IN AN EXTRA-CURRICULAR WRITING CLASS AT DNU

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ABSTRACT

This is a four-week study aimed to investigate the influence of group activities on grammar mistakes of EFL students' writing. The study was conducted with the random selection of 25 second-year students from non-English major classes at Dong Nai University, in which 13 are female and the rest are male. The study used pre- and post-trial writings, and after-school classes for group activities during the pre- and post-treatment to unveil the result of the study. The results suggest that group activities have led to a slightly greater gain than traditional teaching practices which focus on teachers' control towards the classroom activities. More efforts as the research invested, the plan for implementation of innovation has not proved to be better than the previous treatment, even though students have had more time to practice a new learning method. Hence, more effort, time and better preparation for the study need to be invested to confirm the significant differences. Based on this result, suggestions and recommendations for future studies were also provided.

Key words: Group work, non-English major students, after-class activities.

1. Introduction

1.1. Reasons for Innovation

Education innovation has been one of the most concerned issues in Vietnam in the past few years. The demands for curricular innovation are very urgent at the moment because, as professor Tran Van Tho comments, "the quality of education in Vietnam has been recognized to be seriously "*backward*" for a long time". Sharing this view, Nguyen Thi Binh, Vietnam's former Vice State Chairperson, says in an interview: "The current education (in Vietnam) is far from reality and less practical. It has not focused as much as expected on the key abilities such as: independent thinking, practice skills, skills for using foreign languages and computer, ethics, personality and skills in life. These skills are essential for the youth to take part in the process of industrialization and modernization of the country and to advance with other countries in the world".

Most importantly, lots of readers' suggestions to both the Vietnamese government and Ministry of Education and Training have put the emphasis on the ways of teaching and learning. It is the poor quality of the learning and teaching that the roles of the instructors and learners in classes have largely been recognized as key players in curricular innovation. It cannot be denied that teachers contribute a great part to men's advance for education.

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Nonetheless, teacher's role is currently of much complaint as a student's parent in Ho Chi Minh City earnestly suggests that "Education innovation in Vietnam should be done with the teaching staff first". It is now quite common in Vietnam that university teachers do most of the lecturing (this is also, to a large extent, meant that teachers read and students write). Consequently, teachers have neither the routine of doing researches nor upgrading their expertise. It is, however, obvious that not only the teacher's role is to blame. The quality of education is necessarily supposed to largely depend on the learners too. It is complained that learners are in the habit of depending on the teachers. They do not show the ability to self-study, self-discover and think independently.

In brief, the management and system of education in Vietnam are facing so many problems that the innovation in teaching and learning methods is an urgent demand and it cannot be helped doing at this phase. If the implementation of innovation, however, is formally and mechanically conducted, it may cause pressure to the learners and result in inefficiency.

1.2. Problem identification

The identified problem with students of the non-English department at Dong Nai College of Education is their low marks in writing. Though these students can do grammar exercises with a high degree of accuracy, they still find it hard to write a grammatically correct paragraph or composition that is an essential part in every English exam for the first, second and third-year-students. They might have problems with English grammar, which prevent them from expressing themselves accurately and fluently. Difficulties with English grammar also lead to difficulties for teachers when teaching different sub-skills in writing such as brainstorming or outlining. Based on the statistics of scores in each part of the English exams in the past few years, the teacher-researcher has found that students' grades of writing, *a paragraph or a composition*, have been poor compared to those of other parts in the exams such as: *sentence transformation, guided sentence building, gap-filling, vocabulary, reading comprehension and grammar rules*. Their low grades have been largely due to *grammar mistakes*. During the time working with students of non-English majors, the teacher-researchers has also spotted this problem and made an uttermost effort to lessen mistakes and/or errors made by learners in the writing assignments, and one of the ways the researcher found out was that using peer feedback in the group work activities may improve writing skills with fewer or free-errors in the areas of surface grammatical mistakes.

1.3. The benefits of group work activities on learners' writing skills

Professionally, looking for teaching activities or methods that students can benefit the most is an

essential part of being a classroom teacher. One factor the teacher-researcher considers as being important in language teaching and learning is group activities that help satisfy human's need for affiliation and build up learners' confidence. Jacobs [1998: 1] asserts that "when learning in groups, students have more opportunities to receive praise and support from peers, not only from teachers". This is to say that during group discussion, asking and answering, and giving comments may help increase students' writing ability. The teacher's job is, as Blanchard and Root [1994: 2] put it, "to design activities to encourage students to think independently and as well as to provide them with many opportunities to share ideas with classmates, thus creating a more dynamic learning environment." This view is also shared by Cook & Lewis [2002: 3] who argue that "creating a positive learning environment" and "maintaining a cooperative atmosphere" are important for Vietnamese teachers. During the writing process in groups, students correct each other's grammar mistakes, and students of better proficiency in English may help the less able ones, which implicitly means that, according to Richards [2002: 4], "direct teaching by a teacher is not always essential for learning" (that a teacher can be a facilitator instead of a preacher). Speaking to this issue, [3] also goes on to note that "learning is a gradual process that involves trial and error".

