

# THE EFFECTIVENESS OF COOPERATIVE LEARNING TO ENHANCE ORAL ENGLISH PROFICIENCY: A REVIEW & SYNTHESIS

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## ABSTRACT

*Cooperative Learning (CL) is a learner-centered instructional approach which is believed to stimulate students' oral production and interaction, and contribute to the development of speaking skills. Though there were many systematic literature review articles on CL, but the review with a focus on CL and ESL/EFL oral proficiency is very scant. This study seeks to identify, synthesize, and evaluate the extant scholarship on the application of CL to enhance oral English proficiency. The authors retrieved on the major databases and engines including Web of Science, Scopus, ERIC and Google Scholar by the key words such as cooperative learning, collaborative learning, student teams achievement division, jigsaw, group investigation, speaking and oral proficiency. 42 relevant empirical studies (including peer-reviewed journal articles and doctoral dissertations) from 2000 onwards were finally included through setting inclusion/exclusion criteria, identifying relevant literature, and thorough screening for final selection. The authors then systematically analyzed the studies in terms of the effectiveness, research design and instruments, adopted CL methods, and ways of grouping. This study also provided some implications for future research and practice in this area.*

**Keywords:** Cooperative Learning, Collaborative Learning, Oral Proficiency, Speaking Skill, Critical Synthesis

## INTRODUCTION

English as a second or foreign language learning (ESL or EFL) has shifted from behavioristic approaches that considers learning as a mechanical process between stimulus and response to constructivism approaches that emphasizes the role of social interaction in constructing knowledge with peers and advanced learners (Brown, 2013). Language learning, therefore, strives to achieve learner-centeredness and increased interaction in classroom settings. In particular, the enhancement of oral proficiency also stresses the role of interaction and communication in classroom since students can be provided ample opportunities to use the target language (Burns, 2017).

In recent years, Cooperative Learning (CL), as a student-centered instructional approach, has been widely applied to ESL/EFL learning (Olsen & Kagan, 1992). It is generally believed that when working in groups, students can have more oral productions and more opportunities to experiment with different language functions compared with traditional whole-class instruction. This approach naturally encourages students to clarify their meanings, give elaborations, resolve discrepancies, negotiate for consensus in the process of peer collaboration (Kagan & Kagan, 2009; Slavin, 1995). A lot of studies on cooperative learning have also confirmed that there are positive effects of cooperative learning on achieving the expected speaking proficiency (Al-Tamimi & Attamimi, 2014; Ning, 2011). Though there were many systematic literature review articles on CL (e.g. Akdemir & Arslan, 2012; Gillies, 2016; Liang, Mohan & Early, 1998; Puzio & Colby, 2013), the review with a focus on CL and ESL/EFL oral proficiency is very scant. Therefore, this study aims to review and synthesize the relevant empirical studies in real-life classrooms on CL and ESL/EFL oral proficiency which will ultimately unveil the trend in this field.

The research questions are as follows:

What do recent empirical studies tell us about the overall effects of CL on enhancing speaking skills?

What is the general trend of their research design and instruments?

What are the CL methods commonly used in the empirical studies to enhance speaking skills?

What are the features of the CL groups implemented in the empirical studies in terms of their composition, size, and duration?

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Cooperative Learning

Cooperative Learning, generally used interchangeably with Collaborative Learning regardless of endless terminological disputes, is one of the dominating educational approaches with solid theoretical and empirical support (O'Donnell & Hmelo-Silver, 2013). It refers to "group learning activity organized so that learning is dependent on the socially structured exchange of information between learners in groups and in which each learner is held accountable for his or her own learning and is motivated to increase the learning of others" (Olsen & Kagan, 1992, p. 8). Different from traditional group work, CL should be well-structured with certain shared goals to achieve for by the group members, whether it requires them to submit a tangible product or not (Crandall, 1999; McCafferty, Jacobs & Iddings, 2006; Olsen & Kagan, 1992). It emphasizes the active interaction and strong correlation between group members as well as their individual responsibility. It is characterized by the following six elements regardless of different wording.

