

The Theoretical Relevance and Efficacy of Using Cooperative Learning in the ESL/EFL Classroom

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Contemporary conceptualizations of language proficiency underscore the importance of teaching and using language in the context of authentic communication (Bachman, 1990; Omaggio-Hadley, 2001). These conceptualizations suggest that while a skill-based perspective on language teaching that focuses on the linguistic skills involved in listening, speaking, reading, and writing might be useful in identifying and teaching certain syntactic and semantic elements of language proficiency, such a perspective does not encompass all the requisite competencies involved in authentic communication. For instance, the speaking skill can be thought of as an *interpersonal* skill involving two-way communication and negotiation of meaning when two or more interlocutors converse about a certain topic. Speaking can also be thought of as a *presentational* skill when a speaker addresses an audience. These two communicative situations require a variety of linguistic as well as pragmatic competencies relative to the appropriateness of utterances, naturalness of language, sensitivity to the register, awareness of cultural referents and so forth.

Similarly, listening, reading, and writing require a variety of linguistic and paralinguistic competencies that vary according to the demands of certain textual as well as contextual variables that impact communication. Specifically, a certain act of communication such as listening to an academic lecture versus carrying out a conversation, reading an expository text versus reading a short story, or drafting a memo or a business letter versus composing an argumentative essay or a research article requires a variety of grammatical, sociolinguistic, discourse, and pragmatic competencies.

Consequently, there is a need for a balanced instructional approach in teaching English as a second/foreign language (ESL/EFL) that addresses and integrates the pedagogical implications of the sub-skills as well as the functional and interactional models of language. Such an approach would focus on developing the learner's linguistic as well as pragmatic competencies through the provision of classroom opportunities for interaction and practice that break down the stereotypes of traditional

classroom procedures and allow learners to democratically and independently interact in order to construct knowledge, negotiate meaning, and enhance comprehension (Christison & Bassano, 1981).

Recently, cooperative learning (CL) has been proposed as a framework for organizing and maximizing authentic and purposeful classroom interaction among learners in a supportive and stress-reduced environment, thereby increasing their achievement in the cognitive, affective, and social domains of schooling. The purpose of this article is to explore the theoretical relevance and possible applications of CL in ESL/EFL instruction. Specifically, it attempts to define CL from the perspective of ESL/EFL instruction by suggesting the possible primary applications of this instructional approach in targeting the organizational and pragmatic aspects of language proficiency. In addition, the article demonstrates how CL works in the context of teaching language rules and mechanics through the application of the Student Teams-Achievement Divisions (STAD) cooperative method.

What is Cooperative Learning?

Cooperative learning is viewed in the context of the present article as a general term for an instructional approach that emphasizes conceptual learning and development of social skills as learners work together in small heterogeneous groups according to the principles of positive interdependence, individual accountability, face-to-face promotive interaction, and group processing (Johnson, Johnson & Stanne, 2000). Presently, there is more than “one flavor of cooperative learning” (Kluge, McGuire, Johnson, & Johnson, 1999, p.19) operationalized into a number of techniques and structures. These techniques and structures include Learning Together (LT) (Johnson & Johnson, 1975/1999), Teams-Games-Tournaments (TGT) (DeVries & Edwards, 1974), Group Investigation (GI) (Sharan & Sharan, 1976, 1992), Constructive Controversy (CC) (Johnson & Johnson, 1979), Jigsaw (Aronson, Blaney, Sikes, Stephan, & Snapp, 1978), Student Teams Achievement Divisions (STAD) (Slavin, 1978), Complex Instruction (CI) (Cohen, 1986), Team Accelerated Instruction (TAI) (Slavin, Leavey, & Madden, 1986), Cooperative Structures (CS) (Kagan, 1985), and Curriculum Packages: Cooperative Integrated Reading and Composition (CIRC) (Stevens, Madden, Slavin, & Farnish, 1987).

Table 1, adapted from Johnson, Johnson, and Stanne (2000), presents the various cooperative learning models, their history, developers and possible primary applications in the context of ESL/EFL instruction.

