

The Effects of Cooperative Language Learning Strategies on Learning Active and Passive Structures among Iranian EFL Learners

Abbas Rahmani, MA

Mohammad Taghi Hassani, PhD

Islamic Azad University, Takestan Branch

Abstract

This study aims at investigating the effects of cooperative language learning on learning active and passive structures among Iranian EFL students. The participants of the study were 60 high school students that were selected from third grade of Barikbin high school in Qazvin. All of the participants were male. Their level of proficiency was intermediate. Then the participants were divided into two groups: experimental and control groups. Their age was between 16-17 years old. The experimental group received passive and active structures' instruction through cooperative language learning strategies and control group received normal instruction regarding passive and active structures. At the end of treatment, the post test was held in order to measure the difference between experimental and control groups' achievements. The results show that that cooperative language learning strategies had significant effects on Iranian EFL students' active and passive structures.

Key words: Cooperative learning, cooperative language learning, cooperative learning activities, group work, strategy

1. Introduction

Cooperative learning is group learning activity organized so that learning is dependent on the socially constructed exchange of information between learners in groups and in which each learner is held accountable for his or her own learning and is motivated to increase the learning of others.

In choosing what method to use in a class, a teacher should have a sense of plausibility, to use Prabhu's (1990) term. That is, teachers should try a method themselves to see if it works in their context. For instance, CL is believed to be globally applied successfully (Johnson and Johnson (1998, cited in Liang, 2002). Nonetheless, some researchers believe it cannot be applied

well in Asia—including Iran—where students are supposed to be passive consumers of knowledge and cannot go beyond what they have been spoon-fed (Gow & Kember, 1990, Go & Mok, 1995, cited in Liang, 2002). Moreover, Thanh, 2011 in his meta-analysis reported that more than 50% of the studies about CL in Eastern contexts found it inappropriate. The problem is that CL is still unknown to Iranian universities where GTM with rigid roles for learners as passive recipients and mere audience, and teachers as lecturers and decision makers is dominant (Eslami, 2010; Ghorbani, 2009). Thus, to see if Iranian students are really Asian passive students and if CL is applicable in Iran, the present study was conducted.

The long-held grammar-teaching in language classes was hindered with the heyday of the communicative method of language teaching in the 19100s. The concept of grammar has been defined in a variety of ways; besides, in the eyes of the learners various methods and techniques in the world of teaching English as a second/ foreign language (TESL/ TEFL) have added different colors and costumes to it. It has been defined, for instance, by Richards and Schmidt (2010) as a description of different ways in which bits of linguistic value are or can be combined so that longer linguistic units by the name of sentences are made. Nunan (2003), further, classifies grammar into two categories; prescriptive grammar, dealing with what to do, and descriptive grammar, dealing with what there really is. Noteworthy is the fact that grammar was (and still is) either oppressed and thrown away since the rise of communicative revolution focusing on meaning, or dealt with in rigid teacher-fronted classes focusing on forms except for the case of some classes whose teachers focus on form (not forms), that is, form + meaning at the same time (Long & Robinson, 1998).

Access to authentic interaction with peers in the classroom is particularly valuable for EFL language learners such as English learners in Iran, who have very few chances to use English

outside the classroom since English is not the language of communication in the society. CL is also likely to provide a solution to some common problems with Iranian EFL learners in group work, who tend to lack the necessary cooperative skills as well as motivation and willingness to communicate in English with each other. Importantly, CL and traditional instruction do not always stand in contrast to each other. Some CL models integrate the two different approaches by drawing useful elements from both whole-class instruction and communicative group work (Slavin, 1995). This facilitates a smooth transition from one approach to another, and follows the suggestion of using an eclectic teaching model which appropriately balances the use of old practices and new techniques (Bjorning-Gyde et al., 2008; Hu, 2005; Jin & Cortazzi, 2004; Li, 2008). Therefore, the need to find an alternative method to GTM was the first point that motivated this study. Although so many researchers have investigate the effects of different learner factors such as age, gender, proficiency level, motivation, autonomy, and learners' beliefs, and learners' purpose of using language learning strategies, few studies have been done on the effect of cooperative language learning strategies. So, this study aims to investigate the effect of cooperative language learning strategy on Iranian EFL students' passive and active structures.

