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Title: The Effects of Integrating Cooperative Learning
into Vocabulary Learning of Elementary School Students

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Abstract

The purpose of the research is to examine if integrating cooperative learning into vocabulary learning helps to increase word recognition of students in an elementary school in Iran. It tries to investigate whether cooperative learning approach enables students to improve their language learning. This research used STAD (Students Team Achievement Division) as a cooperative model in this study.

Two classes of the fifth grade students in an elementary school participated in the study. The students in the experimental group received the treatment, which was teaching vocabulary through cooperative learning approach. In this study quantitative data was analyzed by using mean, t-test and standard deviation to find out whether there were significant differences in participants' word recognition before and after the treatment. The results showed that there was significant improvement on word recognition of the participants in the experimental group. Based on the conclusions of study, integrating of cooperative learning into the elementary school English instruction is recommended. Pedagogical implications and suggestions for future studies were provided.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

1.1. Introduction

In recent decades, due to the use of English in different fields such as education, technology, business, and so on, this language has become a shared language in many parts of the world (Moiinvaziri, 2002). English is an international language; as a result, the study of English language has increased worldwide.

English as a foreign language is taught to Iranian students from the first year of junior high school and during high school for three years, and for another year during the pre-university level. English is not taught formally in elementary schools In Iran, but in some schools English classes are extra-curricular classes. Children, who start learning English at an earlier age in schools or private English language institutes, have access to good resources. On the contrary, the others start learning English from the first year of junior high school. They often receive less motivation from their families; therefore, their success in learning English is slow.

In heterogeneous classes, there is an achievement gap between the English learners, and this gap causes some problems for teachers. In such classes, English teachers can use

different methods to help learners with different level of proficiency to learn better. Among them, the researchers pay much attention to cooperative learning. Researches on cooperative learning have taken place at different kinds of schools and in all grades in many countries. Most of these studies show the success of implementing cooperative learning methodology in language learning in schools and universities (Johnson &Johnson, 1989).

The elements of cooperative learning approach such as positive interdependence and active interaction among the students with different level of proficiency caused cooperative learning approach to be considered as an appropriate method for all students (Johnson & Johnson, 1989). Cooperative learning approach helps learners to improve their achievement, and retention of what has been learned (Johnson and Johnson, 1999). The studies on cooperative learning show that it is a good method to be implemented in elementary schools, where students can learn better in groups by helping each other than alone.

Learners can use different strategy to facilitate their learning. Cooperative learning is a student-centered method, and has positive effects on language learning. Many researchers believe that cooperative learning is an advantageous teaching-learning method for different subjects (Slavin, 1995). EFL students can be helped with how to use and speak English to learn better through working in small groups. In Iran, however, it is difficult for teachers to implement this method in their classrooms.

1.2. Problems with EFL Instruction in Iran

One of the most serious problems that EFL students have in Iran is that most of them don't have the ability to use and speak English properly after studying in schools and in universities (Vaezi, 2008). Their general English is weak, and they are not proficient in using language after graduation from schools or universities. To improve the quality of English teaching and learning in our educational system we should consider the reasons of the English learning problems.

English as a foreign language is taught to Iranian students from the first year of junior high school. It seems that EFL teaching in Iran is based on the students' need to read and translate English materials. Reading and translation are the most important skills which are emphasized at schools in Iran. The traditional teacher-centered Grammar-translation method is used in the English classrooms in schools as a powerful method. The teacher has to teach, ask questions, and speak throughout the class, while the students sit and listen to the teacher passively. The traditional approach makes students passive and indifferent to what they are being taught (Liang. 2002). One of the most important reasons of the low English proficiency of the students in Iran is the traditional teacher-centered methodology.

In general, the problems of the Iranian system of English education are because of the performance of this system for EFL teaching. In addition, the limitation of time is another important problem of English teaching in English classes in Iran. It reduces the effects of language teaching on students' performance (Eslami and Fathi, 2002). Factors

such as increase in using the Internet and people's interest in going to language institutes have provided some opportunities for English language instruction in Iran.

1.3. Background and Purpose of the Study

Through cooperative learning, small heterogeneous groups are helped to work together towards a learning goal. This approach entails changes to both task and incentive structures. Through the task structure the teacher or students design activities which lead to student learning where a cooperative structure involves students working together to help one another (Slavin, 1992) The incentive structure moves from traditional to cooperative atmosphere in many classrooms so that the success of one student is related to the success of others (Slavin, 1992). It is important to monitor how students interact with each other, since it has positive effects on students learning, their attitudes towards school, as well as their self-esteem (Johnson and Johnson, 1994).

