

Acknowledgments

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1.1. Overview

As a teacher of English, I have always been wondering if there are certain ways in which I could enhance and improve the quality and the status of *English as a Foreign Language* (henceforth referred to as EFL) learning process. English teaching classes at Iranian schools are often teacher-oriented; hence, the teacher is restricted in time and energy to cope with so many students on an individual basis. My perpetual endeavor has been to find how comprehensible input can be retrieved quickly and appropriately in real life communication. At times I found the process too exhausting to follow and for this reason, I started sharing this fundamental concern with some of my colleagues who were eager to improve the quality of their students' knowledge of English. These teachers did not tend to treat learners as empty vessels to be filled fully with the information they received from their teacher who had full authority and control in the classroom.

Studying about the instructional implications of the input, output, socialization, and interactive theories of alternative approaches (Armstrong, 2000 ; Johnson, et al., 1994; Krashen, 1988; Marr, 1997; Murray, 1994) made me realize their importance and the fact that they are often neglected and overlooked in Iranian EFL educational contexts at least as far as I could observe.

Realizing how my students could benefit from learning together and yet not having the opportunity to accomplish this exercise in the classroom, truly disappointed me. This goes so far as the EFL teachers must spend hours instructing students without allowing them to work in groups and hence not be able to learn from each other. Furthermore, in some cases in the EFL classes which I taught, it was almost impossible for me to dedicate myself to every individual learner during class sessions due to the excessive number of students and insufficient class hours.

However, *Cooperative Learning* (henceforth referred to as CL) seemed to me an alternative and well-suited technique to overcome those unfavorable conditions in EFL classrooms. According to CL, it is desirable to have a classroom organization in which students work in small heterogeneous groups and learn from their own and other peers' mistakes (Slavin, 1987). The present study investigated whether or not traditional whole-class method in Foreign Language (henceforth referred to as FL) reading classes could be replaced by CL technique in order to be more productive learning environment.

1.2. Background of the Study

The nature and use of CL have been extensively examined over the past four decades to discover the impact CL could have on the academic achievement of a variety of students in a variety of classroom-based settings (Babapour, 2008; Bandura, 1971; Bejarno, 1987; Douglas, 1983; Gillies, 2004; Jalilifar, 2009; Johnson & Johnson, 1972; Johnson et al., 1985; Lotfi, 2007; Marr, 1997; Pica, Young, & Doughty, 1987; Slavin, 1995). Furthermore, it has been observed in the above studies that CL could influence learners' achievement, attitudes, cognitive and social relations. In fact, CL is one of the most widely researched instructional techniques in the field of education (Johnson & Johnson, 1991; Stevens & Slavin, 1995). Olsen and Kagan (1992) believed that interaction among learners is strengthened by employing CL as they restate, extend, and elaborate their ideas in order to convey or clarify their intended meaning. As this interaction contributes to achievements in L2 acquisition, it is very significant to take place in learning environments (Pica, 2002). Moreover, CL-based instructional program is pedagogically viable as it allows small-group interactions and problem-solving activities in a stress-free setting (Ghaith, 2003; Kagan, 1989).

Ghaith et al. (2007) referred to “teaching style, teacher–student relationships, and cooperation in the classroom” by the term social climate. Furthermore, CL was viewed as a vehicle for improving the overall social and academic climate for a school (Johnson et al., 1985). Consequently, it might be considered as a useful technique in promoting appropriate behavior of students in school which would result in creating positive behavioral climate in a school and preventing violence (Kagan, 1995).

The process of organizing student-student interactive groups highly depends on the following issues:

- How well the students learn,
- How they feel about school and the teacher,
- How they feel about each other, and their self-esteem.

I embarked on this study in order to explore more about how the CL models allow students work together in group to promote their ability levels. The present study is undertaken to determine the impacts of the *Learning Together Model* (henceforth referred to as LTM) of cooperative activities on Iranian Young Learners(henceforth referred to as YL) reading achievement, academic self-esteem, and feelings of school alienation.

1.3. Statement of the Problem

In recent years, much has been written concerning the benefits of employing CL as an effective technique in the classroom regarding both social and cognitive outcomes and promotion of academic achievement (Calderon, Hertz-Lazarowitz & Slavin, 1998; Fall & Webb, 2000; Johnson & Johnson, 1999; Leikin & Zaslavsky, 1997; Lotfi, 2007). Several researchers (Chen & Feng, 2000; Ghaith, 2003; Liang, 2001; Shaw, 1992; Watanabe & Swain, 2007) have agreed on CL to be potentially more useful than traditional or competitive learning. The cooperative group processes especially can provide opportunities for frequent and extended interaction in the target language among students. Contrary to teacher-centered instruction, CL techniques are student-centered (Gillies & Boyle, 2007; Sewell, 2008; Shwalb et al., 1995).

