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Application of cooperative learning in EFL classes to enhance the students' language learning

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to investigate the effects of cooperative learning on EFL learners' language learning, motivation toward learning English as a foreign language, and the high- and low-achievers' academic achievements in a heterogeneous language proficiency group. This study brings together the fields of cooperative learning, second language acquisition, as well as second/foreign language teaching to create optimal schooling experiences for students. The major findings of this study suggested that cooperative learning helped significantly to enhance the junior high school learners' oral communicative competence and their motivation toward learning English. Based upon the conclusions drawn from the study, cooperative learning was thus recommended to be integrated into the school English instruction as part of the Curriculum. As a result, the effects of cooperative learning seem salient in enhancing the EFL junior high school students' language learning.

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1. Introduction

Nowadays cooperative learning is applied in almost all school content areas and, increasingly, in college and university contexts all over the world (Johnson & Johnson, 1989; Kessler, 1992), and is claimed to be an effective teaching method in foreign/second language education by scholars abroad and at home. It is generally asserted that cooperative learning is the best option for all students because it emphasizes active interaction between students of diverse abilities and backgrounds (Nelson, Gallagher, & Coleman, 1993; Tsai, 1998; Wei, 1997; Yu, 1995) and demonstrates more positive student outcomes in academic achievement, social behavior, and affective development. The purpose of this study is to answer these questions:

a) What are the effects of cooperative learning on the improvement of the EFL learners' language learning in terms of communicative competence?

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- b) What are the effects of cooperative learning on the EFL learners' motivation toward learning English as a foreign language?
- c) What are the effects of cooperative learning on the high/low achievers in a heterogeneous class?

2. Communicative language teaching and cooperative learning

Different researchers might define cooperative learning in different ways. The working definition of cooperative learning in this study entailed the following features: cooperative learning was a system of teaching and learning techniques in which students were active agents in the process of learning instead of passive receivers of the product of any given knowledge. This system could increase students' academic learning as well as personal growth because (1) it reduced learning anxiety, (2) it increased the amount of student participation and student talk in the target language, (3) it built supportive and less threatening learning environment, and (4) it helped the rate of learning retention. The embodiment of communicative language teaching through cooperative learning was not new. Richards, Platt & Platt (1992) pointed out that cooperative learning activities were often used in communicative language teaching. Kagan (1995) also claimed that communicative language teaching and cooperative learning was natural match in foreign language teaching.

3. Cooperative learning and language acquisition

Examinations on cooperative learning and language acquisition could be inspected through three vital variables of *input*, *output*, and *context*, which contributed to language acquisition to a great extent (Krashen, 1985; Kagan, 1995). An investigation revealed that cooperative learning had a dramatic positive impact on almost all of the factors critical to language acquisition (Kagan, 1995). Language acquisition was fostered by input that was comprehensible (Krashen, 1985), developmentally appropriate, redundant, and accurate (Kagan, 1995). As Kagan (1995) suggested, the small group setting allowed a far higher proportion of comprehensible input, because the speaker had the luxury of adjusting speech to the level appropriate to the listener to negotiate meaning—luxury unavailable to the teacher speaking to a whole class. In general, there were five major factors that define cooperative learning and to make cooperative learning successful: (1) positive interdependence, (2) individual accountability, (3) quality of group processing, (4) teaching of cooperative skills, and (5) teaching of social skills. Each of these five elements would be discussed in the following sections.

3.1 Positive interdependence

Positive interdependence was creating the sense that “we sink or swim together” (Johnson et al). It was a sense of working together for a common goal and caring about each other's learning. Within cooperative learning situations, students have two responsibilities: 1) learn the assigned material, and 2) ensure that all members of the group learn the assigned material. The technical term for that dual responsibility was positive interdependence (Sharan, 1980). When positive interdependence was clearly understood, it establishes that: (1) Each group member's efforts were required and indispensable for group success (no “free-riders”); (2) Each group member had a unique contribution to make to the joint effort because of his or her resources and/or role and task responsibilities (Johnson & Johnson, 1994).

3.2 Individual accountability

Individual accountability was the element, which provided for each student believing that it was important for him/her to learn the material. Each team member feels in charge of their own and their teammates' learning and makes an active contribution to the group. Thus there was no ‘hitchhiking’ or ‘freeloading’ for anyone in a

team—everyone contributes (Kagan, 1990). The teacher must have a way of determining what each individual had learned, as well as what the group had accomplished. There were a number of ways of accomplishing individual accountability; random selection of student papers if each student was doing work within the group, random oral quizzes of students, or written quizzes or examinations at the culmination of the work (Kagan, 1989).

3.3. *Quality of group interaction process*

To provide abundant verbal, face-to-face interaction, where learners explain, argue, elaborate, and link current material with what they have learned previously was important in cooperative learning. Face-to-face verbal interaction referred to the physical set up of the group. Students needed to be clustered together in a tight group, facing each other, in order to have the kind of interchange necessary to accomplish the task.

3.4. *Teaching interpersonal and small group skills*

The teaching of cooperative skills was essential. Placing socially unskilled students in a group and telling them to cooperate did not guarantee that they have the ability to do so effectively (Johnson & Johnson, 1994). Students must learn the task and maintenance skills for the groups to run smoothly. Students might not intuitively know those social skills; therefore, they must be taught explicitly how to cooperate with others.

3.5. *Teaching of the social skills*

It was very important for students to have sufficient social skills, involving an explicit teaching of appropriate leadership, communication, trust and conflict resolution skills so that they could cooperate effectively. Schultz (1999) stated that social skills should be explicitly taught to the students so that students could work among themselves, not only in terms of cooperation but also without hostility and without the teacher's authority. Under this logic, the scholar said that each student was motivated internally by need for freedom, love, and fun (Schultz, 1999).

4. Limitations of cooperative learning

Though cooperative learning had been widely accepted and recommended for language teaching and learning, there were like all other teaching methods, limitations in cooperative learning. Most of the limitations of cooperative learning came from not being able to implement the cooperative structure carefully. If the teachers just put the students into groups to learn and didn't structure the positive interdependence and individual accountability, then it would not be unusual to find groups where one person did most (or all) of the work and the others signed off as if they had learned it or had done the work. It was also considered time-consuming to teach materials in a cooperative way. Another concern, according to Turco and Elliott (1990), was that the educational rationale for cooperative learning techniques tended to have been developed more from socialization needs than from achievement needs. Another limitation of cooperative learning lied in the differences of opinion regarding encouraging conflict or achieving consensus among group members (Tsai, 1998).

5. Conclusion

Based on this study the students were able to demonstrate better, and significantly better, linguistic competence, discourse competence, strategic competence, and non-verbal communicative competence than the other students. In a cooperative learning context, there were many interactive tasks that would naturally

stimulate the students' cognitive, linguistic, and social abilities. Cooperative activities tended to integrate the acquisition of these skills and create powerful learning opportunities. The findings that supported the questions in this study favored cooperative learning as a powerful instructional method to replace the long-existing Grammar Translation to teach English at school. Thus, cooperative learning could achieve the positive effects in language acquisition as well as enhancing motivation toward learning English. Likewise, cooperative learning also enhanced the low-achievers' and high-achievers language learning displayed in their oral performance. Taken as a whole the findings of the present study, as discussed above, echoed the four advantages of group work proposed by Brown (2001). According to Brown (2001), cooperative learning, or group work, yielded four major advantages for English language classroom: (1) group work generated interactive language, (2) group work offered an embracing affective climate, (3) group work promoted learner responsibility and autonomy, and (4) group work was a step toward individualized instruction.

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