

**Cooperative Learning Strategies to Reinforce the EFL Learners' Speaking Skill: A Review of Literature**

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**Abstract:**

University researchers and educationists, including the Algerians, are continually seeking to adopt the best teaching methods and techniques that would provide the desired results. In a globalized world, and the need for English for many purposes in different workplaces, a good command of English has become a necessity. To meet the learners' needs, a variety of approaches, methods, techniques, and strategies are adopted to achieve a better manipulation of foreign languages. The current study suggests a teaching technique -- cooperative learning--which is believed to be useful for both English language teachers and learners to achieve the objectives and overcome some learning obstacles. Cooperative learning has been proved to be effective in improving and reinforcing the learners' speaking skills.

**Keywords:** Cooperative Learning; Strategies; Speaking; Interaction

**ملخص:**

يسعى الباحثون الجامعيون والتربويون ، بما فيهم الجزائريون ، بشكل مستمر إلى اعتماد أفضل أساليب التدريس والتقنيات التي من شأنها أن توفر النتائج المرجوة. في عالم العولمة ، و تزايد الحاجة إلى الإنجليزية للعديد من الأغراض في مختلف أماكن العمل ، أصبح إتقان اللغة الإنجليزية أمراً ضرورياً . لأجل ذلك، أي لتلبية احتياجات المتعلمين، تم اعتماد مجموعة متنوعة من الأساليب والتقنيات والاستراتيجيات لتحقيق معالجة أفضل للغات الأجنبية تقترح الدراسة الحالية طريقة تدريس- التعلم التعاوني - والتي يعتقد أنها مفيدة لكل سواء لمعلمي اللغة الإنجليزية او للمتعلمين لتحقيق الأهداف والتغلب على بعض عقبات التعلم.

لقد ثبت أن التعلم التعاوني فعال في تحسين وتعزيز مهارات التحدث للمتعلمين.

**الكلمات المفتاح:** التعلم التعاوني؛ استراتيجيات ؛ التحدث؛ التفاعل.

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## **Introduction**

Underlying language forms, “Spoken language is an important form and means of realizing the value of languages” (Liu, 2013, p.13). Its significance is demonstrated by the ongoing research in the areas of foreign language learning and teaching. Recently, Wolf (2010) used the term *Mute English Learners* to delineate those who are good readers and writers in English but cannot interact orally with foreigners. One simple clarification is that writing and reading skills can be reinforced and enhanced individually, but not speaking and listening (in Dinçer et al., 2012). Hence, this latter requires more practice opportunities and motivation to reach satisfaction. Despite the constant efforts, the majority of Algerian university students fail to achieve an admissible level in speaking skill. These deficiencies might be linked to high anxiety, lack of motivation, low self-esteem, and lack of language practice opportunities. In order to minimize these interfering elements that interrupt the process of language learning and teaching, cooperative learning is believed to be one of the most effective instructional strategies.

## **1. Speaking**

### **1.1.The Nature of Speaking**

Learning a second/foreign language is usually combined with speaking, in the sense that language speaking occupied a sensitive position throughout the history of language teaching, and begun to emerge as a branch of teaching, learning, and testing on its own (Bygate, 2001). Speaking is a highly complex and dynamic skill that involves the use of several simultaneous processes – cognitive, physical and socio-cultural – and a speaker’s knowledge and skills have to be activated rapidly in real-time (Burns, 2012). We speak to express our thoughts, share feelings, exchange experience and information.

### **1.2.Speaking Challenges**

Typically, learning a language means giving importance to all language skills, however, Ur (2000) goes against the flow and stresses the vital role of, particularly, the speaking skill. According to him, knowing a language is equal to speaking which implies that speaking includes all the other aspects. Consequently, more interest is given to this former skill as it is embedded in oral interaction. Despite the efforts, the enhancement of this skill faces numerous obstacles which break the learning/ teaching process.

The first reason is the large multilevel classes. Students with different levels show different attitudes toward English classes. Two categories of students are observed in the classroom. First, the bright students tend to be active learners participating in the suggested activities and they are motivated to learn. The other type is known as the less able students. They tend to be passive learners and they are usually shy and introvert learners. Teaching crowded classes usually fail to achieve the predetermined objectives which make it fairly impossible to get all students to speak.

The second reason is the short exposure to the target language. Controlled learning limits language opportunities as well as communicative context. The restricted timetable devoted to oral expression classes results in an oral deficiency. Students experience the spoken language in an average of three hours a week. This length of time is not sufficient to achieve good results. College students take oral expression classes for a few years and then total neglect. Speaking has no expiration date; it is lifelong learning.