In a number of studies in which children's interactions as they worked together in groups were examined, Webb (1985, 1991, and 1992) discovered that the explanations children gave each other were related to positive learning outcomes. However, he did not elaborate on help (i.e. short responses or responses with little detail) since it was not related to achievement gains. Perhaps as students worked cooperatively together, they learnt to engage in processes of shared thinking which helped them not only gain a better understanding of the perspectives of others but also build on their contributions to develop new understandings and knowledge (Brown & Campione, 1994; Rogoff, 1994).

As mentioned earlier, Iranian students are mostly treated as listeners-type. This means they receive all information from the authority without making any contributions to their own learning while numerous studies have documented the benefits of CL (Lantolf, 2000; Lantolf & Apfel, 1994; Pica et al. 1987; Swain, 1997). Consequently, here emerges a need for an effective model of CL; that is to coach the students in understanding what they are expected to do and how

they are expected to work together in order for maximizing their potential for cooperation and learning processes.

1.4. Significance and Justification of the Study

The use of CL in the EFL classrooms has been productive in the past few years (Krashen, 1988; Liang, 2001; Murray, 1994; Olsen & Kagan, 1992; Tsai, 1998). Kagan (1996, p.1) believed that language acquisition has been seen by linguists as a complex interaction in terms of input, output, and context variables .Nevertheless studies show that CL has promoted most of the variables regarding FL learning and institutional **Input-output**. This is because the language classroom is enriched by comprehensible, appropriate, and accurate input via group work as well as developing frequent, communicative, and referential classroom talks in a supportive, motivating, and feedback-rich environment. Furthermore, Olsen and Kagan (1992) maintained that CL offers three major benefits relative to (a) providing a richness of alternatives to structure interaction among students, (b) addressing content area learning and language development needs within the same organizational framework, and (c) increasing opportunities for individualized instruction.

Various models of CL, which have been explored in previous studies, have been used in different countries including Iran, but only in a few of them, YL has been considered as an experimental sample. Therefore, there seemed a necessity and lack that needed to be addressed in the context of teaching Iranian YL. Specifically, the LTM was selected as an institutional technique for the present study because it was assumed to promote active learning and meaningful interaction in the target language of English among learners. In general, the study aimed at examining the effectiveness of LTM in teaching FL reading to a group of YL. Bearing

in mind that focus on individual is still a common practice in Iranian EFL classes, I attempted to investigate whether this CL model could provide a better and a more effective time-saving method for Iranian language learners.

1.5. Purpose of the study

The current study aimed to examine the effectiveness of LTM in teaching EFL to a group of YL at Mahdavi elementary school in Tehran. The assumption was that CL methods could enhance learning and reduce frictions among learners in the experimental group and that these students might be taught to interact in a more strategic and dynamic way during reading tasks while the unstructured procedures of whole-class instruction in the comparison group would fail to have the same effect.

Academic self-esteem and psychological adjustment at school are significantly important as they result in enabling students to overcome the disappointments and discouragements in life. Students with high academic self-esteem are self-assured decision makers, and efficient individuals (Slavin, 1995). Similarly, the LTM of CL was the preferred institutional technique for the present study because it included all the CL components and principles. In general as mentioned earlier, there was a need to examine the efficacy of this model in the context of teaching EFL in general, and in the context of the present study in particular, due to the scarcity of previous research.

Based on the above assumption, this study attempted to investigate whether implementations of this CL model could enable students to improve their reading achievement, to enhance their academic self-esteem, and to reduce feelings of school alienation among them. Therefore, one of the significances of this study was to focus EFL teachers' attention on perceiving the potentials

of Learning Together Model of CL. It also provided insights and targeted to familiarize both EFL teachers and learners with the productivity of LTM of CL model on a group of YL's reading achievement, academic self-esteem, and feelings of school alienation.

1.6. Research Questions

The following specific questions guided the present study:

1. Will LTM of CL lead to significantly more effective instructional opportunities than whole class method in the case of promoting EFL reading achievement of Iranian YL?
2. Will LTM of CL lead to significantly more effective instructional opportunities than whole class method in the case of enhancing academic self-esteem of Iranian YL?
3. Will LTM of CL lead to significantly more effective instructional opportunities than whole class method in the case of reducing feelings of school alienation of Iranian YL?

