Implementing cooperative learning in the language classroom: opinions of Turkish teachers of English

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Abstract

Cooperative learning in the foreign language classroom is believed to increase target language use, improve communication skills, build confidence and stimulate learner autonomy. However, challenges may arise due to poor group dynamics, time constraints, standardized curricula, and other classroom issues. To investigate the applicability of cooperative learning in the Turkish context, the researchers employed two separate focus group interviews to explore the opinions of Turkish teachers of English as a Foreign Language (EFL). The results revealed that while the teachers believed group learning to be beneficial, the standardized EFL curriculum and students’ attitudes toward cooperative learning caused difficulties in implementing this approach with Turkish learners.

Keywords: Constructivism; cooperative language learning; English as a foreign language; EFL; group learning.

1. Introduction

Ongoing research into the neurological, psychological and sociological aspects of learning has made it clear that the construction of knowledge is not purely a behavioral or cognitive phenomenon; rather, it is a holistic process that also involves both social and affective elements (McCombs, 2000). Based on this understanding, the purpose of education has undergone a dramatic shift, moving from surface-level, rote instruction within a teacher-fronted framework to a learner-centered, context-grounded approach in which the goal of education is to foster the ability of learners to “communicate with others, find relevant and...
accurate information for the task at hand, and be co-learners with teachers in diverse settings” (p. 2). Accordingly, teaching methodologies are increasingly formulated around a constructivist approach, where learners are expected to actively create new understanding by integrating their existing knowledge with new experiences (Fer, 2009). Among the many student-centered instructional techniques employed in the constructivist classroom, cooperative learning has been extensively documented as an effective means for increasing learner retention, building communicative and social skills, and developing students’ critical thinking ability (Johnson & Johnson, 1994; Kagan, 1994; Richards & Rodgers, 2001).

1.1. Definition and characteristics of cooperative learning

Cooperative learning is described by Kagan (1994) as a communal activity in which learning is carried out through the mutual exchange of information. Within this framework, group members are responsible for their own construction of knowledge, as well as for facilitating the learning of the other group members. Johnson and Johnson (1994) outline five features of cooperative learning:

- **Positive interdependence** – each member of the group is responsible for the success of the group as a whole and is assigned a fair share of work.
- **Face-to-face interaction** – students work in close physical proximity, which enables them to communicate easily and provides opportunities for oral practice.
- **Individual accountability** – every student is accountable for carrying out his or her assigned tasks; all members are aware that every individual has a role to play in completing the activity.
- **Group processing** – throughout the course of an activity, group members are aware of their learning on a metacognitive level. Group processing provides students a chance to give and receive feedback and enhances the skills of each group member.
- **Social skills** – group learning activities provide an opportunity for communication and interaction. Leadership, decision-making, and conflict management are an integral part of group work, and teachers should encourage students to use these skills in the classroom.

Furthermore, Richards and Rodgers (2001) emphasize that learners in a cooperative context are encouraged to take charge of their own learning throughout the process of planning, monitoring and assessment, noting that “learning is something that requires students’ direct involvement and participation” (p. 199).

1.2. Rationale for cooperative learning

The concept of cooperative learning is drawn from the educational philosophies of early social researchers such as Vygostsky, Piaget and Lewin (Kagan, 1994; Richards & Rodgers, 2001), who called attention to the role of community and social interaction in all aspects of learning. This approach is believed to foster a positive learning environment which leads to greater academic achievement for all group members, as well as developing important social skills, improving communicative ability, and providing a positive model for lifelong learning (Kagan, 1994). In addition, as Kagan stresses, cooperative learning is an effective means for addressing multiple intelligences, while McCombs (2000) argues that constructivist strategies such as collaborative learning allow for the development of the cognitive and metacognitive skills that are critical to building true knowledge.

