The Impacts of Cooperative Learning on Oral Proficiency

Farima Talebi

Hakim Sabzevari University, Iran
E-mail: Farimah_1984@yahoo.com (corresponding author)

Atefe Sobhani

Azad University of Torbat-e-Heidarieh, Iran

Doi:10.5901/mjss.2012.v3n3p75

Abstract *This study explored whether applying cooperative learning approach brings about significant improvements in English language learners' speaking proficiency. 40 male and female students enrolled in a speaking course at IELTS Center institute in Mashhad, Iran, were assigned randomly to two control and experimental groups. The administration of an oral interview showed that two groups were homogeneous in terms of their oral proficiency at the entry level. While both groups received instructions in speaking three sessions per week for one month, CL activities were employed only in the experimental group. The performance of the experimental group on oral interview (posttest) held at the end of the course showed that the mean score of this group was significantly higher than the control group. Hence, CL approach can effectively be implemented to improve the learners' speaking proficiency.*

Keywords: *Cooperative Learning, english language, education.*

1. Introduction

After introduction of communicative language teaching which emphasizes the importance of group work in the language classroom, applying cooperative learning approach in language teaching became popular (Feigenbaum, 2007). Cooperative learning (CL) is defined as the instructional use of group activities which makes students work together and develop their own and others' learning (Johnson & Johnson, 1981). When structured well, CL involves students in working as team, interacting with others, and sharing goals, ideas and feedback (Murdoch & Wilson, 2004).

To benefit from cooperative learning, groups of participants must be working together, not only "next to" one another. Also, it should be considered that if teacher do not have careful planning and monitoring, group works hinder learning and decrease social interaction than promote it in classes (Woolfolk, Winne & Perry, 2003). There are some principles for cooperative learning approach according to Freeman (2000). For example, students think cooperatively not competitively and individualistically in this approach. In other words, they think in terms of positive interdependence. Moreover, teachers teach social skills as asking others to contribute or keep the conversation calm. So, the teachers teach language as well as cooperation. Also, Group work helps students to feel responsible and through which students learn how to work with different people in different groups.

There are some advantages and disadvantages in CL group work and pair work. Group works generate interactive language, present learner responsibility and autonomy, promote the affective climate in the classroom, increase motivation, and individualize instruction (Arnold, 1999). Also, CL tries to promote students' critical thinking to create classrooms in which cooperation rather than competition will be enhanced. But, it brings some disadvantages: the teacher is no longer in central of the class, students will use their L1, Students' errors will be reinforced in small groups, teachers can not control all groups at the same time, and also some learners prefer to work alone. Although group work lead to cooperation, group activities, and active learners, it is not good for all learners with different levels of proficiency (Richards & Rodgers, 2001).

In global education, educators try to develop active students in the classroom as well as active people out side of the classroom. Students know that positive-interdependence exists between them and put this realization into action through cooperative learning. Thus, the ability and willingness to work together outside the classroom can be increased by CL (McCafferty, Jacobs & Christina, 2006).

The focus of cooperative language learning is on language form and function. Also, it focuses on developing communicative competence in a language (Richards & Rodgers, 2001). Ning (2011) suggested with integration of six key elements of CL such as positive interdependence, individual accountability, promotive interaction, equal participation,

equal opportunity for success, and group processing, the students' communicative competence would be developed. Fostering a supportive learning atmosphere, providing more opportunities for authentic peer interaction, and generating meaningful language input and output in a cooperative teaching team are conducive to improvement in social and communicative skills.

According to Murdoch and Wilson (2004), the most obvious sign of cooperative learning in a classroom is that the students meet and work together in a variety of groupings. When CL works affectively, the following features are evident: 1. groups of students work on a shared task 2. Every one is aware of their roles and responsibilities 3. Students employ different skills such as communication, thinking, and social skills 4. Strategies and skills are assessed by teachers and students. The researchers, also, stated that cooperative learning is only one variety of teaching approaches used in the classroom, not a total classroom program or strategy; CL works when mix with other approaches in a classroom.

