



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Vol. 4. Issue.1., 2017 (Jan-Mar.)

ISSN INTERNATIONAL  
STANDARD  
SERIAL  
NUMBER  
INDIA  
2395-2628(Print):2349-9451(online)

THE ROLE OF COOPERATIVE LEARNING IN ENHANCING EFL LEARNERS STUDENTS'  
ORAL COMMUNICATION SKILLS

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ABSTRACT

This study aimed to shed light on the importance of implementing cooperative learning strategy for developing English language learners students' speaking skills. The researcher has implemented the test which consisted of six questions and has taken place with the students of second year, University level at Khartoum State. Pre and post-test were used as a research instrument for data collection. The sample of the study consisted of (50) students from both sexes. The research's data has been entered and processed by using the (IBM SPSS). The study has found out that: firstly, students of second year can develop better communication and speaking skills through the implementation of cooperative learning in the learning process. Secondly, students' performance improved significantly and they developed better attitudes towards learning English via cooperative learning. Thirdly, in cooperative learning, students are motivated and less reluctant. Therefore, the study recommends that cooperative learning should be adopted in English learning and English speaking in particular.

**Key words:** teacher-centeredness, STAD, acquisition, group investigation

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INTRODUCTION

Cooperative learning is not a new teaching strategy, but appeared recently in the field of teaching and learning; but it has its roots in the history of education, so it is important to remember that the cooperative learning strategy started just before World War II. According to Kessler (1992), the cooperative learning strategy finds its roots in the classroom application a long time ago in the 1970s when the USA began to design a model of study for a classroom context based on cooperation.

The cooperative learning strategy was developed by Coleman (1959) as a means to reduce competition between students, namely in American schools. He believes that competition is a negative component in the educational system. He also suggests that instead of encouraging competition in the academic setting which effects the process of education; schools should introduce more collaborative approaches to teaching.

Likewise, Sharan (1994) mentions that new waves of cooperative learning appeared in the early seventies, following the pioneering work of John Dewey and later Alice Miel and Herbert Thelen in the 1950s.

As the years went by, more exactly in 1975 cooperative learning has become strategy applied by many people and it helped them to promote mutual satisfaction, better communication, acceptance of others and support among the participants of the team, and has shown an increase in a variety of thinking strategies among individuals in the group. Johnson and Johnson (1994) introduce the five elements of cooperative learning as: a) positive interdependence; b) individual accountability; c) face-to-face interaction; d) social skills and; e) processing information, which are considered essential for effective group learning. These elements are cornerstones for teachers who use cooperative learning in their classes. If teachers apply the elements above; they at least guarantee that every student is going to get adequate opportunities to participate in the class activities.

### **Review of Literature**

#### **Cooperative Learning in Teaching English**

Cooperative learning can be used to teach any imaginable subject, not just the English language. This strategy requires learners to participate and share their knowledge with other classmates. Once they start learning in groups, they will unobtrusively be engaged in oral practice. In contrast, when it comes to English, it is actually important to use cooperative learning strategy. It is well known that practice makes perfect; which refers to the expertise people gain when they repeat something many times. So, practice is an important component for learning and it is necessary for anyone to become an expert in skill. For example, Sawin (1985, p.235) states that "students need practice in producing comprehensive output using all the language resources they have already acquired". Therefore, cooperative learning helps learners practice the language they are learning in a very comprehensible way. On the other hand, Wendy (2007) believes that using cooperative learning structures both formally and informally can make lessons into fun, where students are really involved in their learning. He adds that cooperative learning structures create a situation in which tasks will not be completed unless students cooperate. Therefore, each group member must contribute actively in the group so that they can reach their learning goals.

#### **Cooperative Learning and Speaking Skills**

We get people to understand and know us from our discourse; therefore, speaking is a mirror that reflects who we are and even more reflects a person's identity. Allah Almighty says "and if we willed, we could show them to you, and you would know them by their mark; but you will surely know them by the tone of [their] speech. And Allah knows your deeds". This verse shows that through speaking we let others know us and know our identity and in return we will know them. According to Madrid (1993), cooperative learning activities are designed to sustain and develop positive attitudes toward students with different levels of learning and cultural backgrounds. Learners learn to regard their classmates as valuable sources of support and encouragement in their efforts to become successful socially, linguistically, and in their academic career. That means that in cooperative learning, students have the advantage of managing their own learning in a way in which they are interested. Similarly, Coelho (1994) claims that cooperative group instruction provides students with opportunities to discover, to clarify and to internalize ideas among their peers. Such kind of classroom procedures help students to develop high levels of thinking skills by analyzing, evaluating, and using the new information provided by other teammates in the group. The aim behind learning any foreign language is to speak and communicate in that language (i.e. a language should be spoken).

