COOPERATIVE LEARNING: TOWARDS A NEW OUTLOOK IN ALGERIAN UNIVERSITIES

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ABSTRACT

Research about education has unveiled solutions to numerous problems and provided educators with respectful methodologies to consider. Likewise, teaching languages through cooperative groups received so much interest by scholars in the field. Though this method of teaching is discussed in so many books, articles, conferences and workshops; and though an enhancement in the learners' social and academic outcomes has been proved, teachers still neglect this method and rely on traditional ways. Well, relying on traditional ways means either structuring classrooms that are purely competitive or individualistic, or simply putting students to work in traditional groups; without any consideration of the basic elements and characteristics of true cooperative learning. In this article, the researcher aims at demonstrating to teachers and policy makers that cooperative learning is still misunderstood and mistreated. Being a case study, its purpose is to provide teachers with the necessary knowledge about the real cooperative method. The researcher selected a sample composed of six teachers of grammar at the English department of Tlemcen University, and made use of an interview as a data collection instrument. The data gathered were analyzed both qualitatively and quantitatively, and the results showed that teachers prefer traditional classrooms, i.e. competitive and individualistic classrooms, and that even if they try to structure cooperative groups, they most of the time miss the real essence of cooperative learning. Thus, this article provides the reader with the basic concepts of cooperative learning, and proposes solutions and recommendations to the current educational situation.

Keywords: Cooperative learning, grammar, teaching, traditional classrooms.

INTRODUCTION

Cooperative learning is an instructional approach in which students are put into small groups to achieve mutual goals. Through decades, cooperative learning have been under so much focus; to better explore this method with all its elements, types, benefits, and limitations. Almost, all researches done unveiled in a clear manner how fruitful this method is. Students could achieve better academic results, have better socio-affective relationships with peers, and have better psychological adjustment to their schools.

In point of fact, though researchers attempted through their writings to recommend this instructional method to almost all educational settings; including all subjects and levels, Algerian Universities still feel the need to adopt such a way of teaching. University teachers still seem to neglect this method of teaching and stick to traditional ways. In some situations, some teachers may think of structuring cooperative learning in their classes. They may, merely, put students sit into groups and give them a task to accomplish. These two aspects, though important, do not make cooperative learning all what it is. Teachers, then, should be enlightened with all what concerns cooperative learning to make it really work.

LITERATURE REVIEW
Patterns of Interaction: An Overview
Extensive research on teacher-student interaction was conducted for the sake of demonstrating how it should be and how it influences students' academic and social development. However, it is not the only kind of interaction that takes place in the classroom. Instead, there are other forms including student-student interaction and which has the most influence on their achievement.

Whatever the desired learning goal is, teachers can structure different types of interdependence among students and which in turn determines the way they interact with each other and how far they progress in their learning process. The type of interdependence depends on what goal structure is dominating the classroom. Johnson and Johnson clarified this point saying that: "A goal structure specifies the type of interdependence among students as they strive to accomplish their learning goals. It specifies the ways in which students will interact with each other and the teacher during the instructional session" (1987: p. 3).

The term 'goal structure' is used to refer to the state of working cooperatively, competitively, or individualistically in the classroom. In every classroom, whatever the age of the learners or the subject being taught are, one of the following three goal structures can dominate the instructional situation. Learners can either work individualistically without caring of others, competitively where everyone challenges the others to see who can do best, or cooperatively where students are placed in small groups to assist one another in order to achieve a one common learning goal.

Closely looking at competitive classrooms will lead to mention that the fact of working against each other dominates the whole situation. Students try always to learn, focus, search, ask, and participate more than their peers do. Additionally, they benefit when their peers are deprived of knowledge and success; and they celebrate the failure of others. They even work independently without seeking any help from others except the teacher.

This competitive atmosphere creates a type of interdependence that is referred to as 'Negative Interdependence' as it is briefly and clearly said by Johnson and Johnson: "In such competitive situations there is a negative interdependence among goal achievements; students perceive that they can obtain their goals if and only if the other students in the class fail to obtain their goals" (1987: p. 4). Significantly, schools are seen as 'competitive enterprises' in the eyes of the majority of students and they either do their best to faster and more accurately complete the task or they relax simply because they do not have enough self-confidence to engage in such struggles.

