

# The Impact of Cooperative Learning on Grammar Learning among Iranian Intermediate EFL Learners

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**Abstract**—The purpose of this study was to investigate the effects of cooperative learning activities on Iranian intermediate EFL learners' grammatical competence. This research was a quasi-experimental study and its design was comparison group design. The study included one control and one experimental group. In total, 50 students participated in the study. They were male and female intermediate English language learners studying English in EFL department at Shokuh-e-Danesh Institute, Dehdasht, Iran. Following a workshop on the implementation of cooperative learning activities, the experimental group was exposed to cooperative learning activities. The control group was, on the other hand, provided with traditional grammar learning methods. 25-item grammar tests were given to both groups before and after the eight-week treatment. T-tests were employed to analyze the obtained data. The results of the tests revealed significant differences between the control group and the experimental group regarding their grammar learning through cooperative learning. The findings of the study suggested that cooperative learning had positive effects on Iranian intermediate EFL learners' grammatical competence.

**Index Terms**—cooperative learning, grammar learning, EFL context

## I. INTRODUCTION

Grammar refers to the collection of rules which are used to create words and sentences. Richards & Schmidt (2010) define grammar as a description of different ways in which bits of linguistic value are or can be combined so that longer linguistic units are made. In addition to empirical evidence in support of grammar instruction in both ESL and EFL contexts, some scholars argue that grammar instruction is almost inevitable in language learning. This position is deeply rooted in some well-known theories like Schmidt's Noticing Hypothesis (1990) and Swain's Output Hypothesis (1985) indicating that learners tend to fail to acquire language by simply getting exposed to comprehensible input. Moreover, Ellis (2002) is in favor of extensive grammar instruction as it, in the long run, would lead to the formation of implicit language knowledge. Despite the fact that grammar is the key component in language system and that it plays a key role in verbal communication, with the rise of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) with its main focus on meaning, grammar was either completely overlooked in language classes or it was simply dealt with in traditional teacher-fronted classes focusing on pure grammatical structures of the language with no care for meaning (Long & Robinson, 1998).

Focus on form has recently been considered as a working strategy for teaching grammar. For instance, Sheen (2003, p. 225) believes that in the focus on form approach "all classroom activities need to be based on communicative tasks, and that any treatment of grammar should arise from difficulties in communicating any desired meaning." In a similar way, Ellis (2006) argues "the grammar taught should be one that emphasizes not just form but also the meanings", and that focus on forms is valid, provided that students are given chances to use the discrete forms they have studied in communication tasks.

One teaching strategy that is considered an important component of the recent approaches to teaching a second or a foreign language is cooperative learning. Cooperative learning is an "arrangement in which students work in mixed ability groups and are rewarded on the basis of the success of the group" (Woolfolk, 2004). As Liang (2002) puts it, cooperative learning (CL) is very close in nature to the principles of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT). Most researchers and practitioners have agreed on the effectiveness of cooperative learning in language learning. According to Hill and Flynn (2006) "Educators have found that cooperative learning groups foster language acquisition in ways that whole-class instruction cannot".

According to Slavin (1991), three techniques are widely used in employing cooperative learning approach, namely Jigsaw, Student Teams-Achievement Divisions (STAD) and Team-Games Tournament (TGT). While Jigsaw is mainly used in teaching reading and vocabulary, STAD and TGT can be implemented in teaching grammar. STAD and TGT, as defined by Slavin (1995), share the two basic features of cooperative group work: shared goals and individual accountability, in addition to equal opportunity of success, team competition and face to face interaction.

In Student Teams-Achievement Divisions (STAD) (Slavin, 1994a), students of different performance level, gender, and ethnicity are assigned to four-member learning teams. The members of each group are required to work together in their teams until they all have mastered the new lesson. They next take individual quizzes on the lesson. Then their scores on the quizzes are compared with their own past averages. The points of the members in each are then added up to form team scores. In Teams-Games-Tournaments (TGT), another cooperative technique, students play games with members of other teams to add points to their team scores.

It is interesting to point out that cooperative learning is not only a simple group work. A basic difference between cooperative learning and traditional group work is that in traditional group work, students are asked to work in groups with no attention to group organization or planning, whereas in cooperative learning, group work is carefully organized, planned, and examined (Jacobs, 1997; Johnson & Johnson, 1994; Ng & Lee, 1996).

