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THE EFFECTIVENESS OF COOPERATIVE LANGUAGE LEARNING IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

Language proficiency is a critical factor in student success in higher education, where effective communication skills are essential for academic achievement and professional growth. Traditional teacher-centered methods often limit student interaction, making language learning passive rather than engaging. Cooperative Language Learning (CLL) offers an alternative approach that fosters collaboration, active participation, and peer-assisted learning. This study examines the effectiveness of Cooperative Language Learning in higher education, focusing on its impact on students' language proficiency, engagement, and academic performance.

The research aims to: (1) examine the effectiveness of cooperative learning in improving students' proficiency and (2) analyze student engagement and learning outcomes in cooperative learning environments. Using a mixed-methods approach, the study collected qualitative data via student feedback and classroom observations.

The findings indicate that students who participated in cooperative learning activities, such as think-pair-share, jigsaw reading, group discussions, and peer-assisted writing, demonstrated significant improvements in oral fluency, vocabulary retention, academic writing skills, as well as in acquiring knowledge of the material. Additionally, students reported increased motivation, confidence, and engagement in language learning. These results suggest that cooperative learning strategies create an interactive and supportive learning environment that enhances language acquisition and helps students master the knowledge of the subject in higher education.

The study concludes that incorporating cooperative learning strategies into university curricula can foster collaborative learning experiences, critical thinking, and communication skills. Educators are encouraged to integrate these approaches to maximize student success in learning.

KEYWORDS

Cooperative Learning, Engagement, Active Learning

CITATION

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1. Introduction

Language proficiency is a critical factor in student success in higher education, where effective communication skills are essential for academic achievement and professional growth. Traditional teacher-centered methods often limit student interaction, making language learning passive rather than engaging. Cooperative Language Learning (CLL) offers an alternative approach that fosters collaboration, active participation, and peer-assisted learning. This study examines the effectiveness of Cooperative Language Learning in higher education, focusing on its impact on students' language proficiency, engagement, and academic performance.

The research **aims** to: (1) examine the effectiveness of cooperative learning in improving students' proficiency and (2) analyze student engagement and learning outcomes in cooperative learning environments. Hence, we will try to

- Investigate the effectiveness of cooperative learning strategies in improving language proficiency.
- Identify specific CL methods (e.g., **think-pair-share**, **role-playing**, **jigsaw activities**) that enhance language learning.
- Analyze student engagement and performance in language-based cooperative activities.
- Provide recommendations for integrating cooperative learning into higher education curricula.

By examining these aspects, the research will contribute to educational practices that enhance language learning outcomes for university students.

Literature Review

In this section we shall try to survey and synthesize existing research and scholarly work related to the topic. We shall be showing how their work contributes to our understanding of the topic, identifying gaps, and setting the foundation for our own research or argument.

1.1.1 History of Cooperative Learning

Cooperative Learning has its roots in long-standing practices of peer tutoring and peer monitoring, traditions that span back hundreds of years. The concept of integrating cooperation systematically into classroom instruction is most commonly associated with early 20th-century American educator John Dewey (Rodgers, 1988). In the United States, Cooperative Learning gained broader attention and development during the 1960s and 1970s, largely as a response to the challenges posed by the mandated integration of public schools. Since that time, the approach has undergone significant refinement and expansion. Educators at the time were increasingly critical of traditional classroom models, which were typically teacher-centered, encouraged competition over collaboration, and tended to advantage majority students. There was concern that minority students were at risk of falling behind their higher-achieving peers in such environments. Cooperative Learning emerged as a strategy to address these concerns by aiming to:

- Improve academic outcomes for all students, including both gifted and academically challenged learners
- Support teachers in fostering positive student relationships
- Provide students with the social, psychological, and cognitive experiences essential for healthy development
- Replace the competitive structure of conventional classrooms with a collaborative, team-oriented, high-performance model (Johnson, Johnson, and Holubec, 1994, p. 2)

1.1.2 Cooperative Language Learning (CLL)

CLL is a student-centered approach that encourages interactive learning through structured group activities. Research suggests that cooperative learning strategies enhance engagement, critical thinking, and problem-solving skills (Johnson & Johnson, 1999). CLL fosters a collaborative environment where students actively participate in discussions, share knowledge, and support each other's learning.

In the field of second language instruction, Cooperative Learning—commonly referred to as Cooperative Language Learning (CLL)—has been widely adopted as a means of fostering communicative interaction within the classroom. It is regarded as a natural extension of the principles underlying Communicative Language Teaching and represents a learner-centered approach that is considered more beneficial than traditional teacher-led instruction. Within language education, CLL aims to: (Richards and Rodgers, 2001).