2. Empirical studies

Providing more insights into the merits of implementing cooperative learning method in language teaching, Suwantarathip and Wichadee (2010) investigated the impact of cooperative learning approach on language proficiency and examined its effectiveness in reducing foreign language anxiety. First of all, 40 sophomore students were given the questionnaire "Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale", followed by a proficiency test as pretests. Then, a 3-hour lesson was taught through cooperative learning approach for 14 weeks. After applying CL activities in the classroom, another proficiency test and FLCAS (posttests) were used to assess the participants' language proficiency and learning anxiety. The obtained scores from both instruments were compared with the previous ones to reveal changes in language proficiency and anxiety. The results indicated that the use of cooperative learning as part of the language learning led to the students' anxiety reduction and higher language proficiency. The researchers took the idea that the reason why the students' anxiety reduced was probably because this learning environment provided opportunities for them to support, encourage, and praise each other. Hence, feeling relaxed in such a learning environment, students developed their language proficiency.

In a recent study, Aziz and Hossain (2010) aimed at comparing the effects of cooperative leaning and conventional teaching on the learners' mathematics achievement. To reach the aim of study, the researchers divided 62 students into experimental and control group. Then, the process of Learning Together model of CL only for the students in the experimental group was applied. The result of this study showed a significant difference between experimental and control group in mathematics achievement. The findings indicated that the cooperative students outperformed the conventional students. In other words, CL can effectively be applied to improve students' achievement in mathematics.

Similarly, Artut (2009) investigated the effects of cooperative learning on the mathematics ability of kindergarten children and evaluated teachers' perspectives on the application of cooperative activities in the classroom. To fulfill the aim of study, the researcher chose 34 children and divided them into experimental (n=17) and control groups (n=17). Though the same mathematical concepts were taught for both experimental and control groups, a teaching program based on cooperative learning approach was used for the experimental group. In this group, the children encouraged to cooperate, share, listen to each other's idea, and fulfill their responsibilities in group works. The result of study revealed that improvement in mathematics ability of children in the experimental group was observed after the implementation of cooperative learning method. In addition, at the beginning of the study, the teacher indicated that she did not like group work because children in groups become distracted easily, do not listen to the instruction, and continue to work individually. Thus, it is obvious that the teacher had negative attitudes about group work before the course started. However, at the end of the study, the teacher's ideas about group work changed positively. She stated that group activities were amusing for children, improve their cooperation, and develop their cognitive and motor skills.

In a similar study, Gillies (2004) investigated the effects of cooperative learning on students as they worked on mathematics problem-solving activities in structured and unstructured cooperative groups. Two hundred and twenty-three students, participants of the study, were engaged in group problem-solving activities in their mathematics program. Two observational schedules were used to compile information on students' verbal interactions and behavior states during sessions. The study showed that providing children with the opportunity to work cooperatively together on a regular basis in structured cooperative groups encourages students to be more willing to work with each other, to share ideas and information, and to develop stronger perception of group cohesion and social responsibility for each other's learning than their peers in the unstructured groups. Furthermore, the researcher of this study declared that it was the schools that demonstrated a high commitment to cooperative learning by establishing structured cooperative learning groups in their classrooms and it was these groups that obtained higher learning outcomes than unstructured groups.

To have a more comprehensive outlook on the effects of cooperative learning in the classroom, Johnson and Johnson (1981) investigated the impact of cooperative and individualistic learning on interpersonal attraction between handicapped and non handicapped students. 51 students chosen on a stratified random basis, participated in one instructional unit for 16 days. In this study, not only were the handicapped students interacted by their non handicapped peers, but both groups of students perceived the interaction to be supportive, friendly, and facilitative of academic achievement. The findings of this study indicated that cooperative learning compared with individualistic learning enhances interaction between handicapped and non handicapped learners. This result was also supported by Yager, Johnson, Johnson, and Snider (1985) that stated the continued use of cooperative learning promote interpersonal relationship between handicapped and non handicapped students.

There has been a large body of research addressing the effects of cooperative learning from various perspectives (Johnson & Johnson, 198; Gillies, 2004; Yager, Johnson, Johnson, & Snider, 1985). Few numbers of studies, however, investigated the effects of cooperative learning on academic achievement (Suwantarathip & Wichadee, 2010; Aziz & Hossain, 2010); therefore, the present study addresses the following question:

1. Will applying the CL techniques bring about any significant difference in the mean scores of control and experimental groups on oral proficiency test

In view of the above question, the present study tries to provide empirical supports for the following hypothesis:

HO1. Applying the CL techniques will not bring about any significant difference in the mean scores of control and experimental groups on oral proficiency test.