Considering the importance of grammar in language teaching and learning, seeking new methods of teaching grammar for the time being seems to be an urgent need since the existing method of grammar teaching in EFL contexts appears not to be effective. Thus, the present study was conducted to see if Cooperative Learning approach is applicable in teaching grammar in Iran. Therefore, the following research question was put into spotlight:

In search for new methods of teaching grammar in an EFL context, the present study was conducted to see if Cooperative Learning approach is effective with Iranian learners in learning grammar. In other words, the study addressed the following research question:

Does use of cooperative learning strategy significantly affect grammar learning among Iranian intermediate EFL learners?

## II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

When using cooperative learning, learners practice many strategies either directly or indirectly. Explaining, arguing, negotiating meaning, repeating key words several times, and using words in actual contexts are important to be used in cooperative learning (Hill & Flynn, 2006). Learners have to agree on certain goals and specific ways to achieve those goals. This obliges them to understand each other's points of view and to try to be aware of how others think and feel.

Some studies argue that learners who participate in cooperative learning have usually gained larger achievement than learners who use traditional groups learning (Gambrell, 2007). Haynes (2007) indicates that for English Language Learners (ELLs), using cooperative group activities would help them achieve their academic goals because they are actively involved in "comprehensible output" and, at the same time, they receive "comprehensible input"; both have almost the same importance in learning a language (p.6).

There are many positive results of using cooperative learning on the social relationships. First, it provides respect for others and cooperation between students (Hohn, 2005). When learners help their peers and feel helped by others, they start to strengthen their relationship with them and maximize their respect for them. Slavin (2006) thinks that this effect would last even outside the school. Stevens (2008) indicates that these social effects may go beyond time and place of using cooperative group work. In other words, the positive relationships that are built in the classrooms tend to remain even outside the classroom and after ending the cooperative work.

According to Brown (2001), the use of CL makes learners feel secure from criticism; this feeling has great effect on the effectiveness of CL. This security is derived from dividing the embarrassment that one would feel when correcting his mistakes among the group members. Through this way, all learners, even the shy ones, would become active participants in the leaning process. Johnson and Johnson (2005) note that the feeling of commitment learners have when they are involved in the cooperative wok will decrease their "disruptive" and "off-task behavior" (p.118). It is the students' feeling of participation in something meaningful and having active role in it that lead to commitment and feeling engaged in the activity.

Johnson, Johnson and Smith (1998) argue that there are two forms of group work, namely "pseudo-groups", which cause competition at close distance, and "Traditional Learning Group", which consists of individualistic learning with talk; none of them result in any cooperation (p.28). It is then only under some circumstances that group work will be cooperative. In cooperative learning, students have to sit near each other, explain, discuss, and teach what they know to their teammates. They have to help each other to be productive. This is what Johnson and Johnson (2005) considered one of the elements of effective cooperative leaning, and named "face-to-face promotive interaction" (p.118). This interaction cannot fulfill its purpose without practicing certain social skills which are definitely some key elements of cooperative learning. Examples of these skills are conflict management, decision making, communication, and trust building skills. When working together in cooperative groups, students should have the feeling that they need each other to accomplish their goals. Johnson et al. (1984) insisted that this feeling of interdependence on one another would enhance the chance of achievement.

The review of literature has shown the positive effects of cooperative learning across different subject areas and among learners of different age groups. However, a large body of research on cooperative learning mainly dealt with reading comprehension and not the possible impact of CL on grammar learning.

## III. METHODOLOGY

### A. Participants

This study assumed a quasi-experimental study and its design was comparison group design. The EFL participants in this study were selected out of a total population of 120 intermediate English language learners studying English in EFL department at Shokuh-e-Danesh Institute, Dehdasht, Iran. To establish the homogeneity of the participants, they were chosen from among the learner population who could pass the Oxford English Language Placement Test (OELPT, 2009) with a score range of 40-60 out of 100. This range is usually considered as the score limit for intermediate English language proficiency level. The subjects aged 20 to 25 years, and talked Persian as their native language. They had completed the elementary and pre-intermediate level of EFL programs in different institutes. The subjects were randomly divided into control and experimental groups (25 each).

### B. Materials

'American English File 2', originally published by Oxford University Press, was assigned to be covered for intermediate EFL learners. Units 4-7 were taught during the experiment. The grammatical points which were taught in these units were present perfect, comparative and superlative adjectives, infinitives, first and second conditional sentences, present and past passives and modals of possibility and advice.

### C. Instruments

#### 1. Grammar Achievement Pre-test

After dividing the participants into one experimental and one control group using stratified random sampling, a grammar achievement test functioning as pretest (Appendix B) was designed in order to determine the prior grammar knowledge of the participants. The test items were selected from students' text book named "American English File 2". Thus, the pre and post-test consisting of a 25-item grammar test were administered on the content of 4 selected units covered in the duration of the study to evaluate their grammar proficiency before and after the treatment.