The third reason is the Lack of vocabulary and language luggage. Students fail to express their thoughts and frequently are at loss of words. They often keep silent and cannot interact in the classroom. On the other hand, teachers lack teaching materials or the media to

best present the foreign language. Language laboratories are the most needed tools but most of the universities are lacking technology.

The fourth factor is the English language properties. In addition to the previously mentioned obstacles, specifics of English add to the list. Every language has its own features and characteristics, some of which makes it very difficult to acquire. Brown (2001) lists these features as follow: clustering, Redundancy, reduced forms, performance variable, colloquial language, the rate of delivery, stress, rhythm & intonation, interaction: the interlocutors taking parts in a conversation. A successful speaker of English is required to distinguish and manipulate language hallmark.

Moreover, the psychological side of the learner is probably one of the most important influencing factors on language learning success or failure (Oxford, 1990, in Dinçer, 2012). Motivation is a form of internal drive that pushes us to do things in order to achieve something. The extrinsic comes in the form of grades, prizes, and rewards while the intrinsic is inside the individuals like the feeling of pleasure, satisfaction, and joy. Based on earlier researches, intrinsic motivation is along-lasting investment. It is a key variable that controls the teaching/learning process. Whether the inner desire or external influence, students are always looking for positive energy that will keep them look forward and consistently improve their abilities.

Putting all in the same basket, Speaking is considered as an anxiety-provoking skill. When foreign language learners speak, they often experience a high level of anxiety. Because of the insufficient exposure to the target language, learners may be under pressure and be vulnerable to anxiety once they are required to communicate through English in the classroom (Oxford, 2002, in Akkakoson, 2016).

### **1.3. Teaching Speaking inside /outside the Algerian Context**

Chronologically, Language teaching was always concerned with the written form at the expense of the spoken one. However, it is generally acknowledged that writing correct sentences and passages is not a reliable measure for language mastery. Educators, researchers, linguists, and even ordinary people are convinced that learning only written English is like learning a language in view. This truth guides teaching toward focusing on developing the Spoken language as the medium of communication without completely ignoring the writing skill.

In the opinion of Brown & Yule (1983), the main goal of teaching speaking is to make the students enable to express themselves in the target language, use basic interactive skills like greetings, thanks, apologizing and expressing the needs. Hughes adds that the objective of teaching spoken language is the development of the ability to interact successfully in that language and that involves comprehension as well as production (1989). In this case, the teacher should create an interesting environment, topic, and implement suitable teaching technique in the teaching-learning process in order to make students able to speak passingly and confidently.

Equivalently, English gained a primary concern in the Algerian educational System. No one can deny the role of English as a universal medium of communication. In early 2001, the Algerian educational reforms announced new changes concerning the teaching of the foreign language. The new upgraded system involves syllabus design, content material as well as methodologies. Within this view, the study of English was fully academic for exam purposes. It is generally agreed that the cornerstone was developing the writing and ignoring the others, particularly speaking. Unfavorably, even the top-ranked students that are used to score the highest grades in the foreign language fail to carry a simple conversation in English.

Communicative Language learning is the most dominant approach since 1970. Its Principles were rooted in the notion of communicative competence. The birth of the prominent approach contributed to the development of some sub-branched methodologies. Richards(2006) stated that CLT keeps building up new approaches and methodologies refereeing to CLT and that take unique paths for the sake of developing the learners ' communicative competence. The Algerian educational authority adopted this latter as a remedy to the shortcoming of previously implemented approaches. It Targets the learner's needs and interests, and content material. Despite the efforts to maintain an effectiveteaching-learning situation, little is achieved in promoting oral skills.

## **2. Cooperative Learning**

### **2.1.Introducing Cooperative Learning**

A good understanding of the term lays out a good starting point for further comprehension. Several definitions were proposed for the term; Cooperative learning is an instructional strategy that uses small groups in which students work in a group and are responsible for their own learning as well as the others.It is established when students work together to achieve a mutual goal (Johnson, Johnson, & Holubec, 1991). On the same line, Slavin (1990) defines CL as a classroom techniques that inspire students to do all kinds of learning activities in group or small team, helps learn some materials and recompense students for achievements or performance of the entire group, improves teacher-student, and student-student interactions, advocates students to carry out an effective cooperative learning.