Table 1

Modern Methods of Cooperative Learning

Researcher Developer	Date	Method	ESL/EFL Primary Applications
Johnson & Johnson	Mid 1970s	Learning Together	Reading, Writing, Speaking, Culture
DeVries & Edward	Early 1970s	Teams-Games-Tournaments (TGT)	Language Rules and Mechanics
Sharan & Sharan	Mid 1970s	Group Investigation (GI)	Writing, Culture
Johnson & Johnson	Late 1970s	Constructive Controversy (CC)	Culture
Aronson, Blaney, Sikes, Stephan & Snapp; Slavin	Late 1970s	Jigsaw Procedure	Reading, Literature
Slavin	Late 1970s	Student Teams - Achievement Divisions (STAD)	Language Rules and Mechanics
Cohen	Early 1980s	Complex Instruction (CI)	Social Skills, Culture, Reading, Writing, Language Rules and Mechanics
Slavin, Leavey, & Madden	Mid 1980s	Team Accelerated Instruction (TAI)	None
Kagan	Mid 1980s	Cooperative Learning Structures	Speaking, Listening, Reading, Writing
Stevens, Madden, Slavin, & Farnish	Mid 1980s	Curriculum Packages: Cooperative Integrated Reading and Composition (CIRC)	Reading, Writing, Spelling, Vocabulary, Literature

Learning Together

This CL model organizes instruction according to the principles of heterogeneous grouping, positive interdependence, individual accountability, social/collaborative skills, and group processing. Heterogeneous grouping is formed on the basis of mixed ability as determined by past achievement as well as based on some demographic variables such as gender, race, ethnicity, and so forth. Positive interdependence among group members is structured through setting a common goal, assuming a common identity, using the same space and resources, getting the same reward and so forth. Individual accountability is structured through individual testing, random responses to teachers' questions, and reporting on behalf of the group. Finally, learners do group processing to reflect on their achievement as a group and plan for further cooperation. In the context ESL/EFL instruction, learners may learn together in a classroom climate of academic and personal support in order to read and comprehend a certain text, write an essay, and/or prepare a group project or presentation about certain aspects of the target culture (i.e., beliefs, conventions of behavior, attitudes, values, and so forth).

Teams-Games-Tournaments (TGT)

In this method, instruction is organized into the five major components of lesson planning—class presentation, team study, tournament, determining individual improvement points, and team recognition. Initially, the teacher introduces the material under study in a class presentation, following which learners work together to complete worksheets in heterogeneous groups of four members each, making sure that all team members have understood the material. A tournament is then held at the end of a week or unit during which team representatives of similar levels of ability (high, average, low) compete together to earn points for their teams. Finally, the achievement of various teams is determined by calculating the average improvements earned by the members of the teams. TGT is most appropriate for teaching spelling and the language rules and mechanics of the target language.

Group Investigation (GI)

This method divides work among group members who plan and carry out investigations, complete individual specific tasks, and then reconvene to discuss their work, coordinate the various tasks, and present a final group project. First, the teacher presents a problem to the learners who work in heterogeneous groups to scan topics, identify resources, assign primary responsibilities, individually research issues, and then reconvene to prepare and present a group project. In the ESL/EFL context, GI is particularly well-suited for completing complex tasks such as writing a research paper,

preparing a presentation about some relevant theme or issue, or developing culture capsules, mini-dramas, and clusters to learn about certain aspects of the target culture.

Constructive Controversy (CC)

Learners in Constructive Controversy (CC) are assigned to heterogeneous groups of four members each and each group is divided into two pairs. Instruction proceeds by stating an issue and assigning a position to be advocated by each pair. First, learners research and prepare the best possible case for their assigned position, present their best case to the two other members of their team, engage in open and free discussion, reverse roles to have the best case possible for the opposing position presented, and finally drop all advocacy and strive together to find a synthesis on which they can all agree by summarizing the best evidence and reasoning from both sides. CC is particularly well-suited for researching and debating certain aspects of the native language culture and the target language culture, thereby increasing ESL/EFL learners' knowledge of cross-cultural variations in the belief systems, norms, and values as well enhancing the learners' general research and communication skills.

Jigsaw Procedure

This procedure can be used whenever the material under study is in a narrative or expository form. Instruction proceeds according to the following stages of lesson planning: reading the assigned material, expert group discussion, team reporting, and finally team recognition as in TGT. Jigsaw is most appropriate for teaching literature, biography, a chapter in a book, or any other similar narrative, expository, or descriptive textual material.

Student Teams-Achievement Divisions (STAD)

This method is very similar to the TGT method described above except that instead of the tournament in the TGT, learners in STAD take individual quizzes and tests in order to determine their mastery of the material under study. Like TGT, STAD is most appropriate for teaching the language rules and mechanics of the target language.