1.3. Advantages of cooperative learning in the foreign language classroom

With a growing focus on communicative language teaching (Richards & Rodgers, 2001), numerous advantages of cooperative learning have been cited in the context of the foreign language classroom. For
instance, Gillies (2007) asserts that practicing speaking in groups helps students to explore the various structures of the language, allowing them to develop new patterns of thought. Crandall (1999) likewise points to the efficacy of cooperative language learning in reducing learner anxiety, fostering positive attitudes toward language learning and improving self-esteem; while a flexible learning atmosphere which is shaped by cooperation rather than competition is claimed to increase students’ level of autonomy (Candy, 1991).

1.4. Possible disadvantages of group learning in the foreign language context

Considering the drawbacks of cooperative learning, Thornton (1999) asserts that not all students may participate equally in collaborative activities, with the more conscientious students shouldering the responsibility for the assigned tasks. Furthermore, Pica (1994) points out that students are less likely to pay attention to the structures of the foreign language when they feel their teacher is not involved, instead reverting to mother tongue usage when the instructor is not within hearing range. Richards and Rodgers (2001), moreover, note that cooperative learning places an additional burden on teachers who may not be comfortable with their altered role in the classroom.

2. Purpose of the Study

In Turkey, considerable attention has been given to educational reform and the adoption of constructivist curricula (İrfaner, 2006). As Özsevük (2010) explains, with the current international emphasis on foreign language education, communicative language teaching has been stressed at all academic levels. However, both teachers and students frequently demonstrate a preference for traditional, teacher-centered methods and tend to resist efforts at applying learner-fronted instruction (Acat, Amlan, & Anagüm, 2010; İrfaner, 2006; Kök, 2009). Given the demonstrated benefits of cooperative learning in the foreign language classroom, the researchers in this case took the position that successful implementation of group learning entails that instructors possess an adequate understanding of the benefits of cooperative work, as well as the skills to apply it on a practical level. In addition, they believed that teachers’ attitudes toward the collaborative approach have a significant impact on whether or not they choose to incorporate group activities in their instruction. Yet little has been done to investigate the perceptions of Turkish teachers of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) concerning cooperative learning and whether they believe it is applicable in the context of the EFL classroom. Therefore, in order to address this gap in the current knowledge and to gain insight into the current use of constructivist methods in foreign language instruction in Turkey, the researchers sought to answer the following questions:

- What do Turkish EFL instructors understand as the meaning and purpose of cooperative learning?
- What are the attitudes of Turkish language teachers toward the use of group work in the foreign language classroom?
- What are the perceptions of EFL instructors concerning the applicability of group learning in the Turkish context?
3. Methodology

As the goal of the study was to illuminate the perceptions and beliefs of the respondents concerning the topic under investigation, a qualitative research design was employed (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007), using focus group interviews in order to interrogate the experiences of the participants and gain insight on their perspectives (Leech & Onwuegbuzie, 2007).

3.1. Setting and participants

In qualitative research, purposive sampling is considered an effective technique for choosing the respondents from whom the most relevant information can be obtained (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2008; Patton, 2002). Accordingly, as the population of interest in this case comprised individuals who had pedagogical training in English language instruction and who were currently employed as university-level EFL instructors, the participants selected for this study were fourteen English language teachers working in the Basic School of English at a well-known university located in the eastern Black Sea region of Turkey. Teachers with varying levels of experience (ranging from one to more than twenty years) were included, as the researchers felt that a more diversified group would provide a broad spectrum of viewpoints concerning the issue under investigation. Participation in the study was voluntary, and the written consent of the respondents was obtained prior to the data collection phase.

3.2. Data collection

Researchers such as Creswell (2007) and Fraenkel and Wallen (2008) contend that interviews are among the most effective methods of collecting qualitative data, as they allow researchers to inquire in detail into the perspectives of the participants. Furthermore, according to Richardson and Rabiee (2001), focus group interviews, which are conducted with several individuals who share specified characteristics, are useful in stimulating a dynamic discussion concerning the topic under investigation. The objective of this type of interview is to illuminate the shared views of the group participants, rather than their individual opinions (Rice & Ezzy, 1999). For the purposes of this study, the researchers elected to carry out two separate focus group interviews, with 6 and 8 participants respectively, as a means of triangulating the data.