The pre-test was given to both groups to specifically verify the grammar knowledge of the participants. This test would reveal that all to-be-instructed grammar points in this study are new and unfamiliar for all the participants and ultimately any change in the grammar knowledge of the participants would be because of the treatment they received.

#### 2. Grammar Achievement Post-test

The post test was exactly the same as the pre-test, consisting of the same 25-item grammar test (Appendix B). In order to eliminate the probability of remembering the correct answers from the pre-test, a similar version of pre-test with different item and option arrangement was used after the treatment of the study in order to detect the grammar achievement of the participants.

### D. Procedures

After administering an Oxford Placement Test (OPT) and determining homogeneity and language proficiency level of the participants with regard to test scores, and a pre-test of grammar to make sure of students' unfamiliarity with the to-be-learned grammatical points to eradicate possible students' background knowledge, the next step was for the participants of the quasi-experimental and control group to undergo the treatment assigned for them based on the purposes of the study in hand.

Therefore, throughout the treatment which consisted of eight 120-minute sessions over a period of eight weeks, the two groups were exposed to a communicative language teaching approach. The only difference involved in the cooperative learning component which was practiced with the experimental group. A detailed description of the treatment procedure is provided in the following.

#### 1. Procedure for Control Group

The students in control group received ordinary classroom instruction in each session. The teacher first explained each grammatical point in the students' mother tongue, Persian. Then she provided the students with some examples of each point and asked the control group to practice the grammatical points mostly individually. They were required to focus on their own learning rather than care for that of the others. If they faced any problems, they were required to ask the teacher. The students were sitting in rows and required to ask the teacher who was ready for instant help in case of any problems. This type of practice ensured that the sense of competition was dominant in the class among the students. They were, however, asked to work in pairs for a small portion of class time, practicing the same content of only some tasks.

#### 2. Procedure for QEG Group

From the very beginning of the course, the participants of the experimental group were divided into five groups, each consisting of five students. In order to gain a sense of new identity, they were allowed to name their groups after their favorite actors, animals, or whatever they showed interest in.

As the CL approach calls for, the classroom environment was designed to be supportive and friendly to the students. The seating arrangement was, for instance, changed in a way that encouraged cooperation in the classroom. Therefore, instead of sitting in rows, the students sat face-to-face with their group members. The QEG then received 8 sessions treatment which incorporated a CL grammar learning with accompanying techniques of making the students work and cooperate with each other. Some of the CL activities and techniques that were practiced with the experimental group included Jigsaw Strategy, Round-robin and Learning together.

It is worth mentioning that it just took a little planning to teach grammar to the students via CL techniques, but students liked the method since they could learn how to work together to learn a great deal of information quickly. Of course the teaching of cooperative skills was quite necessary simply because as Johnson and Johnson (1994) argue, "Placing socially unskilled students in groups and telling them to cooperate did not guarantee that they would have the ability to do so effectively" (p. 38).

#### E. Data Analysis

After the treatment, the post-test was administered and the results were analyzed using the SPSS program. Descriptive statistical analysis was used to describe the information obtained from the results of pre-test and posttest administered to participants during this study. Therefore, the mean and standard deviation of the scores of each group were calculated.

### IV. RESULTS

In order to check the level of the grammar knowledge of the participants, a grammar achievement test, was run among the participants of the two groups,. As it was already mentioned, this test was designed based on the students' textbook (American English File 2). The purpose of this test was in fact two-folded: first it was intended to determine the homogeneity of the participants; second, it was run to check the unfamiliarity of the subjects with the intended grammar points. Tables 4.1 and 4.2 present the results of this test.

TABLE 4.1.  
DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS OF THE CONTROL AND EXPERIMENTAL GROUPS IN PRE-TEST

VAR00001	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
1	25	37.8800	2.92005	.58401
2	25	36.2800	3.23419	.64684

According to the statistics presented in table 4.1, the mean difference between control and experimental group is 1.60. To ensure the homogeneity of the participants in terms of their grammar knowledge, an independent samples t test was run, the results of which are presented in table 4.2.

TABLE 4.2.  
INDEPENDENT SAMPLES TEST OF THE CONTROL AND EXPERIMENTAL GROUPS IN PRE-TEST

	Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means					95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
	F	Sig.	t	Df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	Lower	Upper
	VAR00002 Equal variances assumed	.184	.670	1.836	48	.073	1.60000	.87147	-.15222
Equal variances not assumed			1.836	47.507	.073	1.60000	.87147	-.15269	3.35269

Based on the results of the independent samples t-test, the level of significance is higher than .05 (.073>.05); therefore, it can safely be claimed that both groups were rather homogeneous in terms of their grammar knowledge at the onset of the study.

