



A STUDY ON COOPERATIVE LANGUAGE LEARNING: THE IMPACT OF CLL APPROACH ON ENGLISH LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY OF EFL LEARNERS

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Abstract:

The current research investigated the impact of cooperative language learning (CLL) approach on English language proficiency of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners. The participants were 150 intermediate female EFL learners who were randomly selected from various private English language institutes of Tehran, Iran. First, FCE (First Certificate in English) test was administered to all 150 participants as a means of homogenization which brought down the number of the students to 135. Then, the homogenized participants were taught English through CLL approach for 20 sessions, each for 90 minutes. A pre-test/post-test quasi-experimental design was employed to investigate the impact of CLL approach on English language proficiency of the EFL learners. The results were analysed through a one-way ANOVA and paired-samples t-test statistics. The outcomes revealed that CLL has a significant positive effect on English language proficiency of EFL learners.

Keywords: Cooperative Language Learning (CLL), English language proficiency

1. Introduction

Cooperative Learning (in contrast with traditional method where students work individually or competitively) is a technique by which students assist each other in the learning process, acting as partners with the instructors and with each other in order to learn the course material (Johnson & Johnson, 1988; Nunan, 1999). According to Castillo (2007), it is clear that by cooperative learning (CL), most of the students will be actively involved in the use of the language, especially in oral activities. Richards and Rodgers

(2014) propose that cooperative learning provides opportunities for learners to enhance their participation in the classroom.

Cooperative learning and group work activities have been in ELT since mid-1970s, but it still is the topic and concern of recent research studies. In addition, the growing number of English language learners around the world demonstrates that more and more people are interested in English language learning. Consequently, the teachers are in need of some remedies in their English language teaching to help their students be proficient English speakers. Many research have been done on how CLL can help the learners enhance EFL writing skills (Mahmoud, 2014; Zamani, 2016), improve their reading comprehension skill (Farzaneh & Nejadansari, 2014; Jalilifar, 2010; Zhang, 2012), improve their social skills (Ghaith, 2002; Ning, 2013), and decrease language learning barriers (Davoudi & Mahinpo, 2012; Han, 2014; Wichadee & Orawiatnakul, 2012). However, there is dearth of research on the effect of CLL on English language proficiency of EFL learners. Thus, this study is set out to investigate the following research question:

Does cooperative language leaning have any impact on English language proficiency of EFL learners?

2. Literature Review

2.1. Previous studies on Cooperative Language Learning

Cooperative Language Learning (CLL) refers to an English language teaching and learning approach in which students work together in groups to reach common goals and maximize their own and each other's learning (Johnson, Johnson & Smith, 1998). In addition, it is operationally defined as having several groups in a class in which there is no force on any single learner to talk; rather, learners interact with each other and whenever they feel ready, they will express their ideas through group work (Slavin, 1995).

As Richards and Schmidt (2010) state, students can work cooperatively in class so that they reduce the teacher's dominance in the classroom, increase student participation in class, reduce the need for competitiveness, and make it less threatening for many students. Stahl (1994) quotes, CLL and cooperative learning group are means to an end rather than an end themselves. Brown (2001) states that cooperative – and therefore not competitive – usually connotes a “team” with common goals and its players must work hard together to achieve those shared aims successfully through sharing information and coming to one another's aid.

Kessler (1992) states that in CLL, groups are formed and each member is assigned a duty to complete their tasks through the process of group discussion and peer interactions. Group members seek to accomplish the assigned goal. According to Johnson et al. (2000), CLL is a generic term which refers to numerous methods that might be applied to organize and conduct classroom instructions. Many different CLL methods have been developed and used in different contexts and settings since 1970s (Brody, et al, 2004; DeVries & Edwards, 1973; Johnson & Johnson, 1990; Kagan, 1992; Sharan & Sharan, 1992).