2. Review of the related literature

2.1. Cooperative learning

Cooperative learning is a set of teaching strategies used to promote face-to-face interaction among students and help them reach specific learning and interpersonal goals in structured groups (Johnson and Johnson, 1994; Slavin, 1997). While most cooperative learning approaches share this definition, cooperative learning strategies employed within them may vary in a number of ways. Cooperative learning strategies may be informal groupings to allow students to work together. They may be structured, with students having specific tasks in their

group and assessing their group and individual performance. While cooperative learning groups generally involve four members, the number of students may be greater or fewer. Groups may work together for a few minutes, a couple of weeks or for many months (Slavin, 1997).

2.2 Rationale for using cooperative learning

The research on cooperative learning clearly suggests that no matter what form cooperative learning takes within classrooms, when well-structured, it offers many benefits for both teachers and students. Cooperative learning helps teachers in classroom management and provides an alternative instructional practice while creating a more learner-centered atmosphere (Cangelosi, 2000; Sharan, 1994). For students, cooperative learning seems to improve their management (Baloche, 1998; Good and Brophy, 2000), social (Kagan and Kagan, 1994; Johnson and Johnson, 1992).

Research suggests that cooperative learning provides benefits for teachers. Orlich et al. (1998) stated that cooperative learning helps classroom management and instruction. Cangelosi (2000) states that use of cooperative learning activities provides student engagement in lessons, helps students develop intrinsic motivation, contributes to solutions for conflicts among students, and reduces disruptive behaviors of students. Thus, he suggests that language teachers should organize cooperative learning groups to have more efficient classroom management. The study conducted by Gwyn-Paquette and Tochon (2003) has shown that teachers who include cooperative learning activities in their teaching plans have fewer classroom management problems.

In addition, the use of cooperative learning activities provides an alternative instructional practice for teachers by creating more learner-centered classes and focusing on students' learning needs (Nunan, 1992). Teachers using cooperative learning activities concentrate on engaging

students in the learning process rather than concentrating on the presentation of instruction through direct teaching. During cooperative learning activities teachers have opportunities to observe each student's difficulties in learning, strengths, and learning styles. This information helps teachers in organizing and presenting the instruction to be taught (Sharan, 1994).

Cooperative learning offers benefits for students as well as teachers. Research has pointed to cooperative learning's positive effect upon student's self-management skills. Good and Brophy (2000) suggest that cooperative learning teaches management skills to students since it encourages student responsibility for each other. Each student has a task in the group and without completing each task and coordinating with others, group work cannot be completed. Several tasks associated with cooperative learning such as organizing materials, keeping the group working, watching the time, and following directions also seem to be factors that help improve the management skills of students (Baloche, 1998; Orlich et al., 1998).

2.3 Cooperative language learning

Cooperative Language Learning is grouping students within the classroom, having them study on specific assignments cooperatively and providing benefits for each team member to practice the target language while interacting with each other (Kessler, 1992). In language teaching cooperative learning has five major objectives:

- to provide opportunities for naturalistic second language acquisition through the use of interactive pair and group activities
- to provide teachers with a methodology to enable them to achieve this goal
- and one that can be applied in a variety of curriculum settings (e.g., content-

based, foreign language classrooms; mainstreaming)

- to enable focused attention to particular lexical items, language structures, and communicative functions through the use of interactive tasks
- to provide opportunities for learners to develop learning (Richards and Rodgers, 2001, p. 193)

Although cooperative learning enthusiasts have advocated its use in teaching a variety of subjects and its successful use has been widely researched over a number of years (Richards & Rodgers, 2001), it has only recently gained importance in language instruction (Dörnyei, 1997). The failure of cooperative learning to be an area of major interest may result from its similarity to typical group work activities in communicative language teaching.