On the other hand, teachers have a second option and which concerns structuring "…lessons individualistically so that students work by themselves to accomplish learning goals unrelated to those of the other students" (Johnson & Johnson, 1987: p. 4). Admittedly, in such classes, students are passive participants in the learning process; they have no role except listening to the teacher attentively and doing the assigned tasks individually. Each student takes care of only his/her own materials and achievement. Moreover, they believe that the learning of others does not by any mean influence their own learning. This appears to be the reason why no interdependence is related to this goal structure.

The third pattern of interaction; that may exist in classrooms, concerns splitting students into small groups to work collaboratively for the sake of achieving the common goals. They strive

for making each member of the group benefits from the others and for celebrating the success of the whole group. Students believe that they can achieve their goals if and only if their peers reach their own goals (Zhang, 2012). This goal structure is characterized mainly by students feeling responsible for their own and others' learning. This feeling of caring of others is what makes 'Positive Interdependence' an essential part in these cooperative situations. Johnson and Johnson stated in this sense: "In cooperative learning situations there is a positive interdependence among students' goal attainments; students perceive that they can reach their learning goals if and only if the other students in the learning group also reach their goals" (1987: p. 6).

Certainly, the three goal structures are not in a win-lose challenge. Each of the three can bring students to success if structured appropriately. However, the great deal of research, consisting of 600 studies over 90 years, proved that cooperative learning results in better outcomes in terms of academic achievement, peer relationships and psychological health when compared to competitive and individualistic learning. Cooperative learning, then, is believed to be a potential solution to a number of teaching problems. The more students work in cooperative groups, the more they understand and learn better such that when they try to share their knowledge with others. Additionally, they develop positive attitudes towards their peers, classroom and the entire school. In this respect, Zhang added:

> Even though these three goal structures are effective in helping students learn concepts and skills in some conditions, students can learn to interact more effectively and positively in cooperative learning process compared with competitive and individualistic goal structure. Therefore, cooperative goal structure should be the best choice of our life, schooling, family, career, etc. (2012: p. 1).

Traditional Vs Cooperative Groups
It is admitted that traditional classes involve learners who work in a competitive manner to determine who is best or in an individualistic way without caring of others' achievements. At certain times, teachers seek to break the routine so they split students into groups and ask them to work together. Basically, this is not enough to describe the scene as being cooperative. In some tasks, and because learners are not aware of the true meaning of working cooperatively, they simply ask one member of the group to do the work while they go for a free ride and only mention their names on the final report. These groups, in point of fact, are no more than sitting near each other while only one student does a common work for the whole group.

Group work has often been used in teaching through organizing students to sit in groups. It was dominated by competition among the group members and characterized by a noticeable limited interaction between them (Jolliffe, 2007). For this reason, cooperative learning may sound simple for some educators and they may try to group students thinking that they are structuring cooperation in their classrooms. In such a case, they may face some troubles within groups including: self-induced helplessness, ganging-up against one student or against the given task, unfair divisions of labor, as well as dependence and conflicts. Thus, simply putting students into groups does not necessarily mean that cooperative learning is being structured and that higher achievement is being promoted.

Conspicuously, cooperation is much more than having students sit side-by-side at the same table; talking to each other while doing their individual tasks (Johnson et al, 1991). Though, there must be some rules that have to be respected when trying to structure cooperative

groups. Research on cooperative learning by Johnson et al (1991) showed that five basic elements are crucial to be included in each group so to be truly cooperative. The following table summarizes the elements and provides concise explanations for them.

Basic Elements	Definition
Positive Interdependence	It generates the sense that each student's endeavor is needed to achieve the common goal, and for the success of the whole group
Individual Accountability	Each student is considered as important and his/her contribution as indispensible. Thus, every group member must feel accountable for his own learning and must learn the assigned material.
Face-to-face Interaction	It refers to the state of facing other students when working cooperatively in small groups. Because of the proximity, group members work together and interact verbally through explaining to each other
Social Skills	Students need this set of skills so to deal appropriately with conflicts among the group, to know how to trust each other and to make the right decisions.
Group Processing	This element involves some discussions among the group members about how far they progressed towards the goal, how well they learned the assigned academic content and what behaviour are helpful so to keep or unhelpful so to change

Table 1: Basic Elements of Cooperative Learning

In a similar vein, and in an attempt to understand the main differences between true cooperative groups and the traditional groups that teachers may think to structure in their classrooms, Johnson et al proposed a summary of the main distinctions.