Positive interdependence: students should be structured well in a group through mutual goals, joint rewards, shared resources, or assigned roles so that they can positively interdependent on and actively cooperate with each other to maximize their own and each other's learning. Individual accountability: each student in the group should take certain responsibilities to support other team members and achieve their final goals. No one should or can freeride during CL activities. Promotive (Face-to-Face) Interaction: students in the group should gather often to engage in interactions and give their teammates encouragement, praise, elaboration and negotiation so as to complete the task. Interpersonal and Small Group Skills: in order to facilitate the successful implementation of CL, students should be furnished with interpersonal skills through direct instruction and modeling and then motivated to use them. In other words, for CL classes, both academic objectives and interpersonal skills objectives should be concurrently highlighted. Group processing: after CL tasks, students need to process and reflect on their experiences by listing at least three good behaviors in cooperation with others and one action that needs to be further enhanced. Heterogeneous groups: CL encourages students to form heterogeneous groups with members of different traits and academic achievements. Assigning students to a 4-6-member heterogeneous group can better help students to learn from each other and maximize their potential and contribution in the group (Jacobs, Power & Inn, 2002; Johnson & Johnson, 1994; Kagan & Kagan, 2009; Olsen & Kagan, 1992).

A variety of CL methods are developed and used extensively in educational fields, and it is difficult to present an exhaustive list of them. The well-known and commonly used ones are Student Teams Achievement Divisions (Slavin, 1991, 1995), Group Investigation (Sharan & Sharan, 1992), Jigsaw (Slavin, 1978), Cooperative Integrated Reading and Composition (CIRC) (Stevens, 1987), and Kagan's Structural Approach (Kagan & Kagan, 2009).

A good deal of research has revealed the great potential of CL in promoting students' academic achievement, social skills and interpersonal relationship, and psychological well-being compared with individualistic or competitive classroom climate (Johnson, Johnson & Smith,

2014). The advantages of CL in second or foreign language learning are reflected as follows: increasing student talk, providing frequent opportunities for negotiating meanings and using different functions of language, creating an authentic environment for interaction and employing different interactional strategies, motivating students to talk with less reluctance or anxiety in a more relaxing and non-threatening environment, enhancing students' positive attitude toward language learning, etc. (Apple, 2006; McGroarty, 1989; Olsen & Kagan, 1992). These advantages make CL a promising approach to enhancing EFL/ESL learners' English oral proficiency.

### **Speaking Skill**

Speaking is the verbal use of language to express meaning (e.g. feelings, ideas, intentions) and communicate with others. It is the most demanding skill that ESL or EFL learners need to master. However, there is a consensus that speaking competence remains a largely neglected area in educational research and ESL or EFL learners always report numerous difficulties in speaking (Burns, 2017).

Brown (2013) proposes three aspects of speaking skill, namely fluency, accuracy, and pronunciation. A fluent speaker is defined as the one who is able to use the target language eloquently and spontaneously with no or few unnatural pausing, hesitation and signs of searching for words, etc. Accuracy specifically deals with the mastery of grammatical structure and vocabulary. It means whether a speaker can use the correct utterance to get a correct and effective communication without or with few errors. The third aspect is pronunciation, which encompasses segmental sounds and the speech melody or intonation. A speaker is expected to have clear and comprehensible pronunciation as well as natural intonation, stress pattern and voice quality, etc. in order to express meaning in the specific context.

Another common criterion to judge a speaker's oral proficiency is drawn from the speaking ability model proposed by Saville & Hargreaves (1999). It is widely recognized in speaking assessment and applied in Cambridge Certificate in English Language Speaking Skills (CELS) Test of Speaking. This model entails four aspects of speaking skill, namely grammar and vocabulary, discourse management, pronunciation, and interactive communication. Grammar and vocabulary refer to the accuracy, range and appropriateness of syntactic forms and vocabulary to meet the task requirements. Discourse management requires speakers to maintain a relevant and coherent flow of language with an appropriate range of linguistic resources. Pronunciation refers to the comprehensible utterances of individual sounds, the natural use of stress, rhythm and intonation to convey the intended meaning. Interactive communication consists of the ability to verbally interact with others, appropriately initiate and respond, and effectively use the functional language and strategies for maintaining or repairing interaction.