CLL approach which principally aims to improve students' learning by having learners cooperate in small groups or pairs has been part of the language learning domain for at least two decades (Fitzgibbon, 2001). Research studies have shown many advantages for Cooperative Language Learning (CLL) approach (as opposed to individual learning) on factors such as: lowering anxiety and prejudice, promoting intrinsic motivation, creating altruistic relationships, and heightening self-esteem. It also increases learning since it is a mode of learning which (Christison, 1994; Jacobs & Hall, 1994; Richards & Schmidt, 2010):

- 1) emphasizes mutual helpfulness and active participation from all students in solving an issue,
- 2) is strategic and help learners use their cognitive resources to master a particular language skill as efficiently as possible.
- 3) is less threatening for many students,
- 4) increases the amount of student participation in the classroom,
- 5) reduces competitiveness,
- 6) decreases the teacher's dominance in the classroom,
- 7) benefit the students from sharing ideas, and
- 8) promotes active interaction of individuals from various abilities and backgrounds.

CLL goals (Figure 1) and elements (Figure 2) demonstrated that students' active participation instead of passive learning in class distinguished cooperative learning from traditional lecturing. As Johnson and Johnson (1994) point out, CLL does not mean to simply put students in groups and tell them to interact. The structure of these groups and how they are formed will widely affect the effectiveness of CLL in comparison to the competitive or individualistic groupings. Thus, there are different types of cooperative learning groups based on researchers (Johnson, et al., 1994; Kagan, 1994; Kessler, 1992) which teachers should be aware of so that they would be able to use them in wide range of ways. For example, Johnson et al. (1994) has categorized cooperative learning groups into three types (Figure 3).

In addition, Johnson and Johnson (1990) also state that these CLL skills must be taught to the students and the teachers should encourage their students to apply them effectively. If students lack the interpersonal and small-group skills, they would not be able to cooperate effectively and CLL would not be fruitful and productive anymore.

Many research studies have also been conducted in other contexts than English language teaching (ELT) and proved that cooperative learning is an effective method for greater achievement of the students in mathematics (Gokkurt et al., 2012) and nursing proficiency (Baghcheghi, et al., 2011; Lin, 2013).

2.2. Previous studies on English Language Proficiency

English language proficiency means how well a person can speak, read, write, or understand English language. Generally, language proficiency is the skill with which a person can use a language. English language proficiency can be measured through the use of an English language proficiency test (Richards & Schmidt, 2010).

Although English is not a second language in most parts of the world, it has become an inseparable part of many people's lives and is becoming more and more widespread (Flowerdew, 2007). English is an International language which is learned by so many people for different purposes such as: living abroad, pursuing education abroad, communicating with other people around the world (either native English speakers or non-native), travelling to different countries, doing business in other countries, and working with techno-gadgets (Elder & Davies, 2006). In sum, English is the only language which can be medium of communication with people around the world (Sharifian, 2009). Therefore, English language proficiency for every single English as a Foreign/Second Language (EFL/ESL) learner is something necessary and many research studies showed that one of the English language teachers' concerns is how to improve English language proficiency of EFL/ESL learners (Al-Mahrooqi & Tabakow, 2013; Huang, 2012; Nair, et al., 2012). The review of literature demonstrates that ELT researchers and teachers are still seeking ways to improve English language proficiency of EFL/ESL learners.

3. Materials and Methods

3.1 Participants

The participants were all level four (intermediate) Iranian students in 15 classes of different private English Language Institutes in Tehran, Iran. The participant selection was done through non-random convenient method. Each class had approximately the same number of students (9-11 students per class), one hundred and fifty students in

total. They were all female learners with Persian as their first language and aged from 18 to 40 years.

3.2 Design

A pre-test/post-test design was selected for this quasi-experimental study, and the participants were chosen through non-random selection. There were one dependent variable and one independent variable. The dependent variable was English language proficiency of the learners and the independent variable was Cooperative Language Learning (CLL) as a medium of teaching. Gender was control variable of the study as the participants were all female.

The researcher reached all CLL goals by applying various elements of it such as positive interdependence, promotive interaction, individual accountability, interpersonal skills, and group processing throughout all parts of English language teaching (reading, writing, speaking, and listening). Different types of grouping – formal CLL group, informal CLL group, and cooperative-base group were also employed to increase CLL and group working in classroom.