#### **Cooperative Learning and Teacher-centeredness**

Since the cooperative learning is a strategy of involving students in regular practice, it is so far different from all other traditional teaching and learning strategies which concentrate mainly on the teacher as the center of the learning process. According to Astin (1993), many studies have demonstrated that changing the learning process from teacher-centered into student-centered makes cooperative learning more effective and powerful than traditional learning. Supporting the same idea, Webb (1989) continues to add that it is an important warning to differentiate between students-centeredness and teacher-centeredness because; when students' role is passive, it strongly effects students' academic achievements and progress. Likewise, Johnson, et al, (1990) emphasize that giving the student the burden to direct their own learning leads to more positive

interdependence among members in the group. Supporting the same point Gillies (2007) adds that students feel responsible for managing their own learning, which is known as individual accountability. He also believes that students need to learn how to communicate effectively with other teammates and they also need to know how to articulate their thoughts, deal with disagreement, accept others' points of view and engage in democratic decision making. When the teacher is controlling everything and he is the person who takes much time in the class, as Smith and Waller (1997) argue, that very low interdependence and individual accountability exist. It is obvious from what is being mentioned above that in conventional methods of learning learners role is very passive and they do not actively involved in the learning process. In other words, students must be given opportunities to share what they have.

#### **Designing Cooperative Group Work in the Classroom**

In our early childhood period, we learned to play different games together that required us to cooperate with other children in order to feel the happiness and pleasure. Before we started those games, we formed groups according to age since you can play any game alone but you won't satisfy your instincts as when you play it with others. Therefore, the importance of doing something cooperatively starts from very early ages in our lives. According to Cohen (1994), group work is a helpful technique for achieving certain kinds of intellectual and social learning goals; it is also regarded as a superior technique for conceptual learning, for creative problem solving and for developing oral language proficiency.

Likewise, Johnson & Johnson (2004) believe that group working provides students with opportunities to practise the language more effectively, deciding, inducing and problem solving. Moreover, it helps them to produce a deeper level of interaction with other teammates. Slavin (1995) goes on to add that working in groups helps students be outgoing by getting in touch with others and making decisions in their lives. Furthermore, group work establishes social norms about what to do and what not to do (Sharan, 1992). Group work also enhances students' relationships positively because students need to get in touch with other students in the same phase which encourages them to interact with no barriers (Johnson and Johnson, 2004). All the above discussions indicate that before developing group work, students need to be well introduced to what group work is, what it is for and how it can contribute to their learning.

#### **Cooperative Learning Methods**

One of the challenges that faces us as teachers and learners of English is how to adopt the teaching and learning strategies that meet our and our learners' needs and help them achieving their goals of learning. One of the teachers' efforts in improving the quality of learning that results in a good student who will be successful in life generally lies in the preparation of a wide range of learning activities that take place in the classroom and the way we implement those activities. Cooperative learning methods strive to enable students to assume a high degree of responsibility for their own learning rather than perceiving learning as imposed by others (Sharan, 1994). This indicates that students are more likely to accomplish this when they are provided with opportunities to practise their learning activities with other teammates.

- **Students' Team-achievement Division (STAD):** It is a cooperative teaching and learning method in which students work in pairs on a topic or an activity to express and exchange each other's knowledge and viewpoints orally. In this method, students are divided into groups of five or six that are mixed according to their level of performance, sex, and ethnicity (Sharan, 1994). The major goal of each team is to make sure that their teammates have learned the material. After a period of team practice, students will take individual quizzes. Although, students study together, they are not allowed to help each other with the quizzes. Such individual accountability motivates students to do a good job by explaining and clarifying concepts to each other. This way, teachers will guarantee and ensure the team's success in mastering the information and skills being learnt. According to Slavin (1995), the main idea behind this method is to motivate students and encourage them to help each other to achieve desired skills and outcomes.
- **Group Investigation Method:** In this method, group composition is based on students' interest, and it is heterogeneous. Slavin (1970) believes that interaction and effective communication are best

achieved when students work in small groups where exchange among peers and cooperative inquiry can be sustained. Therefore, teachers and their students need to experience a variety of communicative and social skills that establish norms of appropriate cooperative behavior in the classroom. This method develops the classroom into a social system in which students are going to have chance to decide what they will study. Students who are involved in this method are divided into groups of four or six members; each one chooses a topic of interest and investigates it.

