

## Cooperative Learning in the EFL Classrooms

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### Abstract:

This paper sheds light on the possible effects of implementing cooperative language learning method in EFL classrooms. It begins by defining the notion of cooperative learning as a student-centered approach where students work jointly together in small groups in order to accomplish a common goal. Second, it attempts to illustrate and explain the various elements required in a successful cooperative learning structure since cooperative groups are designed in accordance with certain principles and tools. Then it explains the types and models of cooperative learning. Moreover, this paper attempts to demonstrate the benefits of using cooperative learning classrooms as good means to enhance the achievement, interpersonal relationships besides psychological health and social competence. In relation to these areas, instances of the usefulness of using cooperative learning in EFL classrooms are presented through review of pertinent literature.

Keywords: cooperative learning, EFL classrooms , benefits of CLL

### التعليم التعاوني في تدريس اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية

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ملخص البحث:

تهدف هذه الورقة البحثية إلى جذب الانتباه إلى التأثيرات المصاحبة لاستخدام أساليب التعليم التعاوني في الصفوف التي تعلم فيها اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية. تستهل هذه الورقة بتقديم صورة واضحة

لمفهوم التعليم التعاوني كونه استراتيجية تعتمد على التعاون بين الأفراد في مجموعات وذلك لتحقيق أهداف مشتركة. كما تقوم هذه الورقة بشرح وتوضيح الأسس المتطلب تواجدها لتكوين أساس تعاوني ناجح بما أن مجموعات التعليم التعاوني يتم إعدادها وفقا لمبادئ ووسائل معينة. كما تحاول هذه الورقة تسليط الضوء على فعالية استخدام التعليم التعاوني كأداة لتعزيز التحصيل الأكاديمي للطلبة والعلاقات بين الأشخاص بالإضافة إلى تنمية الصحة النفسية والكفاءة الاجتماعية. تقدم هذه الورقة البحثية نماذج وأمثلة على فعالية استخدام التعليم التعاوني المتعلقة بالجلات المذكورة وذلك عن طريق مراجعة وتحليل دراسات سابقة نشرت في هذا المجال.

*الكلمات المفتاحية: التعليم التعاوني، صفوف اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية، منافع التعليم التعاوني*

### **Cooperative Learning in the EFL Classrooms**

The improvement of the quality of classroom instruction and the promises of achieving fruitful outcomes has been a controversial concern of pedagogical researchers. One of the approaches assumed to achieve such goals is cooperative learning (CL), which is a structure of collaboration designed to the accomplishment of particular goals through learners working together in groups. "Within cooperative activities individuals seek the outcomes that are beneficial to themselves and to all other group members" (Smith, 1996, p.71). Thus, in order to improve their own learning and the learning of others, learners work cooperatively in groups (Jolliffe, 2007). Within these groups, students discuss the material to be learned with each other, help and assess each other to understand it and encourage each other to work hard. Therefore, it requires the groups to work together as a support system to answer each other's questions.

Many researchers regard CLL as a method of fostering students' performance. CLL is considered to positively develop students' critical thinking skills, social skills and communication skills (Kagan, 1994). As pointed out by researchers, CL poses a higher advantageous impact on learners' achievement when compared to teacher-centered methods (Alghamdi & Gillies, 2013; Ghorbani Nezamoshairi'e, 2012; Taran, 2014, Marashi & Baygzadeh, 2010; Moghaddam & Heidari, 2018).

CLL provides opportunities for students to take part in their learning rather than having students compete with each other without the stronger

students dominating the weaker students (Felder & Brent, 2001). Thus, this will foster students' achievement as whole in the classroom.

Respectively, this study will exclusively investigate the efficacy of implementing cooperative learning in EFL classrooms. Specifically, it will scrutinize its impact on students' overall academic achievement. Based on previous research, it is hypothesized that students who will be instructed using CLL are likely to achieve higher grades than their counterparts who will be instructed using traditional teacher-centered approaches.

### Objectives and Research Questions

This study aims to explore the impact of cooperative learning on EFL learners based on the analysis of previous research. It aims at stating the fundamental notions and procedures related to cooperative learning. Additionally, it intends to review some investigations that studied the impact of cooperative learning in comparison to teacher centered teaching.

