Use of Cooperative Learning Techniques Used to Teach English Communication Skills to Limited English Proficiency ESP Students

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Abstract

The current research investigated the impact of cooperative language learning (CLL) approach on English language proficiency of English for specific purposes (ESP) students. The participants were one hundred and twenty First Year B. Tech students in a private university in Maharashtra, India. First, Pre-English proficiency test was administered to all one hundred and twenty participants to check their English proficiency. Selected students' one to one interactions with English language teachers were also conducted to check their English proficiency level. Twenty-seven students were shortlisted who had scored less than six percentiles and got C and D grades in face-to-face interactions. Then, the selected students were taught English through CLL approach for twenty-four sessions, Pre-test/Post-test quasi-experimental design was employed to investigate the impact of CLL approach on English language proficiency of the ESP students. The results were analyzed. The outcomes revealed that CLL has a significant positive effect on English language proficiency of ESP students.

Keywords: cooperative language learning (CLL), English for specific purposes (ESP), English language proficiency

Introduction
        Cooperative Learning is a technique by which students cooperate with each other in the learning process, acting as partners, interlocutors with the instructors and with each other in order

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to learn the course material (Johnson & Johnson, 1988; Nunan, 1999). Students' interaction with one another is equally important to teachers' interaction with students. How skillfully teachers arrange conversations among students has very important role in learning. When teachers provide a platform where students can interact with one another; it not only helps students to understand the concepts but also to improve their self-confidence.

Richards and Rodgers (2014) propose that cooperative learning provides opportunities for learners to enhance their participation in the classroom. Many researchers have been researching on cooperative learning and group work activities since mid1970s, but still, many of the language teachers are not aware of the role and importance of cooperative learning techniques. As a result, the teachers are in need of some remedies in their English language teaching to help their students be proficient English speakers. Many research has been done on how CLL can help the learners enhance EFL writing skills (Mahmoud, 2014; Zamani, 2016), improve their reading comprehension skill (Farzaneh & Nejadansari, 2014; Jalilifar, 2010; Zhang, 2012), improve their social skills (Ghaith, 2002; Ning, 2013), and decrease language learning barriers (Davoudi & Mahinpo, 2012; Han, 2014; Wichadee & Orawiwatnakul, 2012). However, there is dearth of research on the effect of CLL on English language proficiency of ESP students.

Literature Review
Cooperative learning is a teaching strategy that requires small student groups to work interdependently on learning activities in order to achieve and receive group rewards or recognition (Slavin, 1980). Cooperative learning's basic premise is that students construct knowledge through interaction with other students (Johnson et al., 1991). In such cases, students work together to solve one another's doubts that they may not ask to instructors. The most critical element of cooperative learning is that students must work together to achieve common interdependent goals (Johnson et al., 1991).

Research carried out on the effectiveness of the use of CL in ESL/EFL contexts has shown that CLL is very effective in developing positive attitudes towards learning and towards other learners (Gunderson & Johnson, 1980), enhancing intrinsic motivation (Clement, Dornyei, & Noels, 1994; Szostek, 1994; Ushioda, 1996), and creating solidarity among team members through their working together to achieve group goals (Nichols & Miller, 1994). Research has also shown that CL decreases levels of anxiety and increases self-confidence (Deci & Ryan, 1985), increases social backing for academic achievement (Daniels, 1994), and increases the level of expectancy of completing academic tasks successfully (Douglas, 1983).

Most studies on the effects of CLL have consistently indicated that this method improves students' English oral skills (Pattanpichet, 2011); English reading comprehension (Bolukbas, Keskin, and Polat, 2011; Law, 2011) and English writing (Roddy, 2009).

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Teacher-centered classrooms rely on a pedagogical style in which the instructor transmits knowledge to the students (Knowles, 1970). In such cases, the student is highly dependent on the instructor for learning. In Cooperative learning classrooms, by contrast, instructors serve as learning facilitators rather than the sole knowledge source. The student becomes the focal point rather than the teacher, a technique that researchers have shown to improve thinking skills (Knowles, 1970; Tinto, 1997).