- Create opportunities for natural second language acquisition through interactive pair and group work
- Equip teachers with practical methodologies adaptable across different instructional settings, such as content-based programs, foreign language classes, and mainstream classrooms
- Allow for targeted focus on vocabulary, grammatical structures, and communicative functions via interactive tasks
- Support learners in developing effective learning and communication strategies
- Increase learner motivation, reduce anxiety, and foster a positive emotional climate in the classroom climate.

1.1.3 Theory of the Language

Jack C. Richards and Theodore S. Rodgers introduced an “interactive” perspective on language structure. Cooperative Language Learning (CLL) is grounded in several core assumptions about the inherently interactive and cooperative nature of language and language learning, and it builds upon these ideas in various ways (Richards and Rodgers, 2001).

Premise 1 reflects the perspective captured in the title of a book on child language development, *Born to Talk* (Weeks, 1979). The author, along with many others, argues that “all normal children growing up in a normal environment learn to talk. We are born to talk... we may think of ourselves as having been programmed to talk... communication is generally considered to be the primary purpose of language” (Weeks, 1979, p. 1).

Premise 2 is that most spoken language takes the form of conversation. As Richards and Schmidt (1983) note, “Human beings spend a large part of their lives engaging in conversation, and for most of them, conversation is among their most significant and engaging activities” (p. 117).

Premise 3 holds that conversation follows a shared set of cooperative principles or “maxims,” as described by Grice (1975).

Premise 4 states that individuals learn how these cooperative principles function in their first language through informal, everyday conversational experiences.

Premise 5 extends this idea to second language learning, asserting that learners acquire these conversational norms through participation in structured, cooperative interactional tasks. This involves the use of a progressive sequence of strategies in conversation-based classes, which gradually prepares students, dismantles conventional classroom stereotypes, and encourages democratic and independent interaction. As Christison and Bassano (1981) explain, “students learn step-by-step, functional interaction techniques while simultaneously developing group spirit and trust” (p. xvi).

Teaching practices that are explicitly or implicitly based on these premises are collectively referred to as Cooperative Language Learning. In practice, CLL supports a variety of instructional models—structural, functional, and interactional—since its activities can target both language forms and communicative functions.

1.1.4 Benefits of CLL in Higher Education

Studies highlight the positive impact of CLL on language acquisition, including improved vocabulary retention, oral fluency, and academic writing skills (Slavin, 2014). Cooperative learning methods also promote student motivation and confidence, creating an inclusive and supportive classroom atmosphere (Dörnyei, 2001).

From the perspective of second language teaching, McGroarty (1989) offers six learning advantages for ESL students in CLL classrooms: 1. increased frequency and variety of second language practice through different types of interaction 2. possibility for development or use of language in ways that support cognitive development and increased language skills 3. opportunities to integrate language with content-based instruction 4. opportunities to include a greater variety of curricular materials to stimulate language as well as concept learning 5. freedom for teachers to master new professional skills, particularly those emphasizing communication 6. opportunities for students to act as resources for each other, thus assuming a more active role in their learning.

2. Methodology

Research Design

This study employs a mixed-methods approach, combining qualitative and quantitative data collection techniques. The primary objectives are to: Assess the impact of cooperative learning on students' language proficiency. Analyze student engagement and learning outcomes in cooperative learning environments.

Definition of Cooperative Language Learning (CLL)

Cooperative Language Learning (CLL) falls under the broader instructional framework known as Collaborative Learning (CL). It represents a teaching approach that emphasizes the extensive use of cooperative activities involving pairs or small groups of students within the classroom setting. (Richards and Rodgers, 2001).

Cooperative Learning has been defined as:

A form of group learning activity structured in such a way that learning relies on the socially organized exchange of information among group members. Each student is individually responsible for their own learning while also being encouraged to contribute to the learning of their peers. : (Richards and Rodgers, 2001). (Olsen and Kagan, 1992, p. 8)

Results and Discussion

Some developmental psychologists stress the central role of social interaction in learning. A key principle of Cooperative Language Learning (CLL) is that learners acquire communicative competence in a new language through conversation within socially or instructionally structured contexts. Proponents of CLL have suggested specific interactive formats that are believed to be particularly effective for learning the norms and conventions of communication in a second language. In addition, CLL emphasizes the development of critical thinking skills, recognizing them as essential to the learning process across all domains, The word cooperative in Cooperative Learning highlights another significance of CLL: It aims to develop classrooms that foster cooperation rather than competition in learning. Proponents of CLL in general education stress the benefits of cooperation in promoting learning: (Richards and Rodgers, 2001).