Complex Instruction (CI)

In Complex Instruction (CI) learners use multiple-ability curricula that are designed specifically to foster the development of higher-order thinking skills through group work activities organized around a central concept or big idea. Most importantly, the tasks require a wide array of intellectual abilities so that students from diverse backgrounds and different levels of academic proficiency can make meaningful contributions to the group task. In addition, learners are trained in using CL instructional strategies in order to acquire group work norms and management skills. CI

ensures equal access to learning through status treatments to broaden learners' perceptions of what it means to be smart, and to convince learners that they each have important intellectual contributions to make to the multiple-ability task. In the context of ESL/EFL, CI can be used to teach all the language skills in addition to language structure given that instruction is organized around certain general sociological principles and is not designed to suit any particular type of knowledge or skills apart from social interaction and group participation.

Team Accelerated Instruction (TAI)

TAI is a program specifically designed to teach mathematics to students in grade 3-6 or older. As such, it is not directly relevant to ESL/EFL instruction.

Cooperative Learning Structures

The CL structural approach is based on using a variety of generic and content-free ways of managing classroom interaction called structures. These structures can be used for team and class building, communication, mastery learning, and critical thinking. Examples of these structures are Round Robin, Mixer Review, Talking Tokens, and many other structures that are explained in Kagan (1985). Round Robin can be used to generate ideas for writing as well as a pre-reading technique to build a reader's background knowledge in ESL/EFL classes. Likewise, Mixer Review can be used to review material already studied and ensure that learners have achieved mastery of vocabulary, spelling, and language rules and mechanics. Finally, Talking Tokens can be used to organize group discussions, promote accountable talk, and ensure equal opportunities of participation and practice for all learners.

Curriculum Packages

These are specific programs for teaching mathematics and language and include the Cooperative Integrated Reading and Writing (CIRC) program. CIRC is a comprehensive program for teaching reading and writing based on reading literature and basal readers. Learners work cooperatively in pairs to read for each other, summarize stories, write responses to literature, and practice their spelling, decoding, and vocabulary development skills. Likewise, they develop comprehension and writing skills through reading and process writing workshops.

Theoretical Relevance and Efficacy of CL

The use of CL in the ESL/EFL classroom has been advocated on the assumption that it promotes classroom interaction and enhances learners' cognitive and communicative development (Kagan, 1985; Kessler, 1992; McGroarty, 1993). These

educators and researchers, among others, have claimed that CL makes it possible for learners to have maximum opportunities “for meaningful input and output in a highly interactive and supportive environment” (Ghaith, 2003, p. 451). Furthermore, researchers have suggested that the preceding modern CL models and practices incorporate the findings of research in second language acquisition, especially the need to create a motivating, psychologically suitable and relaxing learning environment (Cohen, 1994; Dornyei, 1997). In this regard, Olsen and Kagan (1992) maintain that CL promotes meaningful interaction among learners as they listen, respond, restate, elaborate, and clarify their communicative messages. It is believed that such interaction contributes to linguistic development (Long & Porter, 1985; Pica, Young, & Doughty, 1987) and to increased overall academic performance (Bejarano, 1987; Kagan, 1989). Moreover, comprehension and meaningful learning output are facilitated and enhanced through the opportunities that CL offers for redundancies and the use of a variety of information sources and learning tasks (Olsen & Kagan, 1992; Webb, 1989). As such, CL becomes particularly relevant to ESL/EFL learning contexts as it provides a variety of techniques for organizing instruction and incorporating language learning in various interactive and communicative contexts (Olsen, 1989). Educators have also claimed that CL promotes autonomous learning and enhances active involvement in genuine discussions and problem-solving activities in an environment of academic and social collaboration (Clifford, 1999; Thomson, 1998).

Research carried out on the effectiveness of the use of CL in ESL/EFL contexts has shown that CL is very effective in developing positive attitudes towards learning and towards other learners (Gunderson & Johnson, 1980), enhancing intrinsic motivation (Clement, Dornyei, & Noels, 1994; Szostek, 1994; Ushioda, 1996), and creating solidarity among team members through their working together to achieve group goals (Nichols & Miller, 1994). Research has also shown that CL decreases levels of anxiety and increases self-confidence (Deci & Ryan, 1985), increases social backing for academic achievement (Daniels, 1994), and increases the level of expectancy of completing academic tasks successfully (Douglas, 1983).