3. Method

3.1 Participants

The data collected from 12 sessions of six IELTS classes, with a total of 40 male and female students enrolled in the IELTS speaking courses at IELTS Center Institution in Mashhad. Each class contained 10 students and the speaking course was held 3 times per week lasting for a month. All participants were native speakers of Persian and their age ranged between 20 and 33. They were divided into two groups: experimental group (n=20) in which cooperative language learning was employed; control group (n=20) in which cooperative language learning was not applied. However, the number of the participants was reduced as some students left the classes or were absent for the test.

4. Instruments

4.1 Oral interview

To assess the participants' speaking proficiency, an oral interview was held at the beginning and end of the course as a pretest and posttest. IELTS sample tests (Cambridge Examinations Publishing, 2011) were used for oral interview. Scales for evaluating the participants' speaking proficiency were taken from Farhady, Ja'fapur, and Birjandi (1994).

5. Procedure

After the researches had assigned participants into two experimental and control groups, all the participants took part in an oral interview as a pretest which was based on IELTS speaking sample test (Cambridge Examinations Publishing, 2011). Students' speaking proficiency was evaluated according to the scales of assessment from Farhady, Ja'fapur, and Birjandi (1994).

During one-month speaking course, the participants in the experimental group took part in twelve instructional sessions in which the teacher employed cooperative learning techniques. For example, Think-Pair-Share was one type of these techniques or activities in which the teacher asked a question and the students worked and thought individually about an answer; then, all of them responded the questions, and they often tried to complete each others. Sometimes, the teacher posed a statement to stimulate and engage students in generating their opinions, accepting, or rejecting others. They shared what they have learned with the class. Another kind of activities was Jigsaw that students read a

text, given by the teacher, and summarized it. This text contained useful vocabularies, idioms and phrases for improving speaking skills (Olsen and Kagan, 1992). However, for the control group such techniques were not employed.

At the end of the course both groups were interviewed and their speaking skill was assessed through IELTS speaking sample test as a posttest.

6. Result

Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics and independent sample t-test analysis of oral proficiency test held as a pretest. As it can be clearly seen, the mean score of the experimental group (3.97) is lower than the control group (4.02). However, the independent sample t-test did not show any significant difference in the mean scores of the control and experimental groups on the oral proficiency test ($t = .13$, $df = 38$, $p > .05$); thus, ensured the researchers of the homogeneity of both experimental and control groups in terms of their speaking skills at the entry level.

Table 1. The descriptive statistics and independent sample t-test analysis of oral proficiency test held as a pretest

	Group	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	T	df	*P*
Pretest	Control experimental	20 20	4.02 3.97	1.15 1.21	.25 .27	.13 .13	38	.89

Table 2 presents the results of paired sample t-test run to compare the performance of the control and experimental groups separately on the oral proficiency pretest and posttest. According to this table, there was a significant difference between the mean scores on oral proficiency pretest and posttest of both control and experimental groups separately ($df=19$, $t=5.67$, $p<0.05$ and $df=19$, $t=14.87$, $p<0.05$, respectively). These results revealed that both control and experimental groups improved regarding their speaking skills. As participants of both groups took part in speaking course, this result seems reasonable.

Table 2. The descriptive statistics and paired sample t-test analysis of oral proficiency test held as a pretest and posttest

	Group	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	T	df	*P*
pretest posttest	Control	20	4.02 5.15	1.15 1.02	.25 .22	5.67	19	.000
pretest posttest	Experimental	20	3.97 6.40	1.21 .94	.27 .21	14.87	19	.000

Table 3 presents the descriptive statistics and independent sample t-test analysis of oral proficiency test held as a posttest. As it can be seen, the mean score of the experimental group (6.40) is higher than the control group (5.15). Also, the independent sample t-test indicated that the experimental group performed significantly higher than the control group on the oral proficiency test ($t = -4.01$, $df = 38$, $p < .05$). This means that the very implementation of CLL techniques helped the experimental group speak significantly better than the control group; thus, the hypothesis that *applying the CL techniques will not bring about any significant difference in the mean scores of control and experimental groups on oral proficiency test* was disconfirmed.

