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IMPLEMENTING COOPERATIVE LEARNING STRATEGY FOR DEVELOPING ENGLISH
LANGUAGE LEARNERS STUDENTS' SPEAKING SKILLS

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this study is to investigate the effectiveness of implementing cooperative learning strategy for developing students' speaking skills. English language learners' students face difficulties and hindrances when they start speaking in English, therefore, this study aimed to help students to overcome those problems. The research used the descriptive analytical methods of research for collecting the data of the study. The population of the study was drawn exclusively from the University teachers of English at Khartoum State. The questionnaire was distributed for the teachers of English which contained (50 copies). The data obtained by the questionnaire was entered and processed using (IBM SPSS). The study has found out the following: firstly, cooperative learning provides students with interesting and useful learning a way that helps them to develop better speaking skills. Secondly, in cooperative learning, students fill each other's gaps through the exchange of information among each other. Thirdly, in cooperative learning, students are more kinesthetic a way that fosters their performance and understanding.

Key words: accountability, interdependence, Kinesthetic, Simultaneous

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INTRODUCTION

Education undoubtedly plays an important role in molding the future leaders and hope of our country. The young generation needs to be well educated to prepare them for the different life's events they are going to face. Learning of any language needs more practice. This practice will not take place when doing it with oneself. In other words, it isn't going to be beneficial ever unless it takes place with people learning the same language.

Cooperative learning strategy is one of the strategies students can use to develop any language skill. According to Johnson (2001), cooperative learning is a teaching strategy in which students of different levels of ability, use a variety of learning activities to improve their understanding of a subject. Each member of a team is in charge of his/her learning and helping others to learn "individual accountability". Cooperative learning environment creates an atmosphere of achievement that can help learners to overcome all barriers they face in developing better speaking skills because when students works in small groups, they more opportunities to

learn and listen to different sources in the classroom where they can extremely benefit from each other. In this way all team's members can reinforce their understanding and can develop high self-confidence which will finally enable them to speak among the whole class freely. Kagan (1995) believes that cooperative learning strategy allows students to use both social speech and academic speech in a safe environment and that will encourage them to perform better academically and prepare them for the life outside the classroom as well. Therefore, the researcher believes that English language learners need to receive repetitive information from a variety of sources because such redundancy enables them to master and fully understanding their learning activities. Students become fluent if they have the opportunity to speak repeatedly on the same topic. Cooperative group provides the arena for expressive, functional, personally relevant, representative language output that is critical for language acquisition (Kagan1995).

According to Johnson, *et al.*, (1991), cooperative learning exists when students work together to accomplish shared learning goals. Thus, unless learners cooperate with each another then cooperative learning will not be successful ever. Each student can then achieve his/er learning goals if other group's members achieve theirs.

Review of Literature

Definitions of Cooperative Learning

Various definitions have been proposed for cooperative learning by many scholars and even by research writers. As for example Pham (2013, p. 12) defines cooperative learning as:

"Teaching methods in which students work in small groups helping each another to accomplish shared learning goals; in cooperative classrooms, students are expected to cooperate with each other discuss and debate with each other, assess each other's current knowledge, and fill any gaps in each other's understanding".

This definition proposes that that cooperative learning requires a radical shift from individual learning wherein learners learn separately and are influenced by some students who usually dominate in the class to working cooperatively in groups where they have equal chances to participate. According to Johnson (2001), cooperative learning is defined as a helpful teaching strategy in which small groups of students with various levels of ability use different learning activities to improve their understanding of the material being taught. Similarly, Artz and Newman (1990) define cooperative learning as small groups of learners cooperating with each other as a team to solve a certain problem, complete a given task, or accomplish a common goal. They go on to add that cooperative learning involves small groups of learners as a team to solve a problem, to complete tasks and to achieve common goals. So, cooperative learning strategies have been developed to improve academic performance, to lead to greater motivation, to increase learners' time talking and to improve self-esteem and self-confidence which will finally lead to more positive social behavior.

Olsen and Kagan (1992) define cooperative learning as a group learning activities organized so that learning is dependent on exchanging ideas and information between learners in groups and in which each learner is in charge for his/er own learning and helping other teammates, increasing their learning. As we see, cooperative learning instills in students the sense of responsibility, even from an early stage in their life. Similarly, Murdoch and Wilson (2004) emphasize that cooperative learning is not merely having students sitting together and talking about their individual deeds, or a case of only one or two students doing the whole work on behalf of others; but cooperative learning is a process of sharing ideas and thoughts among each member in the group. The last two definitions above indicate that there is no place of individual learning when teachers and learners cope with the cooperative learning strategy; instead students should learn together. Learning tasks given to students are based on interaction (oral interaction or kinesthetic learning) and reciprocal interdependence among members of a group needs mutual help of each individual in the group. Thus, cooperative learning will not take place if students do not cooperate with each other in their learning. In the cooperative learning approach, students and teachers are in a state of continuous cooperation and together they build up fruitful learning and social atmosphere in the classroom.