Specifically, the study will be set out to investigate the following questions:

1. Does implementing cooperative learning pose an impact on EFL students' learning?
2. How does cooperative learning affect EFL learners?
3. In what areas are the investigations regarding cooperative learning carried out in EFL classrooms?
4. What are the effects of cooperative learning on EFL students in comparison to teacher-centered approaches?

### Significance of the study

The findings of this study are significant to:

**The administrators.** It can help them recognize the positive effect of cooperative learning and consequently design activities that could help teachers implement this method in the Libyan EFL classroom.

**The teachers.** They will be encouraged to abandon traditional teacher-dominated teaching methods and adopt more student-centered approaches as they could witness the promised outcomes.

**The students.** They will recognize the positive impact the cooperative learning instruction could bring to their learning. Thus, they will be enthusiastic to incorporate with their teacher to achieve the learning goals.

### Method

The paper is a narrative review of pertinent literature related to cooperative learning, specifically in EFL classrooms. It is qualitative in nature. The data were collected from journal articles and books. Papers were retrieved from online data based on their relatedness to cooperative learning in order to extract information. The researcher reported the data and conclusions were drawn respectively.

### What is Cooperative Learning?

Cooperative language learning (CLL) is an instructional learning approach where learners of various abilities are working together in small groups in order to attain a common goal. It is "an approach to teaching that makes maximum use of cooperative activities involving pairs and small groups of learners in the classroom" (Richards & Rodgers, 2001, p. 192). This classroom condition fosters learners' motivation and reduces stress and anxiety as learners work cooperatively.

According to Richards and Rodgers (2001), the idea of using cooperation in regular classrooms was initiated by John Dewey in the early twentieth century. Later, it was promoted as a response to teacher-fronted classrooms for the reason that there were concerns that minority students might fall-behind higher achieving students. Teacher-fronted classrooms and traditional methods, where individual teachers or learners work on their own, can bring good results; however, more ideal and encouraging outcomes are offered when using cooperative learning. This perspective is demonstrated in Johnson, Johnson and Smith (1998) and Zhang's (2010) comparisons between cooperative language learning and traditional methods. One perception is that in CL knowledge is constructed by student and teacher; hence, students are actively constructing, discovering and transforming knowledge in a cooperative learning context. In this context, teachers attempt to develop

students' competencies and talents. Further, interaction is promoted and teaching is seen as a complex procedure requiring considerable training (Johnson et. al., 1998). As illustrated by Zhang (2010), positive interdependence is a basic element in cooperative learning classrooms. In traditional teacher-fronted classrooms, either interdependence does not exist or it is negative. Likewise, the students' roles are passive in teacher-fronted classrooms while it is active in CLL classrooms.

Further distinctions are shown through the general roles of teachers which are viewed as organizers, counselor, facilitator and intervener in CLL; whereas, in traditional method teachers are considered to be the center of the classroom as a controller and a source of assistance, feedback, reinforcement and support. What's more, in CLL classrooms, collaborative small groups of students share materials, activities engage learners in communication and interaction is intense among students. On the other hand, traditional paradigms assign a complete set of materials for each student, who work individually or in pairs, and students take a major part in evaluating own progress towards learning. "Cooperative learning researchers and practitioners have shown that positive peer relationships are essential to success in college. Isolation and alienation are best predictor of failure" (Smith, 1996, p.72); thus, gaining communication and interaction among students is an advantage of CLL classrooms.

### **Goals of Cooperative Learning**

Richards (2001) stated that the learner-centered approach CLL is seen as an extension of the principles of 'Communicative Language Teaching' approach. Presuming certain goals, CLL offers advantages over teacher-fronted classrooms. In CLL, group and pair activities aim at providing naturalistic second language acquisition. This goal is pretended to be attained across various curriculum settings such as content-based, foreign language classrooms and mainstreaming. Furthermore, using interactive tasks in CLL concentrates on particular lexical items, language structures, and communicative functions. Richard and Rodgers (2001) also demonstrate that CLL comes at providing successful learning and communication strategies and opportunities, as well as enhancing learner motivation and reducing stress creating positive effective classrooms.

### **Essential elements of Cooperative Learning**

Structuring cooperation among students is not merely doing assignments in groups of individuals sitting near each other; neither is the work of a single individual that other learners in the group do not take a part in it. The notion of cooperation denotes perspectives more complex than having students interact and communicate with each other while doing activities. These interactions and communications are governed via certain essential components in order for cooperative learning to work. For a successful CLL, Olsen and Kagan (1992) propose five elements; they are positive interdependence, group formation, individual accountability, social skills as well as structuring and structures.