In EFL classes, learners with higher English proficiency (who have been learning English in early ages in language centers) have higher motivation and use more learning strategies. The important issue, however, is how teachers can take good care of every student. Many EFL teachers think that teaching learners with different proficiency levels is very difficult. Most of the time, they focus on the average sort of students, whereas low-achievers, in fact, are those who need more help in their learning. Most low-achievers depend on teachers at school to learn. They need more time to understand and take in the material, so learning at school is not enough. Because of the schedules at schools, the

teachers don't pay much attention to the needs of the low-achievers. When they are not noticed in the class, they can't learn perfectly (Dion, 2005).

As a researcher, I taught in an elementary school in Tehran, and my students were in their fifth grades (their English class is an extra-curricular class). Each class consisted of 20 students, allocate into classes according to their level of proficiency. Although these students had four years of English learning experience, some of them were still low-achievers, and had problems in recognizing English words in their text book. These students were weak in learning vocabulary.

In elementary schools, games and stories are often used to increase learners' interest and help them to develop their listening and speaking abilities. The researcher hopes to build up the students' vocabulary through using the cooperative approach. It seems effective to use cooperative learning in elementary schools, because the students are more interested in interacting with their classmates. The good interaction among the students creates a positive learning atmosphere, and increases their motivation in learning. Motivation is an important factor which helps low-achievers to improve their learning efficacy. The researcher; therefore, wishes to integrate cooperative learning into vocabulary learning, and see if it helps to improve the student's word recognition effectively.

Teaching English as a foreign language to all students in Iran is a very important activity. In this study, the researcher tries to investigate if integrating cooperative learning into vocabulary learning helps students to increase word recognition in an elementary school as measured by achievement tests. The researcher tries to investigate whether

cooperative learning activities enable students to improve their language learning or not. It is hoped that they can use cooperative learning methods to memorize words. This study tries to find out if the elementary school students' interaction within cooperative learning helps them learn the vocabulary better. Through cooperative learning, students are asked to participate in group tasks, work with each other, and try to achieve the group goal. Most low-achievers are passive learners who like to listen and follow teachers' instructions, but cooperative learning helps all participants to be active learners.

1.4. Research Questions

The types of exercises that are used to process a foreign language are the causes of non-fluency in speech. Understanding a language, knowing its rules and vocabulary help learners to progress towards fluency; however, it cannot be equated with active fluency. Cooperative learning could be a useful method in the instruction of students. In this study, the following questions are examined and answered:

1. Does integrating cooperative learning into the vocabulary learning increase word recognition of students?

2. What are the effects of cooperative learning on the improvement of the EFL learners' language learning?

Hypotheses:

1. There is no significant difference in vocabulary learning between teaching vocabulary through the cooperative learning approach and the traditional methods of teaching vocabulary at the elementary level of education.

2. There is no significant difference between the retention of vocabulary learned through the cooperative learning approach and that of the vocabulary learned through the traditional methods of teaching vocabulary at the elementary level of education.

1.5. Significance of the Study

This study considers the field of cooperative learning and foreign language acquisition to provide some experiences for EFL elementary school learners. It intends to investigate how the fifth-graders influence each other on their vocabulary learning in the cooperative model. Students learn new vocabulary items by memorizing their Persian translation most of the time in Iran. Cooperative learning is not introduced and practiced well in our country, and English books have given less attention to cooperative learning. Lack of previous Iranian research in this area is observed. Thus, it is hoped that this study can provide guidelines for EFL teachers who wish to use cooperative learning to increase their students' language learning ability. Therefore, the significant of the study is expected both theoretically and practically:

1-The findings of this study will be significant in determining the value of the cooperative learning approach in teaching vocabulary to elementary school students.

2-The findings of this study will be significant in determining whether integrating cooperative learning into vocabulary learning increases word recognition of elementary school students.

3-The findings will also be good evidence on whether cooperative learning has effects on the improvement of the EFL learners' language learning.

4-It is hoped that EFL teachers at different levels pay attention to cooperative learning and this study can provide guidelines for EFL teachers who wish to use cooperative learning to increase their students' language learning ability.