Furthermore, in the implementation of group investigation method Zingaro, D. (2008, p. 1-2) states that:

"Teachers should first, present a multi-faceted problem to the class, and students choose an interest group. The problem posed here is particularly important, as a variety of reactions from students is necessary for appropriate group formation. Teachers first should avoid giving their own ideas or rejecting ideas from students. Second, groups plan their investigation, the procedures, tasks and goals consistent with the chosen subtopic. Third, groups carry out the investigation as planned in the above step. The teacher's role at this step is to follow the investigative process, offering help when required: suggesting resources, ensuring a variety of skills is being used, etc. Finally, the teacher and students evaluate the investigation and resulting presentations".

- **The Learning Together Method:** This method comprises an important concepts; namely students work face to face in groups of four or five, finding interdependence to achieve group goals and showing that they all mastered the material. According to Johnson and Johnson (1994) this method includes advice on decision making, problem solving, and also teaching mutual respect. Also, students are evaluated on the basis of two aspects: a) the work completed and; b) students' interaction observed by the teacher during the lesson.
- **The Discussion and Dialogue Method:** From its name, it is clear that discussion and dialogue are the cornerstones of this method. Students in groups are going to negotiate, discuss and exchange the ideas and information with each other. As for example Ments (1990) claims that discussion and dialogue can be considered as a process of teaching that involves interaction between the teacher and his students to exchange information so that to achieve their goals of learning. Similarly, Brookfield and Preskill (1999) believe that discussion and dialogue provide students with an opportunity to exchange their thoughts and feelings in order to develop their understanding of the subject they are learning.

Additionally, Fox (1995) points out some challenges that might be found when using this method in teaching such as: a) it can be difficult to allow all students to talk in each lesson especially in the case of having large number of students in the classroom; b) the time could be very short to cover all the contents of the lesson; c) discussion in the classroom might cause loss of control by the teacher. Using this method in an appropriate way with no doubt will enhance students speaking skills as assumed from its mane.

#### **Cooperative Learning and Second Language Acquisition**

A fairly extensive number of researches have been presented in investigating the role of cooperative learning strategy on second language acquisition and students' perceptions of their own language experiences. The use of cooperative learning allows many opportunities for the English learners to practice the language which leads to more promotion in acquisition a way that helps them to become more confident in using and producing English when working in groups. For example, Fathman, *et al.*, (1993) believe that cooperative learning can maximize second language acquisition through providing opportunities for both language input and output. They continue to add that many researchers have compared teacher-led discussions with pair discussions to ensure the amount and variety of student talk in both contexts. Their results reveal that when students work in pairs they produce a significantly greater amount and variety of student talk than if we compare it with when the teacher-led discussions. They do not only talk more but also produce a wider range of language functions (e.g., rhetorical, pedagogical, and interpersonal).

Also, Jelena (2011, p.129) states that "the popularity of cooperative learning has grown over time and had a positive impact on almost all aspects of language acquisition and language learning". This means that cooperative learning fosters both language acquisition and language learning because every student learns and communicates with students almost in the same level and age. As well, Krashen (1985) points out three vital variables of cooperative learning as:

1. *Input*: Krashen believes that second language acquisition theory could be applied to any foreign language learning. He continues to add that second language acquisition theory is a key to successful mastery of any language. In this issue McDonnell (1992) adds that cooperative learning enables language learners to focus their attention on the meaning itself rather than the linguistic forms of the language such as memorization of grammar and vocabulary.
2. *Output*: Krashen's theory of second language acquisition is also used to explain the second variable of cooperative learning which is known by "output" in which Krashen believes that interaction is crucial for foreign language learning in the context of natural linguistic and the context of the classroom.
3. *Context*: in addition to "input and output" there is another factor that fosters second language acquisition and learning known by context. According to Kagan (1995), this variable supports students with motivation, helps them to communicate better and provides them an appropriate feedback. These three variables of cooperative learning have been mentioned above can facilitate language acquisition and learning and show that communicative language teaching can best be implemented in English classroom by using cooperative learning strategies. It is clear that group investigation requires students to seek information from a variety of sources inside and outside the classroom. A central role to group investigation is students' cooperative planning of the learning task.

#### Materials and Methods

The participants of this study were the second year University students at Khartoum State. The researcher used two different classes; one class represented the control group and the other represented the experimental group. The total number of the subjects in each group was (50) students. The pre and post-test were administered to both groups.

#### The students' pre and post-test

For measuring if the students have developed their speaking skills, two tests have been conducted by the students for both the control group and the experimental group (pre and post-test). The test consisted of six questions the students discussed during the course.