Step by step, their writing will be more grammatically accurate.

The teacher-researcher's belief is that additional time for group activities might create a positive learning environment and a co-operative atmosphere, which probably results in the reduction of the teacher's dominance over the class, helps increase the amount of student – student interaction during the writing process and, especially, reduces grammar mistakes in students' writing. No longer may students feel the so-called "losing face" when they avoid lots of red-ink comments on their grammar mistakes.

1.4. Reasons for implementation of group work activities after mainstream class working hours

As said earlier from the outset of the paper, every innovation must need time to take rooted. If a sudden innovation is made, it will be counter-productive. Traditionally, non-English major students of DNU are used to the teacher-centered method where teachers work all the time whilst students listen attentively to their teachers' lecturing before writing down everything asked by the teacher. Therefore, implementation of peer feedback in group work activity without prior training will surely bear no fruits. Second, due to a large number of students per class (normally 55 learners), the group work activity is considered ineffective. Taking the two reasons into account, the teacher-

researcher decided to choose a group of 20 participants randomly from many existing non-English major classes randomly to participate in the research. The announcement of the research was given to students based on the permission of the department of English and the agreement of students participating in this study. It should be noted that the scores obtained from the pre- and post-test were not used for the learning result evaluation at the mainstream class but rather than for the purpose of research only

1.5. Research question

In order to obtain the outcome of the study, a research question was given out

To what extent can peer feedback of mistake correction activities in the group work activities after-school classes result in significant improvement in non-English major students at DNU?

2. Literature review

2.1. Previous studies of group work activities in SLA

Group activities (this includes pairs) have been suggested as one means of promoting interaction [5] Long proposes five reasons are *The quantity of learner speech increases.*, *the variety of speech acts increases, there is more individualization of interaction.*, *anxiety is reduced, and motivation is increased.*

Many types of group activities have been developed to encourage interaction among learners. Kieu [2002: 6] effectively used dictogloss to teach grammar and commented that "group discussion gave students an opportunity to use language in a more natural way". Her students made significant progress in speaking by participating regularly in conversational interaction with their fellow students. She also put it "learners who regularly engage in dictogloss would develop speaking, listening, and note-taking skills and also improve their *knowledge of grammar*".

Another group activity that is very effective in teaching and learning writing is peer editing. Oshima and Hogue [1999: 7] recommend "peer editing be an interactive process of reading and commenting on a classmate's writing. Students exchange rough drafts with each other, read each other's paragraphs or essays and make helpful comments to improve their classmates' content, organization, their clarity, and therefore, *grammatical areas*".

With respect to group activities, [5] also goes on to point out that the use of carefully designed pair work tasks can help learners obtain "comprehensible input". This input is obtained through the interactive negotiation learners take part in as they complete the task. Sharing this view, Richards and Lockhart [1995: 8] confirm that in addition to the benefits

of pair work activities, group work has a number of advantages as follow:

• *It reduces the dominance of the teacher over the class.*

• *It increases the amount of student participation in the classroom.*

• *It increases the opportunities for individual students to practice and use new features of the target language.*

• *It promotes collaboration among learners.*

• *It enables the teacher to work more as a facilitator and consultant.*

• *It can give learners a more active role in learning.*

In practice, lots of studies have firmly proved the effectiveness of group activities and this should be replicated and furthered in particular language teaching and learning contexts.

2.2. The effectiveness of Grammar correction by using group work activities

Most ESL / EFL writing teachers would strongly agree with the statement that teacher correction feedback is an essential part of any writing courses. Truscott [9] has pointed out that "there is no doubt that grammar correction has been so much a part of language teaching for so long that its presence is largely taken for granted". However, in an article reviewing research on grammar correction, [9] argues that "grammar correction (which he defines as the "correction of grammatical errors for the purpose of improving a student's ability to write accurately") is not only completely ineffective but also harmful

and should be abandoned". [11] claims that "no studies have proven that grammatical feedback on student writing leads to greater accuracy". Let's take Semke's study for example, Semke [12] has demonstrated that students who received comments from "teachers" only on content did much better and spent more time working on their essays than those who *received criticism only on grammar*. It is wondered if the matter concerned is actually avoidable when students help correct each other's mistakes.