Cooperative Learning and Speaking Skills

We get people to understand and know us from our discourse; therefore, speaking is a mirror that reflects who we are and even more reflects a person's identity. Allah Almighty says "and if we willed, we could show them to you, and you would know them by their mark; but you will surely know them by the tone of [their] speech. And Allah knows your deeds". This verse shows that through speaking we let others know us and know our identity and in return we will know them.

According to Madrid (1993), cooperative learning activities are designed to sustain and develop positive attitudes toward students with different levels of learning and cultural backgrounds. Learners learn to regard their classmates as valuable sources of support and encouragement in their efforts to become successful socially, linguistically, and in their academic career. That means that in cooperative learning, students have the advantage of managing their own learning in a way in which they are interested. Similarly, Coelho (1994) claims that cooperative group instruction provides students with opportunities to discover, to clarify and to internalize ideas among their peers. Such kind of classroom procedures help students to develop high levels of thinking skills by analyzing, evaluating, and using the new information provided by other teammates in the group. The aim behind learning any foreign language is to speak and communicate in that language (i.e. a language should be spoken). But, it is not an easy task to do in a short time. Foreign language learners know that the individual differences also play a part in the learning process. Many EFL learners are reluctant when they try to speak and that may be due to the mistakes they are afraid to make as they think they will be judged by others. So, we find that most of the traditional classes are affected by the so called "free rider effect", in which the students will not all have equal chances; while only few students are dominant in any classroom and to overcome such a demotivating situation, we need to encourage our students to cooperate in the classroom and outside the classroom as well.

Each member in cooperative learning classes will try to present the best of what he/she has in order to compete with her or his classmates who perform well. In cooperative learning, students cooperate to discuss each and every single point, which helps them to mutually benefit each other and develop their fluency as well. For example, Meng (2010) believes that speaking is more important in English learning for several reasons stated earlier. In cooperative learning, students can develop all of the different skills, but it requires both teachers and students to get familiar with that strategy and then it would become a panacea for improving their speaking skills and indispensable learning method for them as well.

Teacher and Learner's Role in Cooperative Learning

When implementing cooperative learning, it becomes the responsibility of all those who are involved in it and not only the teacher. This is what distinguishes cooperative strategy when compared to other educational strategies. Therefore, both teachers and learners have important roles to get in charge of. Richards and Lockhart (1996) attempt to define both teachers' and learners' roles in the light of methodologies used in cooperative learning as activities in which students paired or grouped themselves to make discussions. In details, teachers' and learners' roles will be illustrated:

- **Teacher's Role in Cooperative Learning:** Teachers' roles in cooperative learning differ considerably from the teacher's roles in traditional teacher-directed teaching. The cooperative learning method is a shift from the old methods of teaching where the learner doesn't have enough opportunities to participate to the one of the important contemporary methods of teaching where the learner is active and a part of the learning process that takes place in the classroom. In cooperative learning, the teacher's role changes from a deliverer of information to a facilitator of learning. As well, Zhang (2010) identifies the role of the teacher in the classroom as facilitator, who should put his learners in the right path of how to reach their educational goals. Moreover, the teacher has to create a highly structured and well-organized environment for classroom instruction. Harel (1992, p.153) defines the teacher's role in the classroom as follows:

"During this time the teacher interacts, teaches, refocuses, questions, clarifies, supports, expands, celebrates, and empathizes. Depending on what problems evolve, the following supportive behaviors are utilized. Facilitators are giving feedback, redirecting the group with questions, encouraging the

group to solve its problems, extending activity, encouraging thinking conflict, observing student and supplying resources".

The teacher's role is important in applying cooperative learning. To have an effective cooperative learning group, teachers need to know their students well. In addition, forming cooperative groups can be a difficult task and must be decided with care. Teachers also need to consider the different learning skills, individual differences, cultural background, personalities, and even gender when arranging cooperative groups.

In classroom activities, the teacher models a variety of roles, each of them is learned by practice over time. While conducting classroom groups, the teacher serves as a resource person and a facilitator. The teacher should circulate among the groups, managing their work and helps out with any difficulties they encounter in group interaction and the performance of the specific tasks related to the learning project (Slavin, 1995). However, the problem with this specific role is that students may feel uncomfortable to interact and respond to their teacher as participants, which might take time to change. Therefore, to avoid the occurrence of such problems, teachers need to build a good rapport with their students so that students will not have problems when their teacher reacts as a member in the group.