Table 4.3 illustrates the mean difference between the participants in control and experimental groups after the treatment, which is 3.36. In order to ensure the claim of significant difference, an independent samples test was run between the two groups.

TABLE 4.3  
DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS OF THE CONTROL AND EXPERIMENTAL GROUPS IN POST-TEST GROUP STATISTICS

VAR00001	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
1	25	60.5600	5.44732	1.08946
2	25	57.2000	3.20156	.64031

1=Experimental Group  
2=Control Group

Table 4.4 reveals that there was a significant difference between the participants in post-test at .05 level of significance (.011<.05). The statistical analysis of the post-test scores showed that the experimental group outperformed the control group. In other words, cooperative learning did significantly affect grammar learning among the Iranian intermediate EFL learners.

TABLE 4.4.  
INDEPENDENT SAMPLES TEST OF THE CONTROL AND EXPERIMENTAL GROUPS IN POST-TEST

	Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
	F	Sig.	t	Df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
								Lower	Upper
VAR00002 Equal variances assumed	6.824	.012	2.659	48	.011	3.36000	1.26370	.81916	5.90084
Equal variances not assumed			2.659	38.813	.011	3.36000	1.26370	.80354	5.91646

## V. DISCUSSION & CONCLUSION

This study was intended to determine the effects of cooperative learning techniques on students' grammar learning. The findings of the study were indicative of the fact that CL is more effective than the traditional methods in helping the learners to acquire the grammatical knowledge. Table 4.6 showed that there existed a significant difference between the grammar knowledge of the participants in experimental and control group in post-test at .05 level of significance (.011 < .05). To put it in other words, utilizing cooperative techniques could positively enhance grammar achievement among the Iranian EFL learners.

The results of this research lend support to some previously conducted studies among which we can refer to Ghaith's (2003a) study. Ghaith also found that cooperative learning approach enabled the EFL learners to perform either significantly better than the whole-class learners or at the same level of them. In a similar way, the results were in line with the research findings of Akuka, Wambugu, and Anditi (2013) which revealed that Computer-based cooperative learning method put the students in a more advantageous position to improve their knowledge of English Grammar. Likewise, the present study supports Bibi (2002) who reported that group work activities significantly improved the academic achievement and the acquisition of the four language skills among the elementary as well as secondary stage learners of English. This study provided empirical evidence to argue that CL is an effective approach for teaching grammar. Therefore, EGFL teachers should be encouraged to employ the CL techniques to address the EFL learners' poor knowledge of the English grammar.

The effectiveness of the CL approach in this and other similar studies might be attributed to the fact that students act as investigators and discoverers in CL contexts. They actively participate in activities through asking questions, making predictions, analyzing, discussing, assessing their strengths and weaknesses, interacting together, and trying to learn. Unlike their dominant role in traditional methodology, teachers tend to act as facilitators in CL, helping the students work together and work out their learning problems.

Despite the huge bulk of research evidence in support of the effectiveness of the CL techniques in improving knowledge of the different aspects of language learning, there, however, exist few studies which are inconsistent. For instance, Parveen (2003) tested the effects of cooperative learning on the achievement of 8th grade students in the subject of Social Studies and found that cooperative learning was not a more advantageous instructional strategy than the traditional teaching method. Thus, care should be exercised that the inclusion of CL in language classes calls for careful planning and carrying out of the techniques associated with the CL.

### Limitations of the Study and Suggestions for Further Research

Despite the insightful findings of the study, this study, like any other research studies, had some limitations, some of which are highlighted here:

The first limitation of this study was the time constraints. Since the study was conducted over a short period of time, the proper implementation of the research was very difficult. As a result, it was difficult to manage classes in a way that the CL techniques could be applied properly. Thus, further research conducted in a longer time span would help investigate the impact of CL strategies training in language learning regarding different skills. The second limitation was the sample size. This rather small sample size (50 students) would not represent the whole population, thus it is difficult to generalize these conclusions. Further studies with larger populations should be carried out to see whether other findings will be supportive of the findings of the present study. Doing so, it is advisable for the teachers to use pairs or small groups, especially at the beginning, in order to be able to manage them and to help the students to master working in a cooperative way with small number of students first, then move to larger number of groups. Moreover, students can be given the opportunity to choose their partners instead of teacher imposing on them group combination.

## APPENDIX A

English grammar pre-test, units: 4 – 7(American English File 2)

Name:.....

date:.....