In view of the major aspects of speaking skill, ESL/EFL instructors have made continuous effort to introduce various speaking activities. The common activities include information or communication gap activities, free discussions, role plays and simulations, monologist tasks (e.g. report, summary, presentation and lecture), model dialogues, problem-solving activities, etc. (Hedge, 2001; Hughes, 2011; Richards, 2008). These activities can be naturally combined with cooperative learning techniques to enhance students' speaking skill.

Speaking is regarded as a very difficult skill to teach in EFL/ESL context, and therefore it is necessary to select appropriate approaches suitable for the specific classes and target groups. According to Bailey (2004), second language teaching has gone through a significant shift from focus on linguistic competence to emphasis on communicative competence over the past decades, and so do the approaches to teaching speaking. When Grammar Translation was prevalent, speaking remained neglected and learners proved to suffer from "what could be described as second language mutism" (Hammerly, 1991). In response to the flaws of Grammar-Translation Method, Direct Method (including its succeeding method Audiolingualism) made the complete change by foregrounding oral skills training in the teaching and learning objectives. Learners were taught mainly through repetition drills of sentence patterns and

rehearsal of dialogues. However, this kind of controlled and repetitive practice “did not lead to fluent and effective communication in real-life situations” (Ellis, 1990). Whether for Grammar-Translation Method or Direct Method and Audiolingualism, they are more of accuracy-oriented approaches concerned with linguistic competence, *i.e.*, mastery of sentence structures or grammatical rules. They are also teacher-dominated methods where teachers take a central and active role while students are passively trained for certain objectives (Richards & Rodgers, 2010). However, as “people don’t learn the pieces of the language and then put them together to make conversations”, these methods do not finally produce competent language learners (Bailey, 2004). Since 1970s and 1980s, researchers began to recognize that the focus of language teaching should not be on structure but on meaningful communication. Learners can only develop their language skills by constructing meanings and engaging in real-life communicative activities instead of simply mastering and drilling language knowledge. Therefore, approaches with learner-centered and interactive characteristics under the theory of social constructivism are thought to produce competent language learners with good oral communicative competence. CL is exactly in alignment with the current trend of the approaches for teaching speaking skill.

## METHODOLOGY

### Literature Search

The authors started with searching for published peer-reviewed journal articles (excluding conference papers) and doctoral dissertations due to their high academic value and robust research design on the major databases including Web of Science, Scopus, ERIC and Google Scholar. Two sets of key words were used to retrieve the relevant literature: (a) key words related to CL, including “cooperative learning”, “collaborative learning”, “student teams achievement division” “jigsaw” “Cooperative Integrated Reading and Composition” and “group investigation”; (2) key words related to speaking, including “speaking”, “spoken” and “oral”. The literature only written in English were included for further identification because of the limited language competence of the authors. The present study also extended the period for searching the literature from 2000 onwards till February 2021.

### Study Identification

After the primary search for the studies, the authors of the present study started to examine the abstracts and determine whether they were closely related with CL and speaking skills. Selections of the papers include the following:

- a) Only empirical studies were included while the conceptual research and review articles were eliminated;
- b) Only studies on cooperative learning were included, while other learner-centered approaches (e.g. problem-based learning, task-based learning, communicative language teaching) were eliminated. The articles which explored the combination of CL and other approaches were also excluded. However, since cooperative learning is usually interchangeably used with collaborative learning by previous scholars (Jacobs & Renandya, 2019; O’Donnell & Hmelo-Silver, 2013), the studies focusing on collaborative learning and speaking were kept for analysis;
- c) Only studies on face-to-face cooperation in a real-life classroom were included, while virtual learning or computer or mobile based collaborative learning were excluded;
- d) studies were restricted to the discussion on speaking skills in a CL context were included, while studies on other language competence (e.g. reading or writing) without discussing speaking in a CL context were not taken into account. However, it is worth mentioning that studies on CL and multiple language competences including speaking were included;
- e) Studies in the ESL/EFL contexts were included while those discussing how English speaking skill as a mother tongue or the speaking skill of other languages was trained through CL were excluded;
- f) Since the review on the implementation of CL approach to enhance the English oral proficiency can generate a large number of relevant articles, the present research only selected the relevant empirical research involving adult learners in tertiary institutions or other private educational institutions. This is

also due to the fact that CL has been found to be more widely used in primary and secondary education while the research on adult learners is underexplored (Lin, 2016; Zhang, 2017).