- **Learner's Role in Cooperative Learning:** When we do something ourselves we never forget it. So, providing your students with opportunities to share their thoughts and ideas, you are unobtrusively helping them play their role in the process of learning. When implementing cooperative learning, the essential role of the learner is as a group member who must work with other group members to make sure that everyone in the group has mastered the content being taught. For instance, Slavin (1995) believes that in order to ensure participation among students, they need to help each other, to discuss and argue with each other to assess each other's knowledge and fill in gaps in each other's understanding. Through cooperative learning, students become responsible for their own learning. Likewise, Richards and Rodgers (2001) believe that learners are taught to plan, monitor, and evaluate their own learning. Similarly, Jacob (2006) summarizes the learner's roles as follows: a) organizer who is in charge of organizing the work in the group; b) recorder who is responsible for recording the outcomes reached by the group; c) observer who is in charge of observing who is participating and who is not; d) coach who keeps the group on tasks; e) reporter who is responsible to tell other group members about the group's work. But this does not mean that the teacher has no role to play. Instead, he is always over there as counselor, classroom organizer, friend and facilitator of learning. In cooperative learning, each group member has a specific role to do in the group, such as noise monitor, timekeeper, notes taker, and recorder or summarize (Richard & Rodgers, 2001). Similarly, Kagan, et al. (1994) claim that as teachers we must assign a variety of roles for each group member, to make sure that everyone in the group is involved in a specific role in accomplishing an overall group task.

Principles of Cooperative Learning: Cooperative learning principles refer to the noble values by which an individual becomes an active and influential member in his/her community. These cooperative learning principles have been proposed a long time ago in history. Johnson, *et al*, (2006) identify cooperative learning principals as:

- **Equal Participation :** One of the advantages of cooperative learning is that students will have equal participations in the class. A common problem inside group work is that one or two students are dominating the whole group (i.e., free rider effect), preventing the participation of others (Kagan, 1994). That is why cooperative learning offers many ways of promoting more equal participation among partners, assigning a role of equal importance to each group member. To get rid of such phenomena, it is crucial that we teach students how they can establish their own roles in each group.
- **Individual Accountability:** It refers to the responsibility each student will have within his/her group. According to Onwuegbuzie, *et al*, (2009), individual accountability is considered the key to the success of the overall group's members and helps to reduce individual effort resulting from too much dependence on a few industrious members. This indicates that the purpose of cooperative learning groups is to make each member stronger in his or her own right. Individual accountability is to ensure that all group members are, in fact, strengthened by learning cooperatively. Asserting the same idea, Tan (1999) supports the same point by

adding that individual accountability is a sense of responsibility where each member in the group takes the responsibility for his own learning and the learning of others in his team. This shows students who are in need of more assistance, support and encouragement to share and complete the activities with others.

It is also argued that this element takes into account both group performance and the individual performance of each student, therefore, the performance of each individual student is assessed and the feedback is given to the group and the individual student (Rodgers, 2001). The purpose of cooperative learning groups is to make each member a stronger individual in a way that makes the group stronger. According to Stahl (1994), the purpose for teachers engaging students in cooperative learning groups is to help them to achieve higher academic success individually; rather than when working alone. Therefore, when students are graded for individual accountability in groups, we guarantee that each student will try to share and interchange her/his knowledge and ideas with others.

- **Positive Interdependence:** Positive interdependence refers to the principle that students should actively and positively contribute in the group by helping other group's members in learning, by sharing and exchanging their thoughts with others in their group and in the other groups as well. Else, Johnson, *et al.* (2007) believe that positive interdependence exists when individuals perceive that they can't fulfill their goals unless all members of the group unified together and work cooperatively toward reaching those goals. When positive interdependence exists among members of a group, learners feel that to help one member of the group, is to help the progress of the whole group. In addition this element is reflected in the practice when all members learn in a meaningful way the topic given to the whole class. According to Roger and Johnson (1994), positive interdependence results in positive interaction, which can be referred to as individuals encouraging and facilitating each other's duties to achieve, complete tasks, and produce in order to reach the group's goals. Therefore, in order to instill this element in our students, we should show them how positively they should cooperate in the learning process.