As regards grammar correction, Lynne [2001: 13] endorses the basic idea of Dictogloss is that "the teacher reads out a text several times during the collaborative reconstruction of the text learners will talk to each other about the language, as well as the contents, drawing on and making their *internal grammatical knowledge*. Through this talk a pupil may learn another about some *aspect of grammar*" as Baker Westrup (2000: 14] contend that "students are learning when they make mistakes or help to correct other students' mistakes". Students may not be able to identify and correct all the mistakes in their friends' pieces of writing, but they will surely detect at least some of them.

In conclusion, group-work can create more opportunities for students to benefit a great deal from each other. They also find out strengths and weaknesses in the writing of others, which can raise their awareness of

grammar mistakes and, step by step, help improve their own writing.

3. Methodology

3.1. Participants

The study was conducted with some implementation of innovation with one class of 20 second-year-students at Dong Nai University whose majors were in other areas other than English. It was a class of students of Music and Fine Arts. These students were now familiar with the teacher-researcher's new teaching style and group-work because they were also the subjects of his previous six-week study (including 1st and 6th week for **pre-** and **post-trial writing**). All the students were Vietnamese with an average age of 20 and 13 of them were females. All the selected participants had had the same amount of exposure to English, 7 years in junior and senior high schools with 3 periods of 45 minutes each per week. They have studied English at Dong Nai University for over 3 terms, every term consisting of 60 periods of 45 minutes each. The fact is that they had little or no exposure to English in their day-to-day lives except for studying it as a "*compulsory subject*" in junior and senior high schools and in the department of Music and Fine Arts. They were students of a state-owned college and the majority of them came from different parts of the province. This ensured the *generalizability* of the research. These students were chosen after the teacher-researcher had a useful discussion with his colleagues who gave him some interesting advice. They all came to an agreement that the class size was the most ideal of all and these students served as a good representative of all students of the non-English departments of Dong Nai University.

3.2. Materials

Textbook to be used was **writing in paragraph, Oxford University Press**. Students were supposed to learn four skills, but grammar knowledge was more heavily focused on than other skills because, as indicated above, all the English exams for students of the non-English department were rather grammar-based. With regard to the writing skill, students were asked to practice writing paragraphs. Most of the topics for writing task were mainly based on the textbook: *friends, a family problem, personal life, travel, hobbies, future jobs, dream people, sports, music, Christmas, Tet holidays*, *army careers, summer vacation, and free time.*

3.3. Instruments

In order to ensure both the *reliability* and *validity* of the research, the teacher-researcher had to measure the writing skill of the subjects by giving them two trial writings, one before and one after the experimental period to see if there was any significant difference in their improvement. The reason why the teacher-researcher had to ask the students to take two trial writings was that after the first study, they could not

go on practicing writing in groups since the teacher-researcher had to spend most of the time covering all the lessons that had been left undone during the first study to keep pace with other classes. With regard to rating, the teacher-researcher also had one pair of his colleagues who did not teach the class mark (check the number of *grammar mistake*s) all the papers based on a checklist to avoid *bias* and make sure of the *objectivity*. To evaluate how students work in groups as a basis for student-centered learning during the four-week treatment, the teacher-researcher also decided to keep a classroom diary: a research instrument that necessitates simultaneously supervising class activities and recording detailed observations of them for later analysis (Nunan, 1989: 15]. As to avoid *research expectancy* that might not reflect the research result properly, the teacher-researcher selected only one class as an Experimental Group.

3.4. Procedures

The procedures to conduct this study consists of four weeks and carried out as follows

First, Students did a Pre-trial writing before the treatment. They were asked to write a paragraph in no more than 150 words in 45 minutes in class (1 period = 45 minutes). The topic was ***"What are your plans for this summer vacation?"*** The teacher-researcher had two colleagues check (grammar mistakes) all the papers based on the checklist given without giving marks. The purpose of it was to check students' knowledge of writing before the start of the training.

Second, the while-training consisted of four weeks, each week lasting 2 hours of learning writing. The students were given a topic based on the textbook content to write a paragraph between 120 and 150 words. And in order to raise the students' awareness of grammar mistakes, the teacher-researcher also gave them a checklist of grammatical areas so that they knew exactly what to look for when they corrected each other's grammar mistakes. (See Appendix B)

The following weeks, 2, 3, & 4 was also conducted in the same format, but the topic given was different from week 1.