*Positive interdependence* is successfully structured when group members perceive that they are linked to each other in a way that a student cannot be successful if not with in the group as a whole. Teachers therefore must design group tasks in such a way so students complete them together cooperatively and rely on each other to help complete their work. If there is no positive interdependence, there is no cooperation.

*Group formation* involves several factors in order to construct the groups. One of which is the decisions on the size of the group, which should be small enough for all members to participate collectively. Other factors include assigning students to heterogeneous groups and assigning roles to members within each group.

*Individual accountability* occurs when each member of the group is accountable for a specific portion of the whole work. This is when the students are in the groups, nevertheless the success of the group is based on individual learning of each member. For example, the students work together on a task and the teacher give half of the grade as a whole group grade given to each student in the group; the other half is given individually depending on the students' contribution to the whole.

*Social skills* emphasis on interpersonal skills to establish a successful interaction. Teachers can introduce the social skills needed by assigning students to roles, explaining and emphasizing teamwork skills. Finally, *Structuring and structures* involves how students are going to interact in order to achieve their goals. Teachers and students organize interactions with in the activity by assigning predetermined roles that each student is

responsible for which. Those various elements are highly required in a successful cooperative structure.

### **Types of Cooperative Learning**

According to Johnson, Johnson and Smith (1998), groups should be designed with attention given to the essential components of cooperative learning in order to be successful. Moreover, there are three types to which cooperative learning groups can be designed; they are formal, informal and base groups.

*Formal cooperative learning groups* last for one or more class sessions. Students work jointly together in order to achieve a goal during one period or several weeks. The teacher assigns the number of students in each group and the task that they are going to do. Besides, the teacher monitors while the group is working, intervenes when needed, and assesses their final achievements (Johnson et. al., 1998).

*Informal Cooperative Learning Groups* are temporary. Students work together for one period to accomplish a learning goal. For example, students discuss the material to be learned or provide a closure to an instructional session (Johnson et. al., 1998).

*Base groups* occupies the longest time when compared to the other two as it continuous for a whole course. The stable members in this heterogeneous group meet regularly and work cooperatively. In addition, they provide support to each other, encourage each other, offer assistance and make sure all group members improve academically and cognitively (Johnson et. al., 1998). These essential types of groups can be used across various models of cooperative learning.

### **Models of cooperative learning**

There are various forms of cooperative learning and teaching which can be successful in classrooms. Table 1. (Johnson, Johnson & Stanne, 2000, p.2) illustrates those distinctive models.

Table 1: Modern Methods Of Cooperative Learning

Research-Developer	Date	Method
Johnson & Johnson	Mid 1960s	Learning Together & Alone
DeVries &Edwaeds	Early 1970s	Teams-Games_Tournaments (TGT)
Sharan &sharan	Mid 1970s	Group investigation
Johnson & Johnson	Mid 1970	Constructive controversy
Aronson & Associates	Late 1970s	Jigsaw Procedure
Slavin & Associates	Late 1970s	Student Team Achievement Devisions (STAD)
Cohen	Early 1980s	Complex instruction
Slavin & Associates	Early 1980s	Team Accelerated Instruction (TAI)
Kagan	Mid 1780s	Cooperative Learning Structures
Stevens, Slavin, & Associates	Late 1980s	Cooperative Integrated Reading and Composition (CIRC)

*Learning Together* model organizes activities according to the essential elements of CL. In addition, it incorporates three types of cooperative learning. Cooperative routines should be manifested within classrooms and within the whole school making use of cooperative learning structures and developing its use (Jolliffe, 2007). According to Shaaban and Ghaith (2005), learners learn to work collectively together in accordance with the principles of heterogeneous grouping, positive interdependence, individual accountability, social skills, and group processing. This is in order to accomplish a certain task in an EFL/ ESL context instruction such as writing an essay.

*Teams-Games-Tournaments* (TGT) is a CLL model in which teachers compare the students' knowledge and scores in order to determine a team rank position for each student so they compete against other students at the same rank only. This method involves five components of "lesson planning-class presentation, team study, tournament, determining individual

improvement points, and team recognition" (Shaaban & Ghaith, 2005, p. 17). After making sure that all students have understood the material presented, a tournament among groups is held where representatives of each group compete together in order to earn points for their teams.