3.3 Instrumentation

In order to conduct this study, three sets of materials were applied: two for the purpose of measuring the participants' English language proficiency and one for the purpose of instruction. Initially, the researcher administered Cambridge First Certificate of English (FCE) test as a language proficiency pre-test. The participants were instructed on how to work in groups and English was taught to them through cooperative tasks. The instructional materials were intermediate English result series including book, intermediate story book, CDs, and workbook. The tasks and activities used in the class for English language teaching were think/Pair/Share, jigsaw, roundtable/round robin, numbered heads together, and group investigation. After twenty sessions, the researcher administered FCE post-test.

3.4 Procedure

The very focus of this study was to foster CLL in the English classrooms to see if it has any significant impact on the English language proficiency of intermediate EFL learners. Firstly, the researcher included all the available one hundred and fifty participants in the first phase of the study, which was homogenization of the participants to come up with nearly the same language proficiency before the onset of the treatment. Students who scored one standard deviation above and below the mean score were selected as the main participants of this research study. Therefore, according

to the result obtained, the number of the participants decreased to one hundred and thirty five.

In the first session, the researcher explained the importance of the study to the participants and asked them to attend the tests and classes as a part of their language learning program. Then, the researcher administered an FCE pre-test to all the homogenized participants. The subjects were taught English through CLL tasks for twenty sessions (90 minutes per session). After twenty sessions, a Cambridge FCE post-test was administered to the participants to measure their English language proficiency improvement after the intervention. Eventually, the obtained data was statistically analysed to investigate the answer to the research question of the study.

4. Results and Discussion

This study was designed to examine how CLL affects English language proficiency of Iranian intermediate EFL learners. In order to test the hypothesis of the research on whether or not CLL has any statistically significant impact on the English language proficiency of Iranian intermediate EFL learners, the researcher needed to run a paired-samples t-test to compare the students' mean scores on the pre-test and post-test of English language. The results of the paired-samples t-test represents ($t(134) = 61.42$, $P = 0.000 < 0.05$, $R = 0.98$) which demonstrates a large effect size (Table 1). It indicates that there is a significant difference between the mean scores of the students on the pre-test and post-test of English language proficiency. The students after receiving instruction through cooperative tasks showed a higher mean score on the post-test ($M = 23.90$) than pre-test ($M = 11.62$) (Table 2, Figure 4). As the teaching process took only 6 weeks, the effect of maturation on the post test result is negligible. Thus, CLL has statistically significant impact on English language proficiency improvement of Iranian EFL learners. It is important to mention that the total score on either the pre-test or the post-test is the sum of individual sub-scores (on reading, writing, speaking, and listening).

Many research studies focused on the effect of CLL on different skills and components of English (e.g. vocabulary, reading, and writing) and probed the positive impact of CLL on the improvement of those skills (Al-Mahrooqi & Tabakow, 2013; Farzaneh & Nejadansari, 2014; Ghaith, 2002; Jalilifar, 2010; Mahmoud, 2014; Ning, 2013). For example, Farzaneh and Nejadansari (2014) have conducted a quantitative study on the Iranian students' attitudes towards CLL for teaching reading comprehension and based on the data analysis, it was shown that the majority of Iranian students have positive view towards it. In another research study by Jalilifar (2010) which employed Student Team Achievement Divisions (STAD) and Group

Investigation (GI) as CLL techniques, the results revealed that STAD improved the reading comprehension of the students much more significantly than GI. Mahmoud (2014) also investigated the effect of CLL on writing skill in Saudi Arabia and concluded that the students outperformed in the post-test of writing. Therefore, CLL instruction of writing skill was effective in the improvement of the students' writing skill and they all had positive attitude towards teaching of writhing through CLL approach.