During this whole four weeks, students are asked to work in group of four under the guidance of the teacher. However, most of the time students are encouraged to work together, conducting activities such as brainstorming ideas, building up the outline, finishing the final products after spending more time writing many drafts. In the meantime, teacher-researcher is always at hand to help their students whenever they have any problems.

After the four weeks were over, students were asked to do a post-trial writing after the four-week-treatment. In other word, they were asked to write a paragraph in no more than 150 words

in 45 minutes in class. (1 period = 45 minutes). The topic was "*Where would you like to recommend foreigners to visit most in Vietnam? Why? ".* And marking the papers (checking the number of mistakes) was also done the same as in pre-trial writing. (Checklist for Rating – See Appendix B).

4. Results and discussions

4.1. Results

Table 1: *The total number of grammar mistakes each student made.*

TOTAL GRAMMAR MISTAKES OF EACH STUDENT

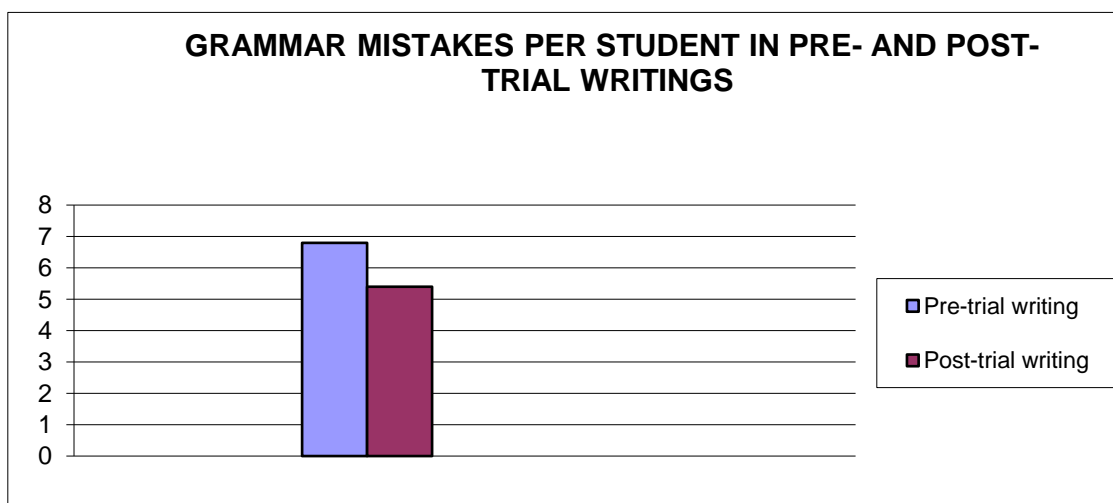| Student No	Pre-trial Writing	Post-trial Writing
S 18	12	7
S 10	10	6
S 01	9	4
S 04	8	5
S 05	8	5
S 11	7	6
S 13	7	9
S 14	7	4
S 16	7	5
S 20	7	5
S 06	6	6
S 08	6	4
S 09	6	5
S 12	6	9
S 17	6	4
S 19	6	4
S 02	5	6
S 03	5	6
S 07	4	3
S 15	4	5
Total	**136**	**108**

Figure 1: *Grammar mistakes per student in pre- and post-trial writings*

Table 2: *The total number of grammar mistakes on each area*

NUMBER OF GRAMMAR MISTAKES		
Grammatical Areas	**Pre- trial writing**	**Post-trial writing**
Article	20	12
Spelling	13	9
Preposition	12	8
Plural	10	6
Comma splice	9	9
Unnecessary word	9	6
Conjunction	8	4
Punctuation	7	6
Transition	6	7
Wrong word	6	6
Capitalization	5	1
Verb tense	5	3
Wrong word order	5	6
Fragment	4	2
Run-on	4	10
Wrong word form	4	5
Pro reference error	3	4
Sub-verb agreement	3	1
Verb	2	1
Word missing	1	2
Total	**136**	**108**

First let's look at the total number of grammar mistakes students made in pre- and post-trial writings. Table 1 (see below) shows a fall in mistakes after treatment. It also reflects a drop in the mean frequency of errors each student made between pre and post-trial writings (Figure 1). In particular, there has seen a significant decrease in the number of grammar mistakes among six students [S01, S04, S05, S10, S14, S18] and a slight fall among eight students [S07, S08, S09, S11, S16, S17, S19, S20]. However, we also see a considerable rise in mistakes in two students [S12 and S13] and a slight increase among three others [S02, S03 and S15]. Only one student [S06] has not shown any change at all.