3. Method

3.1 Research design

The current study was quantitative in nature. The researcher used two groups (experimental and control) and the research contained a treatment; the present research study followed the experimental approach. The dependent variable was passive and active structure and the independent variable was cooperative language learning. The study followed a pretest-posttest method to investigate the effect of the cooperative language learning on passive and active structures.

3.2 Sample selection

Sample selection in this study was done on the basis of proficiency level of the participants and availability. The initial participants of the study were 90 high school students that were selected from third grade of Barikbin high school in Qazvin. In order to homogenize them, an Oxford

Placement Test (OPT) was administered. After administering OPT, 60 students were selected according to the results of the OPT. All of the participants were male. Their level of proficiency was intermediate. Then the participants were divided into two groups: experimental and control groups. Their age was between 16-17 years old.

Table.1
Subjects' Characteristics

Group	Number	Gender	Age
One	30	Male	16-17
Two	30		

3.3 Instrumentation

For fulfilling the purpose of this study, two different instruments were used as follows:

3.3.1 Oxford Placement Test (OPT)

Participants were selected from the population of 90 EFL students. OPT containing three parts (Part One: Questions 1 – 40; Part Two: Questions 41 – 60; and Part Three: Writing section) was used. The test helped the researcher to make sure that all subjects were in the intermediate proficiency level. The test had been developed by Oxford University Press in 2001.

3.3.2 Pretest and posttest

At the beginning of the research, the pretest that was extracted from TOEFL (Grammar section, 2015) was administered in order to assess the participants' passive and active structures knowledge. At the end of treatment, the posttest that was extracted from TOEFL (Grammar section, 2015) was administered in order to measure the effect of treatments on the participants. The reliability of the tests was assured by administering it to the similar group of the learners.

3.4 Procedure

The initial participants of the study were 90 high school students that were selected from third grade of Barikbin high school in Ghazvin. In order to homogenize them, an Oxford Placement Test(OPT) was administered. After administering OPT, 60 students were selected according to the results of the OPT. Then the participants were divided into two groups: experimental and control groups. A pilot study was administered to check the reliability of the pretest and posttest as it mentioned in instrumentation section. Then, the pretest was held in order to assess the participants' knowledge regarding passive and active structures. After holding pretest, the treatment sessions were started. The experimental group received passive and active structures' instruction through cooperative language learning strategies and control group received normal instruction regarding passive and active structures. The treatment was held for three sessions and it was held once a week. Every session was about 90 minutes. The teachers of both groups were required to indirectly check the learners' progress over the sessions. This helped the researcher ensure that the treatment is performed appropriately, since in some sessions directions or guidelines were provided by the researcher as to how to instruct the desired methods of teaching. At the end of treatment, the post test was held in order to measure the difference between experimental and control groups' achievements.

3.5 Data analysis

In order to statistically analyze the results of the tests, the software statistical package for social sciences (SPSS) was of great help in this research. The first step was to conduct two independent T-tests to compare the results of the pretest for two groups so as to make sure that there was no

significant difference between the groups before they underwent the experiment. In the end, two independent T-tests were administered to compare the results of the control group with those of the experimental group of posttest.

4. Results

In order to test the hypothesis, the researcher conducted a series of calculations and statistical routines that are elaborated comprehensively in this chapter. The descriptive statistics was utilized in the process, details of which are presented below. The question and hypothesis of the study was as follows:

Do cooperative language learning strategies have any significant effects on learning active-passive structure among Iranian EFL students?

Cooperative language learning strategies don't have significant effects on learning active-passive structure among Iranian EFL students.