1. Los Angeles is .....city I have ever been to.  
a) the beautifullest    b) the most beautiful    c) the beautifuler
2. she doesn't work ..... Mary.  
a) as hard as    b) as hard than    c) the hardest
3. ....any of his movies?  
a) Did you ever seen    b) Have you ever saw    c) Have you ever seen
4. We're thinking of .....a new office.  
a) opening    b) to open    c) open
5. He went to the supermarket ..... some milk.  
a) getting    b) to get    c) get
6. Sunday is Holiday. We..... work.  
a) don't have to    b) must not    c) don't must to
7. What will you do if you .....the exam.?  
a) won't pass    b) will pass    c) don't pass
8. If we had a yard, I .....a dog.  
a) would buy    b) 'll buy    c) bought
9. What are you going to do this weekend? I don't know. I .....  
a) might to go away    b) might go away    c) may to go a way
10. You ..... coffee late at night.  
a) shouldn't to drink    b) shouldn't drink    c) don't should drink
11. I've known my best friend .....  
a) since 4 years    b) for 4 years    c) for 2004
12. How long ..... your car.  
a) do you have    b) have you    c) have you had
13. He 's divorced now. But he.....for 20 years.  
a) has been married    b) is married    c) was married
14. He..... have a lot of friends at school. He wasn't very popular.  
a) didn't use to    b) don't used to    c) didn't used to
15. The radio .....By Marconi.  
a) invented    b) is invented    c) was invented
16. Basketball is .....Than soccer in the US.  
a) popularer    b) the most popular    c) more popular
17. John .....The dishes.  
a) has already done    b) have already done    c) has already does
18. I don't enjoy ..... to the movies by myself.  
a) go    b) going    c) to go
19. If he .....in that hotel, it will be very expensive  
a) stays    b) will stay    c) stay
20. If I had a car, I.....to work.  
a) would drive    b) will drive    c) drive
21. She's been afraid of flying .....  
a) for many years    b) since many years    c) for 1998
22. I .....Ana for ages.  
a) have known    b) have know    c) knew
23. She ..... with his mother, but now she lives with his father.  
a) used live    b) use lived    c) used to live
24. Jack .....sad, if he doesn't see you tomorrow.  
a) is    b) will be    c) was
25. You ..... smoke in gas station.  
a) don't have to    b) don't must to    c) must not to

## APPENDIX B

English grammar post-test, units: 4 – 7(American English File 2)

Name:..... date:.....

1. ....any of his movies?  
a) Have you ever seen    b) Have you ever saw    c) Did you ever seen
2. She doesn't work ..... Mary.  
a) the hardest    b) as hard than    c) as hard as
3. Los Angeles is .....city I have ever been to.

- a) the beautifuler    b) the most beautiful    c) the beautifulest
4. We're thinking of .....a new office.  
a) opening    b) to open    c) open
5. What are you going to do this weekend? I don't know .I .....  
a) might to go away    b) might go away    c) may to go away
6. Sunday is Holiday. We..... work.  
a) don't have to    b) must not    c) don't must to
- 7.What will you do if you .....the exam.?  
a) don't pass    b) will pass    c) won't pass
8. If we had a yard, I .....a dog.  
a) 'll buy    b)would buy    c) bought
9. He went to the supermarket ..... some milk.  
a) getting    b) to get    c) get
10. You ..... coffee late at night.  
a) shouldn't to drink    b) shouldn't drink    c) don't should drink
11. I've known my best friend .....  
a) since 4 years    b) for 4 years    c) for 2004
12. How long ..... your car.  
a) do you have    b) have you    c) have you had
13. He 's divorced now.but he .....for 20 years  
a) was married    b) is married    c) has been married
14. He..... have a lot of friends at school. He wasn't very popular.  
a) didn't use to    b) don't used to    c) didn't used to
15. If he .....in that hotel, it will be very expensive.  
a) stay    b) will stay    c) stays
16. Basketball is .....Than soccer in the US.  
a) popularer    b) the most popular    c) more popular
17. John .....The dishes.  
a) has already done    b) have already done    c) has already does
18. I don't enjoy ..... to the movies by myself.  
a) to go    b) going    c) go
19. The radio .....By Marconi.  
a) invented    b) is invented    c) was invented
20. If I had a car, I.....to work.  
a) would drive    b) will drive    c) drive
21. She's been afraid of flying .....  
a) for many years    b) since many years    c) for 1998
22. I .....Ana for ages.  
a) knew    b) have know    c) have known
23. You ..... smoke in gas station.  
a) don't have to    b) don't must to    c) must not to
24. Jack .....sad, if he doesn't see you tomorrow.  
a) is    b) will be    c) was
25. She ..... with his mother, but now she lives with his father.  
a) used live    b) use lived    c) used to live

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