Turning now to the grammatical areas in table 2, we can see a remarkable drop in some areas. The grammar mistakes in *spelling, preposition* and *article* account for 33% [*45/136*] in pre-trial, but 26.8% [*29/108*] in post-trial. The group of *plural, comma splice, unnecessary word,* and *conjunction* takes up 26.4% of total [*36/136*] in pre-trial, but 23.1% [*25/108*] in post-trial.

As can be seen from table 2, the post-trial writing shows positive results. There sees a considerable drop in the number of grammar mistakes in *article, plural, conjunction, sub-verb agreement, fragment, capitalization* and *preposition*. Group of *unnecessary*

word and *verb tense* has a slight fall in number. Yet, no changes in *comma splice* and *wrong word* have been seen

One problem to be taken into consideration is that the result of post-trial writing shows a noticeable rise of mistakes, particularly, in *run-on* (from 2.9% [*4/136*] in pre- to 9.2% [*10/108*] in post-), and in group of *wrong word form, wrong word order, transition* and *pronoun reference err*or (from 13.2% [*18/136*] in pre- to 19.4% [*22/108*] in post-).

4.2. Discussion

Nunan [16] has argued that evaluation is concerned with determining what learners have learned from a program and also with making judgments about why instruction has or has not been successful. According to the results of the study, the answer to the research questions is that group activities and after-school classes can, to some extent, make an impact on students' grammar mistakes in writing. The teacher-researcher has achieved the objectives of having students (1) co-operate in the learning process; (2) and correct each other's grammar mistakes, which have made a certain reduction of grammar mistakes in their writing within four weeks. The research also confirms the teacher-researcher's beliefs that, in the first place, students learn more effectively when they help correct their fellow students' mistakes. Secondly, group activities increase the amount of student participation and create a more dynamic learning environment when learners are focused. Thirdly, the teacher can be a facilitator instead of preacher. This view is also shared by Royse [2001: 14] who states that "*learning can occur when the instructor steps down from the lectern and allows students to teach each other*".

However, it is true that the second treatment has not resulted in any significant improvement in the average number of mistakes each student made in comparison with the outcome of the first study. (See Table 3)

Table 3: *Grammar mistakes per student made in Pre- and Post-trial writings.*

	Pre-trial writing	Post-trial writing
1st Treatment	8.7	5.1
2nd Treatment	6.8	5.4

This necessarily means that the teacher-researcher's plan for the implementation of innovation (after-school classes) did not really work as effectively as assumed though it was somewhat compatible with the previous practice and my clients adopted the innovation. Actually, the innovation the teacher-researcher has carried out does not bring him much disappointment since, as Markee [17] argues, innovations are not necessarily always beneficial.

Also, based on the outcome of the first treatment, the teacher-researcher decided to give each student a checklist

for grammatical areas during the second treatment so that they might know exactly what to look for, and especially, to raise their awareness of grammar mistakes in *comma splice* and *run-on* which had remarkably increased in the first treatment. Yet, there has not seen any positive difference in the outcome of the second treatment (See Table 4).

Table 4: *The total number of mistakes students made in 1ˢᵗ and 2ⁿᵈ Treatment.*

Grammatical Areas	1ˢᵗ Treatment		2ⁿᵈ Treatment	
	Pre-trial	Post-trial	Pre-trial	Post-trial
Run-on	4	6	4	10
Comma splice	3	9	9	9

Obviously, there is still a room for improvement in reducing students' grammar mistakes. What the teacher-researcher is going to do is develop a new plan based on the results of the 2ⁿᵈ-treatment-post-trial writing that showed a considerable rise in area of *run-on* and, no improvement in *comma splice* and *wrong word.* The result also sees a slight increase in areas of *transition, wrong word form, wrong word order* and *pronoun reference error.* Particularly, to solve these problems, the teacher-researcher will plan new lessons focusing on the grammatical areas like *comma splice* and *run-on* because, as identified in the process of writing, many of them showed no clear ideas of what *comma splice* and *run-on* should be like.

In addition, there are still some limitations of the research which must be considered. One limitation is the small sample size of the research. Apparently with such a class of twenty students it is difficult to make generalizations about the treatment. Meanwhile, the results of the study and the preparation for innovation implementation have indicated that this type of innovation might work well only in small classes of adult students

Another limitation to be considered as being equally important is the economic cost in terms of time and fund (of after-school classes) if the project is asked to carry out in all the classes of non-English major. Additionally, each class has a different timetable. This is implicitly meant that the innovation cannot be tried out incrementally.