### **2.2.Levels of Cooperative Learning**

Johnson & Johnson (1999) elaborated more work in the field and stated three types of cooperative learning groups:

- **Formal Cooperative Learning group**

A number of students work together for an extended period or more where the aim is achieving the learning goal or completing a task (homework sets, design projects). This type of work set the stage for the most appropriate application of cooperative learning principles. The group is organized through the predetermined objectives and the established tasks.

- **Informal Cooperative Learning Group**

The members of the group work together for a class period or less, usually one session, in order to achieve the learning objectives. It can be used to focus on the content material, create a motivating learning environment, help set expectations, and structure an instructional session. Such type of groups can be used at the begging and at the end of the class for 3 minutes as it provides a shared floor for discussion (Johnson, Johnson, 1999).

- **Cooperative Base Group**

The group stays one body for at least one semester or year that is characterized by stable and consistent membership. Students are required to provide support and assistance in developing both academic achievement and social relationships. More personal relationships

are involved in the base group, students may exchange their phone numbers and emails in order to stay in touch and work outside the classroom. In case one is having doubts, missed a session, question, or curious about something, they can rely on their group mates. On a daily base, the groups prepare the paperwork for each course and save in the group folder (Johnson, Johnson, 1999).

To sum up, the success of the strategy depends on both the instructor and student sticking to their roles. One beneficial feature of cooperative learning is its flexibility and standardization. It can be used in various subjects, alone or with other strategies, whether with small or large size classes. The application in the education setting will create learning opportunities for students and support the new teaching practice on the part of the teachers. The three forms of CL are based on five pillars: positive interdependence, individual accountability, group processing, face to face interaction, and interpersonal skills.

### **2.3. Language and Cooperative Learning**

Similar to any instructional strategy, Richards & Rodgers (2001) summarizes the objectives of teaching through CL in the following points:

- To provide language opportunities for learners to practice the target language
- To increase the learners' motivation and reduce their anxiety by creating a positive classroom climate
- Provide language opportunities for natural language acquisition through pair and group interaction
- To offer teachers a methodology that can help to achieve their goals

Prioritizing the teaching content doesn't always result in satisfaction for both students and teachers. Often the medium of delivery has a partial impact on the success of language learning. CL has changed classrooms from being traditional by adopting a new approach where students are expected to be active participants and responsible for their own discoveries. They are expected to become excited about the learning process (Tsai, 1998, in Wondwosen, p. 60).

Numerous investigations in the field of human learning have declared motivation as a key factor in learning or teaching (Brown, 1978). In order to motivate students, they need interaction opportunities. Through group work, students will experience interdependence. Each member is accountable for achieving a common goal. Due to the specific context, learners will be motivated by the group's efforts as well as their own contributions being appreciated by the others (Johnson & Johnson 1989). Vygotsky, a leading figure in the history of cooperative learning, states that as cooperative activities increase information processing, motivation to learn is enhanced with language. Therefore, the ultimate role of schooling is to provide social contexts to accomplish language mastery (Vygotsky, 1962).

### **2.4. The Advantage and Disadvantage of Cooperative Learning**

Cooperative learning methods are among the most extensively evaluated alternatives to traditional instruction in use in schools today (Slavin, 1990). The importance of cooperative learning is exhibited through the progressive researches in the area and the positive findings (Johnson & Johnson 1975 in Johnson & Johnson, 1984) notes a number of students enrolled in cooperative learning strategy gain the following characteristics:

- ✓ Longer information retention: psychologically, the best way to store the information is to share or teach it to others. Hence, cooperative learning serves this purpose and strengthens the student's memory.
- ✓ Psychological health: maturity and personal identity.
- ✓ High grades: doing well on the exams will surely be reflected in the high grades they receive. The exam results are usually a mirror the how effective the teaching approach is.
- ✓ High reasoning, critical thinking, and problem-solving skills: learners will gain different insights into the various discussed subject as well as provide the opportunity to prove their abilities especially in solving different problems.
- ✓ More positive attitudes toward the classmates and the subject: the friendly atmosphere will build up a positive image of the subject and lead the students to be more opened up.
- ✓ Motivation: with satisfied learning styles, students are more willing to cooperate and participate actively in the learning process.
- ✓ Better interpersonal and communication skills: CL works partially on enhancing the learners' social skills through the encouragement of student-student interaction and student-teacher interaction.
- ✓ Higher self-esteem: the progress of the academic achievement of learners depends to a large extent on the learners' self-confidence. Being familiar with the surroundings will give the learners the guts to work hard and accept criticism either on the part of the classmates or the teacher.
- ✓ Groups are truly heterogeneous, improved race and gender relations: The other acceptance and tolerance are highly achieved in the cooperative learning method.