1.7. Research Hypotheses

The following null hypotheses were formulated:

1. LTM of CL will not lead to significantly more effective instructional opportunities than whole class method in the case of promoting EFL reading achievement of Iranian YL.
2. LTM of CL will not lead to significantly more effective instructional opportunities than whole class method in the case of enhancing academic self-esteem of Iranian YL.
3. LTM of CL will not lead to significantly more effective instructional opportunities than whole class method in the case of reducing feelings of school alienation of Iranian YL.

1.8. Definition of Key Terms

Cooperative Learning (CL): a system that places students in a small group to work together on clearly defined tasks that require active involvement of each member. In this system, students explain the taught material in their own words to other group members to increase their understanding of what they already know (Klingner, Vaughn, & Schumm, 1998).

Learning Together Model (LTM): Learning together is utilized to give students opportunities to summarize, retell, and expand the main ideas of what they read and learned. Five key elements that feature learning together model of cooperative learning in this study include (1) positive interdependence, (2) individual accountability, (3) promotive face-to-face interaction, (4) social skills, and (5) group processing: **Positive interdependence** means that the success of students is linked with the success of their team members. **Individual accountability** means that the performance of each member is assessed and results are given to the team and the individual so that team members cannot get a free ride on the efforts of their teammates. Yet, team members still help, share, encourage, and support each other's efforts to succeed through **promotive face-to-face interaction** within their groups. Furthermore, they use and develop their interpersonal and **social skills** of leadership, decision making, trust building, and conflict management. Finally, the team members perform **group processing** to reflect how well the team is functioning and how its effectiveness may be improved (Johnson, Johnson, & Holubec, 1991, 1992, 1994).

Reading Achievement: "Reading achievement involves functioning according to the type of reading material or the difficulty level of the material while drawing on knowledge of information-seeking processes to meet and exceed expectations for greater success in literacy learning" (Jenkins et al., 2004, p.56).

Academic Self-Esteem: “individual’s sense of his or her value or worth” (Huit, 2004, p.2).

School Alienation: It is described as a lack of sense of belonging, feeling cut off from school and the incapability of student to connect meaningfully with others (Bronfenbrenner, 1986, p.79).

Domain-referenced test: a specific type of Criterion-Referenced Test (CRT) where a test taker’s performance is measured against a domain or a well-defined set of instructional objectives to assess how much of the domain a test taker has learned (Richards & Schmidt, 2002, p.169).

Literal comprehension: It is defined as reading in order to understand, remember, or recall the information explicitly stated in a text passage (Richards & Schmidt, 2002, p.443).

Higher order comprehension: three different types of reading comprehension including inferential (finding information implicitly stated in a passage), critical or evaluative (comparing information in a passage with the reader’s own knowledge) and appreciative (gaining an emotional or other kind of valued response from a passage) comprehension (Richards & Schmidt, 2002, p.443).

Young learners (YL): “learners aging 7 to12 years old” (Slatterly & Willis, 2001, p. 4).

1.9. Limitations and Delimitations of the study

Regardless of the satisfactory results that this study might provide, it is only prudent to consider and treat the outcome with some caution because of the existing limitations.

Firstly, the outcome may have been influenced by the general research procedures and instruments, such as classroom activity types, and the limited time duration for implementing the activity. If the students had been observed taking part in another type of task in a normal classroom situation, over a longer period of time, then patterns of interaction might have been different.

In addition, the posttest took place immediately after the experimental intervention and may have measured only short-term differences in strategy use, which would not have been replicated on a delayed posttest.

Finally, this study did not consider both genders because of the situation at Mahdavi School. In coeducational classes or in other single-sex classes including just male students the results might be different.

2.1. Introduction

Recent research and experiences in language classroom have established the benefits of cooperative activities in expanding students' exposure to a new language and in providing many more opportunities to practice the language more naturally than traditional whole- class method. Approximately, since 1970, a great deal of work has gone into research and methodology in order to develop ways that teachers can help their students learn more effectively and happily in groups. CL environments have been compared and contrasted with competitive and individualistic learning situations. The present study sought to investigate whether or not LTM could be applied as a technique to facilitate the process of learning. The *positive* and *neutral* effects of using different models of CL in different contexts are explored in this chapter. It is worth noting that not any reverse effect was observed in the researches done in this area.

This chapter begins with the historical background and different definitions of CL, instructional models for CL, definition of LTM, the component elements and principles of LTM, its relation to collaborative learning and traditional group work, research done about the effects of CL on academic self-esteem, feelings of school alienation, and reading achievement. The chapter ends in explanation given on learning pyramid.