5. Recommendations

The current study sought to examine how cooperative language learning impact English language proficiency of high-intermediate EFL learners. As this research had some limitations and delimitations, the following suggestions are recommended for further studies:

- (1) The participants of the current study were all female EFL learners; a study can be conducted with male or mixed-gender participants and compare the results.
- (2) As the development of English language proficiency lend itself to time allocation, it is recommended to replicate the same study with an extended length of treatment from one semester to more. This may offer adequate time for teaching and evaluating subjects on their English language proficiency.
- (3) In the study at hand, a quantitative approach has been taken. However, a similar study can be designed with a qualitative approach to hear the learners' narratives and perspectives on CLL.
- (4) In the present study, only high-intermediate EFL learners were chosen as the participants. However, a similar study can be conducted with other levels than high-intermediate.
- (5) The context of the current study was Iran which has a great number of EFL learners. The same study can be replicated in another country which has English as a Foreign/Second language.

6. Conclusion

Based on the result and data analysis of the study, it can be concluded that the use of CLL in English language classrooms has significant effect on the improvement of English language proficiency of Iranian intermediate EFL learners. This result is also in consistent with the previous research on CLL in other parts of the world such as Lebanon, Vietnam, and Thailand (Ghaith, 2002; McCafferty, et al, 2006; Wichadee & Orawiwatnakul, 2012; Yazdanimoghaddam & Faruji, 2013; Zamani, 2016). Thus, almost

any English language teacher in any EFL/ESL context and at any classroom level could find CLL helpful in English language proficiency improvement of his/her students. To conclude, it is quite a great change from teacher dependence to learner interdependence, from classes with teacher lecturing to classes with cooperative learning, and from learning by collecting to learning by sharing; therefore, learners and teachers need to be patient and persistent as they use and practice cooperative learning (Richards & Rodgers, 2014). The researcher also concluded that Cooperative Language Learning activities, according to Johnson et al. (1994), should be structured layer after layer just like peeling an onion, until its heart is reached.

About the Author



Fatemeh Zarrabi graduated in MA degree in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) in 2013. She started her PhD at Monash University, Melbourne, Australia in education (TESOL) in 2015. She has more than seven years English language teaching experience to EFL/ESL learners. Her expertise is in the areas of English Language Teaching (ELT), TESOL, language teacher education, Language Learning Strategies (LLS), methodology in language teaching, and language testing.