- **Heterogeneous Grouping :** Students will have many benefits when they apply cooperative learning such as the diversity. Students learn to work with all types of people. During small-group interactions, they find many opportunities to reflect upon and reply to the diverse responses fellow learners bring to the questions raised. Small groups also allow students to add their perspectives to an issue based on their cultural differences. This exchange inevitably helps students to better understand other cultures and points of views. This will contribute to the development and increasing the learners' awareness in a sense that those students came from different cultures, customs and traditions which will, to a far extent, help them to be culturally developed. According to Kagan (1992), the reasoning behind heterogeneous grouping is that it provides better opportunities for peer tutoring and support. Small groups are usually composed of four or five students who can interchange ideas and provide different point of views to help each other to achieve a common aim.

- **Simultaneous Interaction :** Cooperative learning is basically a simultaneous approach, in a sense that discussions and activities both take place at once. As Kagan (1994) points out that in the traditional classroom the only active agent is the teacher because he or she is the only one who has the opportunity to speak, in the cooperative learning method, a student has the chance to interact at the same time. In other words, learners can express their ideas in a conversation exchanging knowledge and points of view to enrich and to provide feed-back to what the teacher is saying.

Statement of the Study

Speaking skills are undoubtedly of great importance in learning any language because the main purpose of learning a language is speaking. Accordingly, and based on the researcher's experience that many EFL learners do not have the ability to speak in English still it is their specialization. The researcher attributes the problem of such poor oral production to the disability of choosing suitable strategy that can help students to develop better speaking skills and to overcome the difficulties of speaking at a time. Therefore, the researcher believes that cooperative learning strategy can help students to develop and build better speaking skills. This strategy undoubtedly can meet the students' needs and will enable them to achieve their goals of learning successfully. In cooperative strategy, students are very active because they have priority to take much

time in the learning process "learner-centered". More importantly, students will develop their self-confidence, they will be creative, and each one of them will play the role of his/her teacher as a negotiator, facilitator, and a source of information who contributes a lot to the group.

This study is an implementation for the cooperative learning strategy as an effective strategy for developing students' speaking skills, considering that in learning English student-student interaction in cooperative learning could provide students with a range of opportunities for acquiring and developing the targeted language.

Objectives of the Study

The study aims to:

- Develop students' speaking skills through the implementation of cooperative learning strategy.
- Make English speaking process more intuitive and interesting for the students.
- Encourage students to work cooperatively where they can easily understand the subject being taught or the topic being discussed.

Questions of the Study

The study poses the following questions:

- To what extent is cooperative learning an effective strategy for developing students' speaking skills?
- Does cooperative learning strategy make the whole learning process more intuitive interesting for the students?
- To what extent is working in groups help students in understanding the subject being taught or the topic being discussed?

Hypotheses of the Study

The study hypothesizes that:

- Cooperative Learning is an effective strategy for developing students' speaking skills.
- Cooperative Learning strategy makes the learning process more intuitive interesting for the students.
- Cooperative group work helps students to understand the subject being taught or the topic being discussed.

Significance of the Study

The importance of this study stems out of the fact that cooperative learning plays a major role in developing speaking. Current researches seem to validate the view that cooperative learning increases the social interaction among students and consequently leads to improve communication skills among them. English teachers will benefit from this study by using the up-to-date teaching methods involved in cooperative learning strategy. English language classroom should no longer be dominated by the teacher instead it should be more student-oriented where the teacher's role is to adapt the role of facilitator, evaluator and organizer. By doing so, it adds variety to teaching and learning context and making it fun for the students to improve their speaking skills. There is insufficient researches' effort particularly in Sudan to draw any firm conclusions on the centrality of the importance of cooperative learning in developing students' speaking skills. Instead, most of the conducted researches focused on what causes speaking problems. Therefore, this study is an implementation of cooperative learning strategy in a way that will effectively help students to build good oral communication skills.

Material and Method

The targeted population of this study was the University teachers of English at Khartoum State. The total number of the participants who had responded to the questionnaire was (50) teachers from various Universities at Khartoum State who responded to (50) copies.

The Research Instrument

The data related to this research was gathered by the instrument of the questionnaire which has been distributed to the University teachers of English language at Khartoum State. The questionnaire was shown to some experts in the field including the supervisor to insure validity. It was built on the basis of the study's hypotheses which were (3) hypotheses. Each hypothesis has (7) statements. The number of copies was (50)

copies distributed to the teachers of English with different qualifications. IBM SPSS program was used to analyze the data.