- g) The overlapped studies in the databases or the similar studies published by the same authors on different databases should be removed.

This process resulted in the identification of highly related studies to be included. Then the next stage is to adopt snowballing method to locate additional literature from the references in those already identified articles. By using this method, more studies were included. The entire search finally yielded a total of 42 relevant studies.

## Coding Framework

In order to answer the research questions and systematically examine the trends of CL on enhancing English speaking skill, the coding framework in the present study included the following four dimensions: overall effects of CL on speaking skill, research design and instruments, CL methods, and features of the CL groups (including group size, composition and duration). The present study was concerned with the relevant benefits of different methods of CL on oral English proficiency, which can be categorized into English speaking skill, specific elements of speaking skill (e.g. grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, interactive communication, fluency, discourse management, accuracy), and other concurrent dependent variables involved in those studies (e.g. motivation, learning attitude, anxiety). Research designs were identified as the overall strategy used in the study to effectively address the research problems. It was categorized into qualitative (*i.e.*, narrative research, phenomenological research), quantitative (*i.e.*, experimental design, non-experimental design) and mixed-method design (*i.e.*, convergent parallel mixed methods, explanatory sequential mixed methods, exploratory sequential mixed methods, transformative mixed methods, embedded mixed methods, and multiphase mixed methods). Research instruments included test, questionnaire, interview, focus group discussion, classroom observation, learner diary, evaluation form, and others. CL methods refers to the instructional methods of CL, including Student Teams Achievement Divisions, Group Investigation, Jigsaw, Cooperative Integrated Reading and Composition, Kagan's Structural Approach, and others. Grouping was categorized into three categories, *i.e.*, the group size (*i.e.*, the number of learners in the CL groups), group composition (*i.e.*, the way of grouping students in groups: heterogeneous or homogenous grouping based on what criterion), and group duration (*i.e.*, for how long the groups lasted and whether they remain fixed or not).

## RESULTS AND FINDINGS

### Overall Effects of CL on Enhancing English Speaking Skill

Through this systematic review, it has been found that most empirical studies yielded positive results and proved the implementation of CL approach in an EFL/ESL context is effective to enhance participants' English oral proficiency. This is mainly reflected in the fact that participants achieved better in oral tests overall (e.g. Al-Tamimi & Attamimi, 2014; Pattanpichet, 2011). Only a few studies have found little effect of CL on speaking skill improvement or inconclusive results, *i.e.*, (Lin, 2009; Yang, 2005). CL did not significantly raise the oral test scores of the participants. However, it is interesting to find that most studies only presented the effects of CL on overall oral test scores without further discussing what aspects of speaking skill were improved. Many studies even did not show the participants' specific scores in sub-categories but only demonstrated the final score in oral tests. Another problem is the inconsistency of scoring rubric used in different studies. For example, Al-Tamimi & Attamimi (2014) assessed the participants' oral proficiency in terms of pronunciation, grammatical accuracy, vocabulary, fluency, and interactive communication. Altun & Meena (2020) evaluated from the perspective of content, grammar, fluency, pronunciation and comprehension.

In addition to the oral test scores, many studies also focused on the affective aspects. Namaziandost (2019) found CL approach remarkably improved participants' intrinsic motivation but no differences were found on other aspects of motivation (integrated regulation, identified regulation, introjected regulation, external regulation, and amotivation). Al-Tamimi & Attamimi (2014); Al-Yaseen (2020); Tsai (2019); Singh, (2019) all concluded that CL strongly and indirectly enhanced students' attitudes toward learning English or toward this approach. Topcu & Başbay (2020); Tabatabaei, (2015) examined the participants' stress after doing CL activities and found this approach is a promising alternative to reduce anxiety and make students feel more relaxed, comfortable and less reluctant to speak.