Research on the effectiveness of the various models of CL has shown that CL is a valuable instructional approach in the second/foreign language classroom and has underscored its potential for promoting meaningful learning. Ghaith and Yaghi (1998) maintained, based on empirical evidence, that the STAD cooperative method of CL helps EFL learners acquire English language rules and mechanics better than individualistic instruction. Similarly, Calderon, Hertz-Lazarowitz, and Slavin (1998) reported that a bilingual version of the Cooperative Integrated Reading and Composition (CIRC) program proved to be more effective in improving the achievement of third graders during transition from Spanish to English than traditional reading methods that

relied on textbooks. Furthermore, Bejarano, Levine, Ohlstein, and Steiner (1997) reported that the use of social and modified interaction strategies by small cooperative groups helped upgrade the communicative competence of EFL learners. Similarly, Thomson (1998) showed that using CL increased opportunities for interaction and enhanced learning autonomy in a Japanese language classroom at an Australian university. In a recent study, Stevens (2003) examined the relative effectiveness of Student Team Reading and Writing (STRW) in comparison with traditional basal reading instruction. The participants in the study were predominantly minority (80%) and low income (67%) students enrolled in five schools in a large urban United States district. The results indicated that learners in the experimental group ($n = 2118$) who followed a middle school literacy program (STRW) that included CL and utilized high quality literature, explicit reading comprehension, and process writing instruction outperformed the comparison groups from three schools ($n = 2118$) on the measures of reading vocabulary, reading comprehension, and language expression.

Likewise, Ghaith (2003) reported that learners using the Learning Together model of CL did better on EFL reading achievement than learners who followed a traditional approach to reading comprehension. Specifically, this researcher reported that the Learning Together CL model was more effective than traditional whole class instruction in improving the reading comprehension of Arab learners of English who were studying English as foreign language in a multilingual context characterized by competitive instruction and limited opportunities for meaningful social interaction in the target language of English. The participants in the study predominantly use the native language, Arabic, in everyday communication but value English for its vitality in the domains of science, education, and technology. The reading comprehension skills that were enhanced by the Learning Together CL model included effective generation of ideas and completion of graphic organizers, completion of various literal and higher order comprehension tasks, and understanding of the gist and summarizing written discourse.

Furthermore, in a more recent study, Ghaith and Abd El-Malak (2004) reported that the use of the CL Jigsaw II model in teaching reading comprehension proved to be more effective than traditional methods in developing the higher-order reading comprehension skills of university-bound Arab learners of English as a foreign language. These learners had satisfied all college admission requirements, but needed to improve their English proficiency in order to function effectively in an all-English curriculum at the college level. Specifically, Jigsaw II was effective in enhancing learners' interpretive reading abilities that include making inferences, identifying adverb and pronoun referents, understanding implied cause/effect relationships, determining the author's purpose, figuring out the meaning of figurative language as well as reading written discourse critically by assessing the accuracy, timeliness, and appropriateness of

information and determining the author's purpose and the propaganda techniques authors may use in order to influence the thinking and actions of their readers.

How Does Cooperative Learning Help ESL/EFL Learners Become Proficient in a Language Other Than Their Own?

It is beyond the scope of the present article to provide a comprehensive set of sample CL lesson plans that demonstrate how the various CL models enable learners to become proficient in the aspects of a language other than their own. However, an example of the STAD cooperative lesson plan presented in the Appendix may help. An analysis of the plan reveals the following aspects of interest.

Learners in this sample lesson interact together in heterogeneous groups formed on the basis of past achievement, gender, ethnicity and other relevant demographic and background variables. They may become intrinsically motivated to achieve mastery of critical concepts as they collaboratively negotiate meaning in order to solve authentic problems and achieve common goals. Furthermore, they may cultivate greater friendships across gender and racial lines, improve their psycho-social adjustment, and develop better self-concepts as learners. This is because of the personal and academic support provided for each team member and structured in the lesson through setting a common goal for each team (team recognition) and through resource interdependence (all team members complete and sign one worksheet during the stage of team study).

Learners have opportunities to frequently encounter the material under study through various venues and modes of delivery. For instance, during the first stage of the sample lesson plan (teacher presentation) learners listen to the teacher's explanation of the new material, ask questions, take notes, and assimilate new knowledge. Then, they apply what they have learned as they complete exercises and worksheets during the second stage of the plan (team study). Still they have other opportunities to review the material as they prepare for individual quizzes and when checking their own work both during the stage of team study and that of quiz correction. This frequent exposure to materials under study accommodates the learning styles of all learners, creates redundancy, and enables learners to master and retain new material.

