

*In God We Trust*



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**The Effect of Cooperative Learning Activities on Learning the Pronunciation  
of English Inflectional Endings among Iranian Elementary Students**

Thesis

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In memory of my father and dedicated to two women of far-reaching  
influence in my life: my mother and my wife.

## **Abstract**

A vast majority of studies have lately addressed cooperative learning in EFL classroom. Some of these studies focus on the effects of cooperative learning activities on learning different skills of language learning. Findings have largely shown positive effects in improving students' different skills such as reading, writing, listening and speaking (Meng-Lin Chen, 2005; Kao, 2003).

For the purpose of the research, 62 elementary male students between the ages of 15 to 25 from Goldis institute in Tabriz were randomly assigned to two groups. Then, based on an earlier rating scales completed by 50 randomly selected teachers, '-s' endings and '-ed' endings were selected as two most problematic English inflectional endings. After that, as a pre-test a passage containing these two inflectional endings were given to the students for reading. A pre-test was administered for both classes to display whether the classes are homogenous. Next, Pronouncing English inflectional endings was taught in class. Students in the Experimental class worked through Cooperative-Learning activities (by using pair work, group work, act out in class) and students in the Control Group worked in a teacher-centered way. It took 10 minutes at the end of the classes for 6 sessions.

At the end of the research, a post-test was administered to both classes, and an independent sample t-test was used to compare the means of the two groups in terms of '-s' endings and '-ed' endings. The results of this study indicated that Cooperative-Learning activities did not influence '-s' pronunciation, but it did have a significant effect on '-ed' pronunciation. These findings demonstrate positive effects of cooperative learning in improving the pronunciation of English inflectional endings. In the case of –s endings, it can be said that, cooperative instruction was better than teacher-centered instruction although the differences between two groups were not significant. On the whole, the findings are in the favor of positive effects of cooperative instruction.

**Key terms:** Cooperative learning (CL), Group work, Homogeneous classes, Pair work.

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## *Chapter 1*

### *Introduction*

Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) has lately been highlighted as the most prevailing approach to teaching/learning in EFL context. One way in which CLT can be addressed is through the notion of cooperation. Cooperative learning activities, therefore, can be very helpful in teaching different skills. Therefore, many researchers have attempted to investigate the effects of these activities on learning a foreign language and mainly on learning different skills of a language.

The notion of cooperation doesn't seem to be a new idea as far as human life experience is concerned. Humans, by virtue of their social nature, appear to have joined forces in a wide array of activities throughout history (Johnson, Stopka, and Knights, 2003). However, *cooperative learning* as an educational approach dates back to the 1970s that witnessed a growing emphasis on exploring peer power potentials to enhance learning. Roger T. Johnson and David W. Johnson at the College of Education, University of Minnesota examined cooperation and competition in the learning situation in the 1960s (Johnson, Johnson, & Smith, 1998). About two decades later, their work was complemented by Spencer Kegan who introduced the structural approach to cooperative learning. These two lines of research have inspired a trend of research that continues to this day.

The importance of cooperative learning at large and in EFL classroom situation is undeniably important, and it is already evident from the bulk of work done in the field. Educational handbooks appear many of which are publications dealing with research on cooperative learning, the theory behind this concept and tips for the use of cooperative

learning at school (e.g. Thousand, Villa and Nevin, 2002). However, a wide gap felt in CL literature is the scant publications about cooperative learning in foreign language learning and teaching. Therefore, one can claim that although few books and publications address the issue within ELT (e.g. Finkbeiner and Knierim, 2006; Finkbeiner, 2004; Finkbeiner and Koplín, 2002; McCafferty, Jacobs and DaSilva Iddings, 2006; Oxford, 1997; Wilden, 2006), not many empirical studies have dealt with cooperative learning so far.

### ***1.1. Statement of the problem***

Teaching pronunciation has been a neglected area in the Iranian context of ELT with most of the learners facing problems in pronouncing sounds accurately. Moreover, pronunciation as a broad area with potentials for instruction seems to be very promising regarding any potential research studies as well as being a crucial element in the learners' communication. Therefore, this research seeks to investigate the effect of cooperative learning activities (as a realization of communicative approach to ESL/EFL) on learning English pronunciation.