CLL is an approach designed to foster cooperation rather than competition, to develop critical thinking skills, and to develop communicative competence through socially structured interaction activities. The effectiveness of Cooperative Learning (CL) relies heavily on how group work is organized and implemented. It demands a well-structured learning program that is thoughtfully planned to ensure that students actively engage with one another and are encouraged to support and enhance each other's learning.

Olsen and Kagan (1992) identify several essential elements for effective group-based learning within Cooperative Learning (CL). These include:

- Positive interdependence
- Group formation
- Individual accountability
- Social skills
- Structuring and structures

Positive interdependence is established when group members recognize that each person's success benefits the whole group, and setbacks affect everyone. This sense of mutual responsibility is fostered through the design of CL tasks and by promoting a collaborative group dynamic. For instance, a group might be required to produce a single shared outcome, such as a group essay, or their scores might be averaged to reflect overall performance.

Group formation plays a vital role in fostering positive interdependence. Key considerations in forming groups include:

- Determining group size: This depends on factors such as the nature of the task, students' age, and the time available. Groups typically consist of two to four members.
- Assigning students to groups: While groups can be formed randomly, by student choice, or teacher selection, teacher-assigned groups are generally preferred to ensure diversity based on factors like academic ability, ethnicity, or gender.
- Assigning roles within the group: Each member takes on a specific responsibility, such as noise monitor, turn-taker facilitator, recorder, or summarizer.

Individual accountability ensures that each student contributes meaningfully to the group's work. This can be achieved by grading each student's portion of a group task or by randomly selecting students to present their work to the class, their group, or another group.

Social skills are crucial for effective collaboration. Students often need direct instruction in interpersonal skills to interact productively as team members.

Structuring and structures refer to the methods used to organize student interaction and define how students are expected to work together during cooperative activities.

There are a handful of activity types that can be used with CLL. Coelho (1992b: 132) describes three major kinds of cooperative learning tasks and their learning focus, each of which has many variations. 1. Team practice from common input – skills development and mastery of facts, 2. Jigsaw: differentiated but predetermined input – evaluation and synthesis of facts and opinions, 3. Cooperative projects: topics/resources selected by students discovery learning.

Olsen and Kagan (1992, p. 88) outline several Cooperative Language Learning (CLL) activities designed to promote structured student interaction:

Three-Step Interview:

- (1) Students pair up, with one acting as the interviewer and the other as the interviewee.
- (2) They then switch roles.
- (3) Each student shares with the team what they learned during the interviews.

Roundtable:

Each group has one sheet of paper and one pen.

- (1) A student writes a contribution,
- (2) then passes the paper and pen to the person on their left.
- (3) Each student contributes in turn.

When done orally, this structure is called Round Robin.

Think-Pair-Share:

- (1) The teacher presents a question, typically one with no single correct answer.
- (2) Students reflect on their own responses.
- (3) They discuss their ideas with a partner.
- (4) Finally, they share their partner's response with the entire class.

Solve-Pair-Share:

(1) The teacher poses a problem—either one with many possible solutions or one requiring different strategies.

- (2) Students work out solutions independently.
- (3) They then explain their solutions using either the Interview or Round Robin format.

