

Cooperative Learning in the EFL Classroom

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Abstract:

There is a strong research evidence supporting the effectiveness of cooperative learning as a learning strategy in raising the standards of educational learning and maximizing learning outcomes of all students. It proved to have positive educational values which makes it significant to apply it in the EFL classroom.

The present paper investigates the benefits of cooperative learning based on its theoretical relevance to the EFL classroom. Light will be shed on the significance of the cooperative learning elements in addition to focusing on cooperative learning methods which could make a difference in the learning process of non-native speakers of English. The paper concludes with suggestions regarding the how best to present cooperative learning in the EFL classroom and some considerations which EFL teachers need to keep in mind regarding group and size, students and teachers' roles, and the evaluation process.

Introduction

Cooperative learning has been proved to be an effective teaching strategy to both the teacher and learner. It encourages learning to take place and allow communication skills to foster among learners (Jacobs & McCafferty, 2006). Furthermore, it provides a non-threatening learning environment which encourages EFL learners to overcome their apprehension in communicating and expressing their points' of view in a foreign language (Slavin, 1995).

Cooperative learning can be characterized as a social process in which knowledge is acquired through the successful interaction between the group members (Cohen, 1994). Slavin (1995, p. 2) defines it:

Cooperative learning refers to a variety of teaching methods in which students work in small groups to help one another learn academic content. In cooperative classrooms, students are expected to help each other, to discuss and argue with each other, to assess each other's current knowledge and fill in gaps in each other's understanding.

According to Gillies (2007, p. 4-5) cooperative learning has five elements are important aspects which are crucial to enhance both the social and learning processes among the participants.

- Individual Accountability which involves students' understanding that they will be held accountable for their individual contributions to the group, that free-loading will not be tolerated, and that everyone must contribute" (Gillies, 2007, p. 5).
- Social Skills refers to interpersonal and small group skills such as effective communication which are needed to cooperate successfully.
- Face-to-Face Interaction involves working in small groups where students can see each other and are engaged in face-to-face interaction.

- Positive Interdependence which encourages students is established when everybody understands that each member's contribution is important in helping the group to achieve its goal.
- Group Processing refers to the assessment of cooperative learning. It can be described as a formative assessment that focuses on students' feedback on the learning process, including the students' reflection on what they still need to do to accomplish their objectives.

Aims of Cooperative Learning:

Cooperative learning covers many aims which can be summarized as follows:

Academic Learning:

Cooperative learning can help students learn academically (Cohen, 1994). Simply put, as students acquire the content of the subject, they develop meta-disciplinary competence, as for example "higher order thinking skills" (Chen, 1994, 6). These include forming hypotheses, making decisions and finding categories. Moreover, cooperative learning encourages students to find solutions for special problems, which inspire them to discuss, form ideas and opinions and have to give feedback. cooperative learning is able effective in promoting academic achievement with students of all ages (Hornby, 2009).

Social-affective Learning:

Social-affective leaning is another aspect which students can benefit from cooperative learning. They learn to support each other, to deal with heterogeneity in a group, to work in a team and to deal with the perspective of others. A further advantage is that students are able to learn to listen to each other and to solve problems together (Slavin, 1995).

These aspects are closely related to EFL teaching and learning: Thus, affective factors such as motivation and the reduction of anxiety to use the foreign language as a means of communication are especially relevant for language learning, as Long & Porter (1985, p. 211) state:

In contrast to the public atmosphere of lockstep instruction, a small group of peers provides a relatively intimate setting and, usually, a more supportive environment in which to try out embryonic SL [second language] skills.

Consequently, the willingness to speak and act in a foreign language increases in small groups and students feel more confident to produce utterances in their L2 (Dörnyei, 1997; Jacobs & McCafferty, 2006). Cooperative learning activities build supportive classroom communities, students learn to listen and respect each other, therefore everyone can feel that they are at the center at the same time.

Personality Development:

Personality development is another benefit of Cooperative learning. It helps students strengthen the confidence in their abilities and motivate them to apply themselves more in the learning process. If learners realize that their contributions are accepted in a group and even necessary and useful for the aim of the group, their self-esteem might rise (Brecke and Jensen 2007). Healthy relationships with other classmates allow for personal growth and responsibility (Zhang, 2010).