Despite the potential benefits of CL, group work may result in noisy classroom where peer-dependency dominates the floor. Students may focus on the rewards and prizes more than the academic content provided. In group work, it is hard to reach equal participation of the members. Therefore, some students may become more involved than the others. Considering the learners' personalities, some students may not accept peers' criticism which leads to conflicts and low group accomplishment.

## **2.5.Common CL Strategies**

Numerous cooperative learning methods have been generated and implemented in the EFL classroom. Educators made noticeable efforts in determining the most beneficial practice in language teaching and learning. The existence of these methods can be traced back to centuries ago as they were founded to promote the learners' motivation, attitudes, and academic achievements. Along the way, these strategies embedded the principals of cooperative learning. Fulltime or periodical, teachers can select the most appropriate one according to the importance of the topic, students' academic level. "The widespread use of cooperative learning is due to multiple factors. Three of the most important are that cooperative learning is clearly based on theory, validated by research, and operationalized into clear procedures educators can use" (Johnson, Johnson, and Stanne, 2000,p.2).

- The Learning Together model of cooperative learning was developed by Johnson and Johnson (1994). It emphasizes the heterogeneous grouping of four or five learners.

The main principle of this model is having students who differ in achievement, gender or ethnicity work together to achieve shared learning goals and to complete the task.

- Group Investigation was introduced by Sharan and Sharan (1994). Each group is assigned a particular topic of a unit studied by the whole class. The group members determine the subtopics, plan their investigations, carry out individual tasks, plan and make presentations. Eventually, the teacher and the students evaluate their projects together.
- Jigsaw was developed by Aronson and his colleagues in 1978. Each member transforms into an expert in a given area. Each expert is required to teach the other members of the other groups, then returns to the original group. At the end of the activity, students may be given individual quizzes
- Jigsaw II is a modified version of the jigsaw. It was developed by Slavin (1994). In this version, students work on common material first and then are given separate topics to become experts on. Having worked on their topics in the expert groups, students return to their home groups to explain the materials that they have studied.
- Three Steps Interview: The method consists of three steps. Firstly, the teacher poses a collection of questions that have no specific answers but possible opinions. The question can be an issue or a controversial topic. Then, students pair as an interviewee and interviewer. After the interview is done, students switch the roles.
- Round Table: Unlike the previous methods, the latter focuses on the content, encourages teamwork, and includes the writing skills. The teacher poses questions that have different answers. One student of each group writes his answer on a piece of paper and passes it counterclockwise to the others. Once the entire student writes their answers, the group with the most correct responses wins the challenge (Kagan, 1992).

### **3. Cooperative Learning and Speaking Skill Synergy**

Recalling theories of language acquisition, the behavioral view of language learning was the first to be established and emphasizes the stimulus /response speculation. Since the prominent perspective abandoned the role of cognition, an opposing party approached language learning from a cognitive perspective leading to flourishing and blooming ideas in the area. Despite the enormous resources in the preceding areas, they are considered as untapped potentials. In fact, any instructional strategy should link theory to practice. Hence, among the conventional theories, a cooperative learning strategy is built on the motivational, cognitive development, and social interdependence theories

It is generally agreed that speaking skill is the most difficult skill to be acquired due to multiple influences. Motivation is considered a key factor in language learning which determines either failure or success. Cooperative learning structures create an environment in which all the learners' efforts are directed to achieve a mutual goal. That is a success for all. In group work, Students get reinforcement from the teacher as well as their peers. The comfortable learning zone provides opportunities to speak and share especially for shy students. In such a context, learners increase their self-esteem and decrease negative thoughts.

The cognitive developmental theory conditioned learning to social interaction. It is mainly built on the theories of Piaget, Vygotsky and cognitive science (Johnson and Johnson, 1999). Group work enhances the speaking ability through regular use of language in contexts. It increases the participation rate and offers more practice opportunities. "Learners are interactive agents in communicative, socially situated relationships and that the true direction of the development of thinking is not from the individual to the socialized but from the social to the individual" (Vygotsky, 1962, p.20). Additionally, cognitive science has proved that information is better stored and retained when the individual teaches it to others, which in turn supports the implementation of cooperative learning activities.