Results

Table (1) is about the effectiveness of cooperative learning strategy in developing students' speaking skills:

| | Frequency | Percent |
|-----------------------|-----------|--------------|
| Responses | | |
| Disagree | 1 | 2.0 |
| Neutral | 1 | 2.0 |
| Agree | 23 | 46.9 |
| Strongly Agree | 24 | 49.0 |
| Total | 49 | 100.0 |

Table (1) presents the distribution of the responses provided by the participants about the statement that **"Cooperative Learning is an effective way to engage students in discussions and debates"** in which we can see that (95.9%) of the participants agreed upon the former statement. This result indicates that cooperative learning is of a great importance in helping students to foster their speaking skills for better due to the discussions and debates they can find when applying cooperative learning strategy in the learning process.

Table (2) cooperative learning is an interesting and useful teaching and learning strategy:

| | Frequency | Percent |
|-----------------------|-----------|--------------|
| Responses | | |
| Disagree | 1 | 2.1 |
| Neutral | 2 | 4.2 |
| Agree | 22 | 45.8 |
| Strongly Agree | 23 | 47.9 |
| Total | 48 | 100.0 |

Table (2) presents the number of the responses about the statement that **"Cooperative Learning makes learning interesting and useful for students"** where we find that (93.7%) of the participants agreed upon the above statement as shown in table (2). This high result informs that to what extent cooperative learning can provide a suitable environment where students can have interesting and useful learning.

Table (3) cooperative learning helps students fill each other's gap through the exchange of information:

| Responses | Frequency | Percent |
|-----------------------|-----------|--------------|
| Neutral | 5 | 10.4 |
| Agree | 19 | 39.6 |
| Strongly Agree | 24 | 50.0 |
| Total | 48 | 100.0 |

Table (3) represents the number of the responses about the statement that **"In cooperative Learning, students fill each other's gaps through exchanging information"**. As it is presented in table (3) that (89.6%) of the participants agreed at the above statement. This high number of agreement reflects the necessity of implementing cooperative learning strategy so that to help student learning more and expanding their scope of knowledge through the exchange of ideas and thoughts among students.

Table (4) cooperative learning encourages students to act as a source of information for themselves and their colleagues as well:

| Responses | Frequency | Percent |
|-------------------|-----------|---------|
| Strongly Disagree | 1 | 2.2 |
| Disagree | 1 | 2.2 |
| Neutral | 3 | 6.5 |
| Agree | 18 | 39.1 |
| Strongly Agree | 23 | 50.0 |
| Total | 46 | 100.0 |

Table (4) shows the number of the responses provided on the statement that "**Cooperative Learning encourages students to act as resources of information among each other**". As it is presented in table (4) that (89.1%) were agreed that cooperative learning encourages students to act as a source of providing information to other colleagues in the classroom. This high result proves the great importance of when students feel free to direct their own learning and that they are not neglected in the learning process, through which they become more motivated and enthusiastic to present the best of what they have.

Findings of the Study

The study has found that:

Firstly, cooperative learning provides students with interesting and useful learning a way that helps them more to develop their speaking skills. Secondly, in cooperative learning, students can fill each other's gap through the exchange of information among each other. Finally, in cooperative learning, students are more kinesthetic a way that fosters their performance and understanding.

Result by Hypotheses

The current study hypothesizes that "cooperative learning is an effective strategy for developing students' speaking skills" based on the analysis of the questionnaire we found that this hypothesis is considered the main hypothesis because it includes the most prominent statements which have got very high percentage of agreement from the side of the participants as presented in the analysis of the questionnaire regarding the statements analyzed above in table (1-2). Therefore, we sum up that cooperative learning unanimously regarded as an effective strategy through which students can improve their speaking skills. Secondly, the study hypothesizes that "cooperative learning strategy makes learning intuitive and more interesting for students" and according to the analysis of the questionnaire, the statements which had been built on the basis of this hypothesis got high percentage of agreement which is more clearly presented in the analysis provided in table (3). The result presented in table (3) justifies that cooperative learning provides students with useful and interesting learning process. Finally, the study hypothesizes that "cooperative group work helps students deeply understanding the subject being taught or the topic being discussed". The statements which have been built according to this hypothesis got high scores of agreement by the participants as explained and analyzed in table (4) which confirms the importance of cooperative learning strategy in fostering students' understanding.

Conclusion

This study is investigating the effectiveness of implementing cooperative learning strategy for developing students' speaking skills. The main aim behind this study is to provide English language learners students who have problems in speaking with an effective strategy in which they will find better opportunities to practice the language more freely. As well, the study hypothesizes that cooperative learning is considered as an effective strategy for developing students' speaking skills because when students are going to cope with this strategy, they will find themselves in an ongoing discussion atmosphere. The result has been reached by this study proves that the implementation of cooperative learning strategy can help students to develop different skills such as interpersonal skills and more importantly the communication and speaking skills.

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