The Advantages of Cooperative Learning to EFL Learners:

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Research has shown that cooperative learning can help students develop skills in communication. Cooperative learning is the opportunity for groups to work together and for students to talk to one another. This method creates a positive learning environment for students and allows students to have more opportunities for communication (Brecke & Jensen, 2007; Zhang, 2010; Duxbury & Ling, 2010). According to Daniels (2005), cooperative learning structures give students a framework of support for their language learning experience. From this framework, students will facilitate confidence in their language skills, so they will be comfortable in their learning environment and become more eager to speak out in class. They have to talk to succeed in the task and they are motivated to succeed through the task being interdependent (Jolliffe, 2007). When students use language for learning tasks, they must work together to complete a particular objective and make their ideas clear to others and extend themselves a bit to appreciate another's perspective on a problem (Strickland and Feeley, 2003). It is an excellent way of conducting communicative language teaching.

In summary, from this brief explanation, we find that there are many theories about why cooperative learning can be an effective teaching strategy. It can be claimed that cooperation is effective in English teaching in the EFL classroom.

Cooperative Learning Methods to be used in the EFL Classroom:

There several methods which could be adopted from cooperative learning to be applied in the EFL classroom to encourage learners to work together to learn, share ideas and help each other to learn (Slavin, 1995). Each cooperate method has its own characteristics and applicability to different curriculum areas.

It is suggested that EFL language teachers choose the appropriate cooperative learning method to apply it in their classroom to get the most out of it . Kagan (1994) and Slavin (1995) point out that some of these methods which have been successfully applied in the classroom are 'Round Table' for writing, 'Jigsaw' in reading, and 'Think-Pair-Share' to develop oral and aural skills. Those three methods will be the focused on as follows:

Jigsaw II.

Jigsaw II. Teaching was developed by Slavin (1995); group mates share information with each other in this technique. This is a useful activity to teach reading. Slavin summarized the procedure to apply Jigsaw II as:

1. Students receive expert topics and read assigned material to locate information.
2. Students with the same expert topics meet to discuss them in expert groups.
3. Experts return to their team to teach their topics to their teammates.
4. Students take individual quizzes covering all topics.
5. Team scores are computed based on team members' improvement scores, and individual certificates, a class newsletter, or a bulletin board recognizes high-scoring teams.

Round Table.

Round Table can be used for brainstorming, reviewing, or practicing. In this method, each group member has a designated turn to participate and make a written contribution to the group's project. The group has a writing prompt, task, or question (Kagan, 1994). Sequential form as following:

1. The teacher asks a question which has multiple answers, each student writes a response or a portion of a response.
2. After writing their response, they pass the paper to the next person.
3. Round Table can be down with one piece of paper per group or with one piece of paper per group member.

4. One group member may be asked to share with the whole class what their group has written.

Think-Pair-Share.

Think-Pair-Share was proposed by Lyman (1981). This teaching method could encourage students to communicate with others and develop thinking. There are the steps of Think-Pair-Share.

- 1) The teacher poses a discussion topic or an open-ended question.
- 2) The teacher gives students the “think time” to think on their own.
- 3) After thinking, students work in pairs to share their ideas with each other.
- 4) Students share their responses with other partners or with the rest of the class.

Table1, Adopted from Johnson, Johnson, and Stanne (2000), presents the various cooperative learning models, their history, developers and possible primary applications in the EFL classroom.