For both interview sessions, the researchers asked a similar series of open-ended questions. The participants were encouraged to offer their opinions on each topic, and the sessions were recorded so as to preserve the nuances of the conversations. In order to further contextualize the data, the researchers took detailed field notes to track the non-verbal reactions of the participants. The participants were also asked to respond in writing to a series of prompts concerning cooperative learning. Their responses were collected at the end of the interview session and used as additional support for the interview data (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2008).

3.3. Data analysis and credibility measures

In order to facilitate the interpretation of the data, the recordings of the interviews were transcribed. The transcripts, as well as the field notes and response cards, were then read several times by the researchers, and recurring themes were identified and tagged (Hatch, 2002; Leech & Onwuegbuzie, 2007). The data were then organized according to the main themes and further reduced into subcategories. Finally, a research text was prepared, and the results were interpreted with respect to the research questions. Member checks were employed in order to allow the participants to review the researchers’
interpretations of their responses and confirm or clarify their understanding (Creswell, 2007). Peer debriefing (Creswell, 2007; Fraenkel & Wallen, 2008), in which a colleague who was not directly involved with the study was asked to verify the interpretations of the data and the conclusions drawn by the investigators, was also used as a means to establish the trustworthiness of the results.

4. Results

An account of the results has been presented here in terms of the opinions expressed by the respondents from each focus group, which have been designated as groups A and B. In order to protect their anonymity, the participants are referred to by number; (e.g., Participant 1A, Participant 1B, and so on).

4.1. Turkish EFL instructors’ understanding of cooperative learning

When asked what they understood by the term “cooperative learning,” Participant 3B, who had been teaching English for over twenty years, expressed some initial confusion. He noted that “I graduated from the university many, many years ago; maybe you [the researcher conducting the interview] hadn’t even been born yet, so you should have given us some details about those terms so that we could answer.” However, among the other participants, there was a consensus that working together in groups and collaborating on classroom activities is denoted, in accordance with the common understanding of the term. As participant 6A explained:

There is mutual interdependence [in cooperative learning], which means that all of the members of the group depend on each other. Although everyone gets one part of the task to be done, everyone is also responsible for what the others do.

Participant 6B expanded on this idea, noting that in cooperative learning, students are generally “more successful in the process of learning and helping others” than in traditional teacher-fronted instruction.

4.2. The importance of cooperative learning

Overall, the teachers expressed the belief that collaboration is an important element of communicative language learning. Participant 1B observed that cooperative activities “must be the part of language learning process,” as “not only teachers, but also students have to produce something” in order to master a foreign language. Participant 2B went on to relate a personal experience that highlighted the significance of cooperative learning:

Last year, I took German courses in Germany. I didn’t know any German, [but] in the classroom, there were heterogeneous groups. Some of my friends were very good at German, so I learned new vocabulary and other things from them in order to complete the assignments. This was very helpful for me, so I think in English classes, it is very important.

4.3. Advantages of cooperative learning in English language teaching (ELT)

During the course of the interviews, the participants brought up several key advantages of collaborative language learning. For instance, Participant 7A provided the following illustration with reference to building students’ confidence:

I used cooperative learning activities two years ago in my reading classes, and at the end of the term, I realized that some shy students had really changed. They started to participate in the activities more actively, and this also was reflected in their marks at the end of the year.
Participant 6A expressed the belief that “psychologically, [group activities] are less threatening,” especially for students who are “shy to ask their teacher; sometimes, they prefer to ask to the students next to them.” An additional benefit, as Participant 5A pointed out, is that “students share their ideas and are more creative when they are together.”