Cooperative Learning Groups	Traditional Learning Groups
Positive interdependence	No interdependence
Individual accountability	No individual accountability
Heterogeneous membership	Homogeneous membership
Shared leadership	One appointed leader
Responsible for each other	Responsible only for self
Task and maintenance emphasized	Only task emphasized
Social skills directly taught	Social skills assumed or ignored
Teacher observes and intervenes	Teacher ignores groups
Group processing occurs	No group processing

Table 2: Cooperative Vs Traditional Groups
Source: Johnson et al 1991: 25

METHODOLOGY
Data Gathering
Though cooperative learning, as a teaching method, has proved its positive academic and social outcomes, it is still neglected by most of EFL teachers. Through this research, the investigator seeks to unveil this reality and make it clear to educators and policy makers that a reflection on our current teaching methods is needed if we are really intending to enhance the quality of teaching as well as the academic achievement of our students. Accordingly, this research is basically a case study where the researcher opted for interviewing the teachers of English grammar at the University of Tlemcen, Algeria, as a research tool.

The Sample Selected
For this research, the investigator had the chance to deal with six teachers who were assigned to teach grammar to EFL students at Tlemcen University. Since the researcher is interested in the teaching of grammar through cooperative learning, she decided then to choose second year grammar teachers for this study. This accessible sample, then, includes teachers whose ages range from 29 to 42 years old.

The participating teachers are female Arabic native speakers. At the moment of conducting the interview, they were all Magister holders preparing for their 'Doctorate', the equivalent of 'PhD' in other countries' system. After obtaining their BA degree, four teachers were specialised in TEFL and Applied Linguistics, and the two remaining teachers in Sociolinguistics. Their grammar teaching experience ranges from 2 to 6 years.

Instrumentation
In McDonough and McDonough's words, "Interviews…are just another way of asking questions, this time in face-to-face interaction" (1997: p. 182). The interview is a commonly used research instrument in applied linguistics, sociolinguistics and investigations in second language acquisition contexts. Though it is a more sensitive research tool, the interview appears to be the preferred one in many researches.

Considering all the aspects discussed above, the present teachers' interview is designed to include twelve questions divided into three main sets. The first set of questions was made in order to know more about the teaching background of the respondents, as well as their stories with making students in groups. The second class of questions, however, enables teachers to describe the students' attitudes in grammar classes and the procedures teachers follow to raise their learners' interest in learning grammar. The last set of questions, on the other hand, is well-meant to check the teachers' knowledge about cooperative learning.

The investigator designed the interview using two types of questions namely close-ended and open-ended questions. Though close ended questions provide the researcher with a precise data and facilitate the process of data analysis, open ended questions may provide the investigator with more possible and insightful answers; and which in turn may help him/her to get a wider overview about the investigation. In fact, asking teachers about some aspects of their teaching experiences as well as their knowledge about cooperative learning required the use of too many open-ended questions to give more freedom to teachers, so they can answer without feeling the limitations of the multiple-choice questions.

Interviewing each teacher lasted for about 15 to 20 minutes and the data were collected through the audio recording method using a recorder. The subjects were informed, in advance,

about the purpose of the study and their consent was given in order to record their voices and use their answers.

RESULTS

The teachers' answers to this interview will confirm, to a great extent, that they do not make use of cooperative learning in their grammar classes and unveil the reasons that prevent them from doing so; and which will all, hopefully, be a basis for some solutions and suggestions to be proposed. More precisely, this interview seeks, as well, to check the grammar teachers' knowledge about this method of teaching.