Table 3. The descriptive statistics and independent sample t-test analysis of oral proficiency test held as a posttest

	Group	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	T	df	*P*
posttest	Control Experimental	20 20	5.15 6.40	1.02 .94	.22 .21	-4.01	38	.000

7. Conclusion

Introducing a new teaching approach is always full of challenges, so it is recommended that educators, researchers, and teachers share their ideas, work together, plan lessons, and help each other to enhance the effectiveness of educational

programs (Ning, 2010).

The purpose of the current study was to examine the impacts of cooperative learning on the learners' oral proficiency. Findings from this study indicated that the treatment strategy of CL had significant effect on students' oral proficiency. Prior to the treatment, the independent-sample t-test was administered to find out any significant difference in oral interview pre-test mean scores between students in experimental and control group. The findings revealed that both groups were equal ($p > 0.05$) in their performances at the beginning of the course. After the treatment, the independent-sample t-test was done to find out any significant difference in oral interview post-test mean scores between students in both groups. The findings indicated that students in experimental group showed significant ($p < 0.05$) improvement in their oral proficiency in comparison to students in control group. This study came to a conclusion that cooperative learning can contribute to the improvement of students' speaking proficiency.

The findings of study nearly reflect the results gained by Suwantarathip and Wichadee (2010) which asserted that cooperative learning approach can contribute to the improvement of students' language proficiency. They believed the significant improvement on the learners' language proficiency possibly resulted from the fact that discussing, reflecting, and thinking in a group, which are cooperative learning activities, can provide a less anxiety-producing context. The findings of this study are also in line with the findings by Artut (2009) and Aziz and Hossain (2010).

The result of this study may encourage future studies by looking closer at the positive effects of CL on students' achievements and to develop a more adequate explanation of the effects of cooperative learning.

References

Arnold. J. (1999). *Affect in language learning*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Artut, P. D. (2009). Experimental evaluation of the effects of cooperative learning on kindergarten children's mathematics ability. *International Journal of Educational Research, 48*, 370–380.

Aziz, Z., & Hosain, M. A. (2010). A comparison of cooperative learning and conventional teaching on students' achievement in secondary mathematics. *Procedia Social and Behavioral Sciences, 9,* 53-62.

Cambridge Examinations Publishing. (2011). *IELTS 8*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Farhady, H., Ja'farpur, A., & Birjandi, P. (1994). *Testing language skills: From theory to practice*. Tehran: SAMT.

Feigenbaum, E. J. (2007). The role of language anxiety in teacher-fronted versus small-group interaction in Spanish as a foreign language: How is pronunciation accuracy affected? Unpublished MA thesis, university of Pittsburgh.

Freeman, L. D. (2000). *Techniques and principles in language teaching*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Gillies, R. M. (2004). The effects of cooperative learning on junior high school students during small group learning. *Learning and Instruction, 14*, 197-213.

Johnson, D. W., & Johnson, R. T. (1981). The integration of the handicapped into the regular classroom: Effects of cooperative and individualistic instruction *Contemporary Educational Psychology, 6*, 344-353.

McCafferty, S. G., Jacobs, G. M., & Christina, D. I. (2006). *Cooperative learning and second language teaching*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Murdoch, K., & Wilson, J. (2004). *How to succeed with cooperative learning.* Australia: Curriculum Corporation

Ning, H. (2010). Adapting cooperative learning in tertiary ELT. *ELT Journal*, *65*(1), 60-70.

Oslen, R., & Kagan, S. (1992). About cooperative learning. In C. Kessler (Ed.), *Cooperative language learning: A teacher's resource book* (pp. 1-30). Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.

Richards, J. C., & Rodgers, T. S. (2001). *Approaches and methods in language teaching*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Suwantarathip, O., & Woolfolk, S. (2010). The impacts of cooperative learning on anxiety and proficiency in an EFL class. *Journal of College Teaching and Learning*, *7*(11), 51-58.

Woolfolk, A.E., Winne, P. H., & Perry, N. E. (2003). *Educational psychology*. Canada: Pearson Education.

Yager, S., Johnson, R. T., Johnson, D. W., & Snider, B. (1985). The effect of cooperative and individualistic learning experiences on positive and negative cross-handicap relationships. *Contemporary Educational Psychology*, *10*, 127-138.