5- This study is to fill the gap in the literature that finds the relationship between cooperative learning and vocabulary recognition of elementary school students in Iran.

1.6. Definition of the Key Terms

Some of the terms utilized in this study are important to be construed rightly, here I will explain and operationally define them in detail:

1.6.1. Cooperative Learning

Cooperative learning is a type of learning in which learners try to work together to reach to their learning goals. It is defined as a system of teaching and learning techniques in which students work together to enhance their learning through their active participation in small heterogeneous groups (Slavin, 1995). There are five key elements in cooperative learning (1) positive interdependence, (2) individual accountability, (3) face to face interaction, (4) social skills, and (5) group processing. The working definition of cooperative learning methods, on the other hand, refers to 1) STAD (see below), 2) learning together, 3) Jigsaw, as well as 4) group investigation.

STAD (Students Team Achievement Division) is a cooperative learning model proposed by Slavin in1978 (Liang. 2002). In this model, learners work in heterogeneous groups and help each other to learn better. Subsequently, to see how much improvement

each learner has made, they have to take quizzes individually, and their scores are computed. The group whose members have made the greatest progress gets a reward. Therefore, the only way the group can get a reward is that all group members work together and help each other to achieve the shared goal (Slavin, 1995).

1.6.2. Low/High Achievers (or alternatively: Under/Over Achievers)

Low achievers are those students whose English scores fall within the weakest one-third of the whole fifth graders in the school based on their pretest results (which in this case happens to be scores under 10 out of 20).

High achievers, on the other hand, are the first one-third of the whole fifth graders in the school based on their pretest results (scores above 18 out of 20).

1.6.3. Traditional Language Teaching

Traditional language teaching or the traditional method of language teaching here refers to the method that includes lectures on grammatical rules as well as (in the context of the present work) Persian translation of grammatical terms and sentence structures in teaching English as a foreign language. In traditional language teaching vocabulary items are taught through definitions and synonyms.

1.6.4. Vocabulary Learning Strategies

Language learning strategies refer to some specific actions the learners use in their own language learning process (Oxford, 1990). Language learning strategies are divided into six categories: memory strategies, cognitive strategies, compensation strategies, meta-cognitive strategies, affective strategies, and social strategies (Oxford, 1990). Vocabulary learning strategies are used by learners to get or retain the meaning of words. There are different categories of vocabulary learning strategies (Segler, 2001).

CHAPTER TWO

Literature Review

2.1. Introduction

This chapter reviews some of the most prominent research and studies carried out in the field of cooperative learning, and in so try to investigate the advantages and disadvantages of each as opposed to the present work. Needless to say, without having a clear understanding of the status quo of the corresponding research in this area is, I can't be confident that for all practical purposes, my work will be anything more than a complete replication of other works of this nature.

2.2. Cooperative Learning

The concept of "cooperative learning" cannot be defined *per se*. This concept turns out to be intractably elusive. Some have thought of it as a system of concrete teaching and learning techniques, rather than an approach, with students being active agents in the process of learning by means of small group structures in order that students work together to increase their own and the others' learning (Liang, 2002). By others, cooperative learning may be considered as a learner-centered instructional process of

small groups of students who try to work together on a learning task. In this method individual students are supposed to be accountable for their own performance, and the instructor's main responsibility is to serve and facilitate the process (Cuseo, 1992).All the same, some of the concepts of cooperative learning are generally accepted, and all definitions of this issue take account of them(Cuseo,1992). Cooperative learning refers to instructional methods which rest on small heterogeneous groups that work together and help each other to maximize their learning. Cooperative learning calls for changes as to task structure and incentive structure (Sharan,1980).

It is important to point up how students are supposed to interact. The main purpose of cooperative learning is to involve students in the learning process. We can't just simply divide up the students into groups and encourage them to work together for cooperative learning to take effects (Liang, 2002).

Up to the 1970s, with competition being the only significant motivational factor in learning, cooperative learning has unjustifiably been neglected .Nevertheless, researchers began to find fault with competition it would only promote norm-referenced evaluation by setting down a pass mark below which learners were looked upon as unsuccessful. Thus, they concluded that this was culturally inappropriate as social environment was not to be created by merely relying on this approach. Competitive and cooperative learning ideology contrast in that while in the former, some learners cannot help failing in order for others to go through, the latter, i.e. cooperative learning, totally overlooks the gap between high and low achievers (Coelhe, 1992).