In order to test the hypothesis an independent-samples t-test was implemented and the effect size was calculated. The following tables depict the results of data analysis.

$$\text{Eta squared} = \frac{t^2}{t^2 + (N1 + N2 - 2)} = \frac{(.666)^2}{(.666)^2 + (30+30-2)} = 0.007$$

The guidelines (proposed by Cohen 1988, pp. 284–7) for interpreting this value are:

.01=small effect

.06=moderate effect

.14=large effect

An independent-samples t-test was conducted to compare the pretest scores for the control group and the experimental group. There was no significant difference in scores for the control group ($M = 10.5, SD = 1.96$) and the experimental group ($M = 10.2, SD = 1.49; t(54.197) = .666, p = .508$, two-tailed). The magnitude of the differences in the means (mean difference = .3, 95% *CI*: -.60 to 1.20) was very small (eta squared = .007).

An independent-samples t-test was conducted to compare the posttest scores for the control group and the experimental group. There was a significant difference in scores for the control group ($M = 13.1, SD = 1.86$) and the experimental group ($M = 14.96, SD = 1.24; t(50.594) = -4.562, p = .000$, two-tailed). The magnitude of the differences in the means (mean difference = -1.86, 95% *CI*: -2.68 to -1.04) was large (eta squared = .26). Therefore, the research hypothesis “cooperative language learning strategies don’t have significant effects on Iranian EFL students’ active-passive structure” was **rejected**. The results show that cooperative language learning strategies had significant effects on Iranian EFL students’ active and passive structures.

Table 2
Scores of the groups on the posttest

Group	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Control	30	13.1000	1.86344	.34022
experimental	30	14.9667	1.24522	.22735

Table 3
Results of Independent-samples t-test on the posttest

t-test for Equality of Means					
T	Df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference

					Lower	Upper
-4.562	50.594	.000	-1.86667	.40919	-2.68830	-1.04503

$$\text{Eta squared} = \frac{t^2}{t^2 + (N1 + N2 - 2)} = \frac{(-4.562)^2}{(-4.562)^2 + (30+30-2)} = 0.26$$

5. Discussion

The question of the study explored the effects of cooperative learning strategies on Iranian EFL students' active and passive structure. The results show that cooperative language learning strategies had significant effects on Iranian EFL students' active and passive structures. The finding that the CL approach is more effective than traditional instruction in improving learners' English active and passive structures supports previous findings regarding its role in enhancing academic achievement (Brown & Thomson, 2000; Johnson et al., 1998; Kagan, 1994; Slavin, 1995). Actually, a good number of large-scale meta-analyses (e.g. Hattie, 2009; Johnson et al., 1981; Slavin, 1995) have already highlighted the strengths of CL over the traditional whole-class instruction in improving learners' academic proficiency, which is considered one of the major positive outcomes of CL.

Findings of the study reported in this thesis also support the view that CL is more effective in teaching language because of its efficacy in satisfying the communicative nature of language acquisition through the maximum use of promotive peer interaction in a positively-interdependent and non-threatening environment (Dörnyei, 1997; High, 1993; Holt, 1993; Jacobs & Goh, 2007). In addition, the findings of this study support the perspective that well-structured CL teamwork can be adapted to fit in the foreign language teaching context (Jacobs and McCafferty, 2006; Magee and Jacobs, 2001).

This finding is interesting in relation to the findings of four previous studies (Waugh et al., 2005) which have produced somewhat conflicting results. Two studies in Lebanon (Ghaith, 2003) and Thailand (Waugh et al., 2005) reported that CL greatly facilitated improvements in learners' grammatical performance as compared with traditional direct instruction, while the other two studies in Israel (Bejarano, 1987) and Taiwan (Chen, 2005) stated that no substantial difference was found between the two methods in teaching grammar. However, the discrepancy in findings may be due to some variation in the level of exposure to the intervention in different studies. Bejarano (1987, p. 497) noted in her study that "the students in the small-group classes were neither given tasks designed to develop grammar, nor were they encouraged to do so in any way".