*Group investigation* is built upon problem solving approach according to Jolliffe (2007). In this model, students form their own interest groups to research, plan, implement, and synthesize their findings into a group presentation for the class. Therefore, it provides students with opportunities to experience democratic decision making and problem solving through the investigation of real problems, issues or concerns.

*Constructive controversy* model enhances learners' knowledge of cross-cultural variation and their general research and communication skills, as stated by Shaaban and Gaith (2005). They further describe how it works in a procedure that students are assigned to groups of four and each pair are assigned to a position. Students start by researching and preparing possible cases for their position. Then they present these cases to other members of the group. After that, students engage in a free discussion, reverse roles and, finally, find a synthesis evidence on which they all agree.

*Jigsaw Procedure* "can be used whenever the material under study is in a narrative or expository form" (Shaaban & Ghaith, 2005). Aronson (2002) suggests techniques that show how this model works. It operates in a way that each student in a group takes responsibility for one chunk then teaches it to the other members. Then, students meet and discuss with other group members who have identical chunks in expert groups. After that, they return to their groups and they teach their chunks to the group. Finally, like the pieces of a jigsaw puzzle, students fit their individual chunks together to form a complete body of knowledge.

*Student Teams-Achievement Division* is a model with four faces. First, the teacher teaches the lesson; then the students have team study; after that, they take an individual test or quiz; finally, the teacher figures team scores and recognize improvement. To clarify, teacher teaches the lesson to the students. Then, the students work on worksheets in teams to master the material and practice social skills. In this face, the teacher establishes cooperative team rules, chooses a team name and gives one worksheet to each team. The

teacher circulates while teams work in order to observe social skills and check for understanding (Slavin, 1991).

*Complex instruction* enables students of different levels of academic proficiency to make meaningful contributions to the group task. This model uses curricular that promotes the improvement of high-order thinking skills using CL instructional strategies. It assures students that they all have important intellectual contributions to make to the multiple ability task (Shaaban & Ghaith, 2005).

*Cooperative Learning Structures* "is based on using a variety of generic and content-free ways of managing classroom interaction called structures" (Shaaban & Ghaith, 2005, p. 19). Shaaban and Ghaith (2005) state that these structures enables teachers to use strategies to help learners' to build their teams, communicate, master learning and critically think. Further, Jolliffe (2007) demonstrates that those structures enable teachers to transform a wide variety of lessons across any curriculum into a cooperative format.

*Cooperative Integrated Reading and Composition* is a program for teaching reading and writing in the upper grades of primary education (Stevens, Slavin & Farnish 1991). In CIRC, students work cooperatively in groups to accomplish various activities such as reading comprehension and creative writing.

### **Empirical research on cooperative learning in EFL classrooms**

Several researchers have conducted various experimental studies related to the advantages of cooperative leaning with different subjects and settings (Smith, 1996; Jolliffe, 2007). The outcomes of CL are classified to three major categories; they are achievement, interpersonal relationships besides psychological health and social competence. Using CL typically results in higher achievement and greater productivity, more higher-level reasoning and greater transfer of what is learnt across situations and tasks. It further promotes more caring and supportive relationships, and greater psychological health, social competence, self-esteem and social competencies settings (Smith, 1996; Jolliffe, 2007). However, there is a considerable research in language learning that demonstrates these advantages in EFL classrooms.

Zhang (2016) suggests that cooperative learning –compared with traditional instructing- fosters productivity, achievement and communication

opportunities in EFL classroom. Zhang (2016) presents CLL as a highly effective method with focusing on the communicative and effective factors of language learning rather than merely teaching grammatical rules and vocabulary. This research further concludes that this practice helps students narrate their thoughts and ideas.

Alghamdi and Gillies's (2013) study investigates the impact of CLL on the students' achievement by comparing traditional and cooperative learning when learning English grammar. The research shows that there are significant differences between the scores among the investigated groups. In the post-test, results showed that CL groups achieved better than their traditional counterparts did even though there was no significant difference between the examined groups in the pre-test.

Ghorabi and Nezamoshairi'e (2012) held another investigation of the impact of CL on students' achievement. It compared CL to Grammar Translation method in EFL context. The researchers claim that CL possesses higher efficacy than Grammar Translation method. They further regard it as a good alternative to the dominant method in Asia since post-test scores were higher in favor of the CL as a delivered instruction.