5. Conclusion

The effectiveness of each teaching method depends on our own situation and on learners' needs. Although the teacher-researcher is not quite as successful in implementation of innovation as expected, this study has motivated a reconsideration of his current teaching practices such as: it has helped the teacher-researcher notice what he and his students really do, rather than what the teacher-researcher thinks his students do and, it has helped the teacher-researcher get feedback as to success or failure of what he is doing. As a change agent, the teacher-researcher "should be patient and not become discouraged when nothing

seems to happen since, innovation always takes longer to implement than expected". In some way, the teacher-researcher has learned that (a) teachers need to design activities which make learners get more actively involved in the learning, (b) students' confidence will be built up when learning occurs in a relaxing and co-operative atmosphere, (c) and students who give feedback to fellow students would not only help their peers, they also could learn how to improve their own writing skill, and make learning experience a shared activity.

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APPENDIX A
(Adapted from *Writing Academic English* by Oshima & Hogue, 1991).

	PEER EDITOR'S COMMENTS AND SUGGESTIONS
GENERAL	
1. What do you like best about this paragraph?	
PAPER FORMAT	
2. Is the format (title, indenting, double spacing, margins) correct?	
ORGANIZATION AND CONTENT	
3. **Topic Sentence**: Is there a clear topic sentence? Does it have a controlling idea? 4. **Supporting sentence**: Is the main idea clear? Does the writer need to add more details to explain it? 5. **Concluding sentence**: Is there a concluding sentence? Does it begin with an appropriate end-of-paragraph signal? 6. **Unity**: Do all of the sentences support the topic sentence?	
SENTENCE STRUCTURE	
7. Are there any unclear sentences? Can you suggest a way to improve them?	
GRAMMAR AND MECHANICS	
8. Are there any errors in grammar and mechanics?	

APPENDIX B
Here are the common grammar mistakes in EFL writing

Grammatical Areas	S 1	S 2	S 3	S 4	S 5	S 6	S 7	S 8	S 9	S 10	S 11	S 12	S 13	S 14	S 15
01. punctuation															
02. word missing															
03. capitalization															
04. verb tense															
05. subject-verb agreement															
06. spelling															
07. plural															
08. unnecessary word															
09. wrong word form															
10. wrong word															
11. pronoun reference error															
12. wrong word order															
13. run on															
14. comma splice															
15. fragment															
16. transition/ signal															
17. verb															
18. preposition															
19. article															
20. conjunction															

DÙNG HOẠT ĐỘNG NHÓM ĐỂ SỬA LỖI VĂN PHẠM CHO SINH VIÊN KHÔNG CHUYÊN TRONG GIỜ DẠY VIẾT KHÔNG CHÍNH KHÓA TẠI TRƯỜNG ĐẠI HỌC ĐỒNG NAI

TÓM TẮT

Đây là một nghiên cứu kéo dài 4 tuần nhắm vào điều tra ảnh hưởng của các hoạt động trong nhóm trên bài viết của sinh viên học tiếng Anh như một ngoại ngữ. Nghiên cứu này được tiến hành với việc chọn ngẫu nhiên 25 sinh viên năm 2 của lớp

tiếng Anh không chuyên tại DNU, trong đó có 13 nam và 12 nữ. Nghiên cứu này dùng các bài viết trước và sau huấn luyện dạy viết để tiết lộ kết quả nghiên cứu. Kết quả là các hoạt động học theo nhóm đã góp phần vào việc cải thiện về lỗi văn phạm không đáng kể so với phương pháp truyền lấy giáo viên làm trung tâm mà tập trung vào việc kiểm soát của GV đối với hoạt động dạy viết. Dù đã cố gắng hết sức, kế hoạch ứng dụng cho đổi mới cũng không chứng minh tốt hơn điều tra trước đây mặc dù SV đã có nhiều thời gian hơn để thực hành phương pháp học mới. Vì thế cần đầu tư thêm nỗ lực, thời gian, và chuẩn bị nghiên cứu hơn nữa để xác nhận sự khác biệt đáng kể này. Dựa trên kết quả này một số kết luận và kiến nghị cũng được đưa ra.

Từ khóa: *Hoạt động nhóm, SV không chuyên tiếng Anh, hoạt động dạy sau giờ học.*

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