The CLL strategies used in the interventions encouraged students to attempt to surpass themselves rather than compete with others (Slavin, 1995). Through this technique, students could get access to equal opportunities for success. This would have generated more enjoyment and greater sense of achievement for students, and hence they became more intrinsically motivated to commit to learning.

6. Conclusion

The aim of this study was to determine the effects of cooperative learning strategies on Iranian EFL students' active and passive structure. The result show that experimental group outperformed control group in post test and so cooperative language learning strategies had significant effects on EFL students' active and passive structures. This study may be considered as an initial step to encourage learners to have active roles in their learning process by teaching cooperative learning strategies. The findings confirmed previous studies on the same field that

found positive effects on students. Language teachers seeking to implement innovations in their teaching instruction may also look to the findings of the research to encourage them in their efforts. The successful use of CLL strategies in this research may provide insights for colleagues into their future experiments with CL and inspire more English teachers to make CL a regular component of their teaching repertoires.

References

- Baloche, L. A. (1998). *The cooperative classroom: Empowering learning*. Saddle River, NJ: Prentice-Hall.
- Bejarano, Y. (1987). A cooperative small-group methodology in the language classroom. *TESOL Quarterly*, 21, 483-501.
- Bjorning-Gyde, M., Doogan, F., & East, M. (2008). Towards a fusion model for the teaching and learning of English as a second language. *Journal of Second Language Teaching and Learning*, 7(1), 1-15.
- Brown, D., & Thomson, C. (2000). *Cooperative learning in New Zealand schools*. Palmerston North: Dunmore Press.
- Cangelosi, J. S. (2000). *Classroom management strategies* (4th ed.). New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc.
- Chen, M. L. (2005). The effects of the cooperative learning instructional approach on Taiwanese EFL students' motivation, English listening, reading, and speaking competencies (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). La Sierra University, Riverside, California, United States of America.
- Dörnyei, Z. (1997). Psychological processes in cooperative language learning: Group dynamics and motivation. *The Modern Language Journal*, 81, 482-493.
- Eslami, Z. (2010). Teachers' voice vs. students' voice: A needs analysis approach to English for academic purposes (EAP) in Iran. *English Language Teaching*, 3(1), 3-11.
- Ghaith, G. (2003). Effects of the learning together model of cooperative learning on English as foreign language reading achievement, academic self-esteem, and feelings of school belongingness. *Journal of Pedagogical Research*, 3(1), 1-15.

- alienation. *Bilingual Research Journal*, 27, 451-474.
- Good, T. L., & Brophy, J. E. (2000). *Looking in classrooms* (8th ed.). New York: Longman.
- Gwyn-Paquette, C., & Tochon, F.V. (2003). The role of reflective conversations and feedback in helping preservice teachers learn to use cooperative activities in their second language classrooms. *The Canadian Modern Language Review*, 59, 503- 545.
- Hattie, J. (2009). *Visible learning: A synthesis of over 800 meta-analyses relating to achievement*. London: Routledge.
- High, J. (1993). *Second language learning through cooperative learning*. San Juan Capistrano, CA: Kagan Cooperative Learning.
- Holt, D. (Ed.) (1993). *Cooperative learning: A response to linguistic and cultural diversity*. McHenry, IL: Centre for Applied Linguistics.
- Hu, Z. (2005). China's English education reform: Trends and issues. *Foreign language in China*, 6(2), 4-10.
- Jacobs, G. M., & Goh, C. C. (2007). *Cooperative learning in the language classroom*. Singapore: SEAMEO Regional Language Centre.
- Jacobs, G. M., & McCafferty, S. G. (2006). Connections between cooperative learning and second language learning and teaching. In S. G. McCafferty, G. M. Jacobs & A. C. DaSilvaIddings (Eds.), *Cooperative learning and second language teaching* (pp.18-29). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Jin, L., & Cortazzi, M. (2004). English language teaching in China: A bridge to the future. In W. K. Ho & R. Y. Wong (Eds.), *English language teaching in East Asia today: Changing policies and practices* (pp. 119-134). Singapore: Eastern Universities Press.
- Johnson, D. W. & Johnson, R. T. (1992). Positive interdependence: Key to effective cooperation. In R. Hertz-Lazarowitz, & N. Miller (Eds). *Interaction in cooperative groups* (pp. 174-199). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Johnson, D. W. & Johnson, R. T. (1994). Learning together. In S. Sharon. (Ed.), *The handbook of cooperative learning methods* (pp. 55-65). Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers.