A different study (Tran, 2014) examined the impact of implementing CL on students' achievement as well as knowledge retention in EFL classrooms. This study compared using CL to lecture-based teaching over eight weeks. The research reports significantly higher scores achieved by CL groups. It was also deduced that not only CL groups gained higher achievement but also knowledge retention was significantly higher.

Further studies presumably support the theory that CL is highly effective with regard to learners' achievement. Marashi and Baygzadeh (2010) assumes that the overall high achievement of CL group is due to the use of cooperative teaching procedures in comparison to teaching without it. Another study's results provides an evidence that CL strategies help students enhance their oral skill performance as well as their motivation towards learning English (Moghaddam & Heidari, 2018).

Other research tackled different dimensions of the advantages of cooperative learning in EFL classrooms. Conteras and Castro (2016) investigated a pedagogical intervention via using dialogical perspectives of

CL. They found out that this experience fosters students' classroom interaction in new vision of group work. They claim that this method encourages personal growth and social awareness among participants. Moreover, they state that this practice made EFL classes go beyond grammatical and linguistic features of the language to promote students' critical and conscious thinking.

A related study (Herrera, 2011) used cooperative learning structures to provide solutions for problems of interpersonal communication, information distortion and verbal aggressiveness in a learning environment. The researcher concluded that the establishment of rules for CL interaction resulted in positive mediation among students. The research further demonstrates that it featured successful CL task development and improved students' oral communication processes. Besides, it was pointed out that students displayed awareness of oral presentation skills; for example, they mentioned referents clearly and paraphrase to facilitate comprehension. As claimed by this study, combining verbal and nonverbal factors and strategies of oral communication among students lead to a better classroom social environment for learning. Likewise, Atashian and Zamini (2013) conclude that cooperative learning has a significant impact on memory and social strategy use of EFL students.

Cooperative activities are advantageous in EFL classrooms. Celik, Ayten and Byram (2013) consider CLL as means to increase target language use, improve communication skills in addition to building confidence and stimulating learner autonomy. However, the researchers spot some difficulties with implementing CLL with regard to the standardized curriculum in the research context.

In the above surveyed research, different researchers have concluded that cooperative learning is an effective method to be used in EFL classrooms. The divergent assumptions on its positive effect on students' achievement, psychological health and social competence is highly supported by research. However, the above discussions and conclusions recommend CLL to enhance EFL classrooms.

## **Conclusion:**

Cooperative learning is a student-centered approach where students work jointly together in small groups in order to accomplish a common goal. Some of these goals are to teach successful learning and communication strategies and opportunities, as well as fostering students' motivation and providing a naturalistic second language acquisition (Richards, 2001). In a typical cooperative classroom, students work together in cooperative groups that are designed in accordance with certain principles and tools. The different types of groups are formal groups, informal groups and base groups. Moreover, a successful group work depends five basic elements of CL; they are positive interdependence, group formation, individual accountability, social skills and structuring and structures. In addition, there is a range of models of cooperative learning where learners actively participate, activities are challenging and interesting and diversity is celebrated and incorporated.

Arguments regarding the efficacy of cooperative learning method generally support its positive effect on students' learning. As pointed out by researchers, CL poses a higher advantageous impact on learners' achievement when compared to teacher-centered methods (Alghamdi & Gillies, 2013; Ghorbani Nezamoshairi'e, 2012, Taran, 2014, Marashi & Baygzadeh; Moghaddam & Heidari, 2018). What's more, focusing on the social and communicative strategies, CL approach is critically effective in EFL classrooms. For instance, learners engage personal growth and social awareness while learning (Conteras & castro, 2016). Besides, several variables including verbal and nonverbal strategies along with positive mediation among students are revealed to be used by learners' in CLL contexts (Herrera, 2011). Also, using CL promotes communication skills and opportunities and target language productivity (Zhang, 2010; Celik et al., 2013).

To conclude, using fosters students' overall achievement, positive relationships among students, motivation and students' self-esteem. Additionally, students' social nature is developed in constructive and useful ways. Confidence is built through oral presentation and written discussions of the concepts that learners have learnt and the skills they have mastered. Furthermore, critical thinking is also developed as they work together; meanwhile, students appreciate and respect each other's way of thinking. However, this multiplicity of dimensions on the impact of CL on EFL learners require deeper investigation to better specify it.

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