### **General Trend of Research Design & Instruments**

In general, quasi-experiment design with oral tests and questionnaires before and after the intervention was found to be the most common research design in the studies. Due to the restrictions in the educational institutions, two intact classes were purposively chosen and randomly assigned as control group and experimental group to receive different treatments by the same lecturer, *i.e.*, traditional approach and CL approach. The period of intervention ranged from 6 weeks to 15 weeks. The oral pre-test and post-test before and after the intervention were conducted to evaluate the effectiveness of CL approach on participants' English oral proficiency. Questionnaires were adopted to examine whether CL approach has potential to develop students' positive attitude toward learning English or toward the teaching approach, enhance their motivation and lower their anxiety. Statistical significance between the control group and experimental group, between experimental group before intervention and experimental group after intervention were analyzed using t-tests, few using analysis of variance and effect size (Al-Tamimi & Attamimi, 2014). There were also some researchers who adopted other research designs but they were very limited. Topcu & Başbay (2020) conducted action research on 9 students enrolled in the English Language and Literature Department in a state university. Talebi & Sobhani (2012) carried out true experiment in a speaking course at an IELTS center by random assignment thanks to the institutional support.

Other instruments in this research field were employed to explore the potential of CL approach. Pattanpichet (2011) conducted a semi-structured interview and asked the students to keep a diary, which helped elicit rich data on the students' feedback on CL approach and difficulties in implementing this approach. In the same vein, Topcu & Başbay (2020) invited participants to engage in a focus group interview to investigate their perceptions and feelings. In the study of Darmuki (2018) multiple research instruments including questionnaire, interview, speaking test, focus group discussion and observation were adopted in order to obtain more comprehensive findings. Despite the efforts from the researchers mentioned above, it can still be seen that research instruments for qualitative analysis in this field were inadequately employed.

### **Common CL Methods**

This systematic review unveils the trend that the most frequently adopted CL methods were small group discussion, jigsaw & Kagan's Structural Approach, if the researchers provided detailed information on this. For example, Al-Yaseen (2020); Farahnaz, Parviz & Nazila (2013); Talebi & Sobhani (2012) implemented jigsaw in their classrooms to stimulate students' oral production and promotive interaction. Singh, et al., (2019); Tabatabaei, et al., (2015), Tsai (2019), asked participants to engage in group discussion on a certain topic followed by a presentation of their group discussion results. Kagan's Structural Approach can be seen in many reviewed studies, e.g. Think-Pair-Share by Talebi & Sobhani (2012); Singh, et al., (2019), Robin Round, Buzz Groups, Think-aloud Pair Problem Solving by Geetha & Karthiga (2020), Round Robin Brainstorming by Sripradith (2019). It is important to note that various CL methods instead of a single CL method were adopted in most reviewed studies to maximize the potential of CL and achieve more flexibility. Some researchers even integrated different elements of CL

methods and developed a new CL model in accordance with different academic contexts. For example, Namaziandost, et al., (2019) adapted Student Teams Achievement Divisions and combined it with Number Heads Together. Singh, et al., (2019) developed what they named ADDIE model which consisted of analysis, design, development, implementation and evaluation.

However, many studies (e.g. Ahmed & Bedri, 2017; Al-Tamimi & Attamimi, 2014; Altun & Meena, 2020; Pattanpichet, 2011) did not provide any information on which CL methods they implemented and how they ensured the students cooperated with each other. CL is not simply putting students together and asking them to learn cooperatively. CL cannot simply be equated with student-team learning or group learning, but instead it has value beyond simple small groups. As Woolfolk (2004) simply puts, “group work is simply several students working together-they may or may not be cooperating”. A typical example to illustrate their difference is cited in McCafferty, Jacobs & Iddings’s book *Cooperative Learning and Second Language Teaching* (2006). Students are required to finish a composition by working together, but it turns out that “the best writer in the group might do all the writing, while the other members are off task” (p. 5). It can be called group work but not CL. CL can exactly address such problems arising from group activities, e.g. there is no cooperation involved in groups (McCafferty et al., 2006). Therefore, how CL is implemented to ensure the six elements, *i.e.*, positive interdependence, individual accountability, promotive (face-to-face) interaction, interpersonal and small group skills, group processing, and heterogeneous groups, need to be introduced in the research.