Learners have opportunities to use authentic language in order to perform communicative and referential tasks, even when the focus of the lesson is on language rules and mechanics rather than the development of language skills. More specifically, learners experience active listening as they listen to explanations from their teachers and peers. Likewise, they practice the pragmatics of language and their oral communication skills during team study, and their writing and reading skills during the subsequent stages of the lesson (i.e., individual quizzes, correction, and team recognition).

Finally, learners in the sample lesson are in competition with their own standards of past achievement, not with their classmates. This is because the improvement points of each learner are determined on the basis of comparing his or her quiz and test scores with past achievement (base score). This leads to intrinsic motivation and individual accountability for one's learning; it also provides equal opportunities for all learners to experience success and ensures equal opportunities for participation and improvement.

This article has explored the theoretical relevance of using CL in ESL/EFL instruction. It also attempted to determine what particular CL models would be well-suited for developing ESL/EFL proficiency. Practitioners and researchers are encouraged to further explore these various applications keeping in mind that CL actually integrates language instruction although certain models might be particularly well-suited to address particular components of language proficiency.

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Appendix

Sample Lesson Plan Student Teams-Achievement Divisions (STAD)

Subject Area:

Language Rules and Mechanics

Lesson Summary:

Group members cooperatively learn the parts of speech in English as they practice their oral/aural skills as well as their social skills and competencies.

Instructional Objectives:

Students should be able to:

- 1) Define the parts of speech (i.e., identify them in context and give examples of each).
- 2) Stay with their group and make sure that all members learn.
- 3) Use the target language of English to communicate, using quiet voices and taking appropriate turns.

Materials:

1. A teaching point about language rules and mechanics: parts of speech.
2. Worksheets: one copy per team.
3. A quiz: one copy for each student.

4. An answer key: one copy per team.
5. Team recognition forms.

Procedure:**I. Form heterogeneous groups of four members each.**

Step 1: Divide the total number of learners by 4. The answer is the number of teams. The remaining learners can be assigned to teams of five members instead of four. For example: $25/4=6$ and the remainder equals 1. This means that the class of 25 learners will include 6 teams. Five teams will have 4 members each and one team will have 5 members.

Step 2: Fill in the participant's names in the class list marked 1 through last.

Try to rank order the participants so that number 1 is the highest achiever and so on down the list. The rank order does not have to be perfect.

Step 3: Place the highest, two middle, and the lowest achievers on team 1. Use the median of the list to identify the average achievers. Make switches among the average achievers to avoid teams whose members are all of one sex or one race. Also avoid best friends and worst enemies.

Step 4: Cross out the names of Team 1 students from the class list. Repeat Step 2 with the reduced class list to form Team 2. Repeat for each remaining team.

Step 5: Assign the remaining student to a team of five.

N.B. Teachers may also assign learners randomly by drawing names out of a hat if they so wish.

II. Assign a role for each member of the teams. The following roles may be considered:

Coordinator/Manager: Keeps the group on task.

Timekeeper: Keeps track of time allotted for assignment.

Secretary/Recorder: Writes down group responses.

Evaluator: Keeps notes on group processing and social skills.

Encourager: Makes sure all group members have their turns.

Reader: Reads directions, problems, and resource materials for all group members.

Checker: Checks for group members' comprehension of material to be learned or discussed.

Encourager: Provides positive feedback to group members.

Go-For: Leaves his or her seat to get materials for the group and runs group errands to perform tasks such as sharpening pencils and so forth.

Please note that the preceding roles should be assigned based on the nature of learning tasks and should be rotated so that all learners will have an equal chance to practice different roles.

III. Teacher Presentation

Teach learners about the parts of speech. Define each part and give examples.

IV. Team Study

Have learners work together in their groups to complete the parts of speech worksheet. Give each team one worksheet and ask them to complete the worksheets together according to the following rules:

1. Students have responsibility to make sure that their teammates have learned the material.
2. No one is finished studying until all teammates have mastered the subject.
3. Teammates should ask each other before asking the teacher.
4. Teammates may talk softly.

Have learners use the worksheet answer key to correct their work.

V. Testing

Give each participant an individual quiz.

VI. Team Recognition

Have the learners' correct their quizzes using an answer key to determine their improvement points according to the following guidelines adapted from Slavin (1995).

Quiz Score	Improvement points
More than 10 points below base score	0 points
0 points below to 1 point above base score	10 points
Base score to 10 points above base score	20 points
More than 10 points above score	30 points
Perfect paper irrespective of base score	30 points

Recognize the achievement of the participants using the team recognition forms. Teachers may use the following criteria to determine team awards:

Team average	Award
15 points	Good team
20 points	Great Team
25 points	Super Team