Table 1 Modern Methods of Cooperative Learning

Researcher Developer	Date	Method	ESL/EFL Primary Applications
Johnson & Johnson	Mid 1970s	Learning Together	Reading, Writing, Speaking, Culture
DeVries & Edward	Early 1970s	Teams-Games- Tournaments (TGT)	Language Rules and Mechanics
Sharan & Sharan	Mid 1970s	Group Investigation	(GI) Writing, Culture
Johnson & Johnson	Late 1970s	Constructive Controversy (CC)	Culture
Aronson, Blaney, Sikes, Stephan & Snapp; Slavin	Late 1970s	Jigsaw Procedure	Reading, Literature
Slavin	Late 1970s	Student Teams - Achievement Divisions (STAD)	Language Rules and Mechanics
Cohen	Early 1980s	Complex Instruction (CI)	Social Skills, Culture, Reading, Writing, Language Rules and Mechanics
Lyman	Early 1981	Think-Pair-Share	Aural communication, develop thinking
Slavin, Leavey, & Madden	Mid 1980s	Team Accelerated Instruction (TAI)	None
Kagan	Mid 1980s	Cooperative Learning Structures	Speaking, Listening, Reading, Writing
Stevens, Madden, Slavinn, & Farnish	Mid 1980s	Curriculum Packages: Cooperative Integrated	Reading and Composition (CIRC) Reading, Writing, Spelling, Vocabulary, Literature

Implementing Cooperative Learning in the EFL Classroom: Some Considerations:

Group Size:

Group size is an important factor when applying cooperative learning methods in the EFL classroom. The optimal size varies from four to five. According to Jacob (2006) four members in a group seem to be the most popular size. Williams (2002) advocated two factors in effective group size: the students' comfort level and the nature of the assignment. As the circumstances change, then the size of the group changes. However, it is significant to remember that the effective group size might depend on the age of the student and their experience in working cooperatively (Glanz, 2004).

Group Formation:

EFL teacher should consider the members in each group. They are encouraged to use heterogeneous groups in cooperative learning (Johnson and Johnson, 1998; Felder and Brent, 2001; Jacob, 2006). In addition, Huss (2006) points out that cooperative learning teams should be a composition of one low-ability student, two medium-ability students, and one high-achieving student.

Teacher's Roles:

In a cooperative learning class, teachers are facilitators who should guide their learners on how best to achieve educational objectives (Zhang, 2010). Teacher talking time should be less than student talking time (Jacob, 2006). Teachers also are required to provide their learners with a model answer to encourage further learning (Harel, 1992).

Students' Roles:

According to Zhang (2010) Learners are active participators and autonomous learners. Jacob (2006) reminds us of five roles which EFL learners have to perform during a cooperative learning activity. These five roles are: (a) facilitator is the member who coordinates the group's works; (b) recorder's responsibility is recording what the group has accomplished; (c) reporter tells others about the group's work; (d) timekeeper helps the group be aware of time constraints, keeps the group on tasks and fills in for missing group members; (e) observer of collaborative skill checks if group members are using a particular collaborative skill deemed important to the group's interaction.

Individual and Group Assessment:

To be able to judge the effectiveness of the applied cooperative learning method, EFL students' performance should be assessed. Johnson & Johnson (1999, P.2) define assessment as "to judge the quality and quantity of learning and award grades". Assessment help to achieve the following purposes a: (a) diagnosing students' present level of knowledge and skills; (b) monitoring students' progress toward learning goals to help form the instructional program, and (c) providing data to judge the final level of students' learning (Johnson & Johnson, 1999).

Conclusion:

Cooperative learning has proved its effectiveness as a teaching strategy with all the benefits it provides to both the teachers and learners. Research has proved its relevance to the ordinary classroom. Learners have opportunities to frequently encounter the material under study through various venues and modes of delivery. Learners have opportunities to use authentic language in order to perform communicative and referential tasks, even when the focus of the lesson is on language rules and mechanics rather than the development of language skills.

Furthermore, several research studies have proved that cooperative learning creates great opportunities for the EFL classroom. For EFL learners, cooperative learning creates a positive learning environment for students to practice their English. It can help students develop skills in communication and improve their motivation to learn. Cooperative learning also has positive effects on student achievement, increases student relationships and increases self-esteem. These benefits of cooperative learning help EFL learners improve efficiency in their language learning. Cooperative learning is an effective teaching strategy in foreign teaching.

Based on that it is recommended to apply this teaching strategy in the EFL classroom at the college level in Arab countries like Kuwait to benefit from its advantages. It is recommended as well to provide both EFL teachers and learners with training sessions on how to teach and learn through cooperative learning for maximum results.

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