The first item aimed at knowing how many years of grammar teaching experience each teacher has. The teachers' answers demonstrated that their experience ranges from two to six years of teaching grammar. The following table summarizes the teachers' responses:

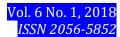| Teacher	Years of Experience
1	2
2	3
3	3
4	4
5	5
6	6

Table 3: Teachers' Experience of Grammar Teaching

Teachers' responses to the second question indicated that four of them begin with lecturing students emphasizing the main points and the main objectives of the lecture; moving later to practice through exercises. When talking about the way of lecturing, one teacher said that she tried once to put students in groups and then ask them to deduce the tense used and the aim behind using it. She described the process saying that *"...it was not really successful...because some students just talk between each other, dealing with other subjects rather than grammar"*; and the reason seemed to be being familiar with listening to the teachers' explanations and then writing what he/she dictates. The last teacher, on the other hand, claimed that she does not have a fixed method through which she teaches grammar, rather, it depends on the situation and on the level of students.

While three teachers appeared to prefer learner-centered approach, two others stated that they move through learner-centered and teacher-centered approaches depending on the situation, i.e., whether they want to direct students and save time or they want to engage students, similarly, in the learning process. In fact, another idea was suggested by another teacher; mainly, she mentioned that following a learner-centered approach means neglecting students with low abilities. Accordingly, she described her way of teaching saying that *"...I just teach in a simplified way"*.

With regard to the fifth question, three teachers ensured that their learners are, to a great extent, passive and unwilling to learn grammar. On the other hand, the three remaining teachers confirmed that not all of the students are passive; rather, competent students are active and trying always to put their touch in the process of education, while low-ability students are most of the time passive. A number of reasons to the students' unwillingness were suggested in the teachers' responses to the present question, including mainly:

- The nature of grammar lectures which makes students feel unable to bring something new.
- Feeling confused with the English tenses.

- Studying grammar tenses again during their second year seems redundant to students, and
- The unsuitable timing assigned for grammar courses in the learners' schedule.

Noticing students working in pairs, discussing answers, asking and helping each other, and exchanging ideas led three teachers; representing half of the present participants, to say that their students prefer working cooperatively most of the time. One of these three teachers explained the fact of preferring working cooperatively as being the result of the lack of confidence they have. The remaining three teachers, however, had different views. One of them contended that learners prefer working competitively, the other said they may work competitively, cooperatively or individualistically depending on the situation; and the third one explained why students work only individualistically. This seems to her that learners prefer so because working with low-ability students can make higher-ability students tired from explaining to them all the time; also because of not always having good social relationships with their peers. She illustrated saying that *"Students can work collaboratively only with classmates whom they have a kind of intimacy with"*.

Actually, teachers mentioned some techniques that they make use of in the grammar classroom and which seemed to them a kind of innovation. The first teacher stated that she tries to give more freedom to the learners by asking them to go to the library for their own research about grammar. The following two teachers appeared to focus more on the way they present the examples by either making them reflecting the real life or in the form of jokes. Their aim behind this is to make students feel the example more; and consequently understand the grammar rule or the lecture as a whole. The fourth teacher, however, talked about only emphasizing the significance of grammar to the mastery of English intending to use technology in the future; while the fifth one proposed three techniques. She mentioned that she makes use of some audio and/or visual aids; she puts her students sometimes in pairs or groups to work cooperatively and she recommends them sometimes to prepare the lecture before they come to study it in the classroom. Indeed, the remaining teacher highlighted the fact that, though she uses different methods in teaching grammar, some materials are still needed for teachers to be more innovative.

None of the teachers attended a workshop, a conference or a symposium where cooperative learning was tackled. However, some of them have read about cooperative learning when dealing with research about teaching methods. More precisely, three teachers have conducted a research; even if humble, about this method of teaching while two teachers have never had any knowledge about it. The last teacher mentioned that, when reading about competency-based approach, she noticed how engaging students in the cooperative work had been suggested.

Teachers' definitions of cooperative learning were various in fact. The first respondent said that, in a cooperative learning process, students are responsible for their learning and are supposed to share knowledge with each other. This last point was also highlighted by the second teacher when she defined the cooperative experience as sharing all what we know with others. Actually, another definition seemed to be more convenient since the teacher stated that cooperative learning is *"...having students working in groups for the sake of completing a task or solving a problem"*. While one teacher mentioned the significance of more than only one endeavor in accomplishing an assigned activity, she appeared to illustrate her view with 'the plays' that some students perform in oral production courses, and which is not by any mean an ideal example for the cooperative learning process. The last definition

centers around the idea of including social strategies in the learning process like putting students in pairs or groups. Finally, only one teacher escaped from answering this question by saying "No idea".