Therefore, learner-centered classroom environments are more likely to elicit higher order thinking gains than teacher-centered classrooms (Peterson & Walberg, 1979). In learner centered classrooms, students are more likely to work interdependently, which requires them to help each other in the learning process. The act of helping others and learning through interaction with others creates interdependence between students, which may lead to an increased desire for cognitive growth. Holtham, Melville, and Sodhi (2006) found that interdependent groups performed much more effectively than students who simply allocated work evenly among members. Cooperative Language Learning (CLL) approach (as opposed to individual learning) on factors such as: lowering anxiety and prejudice, promoting intrinsic motivation, creating altruistic relationships, and heightening self-esteem.

Methodology
Data Collection
Data for the present research was collected from a hundred and twenty First Year B. Tech students in a private university in Maharashtra. These were 12th pass students and admitted to engineering programme. Pre-test/post-test design was selected for this study. Pre-test was administered by using MOODLE to one hundred and twenty students when they admitted in First Year B.Tech. Immediately after that face-to-face interaction of those students with English language teachers were also conducted. All the teachers who conducted face to face interactions were doctorate in English Language and they had around 10 to 15 years' experience of teaching communication skills to engineering students.

Students who had scored less than six percentiles out of ten and those who had received C & D grades in face-to-face interactions were treated as limited proficiency level students. A total of twenty-six students scored less than six percentiles and got C or D grade in face-to-face interaction. Then the syllabus was designed by analyzing the needs and identifying areas in which those students were weak. Teacher cum language trainer used cooperative learning techniques to teach the syllabus of the course on Basics in English. Post-test was administered to them after completing the syllabus. Post face to face interaction was also done to check improvement in students.

Syllabus designed for the course **Basics in English** considering and analyzing the needs of limited English proficiency students:

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Sr. No.	Topics	Subtopics	Time (hrs)
1	Basic Grammar	Tenses, Parts of Speech, Modal Auxiliaries, Types of Sentences	05 hrs
2	Situational Conversations	Greetings, Introducing self and others, Situational conversations	05hrs
3	Practical English	Practical English (few, a few, little, a little)	02hrs
Practical Sessions/Practice			**12 hrs**
1	Basic Grammar	Creating sentences	06 hrs
		Analyzing Sentences (Newspapers, excerpts from story books)	08hrs
2	Story Telling	Guided story writing and telling	04 hrs
3	Describing objects/ Personalities	Describing objects, pictures, events, and famous personalities	04 hrs
4	Listening and reporting	Listening audio clips and reporting them	06 hrs
5	Prepared speeches	Delivering speeches on very simple topics	04 hrs
6	GD	Discussion on very simple topics	04hrs
			36 hrs

Data Analysis

The analysis of the students' Pre-test was done. Out of hundred and twenty, twenty-seven students scored less than six percentiles and got C or D grade. Twenty-four sessions were conducted and completed the syllabus. Syllabus designed for the course Basics in English is as follows:

There are dozens of strategies that can be used by the teachers under umbrella of cooperative learning process, some of them have gained more popularity than others, including; Think- pair- share, Student Teach Achievement Division (STAD), Jigsaw and Teams-Games-Tournaments (TGT). Essence of all cooperative learning activities is that in each case the students

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are divided in heterogeneous groups based on their learning capability, where they support each other for learning (Slavin, 2010). A brief description of activities is given below;

Think-Pair-Share

Think-Pair-Share allows students to activate their prior knowledge and share ideas about content or beliefs with peers. This structure gives students a chance to organize their ideas—first in their own minds, then in a smaller group setting before sharing with the entire group. In a Think-Pair-Share, students think individually about the question or idea(s) put forth, Pair up with someone to discuss their thinking, and then Share their conversation with their table group, and then finally with the whole group.

Jigsaw

Jigsaw is a cooperative learning strategy that enables each student of a 'home group' to specialize in one aspect of a learning unit. Students meet with members from other groups who are assigned the same aspect, which is called 'expert group' and after mastering the material, return to the 'home' group and teach the material to their group members. The purpose of the Jigsaw is to develop teamwork and cooperative learning skills within all students. It helps developing a depth of knowledge, allows student to be introduced to the material and yet maintain a high level of personal responsibility. It also intends to disclose student's own understanding of a concept as well as reveal any misunderstandings.

