

COOPERATIVE LEARNING IN EFL CLASSES: A STUDENTS' GRAMMAR COMPETENCE ENHANCEMENT PROCESS

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ABSTRACT

As teachers decide what learning goals students should achieve, what content should be taught to students, and what prior knowledge students have already acquired; parallel decisions should be made regarding how to operate within the whole teaching/learning process, and what teaching methods and techniques teachers should adopt. Presently, teaching is built on the premise that students are just as responsible as their teachers in the process of education. They are required to search, discuss, ask and answer, and participate in problems' solving situations; rather than only passively receiving the new assigned academic knowledge. One of the methods in which all the previous criteria are believed to merge and positively affect the process of education is cooperative learning. An Implementation of Cooperative Learning in EFL classes seems to be worth trying; for it is admitted that this method of teaching influences both social and academic outcomes of students, in a positive way. Accordingly, the present paper describes an action research process that has been conducted with second year LMD students of English at Tlemcen University; for the sake of enhancing their grammar competence through cooperative learning. The results have been analysed both qualitatively and quantitatively, and reflected in a significant manner how influential cooperation was.

Keywords: Cooperative learning, method of teaching, social and academic outcomes, action research.

INTRODUCTION

It is little wonder that the teaching of English is a satisfying and a worthwhile profession, and that students of English feel satisfied and motivated in some situations; including learning about the target culture, speaking English in oral production courses, or composing in written production courses. However, these learners may show some difficulties in some areas including grammar for instance. The issue is that learners of English feel confused with too much details about English prepositions, articles and mainly tenses.

Grammar has always been the topic of several debates and its significance has always been confirmed. It is considered to be a determinant factor in the mastery of any language being learnt (Kao, 1998). Accordingly, Algerian learners of English are exposed to a good deal of grammar instructions in their classrooms; so to ensure that their communicative competence is being enhanced. In spite of the fact that they receive a satisfactory amount of knowledge about the needed points of the English grammar, as well as some practice sessions in which they are required to solve tasks and exercises about the grammar content taught, they still cannot overcome the difficulties previously mentioned.

The field of educational psychology carefully attempts to analyse the different learning settings to understand the complexity of the educational process and, thus, tries to provide our EFL learners with some practical solutions to the main problems they may face. Accordingly,

cooperative learning has been suggested as a solution to so many educational problems, in a lot of works.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Cooperative Learning: Basics For Implementation

Patently, cooperative learning typifies an alternative method to the student-centered approach, which considers learners as active and responsible agents in the learning process. Cooperative learning is the topic of so much literature; it is relatively impossible to find a scientific journal or an instructional material that does not discuss cooperative learning as being a useful approach to teaching (Johnson & Johnson, 2008).

Traditional classes involve students who work competitively to determine who is best or individualistically without caring of others' performance. In such classes, students merely interact with printed materials, visual aids and their teachers (Hecox, 2010). At certain times, teachers seek to break the routine so they ask students to sit and work in groups. Basically, this is not enough to say that cooperation is being structured among students. "Traditionally, primary schools have often organised pupils to sit in groups of four or six, although interaction between them may be very limited" (Jolliffe, 2007: 4). In such groups, pupils keep complaining 'He is copying me', simply because they do not even know that working collaboratively and sharing knowledge and materials are the main aspects of cooperative groups.

In some tasks, only one student is asked by his/her group mates to do the work while they go for a free ride and only write their names on the report. These groups, in fact, are no more than putting students sit near each other while each participant does his individual work or only one student does a common work for the whole group.

Teachers who seek to structure cooperation in the classroom cannot do so unless they take into consideration some basic elements of cooperative learning. In fact, "To become cooperative, groups must work together to accomplish shared goals. They need to discuss work with each other and help each other to understand it" (ibid 4). Otherwise, teachers will be structuring only traditional groups instead of cooperative ones.

Teachers' Roles in Cooperative Classrooms

Cooperative and traditional classrooms are also different from each other in terms of teachers' roles, teaching activities, interaction and evaluation. Teachers when structuring cooperative groups, act as observers of how each group and each member is functioning. They offer support when needed and facilitate the process by explaining the task and intervening to solve the group conflicts. Cooperative groups promote a different way in which students interact with each other. This two-way communication involves discussion and working together to accomplish shared goals. Teachers, at the end, are supposed to evaluate each student's outcomes and also the development of the whole learning process.

The teachers' role in the process of cooperative learning can be summarised in the following five major strategies. Clearly specifying the objectives is the first step that the teacher must make. Before the lesson starts, the teacher should have already set what goals to be achieved by learners concerning both the assigned academic content and the collaborative skills. Secondly, the teacher is supposed to decide all about the size, the type, and the heterogeneity

of the cooperative groups depending on some factors including the class size and his/her experience in using cooperative learning.

Teachers who seek to structure cooperative learning in their classrooms also need to know how the assigned materials should be distributed and how the assigned task should be explained. If the learning groups are new, teachers should carefully make sure that all the group members are using the materials; however, his responsibility may be decreased if the groups are skillful enough in working collaboratively. Also, explaining the task can take the form of a usual traditional lecture where the teacher deliberately explains the lesson and the related concepts, relates the new lesson to the students' prior knowledge, and checks whether students are effectively grasping the point by engaging them in a two-way communication where the teacher asks and the students answer (Johnson & Johnson, 1987).

The teacher's role begins in earnest when students are already put in groups and have started to work together. Placing students in cooperative groups does not mean that teachers will have a break of some free time; instead, teachers engage in an observation process to check which groups are facing troubles in completing the task and intervene to offer help. The teacher may also intervene when noticing a conflict or an inappropriate behaviour within the group. Finally, the teacher should evaluate the students' learning usually by a criteria-referenced system. Additionally, he/she may determine how well the groups are functioning in terms of social relationships and social skills (ibid).