Three teachers, representing 50% of the present sample population could express nothing when being asked about how cooperative learning can be structured in the classroom. On the other hand, one teacher said that it is no more than just giving the task to students to accomplish it either alone or in groups. Then, only two teachers tackled the main points in structuring cooperation in the classroom including dividing students in pairs or groups, giving them a task to accomplish, and moving around groups to check how they progress in work in relation to the limited time precised for the task.

Precisely, the last question was opened for teachers to express their view points on why most EFL teachers do not make use of cooperative learning in their classrooms. All teachers participated in the suggestion of some reasons which mainly included:

- Teachers' suggestions may not be taken into consideration by the administration.
- Teachers' fear of the change which leads them in most cases to keep the traditional way of teaching.
- Feeling bored from putting students in cooperative groups.
- Being unsure of the results that would be obtained from working cooperatively.
- Avoiding discussions that are out of the grammar exercises.
- Avoiding making students familiar with working cooperatively so they depend on themselves during exams and do not think of cheating.
- The teachers' lack of knowledge about cooperative learning.
- Avoiding the mess and the noise resulted from assigning students into groups.
- Teachers' worry that students may not be responsive to such a new method.

DISCUSSION

The results obtained from the teachers' interview denote that, though their experience ranges from two to six years, teachers keep teaching grammar following a usual way of lecturing and putting students later in practice. Even though one teacher tried to change the way she teaches grammar, her students seemed to resist the change. Besides, in spite of the fact that most teachers prefer the learner-centered approach, their ways of engaging students more in the learning process appear to be still traditional; being mainly asking students to do more efforts or using some information and communication technologies.

Teachers' responses to questions two and six demonstrated that most grammar teachers do not make use of cooperative learning in their classrooms. More precisely, their responses to questions nine and ten ensure to the investigator that the assigned teachers for the present study have little; not to say any knowledge, about cooperative learning. In actual fact, this is one of the reasons why this method is often neglected. Other reasons include doing little research about the teaching methods, teachers' fear of the possible noise as well as learners' resistance to such a new method of teaching.

CONCLUSIONS

As it seems to be recognized, putting students in teams does not make all what cooperative learning is. An effective application of this method requires teachers to have background

knowledge of the main aspects of cooperation. In fact, this research sought to summarize the main points that teachers need to know before attempting to use cooperative learning in their classrooms. It also sheds light on the relevance of cooperative learning in EFL classrooms and on the fact that, though its positive outcomes were thoroughly explained in so many studies before, teachers still do not use it in their EFL grammar classrooms.

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APPENDIX

Dear teachers,

The present interview seeks to collect some information about cooperative learning as a teaching method. It is, also, an attempt to know what might be the reasons behind not using this method in our EFL classrooms, though it is discussed in so much literature. Thus, you are kindly asked to answer the following questions sincerely for how important it is for the success of this work.

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1. For how long have you been teaching the English grammar?
2. How do you generally like to teach the English grammar?
3. Have you tried to put students in groups, to work together?
   Yes ☐   No ☐
If yes, would you summarize how did you do that?
4. Do you prefer teacher-directed teaching or learner-centered teaching? Why?
5. As being a teacher of English grammar, do you think that students are generally passive or not willing to work in grammar classes? Why?
6. According to you, do students prefer working competitively, individualistically, or cooperatively? Why?
7. What innovations you usually make to engage students more in the grammar learning process?
8. Have you ever attended any symposium, a workshop, or a conference where cooperative learning was spoken about?
9. Have you ever come across cooperative learning when hearing or reading about teaching methods?
10. What does cooperative learning mean to you?
11. If you are asked to summarize the process of structuring cooperative learning in the classroom, what would you say?

12. Most EFL teachers do not use cooperative learning in their classrooms. In your opinion, what might be the reasons?

Thank you for your collaboration