Role Play

Role play is any speaking activity when you either put yourself into somebody else's shoes, or when you stay in your own shoes but put yourself into an imaginary situation. Role play is an activity that brings variation and movements in the classrooms. Incorporating role play into the classroom adds variety, a change of pace and opportunities for lot of language production and also lot of fun. It is widely agreed that learning takes place when activities are engaging and memorable. While performing in role play quieter students get the chance to express themselves in a more forthright way. The world of the classroom is broadened to include the outside world; it offers much wider range of language opportunities. Through role plays learners will improve their communication skills. Teachers are facilitator in this whole task. They are supposed to guide students to select the situations for role play and to segregate students.

STAD (Student Team Achievement Division)

This can be termed as most simple form of cooperative learning, where teacher give material to students and they learn it as group. The groups are test and scored individually and collectively, the team securing high scores is termed as winning one (Arends,1997). One strategy adopted during cooperative learning as instruction approach is STAD. The research studies carried

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out by Jolliffe (2005) reported its effectiveness for improving academic achievement and social skills. Similar results have been reported by Vaughan 2002, Jacobs et al. 2003 and van Wyk 2010.

TGT (Team Game Tournament)
　　　The students are divided in heterogeneous groups, where they play multiple games based on given instructional materials. The scores are given individually and collectively as well, however, only team scores are considered basis for winning and losing (DeVries, Edwards & Wells, 1974).

Discussion and Findings

Pre-training result of English Language Proficiency Test and Face to Face interaction of selected students

Number of the students	Grades in Pre-Training Test	Grades in Pre-Training one to one interaction
S1	4.1	C
S2	4.8	D
S3	3.50	D
S4	5	C
S5	5.20	C
S6	5.20	C
S7	4	C
S8	3	D
S9	4.20	C
S10	5.40	C
S11	5	C
S12	5.80	C
S13	4.20	C
S14	4.20	C
S15	4	C
S16	5	C
S17	3.20	D
S18	4	D
S19	3.40	C
S20	3.90	D
S21	4.20	C
S22	4.20	D
S23	4.70	C
S24	4.70	D
S25	5.40	D

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	S26	5.50	D

The results of the pre training proficiency test showed that out of one hundred and twenty students, twenty-six students have scored less than 6 percentiles. 65.38% students out of twenty-six have scored less than 5 percentiles. It showed that these students were very weak in English Grammar. The test consisted questions on tenses, articles, prepositions, parts of speech, situational English etc. In face-to-face interaction these students were unable to give their self-introduction properly. They could not construct sentences in English properly so, many of them have received C or D grades in face-to-face interaction. 38.46% students had got D grade and remaining 61.53% students had got C grade.

Post training result of English Language Proficiency Test and Face to Face interaction of selected students

Number of the students	Grades in Pre-Training Test	Grades in Pre-Training one to one interaction
S1	8.80	B
S2	8.60	B
S3	6.70	B
S4	8.60	B
S5	6.30	B
S6	7.90	B
S7	9.30	A
S8	7.40	B
S9	8.60	B
S10	7.00	B
S11	8.00	B
S12	8.20	B
S13	8.60	B
S14	8.90	B
S15	8.80	B
S16	8.80	B
S17	8.80	B
S18	8.80	B
S19	7.50	B
S20	7.30	B
S21	8.90	B
S22	7.50	B
S23	8.90	A
S24	8.80	A
S25	9.30	B

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| S26 | 7.40 | B |

The result of post training test is improved. All twenty-six students could score more than six percentiles. 88.46% students received B grade after they completed training on Basics in English. 11.53% students received A grade. In post training face to face interactions students were very confident compared to pre training face to face interactions. It was also found that they were able to construct grammatically correct sentences while speaking. Students shared their learning experiences with researcher. According to them many of the grammar rules they learnt better through the Cooperative learning activities their teacher conducted while teaching grammar. Many of them liked think-pair-share, Jigsaw and role plays, STAD and TGT cooperative learning techniques.

Conclusion

The findings of the study support the Cooperative learning techniques. During these CLL activities students' excitement was more than routine class activities. It is also found that students' motivation level is also raised. When asked about feelings of working with their peers, all of them were impressed and happy because of the supportive environment. Students were working in highly cooperative groups, helping each other to perform better during class activities. This friendly environment helped them to achieve more. From the findings, it was determined that the pleasant/friendly atmosphere can be created by the teacher. Though language learning anxiety is natural teachers should not ignore it rather they should help students to achieve their learning goals. Moreover, the significant improvement on the participants' language proficiency possibly resulted from the fact that discussing, creating, and thinking in a group, rather than in a whole class context, can provide a less anxiety-producing context.

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