Although teacher-centered teaching techniques can be effective in learning pronunciation, this study intends to investigate the effect of cooperative learning activities on learning pronunciation. Therefore, employing cooperative learning activities alongside other techniques in teaching pronunciation might have more effects on improving the pronunciation of students. On the whole, the main purpose of this study is to find suitable ways for improving the learning of English pronunciation among Iranian students.

On the other hand, few studies have been conducted considering the effect of cooperative learning on pronunciation. Along these lines, this study addresses the issue of teaching pronunciation in cooperative learning classroom situation. Additionally, due to the broad

area of pronunciation, the researcher wants to investigate the effect of cooperative instruction of pronunciation of English inflectional endings.

### ***1.1.1. Research Question***

Is cooperative instruction of pronunciation in English inflectional endings better than teacher- fronted instruction or the other way around?

### ***1.1.2. Research hypotheses***

There are two hypotheses based on research question that are wished to be accepted as true.

#### **Null hypotheses:**

**NH1:** There is no difference in the pronunciation of '-s' ending between the elementary learners instructed through cooperative vs. teacher-fronted instruction.

**NH2:** There is no difference between elementary learners instructed through cooperative as compared to those instructed through teacher-fronted approaches regarding their '-ed' ending pronunciation.

In other words the substantive hypotheses are:

**SH1:** Cooperative instruction is better than teacher-fronted instruction on improving the pronunciation of '-s' ending.

**SH2:** Cooperative instruction is better than teacher-fronted instruction on improving the pronunciation of '-ed' ending.

### ***1.2. Significance of the study***

As it is mentioned before, although many studies have shown the positive effect of cooperative learning on learning different skills of EFL, few studies have been conducted on the effect of cooperative learning on learning the pronunciation. On the other hand, considering Iranian elementary students' severe problems on the pronunciation of English language, finding some new ways to help these students to improve their pronunciation seems to be crucial. Therefore, the present study selects some English inflectional endings, as problematic areas of English pronunciation and attempts to investigate the effect of cooperative learning activities on improving pronunciation on Iranian elementary students in this field. This is what sets this study apart from all the rest, and this is where the primary contribution of this study to the field lies.

### ***1.3. Organizations of the chapters***

In the first chapter, after giving a brief introduction, stating the problem which is going to be investigated and clarifying the significance of the study, organization of the chapters, key terms, delimitations and the limitations of the study will be presented. In the second chapter, the previous and related literature of the study will be discussed. In the third chapter, the experiment conducted for this study and procedures used to collect and analyze the research data will be discussed.

In chapter four, the computation and displaying of the research results will be discussed and displayed in the form of tables and figures. Moreover, some discussions about the findings of the research will be presented in this chapter. In chapter five, conclusions, implications of the research results, and suggestions for future studies will be elaborated.



#### ***1.4. Definitions of the key terms***

**Cooperative learning (CL):** Cooperative learning (also known as collaborative learning) is an approach to teaching and learning in which classrooms are organized so that students work together in small co-operative teams. Such an approach to learning is said to increase students' learning since a) it is less threatening for many students, b) it increases the amount of student participation in the classroom, c) it reduces the need for competitiveness, and d) it reduces the teacher's dominance in the classroom (Richards, Platt and Platt, 1992, p. 87).

**Group work:** In this research, the term "group work" refers to the activities which are done by the groups of four to five learners in cooperative learning classes in order to complete a task.

**Homogeneous classes:** In this research, this term refers to the classes which do not have significant differences on the correct pronunciation of English inflectional endings. In other words, they have nearly the same abilities on the pronunciation of English inflectional endings before administering the treatment.

**Pair work:** The term pair work refers to the learning activities which involves learners working together in pairs (Richards, Platt and Platt, 1992, p. 261).