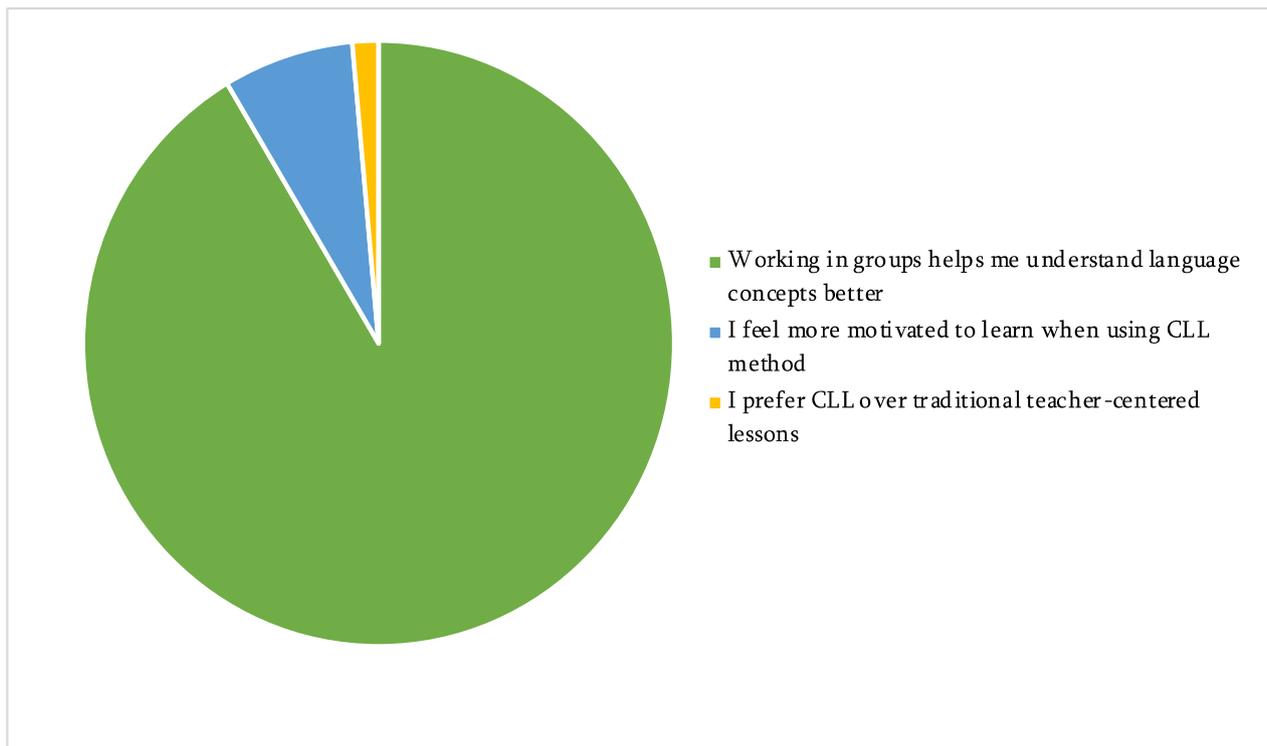
Numbered Heads:

- (1) Students in each group are assigned a number.
- (2) The teacher asks a question, usually one with a clear correct answer.
- (3) The group members put their heads together to ensure everyone understands and can explain the answer.

(4) The teacher randomly selects a number, and students with that number raise their hands to respond, similar to traditional classroom questioning.

In Cooperative Language Learning (CLL), the learner's main role is to function as an active member of a group, working collaboratively with others to complete tasks. Students must develop and apply teamwork skills. In addition, learners take responsibility for their own progress—they are encouraged to plan, monitor, and evaluate their learning, fostering skills essential for lifelong learning. This approach views learning as an active, participatory process that requires the direct involvement of students. The most common format in CLL is pair work, which allows both learners to remain fully engaged in learning tasks. In paired activities, students often take turns assuming roles such as tutor, checker, recorder, or information sharer, ensuring mutual support and shared responsibility (Richards and Rodgers, 2001).

To find out what students' attitudes towards CLL are, a survey was conducted. The students (a group of 66 students) were asked to choose the statement that best represents their attitude toward the Cooperative Language Learning method



Overall, the survey illustrates an amazing result. It shows that the overwhelming majority thinks that working in groups helps them understand language concepts better.

3. Conclusions

Although teacher's role in Cooperative Language Learning (CLL) is significantly different from that in traditional, teacher-centered classrooms, in CLL, the teacher is responsible for creating a structured and well-organized learning environment, which involves setting clear objectives, planning and organizing tasks, arranging the physical setup of the classroom, assigning students to specific groups and roles, and choosing appropriate materials and managing time effectively. A key responsibility of the teacher is to act as a facilitator of learning. In this role, the teacher moves throughout the classroom, providing guidance and support to individual students and groups as needed.

The use of discussion groups, group work, and pair work has long been recommended in both language teaching and other academic disciplines. These formats are often introduced to vary classroom routines and to increase student engagement. However, while such activities can boost participation, they are not inherently cooperative. In Cooperative Learning (CL), group work serves as the core instructional method and is grounded in a structured, theoretical framework for using collaborative activities in education. These group tasks are carefully designed to maximize student interaction and promote mutual support in learning. Cooperative Language Learning (CLL) strategies can also be combined with other teaching methods and approaches.

Unlike many language teaching methodologies, CLL has been widely researched and evaluated, with findings generally supporting its effectiveness (see Slavin, 1995; Baloch, 1998). However, most of this research has been conducted outside second language (L2) classrooms. Despite positive evidence, CLL is not without criticism. Some argue that it may be less effective for learners at certain proficiency levels—for example, suggesting that intermediate and advanced students may benefit more than beginners. Additionally, the method places significant demands on teachers, who must adjust to new roles and instructional practices. Still, advocates maintain that CLL enhances both academic learning and interpersonal communication skills among students.

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