- Johnson, D. W., Johnson, R. T., & Holubec, E. J. (1998). *Cooperation in the classroom* (7th ed.). Edina, MN: Interaction Book.
- Johnson, D. W., Johnson, R. T., & Holubec, E. J. (1998). *Cooperation in the classroom* (7th ed.). Edina, MN: Interaction Book.
- Johnson, D., & Johnson, R. T. (1999). *Learning together and alone: Cooperative, competitive, and individualistic learnin* (5th ed.). Boston: Allyn and Bacon.
- Kagan, S. & Kagan, M. (1994). The structural approach: Six keys to cooperative learning. In S. Sharon. (Ed.), *The handbook of cooperative learning methods* (pp. 115-133). Westport, CT: Preager Publishers.
- Kessler, C. (1992). Part one: Foundations of cooperative learning. In C. Kessler (Ed.), *learning of English in a Chinese context*. In L. Dunn & M. Wallace (Eds.).
- Li, K. (2008). Teaching College English to a large class: Problems and remedies. *Sino-US English Teaching*, 5(2), 13-18.
- Liang, T. (2002). Implementing cooperative learning in EFL teaching: Process and effects. (Doctoral dissertation, National Taiwan Normal University, 2002). Retrieved on 2/19/12 from http://www.asian-efl-journal.com/Thesis_Liang_Tsailing.pdf
- Long, M. H., & Robinson, P. (1998). Focus on form: Theory, research, and practice. In C. Doughty and J. Williams (Eds.), *Focus on form in classroom second language acquisition* (15-42). Cambridge University Press.
- Magee, V. Y. G., & Jacobs, G. M. (2001). Comparing second language student participation under three teaching modes. *Journal of the Chinese Language Teachers Association*, 36(1), 61-80.
- Nunan, D. (19 92). Introducion In D.Nunan (Ed.) *Collaborative language learning and teaching*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1515/9783110850512.1>
- Nunan, D. (2003). *Practical English language teaching*. New York: MC Graw-Hill.
- Orlich, D.N., Harder, R.J., Callahan, R.C., & Gibson, H. W. (1998). *Teaching strategies*, (5th ed.). Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company.
- Prabhu, N. S. (1990). There is no best method—why? *TESOL Quarterly*, 24(2), 161-176.

Richards, J. C. & Rodgers, T. S. (2001). *Approaches and methods in language teaching*(2nd ed.). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Richards, J., & Schmidt, R. (2010). Longman dictionary of language teaching and applied linguistics (4th ed.). London: Longman.

Sharan, Y., & Sharan, S. (1994). Group investigation in the cooperative classroom. In S. Sharan. (Ed.), *The handbook of cooperative learning methods*, (pp. 97-114). Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers.

Slavin, R. E. (1995). *Cooperative learning theory, research and practice*. Massachusetts: Simon& Schuster, Inc.

Slavin, R. E. (1997). Co-operative learning among students. In D. Stern & G. L. Huber (Eds.), *Active learning for students and teachers* (pp. 159-173). Frankfurt am Main: Lang.

Waugh, R.F., Bowering, M. H. & Chayarathee, S. (2005). Cooperative learning versus communicative Thai teaching of English as a second language for Prathom (Grade) 6 students taught in Thailand. In R. F.Waugh (Ed.), *Frontiers in educational psychology* (pp. 221-232). Hauppauge, NY: Nova Science.