#### ***1.5. Delimitations of the study***

The participants of this study were male senior students of Goldis institute in Tabriz, who were at the elementary level of English. As the researcher taught in male branches of Goldis, in order to have a complete observation of the process of the study in both classes during the teaching and recording the students' voices, only male students were used in this study. Moreover, due to the difficulty of doing a research on all levels of English classes,

only elementary students were selected to be examined. Therefore, the sex and level of our participants were two important delimitations of our research.

On the other hand, due to the difficulty of dealing with the whole area of pronunciation, the present research was limited to the effect of CL on inflectional endings rather than the whole area of pronunciation such as intonation, accent, etc. Therefore, one must be cautious in drawing general conclusions of the results of the study.

### ***1.6. Limitations of the study***

Like many other studies, this study has its own shortcomings. The most important limitation lies in the recording process. Some interferences from the environment like the noisy circumstance of the institute, the sound of bell and other students' voice during the breaks were inevitable. Therefore, a number of recordings did not have enough quality and making an accurate judgment about the students' mistakes was difficult for the raters.

The next limitation of our research was the number of our raters. Although it is difficult to find more than two raters and on the other hand it is time consuming to ask more raters to listen to the voices and give their judgments, it, certainly, increases the accuracy of frequency of students' mistakes or errors. Even, it was better to ask two other raters to give their opinions in problematic situations, as discussed earlier.

In the next chapter, a comprehensive review is done on the concept of cooperative learning and its components in details.

## *Chapter 2*

### *Review of the related literature*

#### **2.1. Introduction: What is Cooperative Learning?**

Cooperative learning is not a new idea, and for thousands of years, its value on human life, especially education, has been recognised. However, it seems that the term *cooperative learning* dates back to the 1970s. After that year, a great deal of research and practical work were done to discover the benefit of peer work and group work in human learning, and it is continued until now. Thus, CL has a strong foundation in research.

In a cooperative learning situation, members of a group work together in order to achieve some similar objectives. As an example, they try to work in small groups to fulfill certain tasks which are assigned by the teacher. In CL information is shared with everyone in the group, and learning takes place not only in an individual student, but all the students in class. In such a situation, members depend on each other for success or failure, so they try to cooperate in learning the tasks.

Although pair works and group works are used in CL, ESL teachers should always use these activities in a way that could be truly cooperative learning group tasks. Johnson and Johnson (1987) argue that there is a difference between simply putting students into groups to learn and in structuring cooperative interdependence among students.

Cooperative learning is not only dividing students in small groups and asking them to discuss some assignments given by the teacher. It is possible that only a student does all the work while other members of the group simply claim that the work is theirs too. In order to have cooperation in the true sense there should be interdependence among

students. By this way the students understand that their success relies on the success of the other students, and they try to have a real cooperation with others. As it is appointed by Slavin (1990) in cooperative learning, the emphasis is on the academic learning success and learning of all the members of the groups not only of every individual. This feature differentiates CL from the normal working in groups.

## **2.2. A Brief History of Cooperative Learning**

The notion of cooperation doesn't seem to be a new idea as far as human life experience is concerned. Throughout history, humans appear to have joined forces in a wide variety of activities. It seems that humans have understood the value of group work and cooperative learning and have attempted to use them in most activities in different stages of their life. However, cooperative learning as an educational approach did not introduce until 1960s. As Johnson, Johnson, & Smith, (1998) argues that R. T. Johnson and D. W. Johnson the brothers, who affiliated with the faculty at the College of Education in University of Minnesota, started the investigation of cooperation and competition in learning situations in 1960s.

About two decades later, in 1985, Spencer Kagan introduced the structural approach to cooperative learning, which is now used worldwide in classrooms at all grade levels. His wife, Laurie Kagan, former Director of Elementary Education of the state of Nevada, develops all Kagan training materials. The Kagan's structural approach makes cooperative learning part of any lesson through the addition of cooperative structures, rather than stressing complex cooperative learning lessons, theme units, projects, and centers. These two lines of research have inspired a trend of research on cooperative learning that continues to this day.