### Features of the CL groups

Investigating the research question “what are the features of the CL groups implemented in the empirical studies in terms of their composition, size, and duration”, it was identified that the sizes of learning groups in the reviewed studies ranged from three to eight members per group, with groups of four to six being the most common. In terms of composition, a heterogeneous group with both high and low performing students was the frequent way. A few studies (e.g. Singh, 2019; Altun & Sabah, 2020) also took students’ learning styles, personalities, multiple intelligences into account. This way of grouping usually lasted for the whole implementation period. These results seem to be consistent with the previous research which suggested that small group of four to six members can ensure better participation, more balanced discussions, and promotion of individual development within a group (Jacobs et al., 2002; Johnson & Johnson, 1994; Kagan & Kagan, 2009; Slavin, 1995). If the learning group involves too many members, it would be difficult to generate adequate amount of language output for each individual because some may become free riders and hide away from involving in the cooperative learning. If the learning group involves too few members, the potential of cooperative learning will be limited and the lecturer also face great challenges in managing the classroom. On the other hand, the learning groups should neither change too frequently so that students can form group cohesion for cooperative learning nor stay intact for too long because students can gain more by working with different peers. There was only one research, *i.e.*, Tabatabaei, et al., (2015), in which three members formed a learning group and the group members were not fixed. It is also worth noting that many of the articles still provided no information on how the lecturers managed to assign students into certain groups, e.g. Darmuki, et al., (2018); Pattanpichet (2011); Talebi & Sobhani (2012); Topcu & Başbay (2020).

### CONCLUSION

This paper examined 42 relevant empirical studies on the effectiveness of CL to enhance the English speaking skill from 2000 onwards. Quality papers published in peer-reviewed journals and doctoral dissertations were retrieved and selected on major databases and search engines for this systematic review. This review reveals a generally positive effect of CL on participants’ both oral test scores and affective aspects (e.g. positive attitude toward the

approach, higher motivation and lower anxiety) compared with the traditional approach. However, most studies presented only the oral test scores without further discussing what aspects of speaking skill were improved. Quasi-experiment design with oral tests and questionnaires before and after the intervention was found to be the most common research design in the studies, while other instruments such as classroom observation and learner diary for more in-depth quality analysis were rarely used. The most frequently adopted CL methods were small group discussion, jigsaw and Kagan's Structural Approach. In most studies, four to six members with different language proficiency to form a heterogenous group were the common way for grouping. It generally remained fixed and lasted for the whole implementation period. However, many studies did not provide any information on which CL methods they implemented, how they assigned the students into groups and how they ensured the students cooperated with each other.

### **Direction for Future Research**

The findings above may provide implications for future research direction:

First, since most studies explored the effectiveness of CL on English speaking proficiency by only examining the overall oral test scores, there is a need to study whether and how the specific elements of speaking skill (e.g. grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, interactional communication, fluency) can be enhanced by this teaching approach.

Second, since many articles did not mention how they implemented CL to enhance the participants' English oral proficiency, and some researchers even simply equated CL to group work expecting students to cooperate with each other by putting them into groups, more rigorous research design with solid theoretical foundation are needed for future research. Future research should provide necessary information on which CL method they use, how they put students into learning groups, and how they ensure the six elements of CL.

Third, since most researchers employed oral tests and questionnaires in their studies with subsequent quantitative analysis, more research instruments are needed in this field, e.g. classroom observation, interview, and learner diary, for more in-depth qualitative analysis and drawing comprehensive findings.

Fourth, considering many experimental studies could be identified in this field, future research can be a meta-analysis to calculate the effect size. It can provide substantial evidence for the overall effect of CL on English oral proficiency and how those effects vary with moderator variables, such as age groups of participants, group size, group composition, CL methods, intervention duration, and implementation setting.

Fifth, the discussion on the comparison of classic CL methods such as Student Teams Achievement Divisions, Group Investigation, Jigsaw, Cooperative Integrated Reading and Composition, and Kagan's Structural Approach is still underexplored. Future research can compare different CL methods and investigate their effectiveness and respective advantages in this field.

The areas mentioned above could have great value and potential for future research to help further understand the effectiveness of CL. We hope the present review provides informative analyses for the research community. We also look forward to seeing more quality research in this classic but much underexplored field.

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