#### Validity and Reliability of the instrument

For checking the test's reliability and validity, the researcher showed it to the supervisor of the current study and some other experts in the field.

Table 1: Control group paired samples correlations

Paired Samples Correlations				
		N	Correlation	Sig.
Pair 1	Before & After	50	.486	.000

The table above explains the correlation between the two variables pre and post-test. As it is clearly presented that the Sig. is less than 0.05 which proves the existence of correlation between the two variables. Based on the result above we sum up that students' performance in both tests was poor.

Table 2: Experimental group paired samples correlation

Paired Samples Correlations				
		N	Correlation	Sig.
Pair 1	After & Before	50	.798	.000



The table above presents the correlation between the two variables. As we can see that the Sig. is less than 0.05 which proves the existence of correlation between the two variables. The subjects performed well in both the pre and the post-test.

### Result and discussion

The analysis of the test depends on the hypotheses proposed by the current study which are: Cooperative Learning is an effective strategy for developing students' speaking skills, Cooperative Learning strategy makes the learning process more intuitive interesting for the students and cooperative group work helps students to understand the subject being taught or the topic being discussed. For testing the hypotheses above, the data has been gathered by the two tests have been computed and analyzed by using IBM SPSS program to test whether there is any differences between the students' performance in the pre and the post-test.

Table3: Control group paired samples statistics

Paired Samples Statistics					
		Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pair 1	Before	4.78	50	.954	.135
	After	4.56	50	1.459	.206

The table above presents the descriptive statistics for both variables as the mean, the number of observations, the standard deviation and the standard error mean. As presented in the table above that the mean in the pre-test is higher if it is compared with the mean in the post-test (4.78 vs. 4.56) which means the performance of the subjects declined through the experiment instead of rising.

Table 4: Experimental group paired samples statistics

Paired Samples Statistics					
		Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pair 1	After	8.38	50	1.369	.194
	Before	5.56	50	1.053	.149

The table above presents the descriptive statistics for both variables pre and post-test. It includes the mean, the number of observations, standard deviation, and the standard deviation error mean. As it is shown the table above the mean in the post-test is higher when it is compared with the mean in the pre-test 8.38 vs. 5.56. The result provided by the above table proves that the performance of the students in the experimental group post-test is significantly improved and that asserts the success of the experiment during the course.

Table 5: Control group paired samples test

Paired Samples Test									
		Paired Differences					t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
		Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
					Lower	Upper			
Pair 1	Before - After	.220	1.298	.184	.149	.589	1.198	49	.237

The above table shows that  $t(49) = 1.198$ ,  $p = 0.237$ . As it is shown in the same table that the Sig. or the P-value 0.237 is higher than 0.05 which provides strong evidence that students in the control group did not achieve any progress neither after the pre-test nor the post-test but in return their performance went backward.

Table 6: Experimental group paired samples test

Paired Samples Test									
		Paired Differences					T	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
		Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
					Lower	Upper			
Pair 1	After - Before	2.820	.825	.117	2.585	3.055	24.160	49	.000

The table above shows that,  $t(49) = 24.160$ ,  $p = 0.000$ . As it is explained in the table above that the value of Sig. 0.000 is less than 0.05 a matter that proves the existence of statistically significant differences in the students' performance. The out all result provided presented in the above table proves the success of the treatment which had positive effect on the students' performance. Having a look on the table above, we can see that the students' performance in both groups were improved significantly; but the students' performance in the post-test was better than their performance in the pre-test a matter that proves the success of the experiment which has been provided by the students' performance in the post-test. The success of the experiment supports the study's hypotheses which prove the positive impact of cooperative learning strategy in developing students' speaking skills which has been resulted from the students' performance in the test.

#### Findings

The current study is investigating the impact of implementing cooperative learning strategy in developing English language learners students' speaking skills. The study has found that: firstly, students of second year can develop better communication and speaking skills through the implementation of cooperative learning in the learning process. Secondly, students' performance improved significantly and they developed better attitudes towards learning English via cooperative learning strategy. Finally, in cooperative learning, students are motivated and less reluctant.

#### Recommendations

The study recommends the following:

1. Teachers of English should adopt cooperative learning methods in the teaching and learning process.
2. Students should be provided with enough opportunities in the learning process, and more importantly, they should be encouraged to implement cooperative learning methods both in and out the classroom.
3. Teaching in the classroom should no longer be teacher-centred one.

#### Conclusion

This study is an investigation for the implementation of cooperative learning strategy and its impact on developing English language learners students' speaking skills. The study has found out that students' performance improved significantly after the experiment if it is compared with students' performance before the experiment.

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