4.4. Disadvantages of cooperative learning in English language teaching

In addition to the advantages of cooperative learning, the participants detailed some drawbacks based on their classroom experience. Participant 3A asserted that, in the context of group activities, “we cannot control what they are talking about all the time.” This opinion was supported by participant 2B, who added that “some of them switch [to speaking Turkish] when they are in group work until the teachers go near them and tell them to speak in English; that is a big problem.” Participant 2A also pointed out that group work is more difficult to monitor and that not all students participate equally:

In my writing class, I have a group of five boys. One of them is really brilliant, and he does all the exercises … I am not sure about the collaboration of other students, because for the most part, the leader does the job.

4.5. The applicability of cooperative activities with respect to the Turkish ELT curriculum

While the participants generally felt that cooperative learning could be beneficial for students, a number of issues related to the Turkish context were brought to light. According to Participant 8A, class size sometimes made it difficult to carry out group work, as “the classes are very crowded.” The standardized curriculum was also indicated as a deterrent. According to Participant 4B:

You know we don’t have many options with the syllabus. You have to keep up with the course book; you have to keep up with the topics [and] the chapters. You don’t have a choice to [implement] a student-centered classroom environment.

Participant 3B also remarked that students’ “level of English is not enough to carry out such activities in the classroom,” while in addition, students themselves were seen as resisting the idea of cooperative learning. As Participant 5A revealed, “I have two speaking classes. One of them wants to play games and different activities, but the other class … only wants to listen to me speaking, or they just want to listen to their books.” This observation was echoed by Participant 5B, who pointed out that students are generally focused on learning only what is needed to pass the course:

If they are going to see something on the exam, they will listen to you carefully … [but] they don’t want to create new things. They want to learn grammar instead of speaking; they want to learn what they need to pass the class.

4.6. Teachers’ perceptions of students’ reactions toward cooperative learning

In terms of the reactions of their students toward cooperative learning, the participants’ responses were mainly negative. Participant 5B explained that most students “do not want to take part in activities, so you have to drag them behind,” while Participant 4B added that “some of the students don’t respond to group work … they do not want to participate, especially in speaking activities.” On the other hand, Participant 2A expressed a more positive outlook:

They [the students] like cooperative work. I guess there are two reasons for that. One is that they can do better in cooperative learning, and another is that they can take their time in the classroom. They just gossip, talk about the weather, talk about the match last night.
5. Discussion and conclusion

As can be seen from the results, the participants had a good understanding of the concept of group learning overall, and they generally agreed with researchers such as Richards and Rodgers (2001) in their belief that cooperative activities are beneficial in the foreign language classroom. In particular, they had observed from their classroom experience that students may experience reduced anxiety when learning from their peers, in accordance with Crandall (1999), and that they may learn more readily from other students than from the course instructor.

On the other hand, some of the participants noted difficulties with implementing group learning. As cautioned by Pica (1994) and Thornton (1999), classroom management may become problematic when the instructor relinquishes some of the control to the learners; in addition, the respondents in the current study found that certain students took on most of the responsibility, allowing others to avoid participating adequately in classroom exercises.

Furthermore, in the context of this study, which comprises a fixed ELT curriculum, finding the opportunity to implement cooperative activities was problematic. In accordance with researchers such as Acat et al. (2010), İrfaner, (2006), and Kök (2009), the standardized syllabus and overcrowded classrooms precluded the ability of teachers to incorporate group activities. In addition, several of the participants noted that students tended to resist the idea of learning from their peers, instead preferring to listen passively to the instructor.

The current study is limited in that it is confined to a small number of participants within a constrained setting. Thus, in order to extend the results to a larger population, further studies are recommended. However, in light of the present findings, it can be concluded that implementing group work in educational contexts which comprise standardized curricula and grant little latitude for individual decision-making by classroom instructors can present a significant challenge. Accordingly, the researchers believe that consideration should be given to modifying standardized ELT curricula in order to mitigate the features that deter the use of collaborative learning activities in the foreign language classroom.

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