The social interdependence theory associate learning with social interaction and communication. This latter takes place when individuals share the same goals and each individual's outcomes are influenced by the actions of others (Johnson & Johnson, 1998). In this context, students will learn to cooperate and work for the success not only of their own but also the others. Cooperative learning is an innovative instructional strategy aims at bridging the field of second language acquisitions and language teaching in an EFL classroom. As a matter of fact, a meta-analysis of earlier studies has proved its effectiveness in developing the learners' critical thinking skills, reasoning, academic achievement, self-esteem, and motivation.

#### **4. Survey of Cooperative Learning in some Algerian Universities**

Cooperative learning activities were not new to Algerian instructors. Due to the enormous finding and investigations, this later succeeded in attracting attention. Many Algerian researchers explored the subject and particularly in relation to the speaking skill. Within the framework of applicable studies, Cooperative learning strategies were also investigated in Algerian educational system

At Constantine University in the East of Algeria, Boussiada (2010), conducted a study aiming at examining the effect of CL activities on the learners speaking production. It was built on the hypothesis that language learning takes place in language use, hence teaching English through maximizing language use and classroom participation. The descriptive study adopted two questionnaires administered to third-year LMD learners as well as teachers of Oral Expression. The findings support the use of the technique to increase language use and classroom oral participation which defines learners' oral proficiency.

In the north and south east of Algeria, several studies have been conducted in Bedjaia, Biskra and Ouargla Universities to test out the effectiveness of cooperative learning in enhancing the learners' oral performance.

At Biskra University, for instance a study was conducted in (2013) to investigate the effectiveness of CL activities implemented by EFL teachers to enhance speaking skill. The qualitative study used Classroom observation of second year students, group interview and teachers' interview in order to explore the way the technique is integrated as well as the learners' attitudes. The findings revealed its effectiveness in boosting the learners oral performance, however listed some of its negative points such as noise and conflicts. Yet, these problems can be solved through teacher – learner collaboration.

Kribaa (2013), in the same university also conducted a study to examine the effects of cooperative learning on enhancing the learners' oral proficiency and communicative skills. She hypothesized that effective learning takes its roots in language use. The descriptive study used questionnaires administered to third-year LMD students as well as oral expression



teachers. The Outcomes claimed CL as an appropriate strategy to increase learners' language use and active involvement in the classroom through the creation of communicative situations

Two years later, Alimi and Fdal (2015), within the same University, conducted another study to investigate the positive effect of cooperative group work on improving students speaking production and communicative skills in EFL classes. The descriptive study highlighted how the unique environment motivates learners to use English and on the same time decreases shyness and inhibition .The researcher hypothesized that by using CL techniques in oral expression classes ,students will be more comfortable to use the target language. Two questionnaires were given to third year students and teachers of oral expression .The findings confirmed the effectiveness of this latter in enhancing speaking as well as increasing classroom participation, self-esteem, and reducing anxiety.

At Bejaia University, Lasnami (2015) investigated problems related to the implementation of Think-Pair-Share and its impact on students' interaction among second year LMD students of English. He hypothesizes that using this latter will provide classroom interaction opportunities. The researcher used observation of oral expression classes with a checklist, a questionnaire and teachers' interview to explore teachers' opinions and attitudes toward the topic. Results showed that learners are highly engaged in learning more than working individually and the strategy provided more chances to speak.

At Ouargla University, Chabani (2017) conducted a descriptive study aimed at exploring the significance of CL strategies on promoting the speaking production and communicative skills. The qualitative study used classroom observation for second year secondary school students and an interview for EFL Teachers of the foreign Languages stream at Jilali Liyabes secondary school of Hassi-Messaoud. The outcomes proved the effectiveness of CL in developing the oral skills but spotted some negative aspects.

All the aforementioned studies confirmed CL activities to be effective in enhancing academic achievements in general and learners speaking ability in particular. This implies the reliability and the validity of the approach in addressing deficiencies of speaking skill more than the other skills.

## **Conclusion**

The teaching methods in the Algerian universities do not focus on producing good communicators; rather, they stress the strengthening of the writing skill that is conducive to academic objectives. In a globalized world, speaking is the gate to language mastery. Consequently, Educators and teachers should shift their focus to advance capable speakers. Since oral language involves verbal and nonverbal communication, it has been revealed through several studies that cooperative learning is one of the most reliable strategies that improve both. The social frame of this strategy helps the learners to be interactive, self-motivated, and confident. As it is generally acknowledged, students accomplish the task better when they are working in a friendly and supportive atmosphere. Additionally, it results in higher academic achievements and notable progress.

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