On the other hand, traditional classes involve an emphasis on drills, practices and review of knowledge with authoritative teachers acting as controllers. They just transmit knowledge through a one-way communication; and they evaluate only the academic outcomes of learners (Wang, 2007).

In traditional learning situations, students may feel unmotivated, frustrated, and exhausted. However, cooperative groups promote enjoyment of the learning experience to students. In this respect, Johnson and Johnson (1987: 67) added:

In the process of working together to achieve shared goals students can come to care about one another on more than just a professional level. Extraordinary accomplishments result from personal involvement with the task and each other.

Moreover, it increases their learning outcomes and strengthens their psychological health and their relationships with peers.

METHODOLOGY

Considering the vital effect that teaching methods have on our EFL learners' competence and development, the present study was conducted for the sake of examining to what extent is cooperative learning influential in enhancing the students' grammar competence. This research, in fact, is an action research that required the selection of participants, the design of the research instruments, data collection and finally data analysis.

In any research, not only the methodology and the instrumentation determine its quality; but rather, the sample population selected as well. In fact, a top-down process was followed; in which the total population is first identified, and then the sample is selected to better ensure

its representativeness and therefore its validity (Cohen et al, 2000). In this study, sampling included the selection of one second year class; which consisted of 38 EFL University students, and who were chosen for the study.

Collection of Data

Among the numerous available research tools, only a limited number of them were opted for the use in this research. This is, in actual fact, determined by the nature of the research topic, the research approach, the method selected and the time limitations. To better identify the students' current grammar competence including their strengths and weaknesses, and to determine what can be realistically achieved as well as the relevant academic content required, a learners' needs analysis was opted for. In fact, this was realised through making students sit for a pre-training test, which was considered as a first data collection instrument, and which ideally helped in structuring the lectures that best suit the participating students. Students were previously informed that they would be tested on English tenses and they were given time to revise their prior knowledge. On the other hand, the test included four grammar exercises with clear written instructions. The assigned exercises were different from each other in the form and the content as well, and the use of different tenses was distributed over the four exercises.

The pre-training test is not the only test carried out in this research by the investigator. However, there was a post-training test which aimed at checking the students' progress and how well their grammar competence enhanced after a worth time of working in groups. The present post-training test was designed taking into account that both pre-training and post-training tests should be structured to measure the same academic content.

For the sake of obtaining rich data, and explaining the research situation from different perspectives, a questionnaire was also selected as an additional research tool in this study. Basically, it included three types of questions: close ended, open ended, and mixed questions. It aimed primarily at determining the student's attitudes towards working in groups, as well as how they consider their grammar competence after working in collaboration with peers

RESULTS

The process of data analysis aims at looking at and summarising the gathered data which will help later in validating the research hypotheses, drawing conclusions and providing recommendations. In point of fact, this research is a mixed methods research, in which the results obtained were analysed both qualitatively through narrative means, and quantitatively through both measures of central tendency (the mean and mode) and measures of variability. When analysed, the results obtained from both the pre-training test and the post-training test revealed the following:

The Pre-training Test Results	The Post-training Test Results
Measures of central tendency displayed low scores of students.	Measures of central tendency displayed positive influence of cooperation on learners' outcomes.
The standard deviation displayed that the group chosen was heterogeneous.	The standard deviation displayed that the group became more homogeneous.
8% of students correctly performed the perfect tenses task.	All the students' responses were partially correct.
10.5% of students correctly performed the present time task.	24% of students correctly performed the present time task.

None of the students correctly performed the future time task.	10.5% of students correctly performed the future time task.
15.78% of students correctly performed the past time task.	All the students' responses were partially correct.

Table 1: Tests' Results

However, the results obtained from the questionnaire displayed the following:

- 50% of students used to study grammar through lectures and then individual practice.
- 63.15% of them did not work in cooperative groups before.
- 80% of them participated in group discussions.
- 80% of them consider their level in grammar better.
- The most learnt skills: 'Accepting different view points' and 'Caring about others' learning'.
- 92.10% consider the process as 'Enjoyable' and 'Exciting'.
- 60% of them preferred the cooperative approach.

DISCUSSION

The learners' post-test results are just a detailed way to confirm that working in cooperative groups is influential. Students' grammar competence has been enhanced after working cooperatively with peers; as it is shown first by their scores in both tests as well as their performances in each activity of both the pre and post-test.

The results obtained from the questionnaire demonstrated that students have benefited, in a way or in another, from working in cooperative groups. This, in fact, includes students' engagement in group discussions. Simply, they are a positive sign that learning was taking place. This fact, actually, has been illustrated by students when almost 79% of them ensured that their grammar competence has been increased after working cooperatively. Besides, cooperative learning enabled students to learn some skills; basically, accepting the others' opinions no matter what their nationality, sex, or educational background is. In this respect, Johnson and Johnson said that "No skills are more important to a human being than the skills of cooperative interaction" (1987: 109).

CONCLUSION

Teaching foreign languages is increasingly becoming a needed issue in this gradually changing world. Considering every aspect of language as worth taking, language teachers seek to develop and innovate in all what concerns teaching methods; and a movement towards engaging students in the learning process is witnessed. Cooperative learning has its remarkable advantages; mainly improving both the learners' academic outcomes and socio-affective relationships with peers.

Training students to work in cooperative groups was a fruitful matter; since inspiring results were achieved in the post-training test. The findings of this study demonstrated that students benefited from working in cooperative groups; mainly, their grammar competence has been increased and some social skills have been learnt.

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