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Figures and Tables

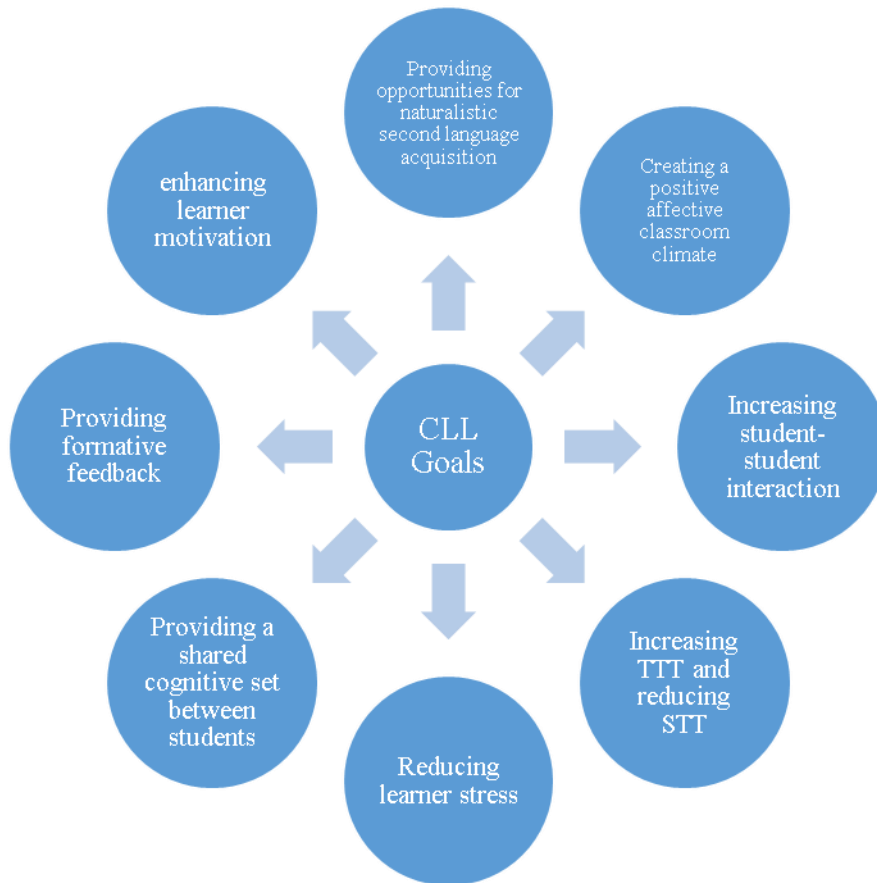


Figure 1: CLL goals based on Richards and Rodgers, 2014.
 S/TTT= Students'/Teachers' Talking Time.

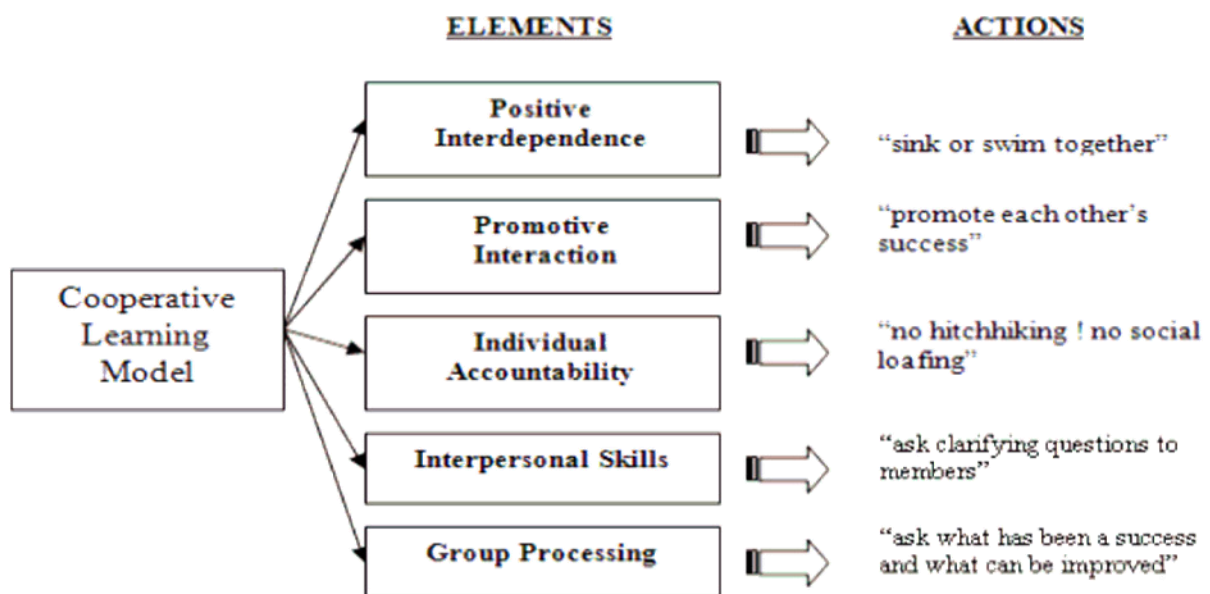


Figure 2: CLL Elements based on Johnson, Johnson & Smith, 1998

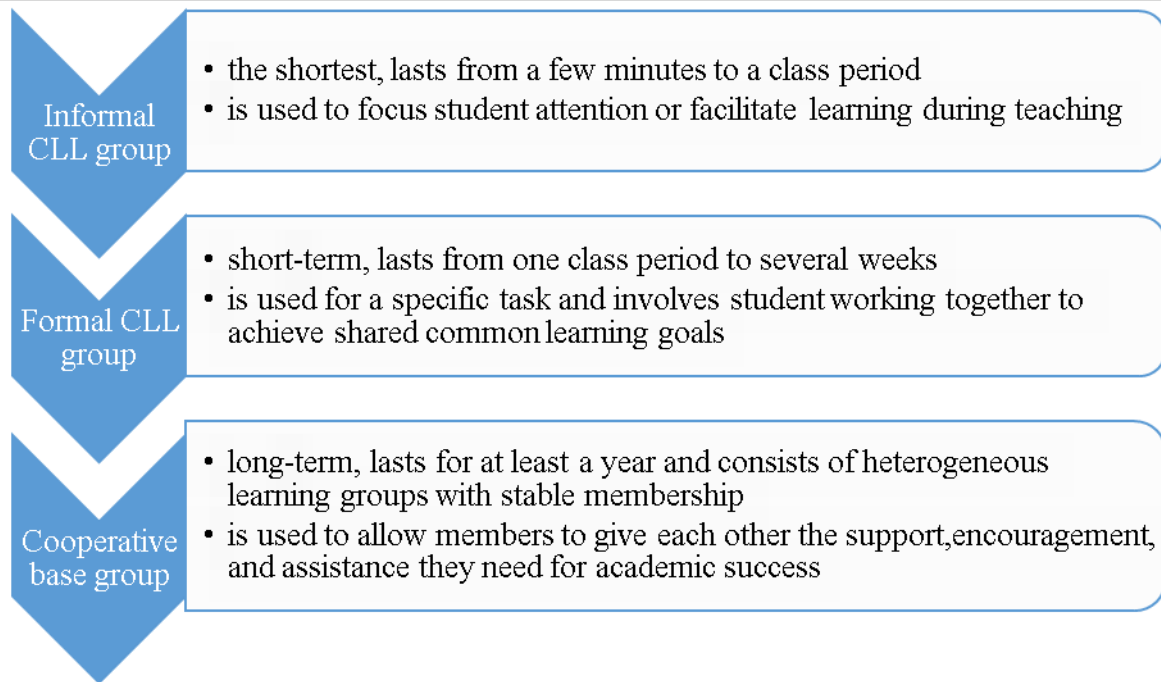


Figure 3: Three types of CLL groups, based on Johnson et al., 1994

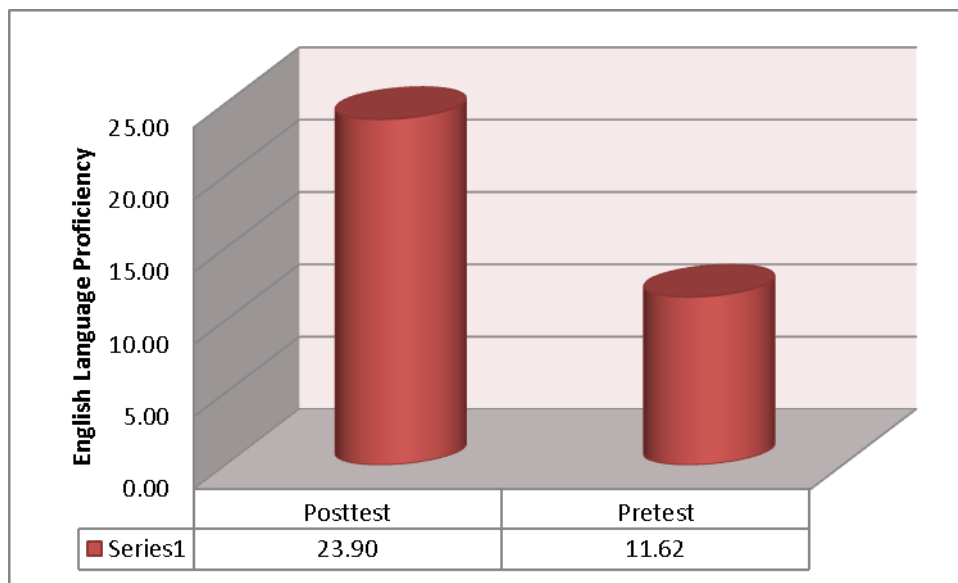


Figure 4: Pre-test and Post-test of English Language Proficiency

Table 1: Paired-Samples t-test Pre-test and Post-test of English language proficiency

		Paired Differences			t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
			Lower	Upper			
12.281	2.323	0.200	11.886	12.677	61.420	134	0.000

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics Pre-test and Post-test of English language proficiency

	Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Post-test	23.90	135	2.687	0.231
Pre-test	11.62	135	2.130	0.183