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RESEARCH ARTICLE

A Review of the Research on Cooperative Learning.

Prasantha Kumar N S.

Asst Prof Sr, Dept. of English, SSL,VIT University, Vellore 632014.

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Abstract

The author has been teaching English language to college students for the past 18 years. The main focus of my teaching is imparting Listening, Speaking, Reading and Writing skills to the students. Teaching English in an ESL context has been an enriching experience as it enables the teacher to expose the students to the nuances of language learning.

Key words:-

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Introduction:-

In language learning contexts, CL is broadly defined as an approach to organize classroom activities so that students are able to learn from and interact with one another as well as from the teacher (Olsen and Kagan, 1992). In addition, CL is within-class grouping of students, usually of different levels of second language proficiency, who learn to work together on specific projects or tasks in such a way that all students in the group benefit from the interactive experience (Kessler, 1992). According to Armstrong (2000), the use of small groups that work toward common instructional goals is the core component of CL model. The student members in a CL group can tackle a learning assignment in diverse ways.

Research work on Cooperative Learning:-

A study of the research work in CL is an absorbing experience ever since it became popular in 1970's. In a recent article titled, "Cooperative Learning Revisited: From an Instructional Method to a Way of Life," Garfield (2013) describes her twenty year journey as a practitioner of cooperative learning. As a Professor of Statistics, she observed that more learning took place in her class as a result of group work because students have to verbalize their understanding, explain or defend their solutions. Planned group activities, whether in class or outside of class, or even online, can help students improve their communication skills, their ability to work in teams, and even their success at solving problems. CL activities enable the students to accomplish a task cooperatively rather than competitively.

Altamira (2013) investigated the impact of CL on grade 7 mathematics class. The implementation of CL included the purpose of improving students' attitudes towards the subject and their academic competencies. The data analysis revealed that CL increases students' confidence level as well as their involvement in the learning process. The reviewers of cooperative learning widely agree that cooperative methods do have a positive effect on student achievement.

Slavin (1991) in "Synthesis of Research on Cooperative Learning," writes that twenty seven studies have investigated the effects of CL programs on student learning, comparing the cooperative programs to traditional control groups in experiments lasting at least two weeks, but more often running for 8 to 16 weeks. A significant

positive effect on student achievement was found in 19 of these studies and in one study there was a significant difference favoring the control group. The most successful methods for improving student achievement appear to be the Student Team Learning techniques: nine of the ten Teams-Games-Tournament (TGT) studies (DeVries and Slavin, 1978), four of six Student Teams Achievement Divisions (STAD) studies, one Jigsaw II study and one study of a combination of TGT, STAD and Jigsaw II (Slavin and Karweit, 1979) all found significantly positive effects on student achievement.

According to Hall (2006), cooperative learning environment refers to a situation which learners with one common cause in their mind strive to achieve one common learning goal. In another words a small dedicated group of students learn together and take advantages of each other's expertise to achieve a common goal. In a cooperative learning environment, learners are encouraged to be in the center of learning and learn together. Learners will not enjoy learning if it happens in isolation. (Bruner, 1996). As such, learners improve their critical thinking and intellectual skills by learning from one another. Therefore, it can be inferred that CL promotes the all-round development of the learner.

The first premise underlying cooperative learning is respect for students regardless of their ethnic, intellectual, educational, or social backgrounds and a belief in their potential for academic success (Millis, 2002). All students need to learn and work in environments where their individual strengths are recognized and individual needs are addressed. All students need to learn within a supportive community in order to feel safe enough to take risks (Sapon-Shevin, et al., 1994). It can be inferred that cooperative learning promotes a shared sense of community for learning, like living, is inherently social.

Cooperative Learning and its Implications:-

There are many studies on the impact of CL on achievement levels of learners. In a recent research article titled, "The Effects of Cooperative Learning on the Academic Achievement and Knowledge Retention," Tran (2014) in an experimental study on tertiary students, supports the effectiveness of CL in Vietnamese higher education. Though CL was widely implemented in school education, of late it started attracting the teachers in the university education.

In "Randomized Study on the Impact of Cooperative Learning," Riley and Anderson (2006), write that considerable research demonstrates that cooperative learning produces higher achievement, more positive relations among students, and healthier psychological adjustment than do competitive or individualistic learning experiences (Johnson and Johnson, 1979). Also, students in cooperative structures perform better on questions involving higher level thinking than their peers in traditional classrooms.

In "A comparison between Cooperative Learning and Traditional, Whole-class Methods – Teaching English in a Junior College," Chen (2006) indicates that students in small cooperative groups gained significantly higher achievement on the total test and the cloze test than those in a teacher-led learning environment. These results are consistent with the view that the basic requirements of effective language teaching are reward structures and carefully structured interaction. Both group rewards and class rewards motivate learners to perform better themselves and to increase the academic gains of their teammates. Through carefully structured interaction, students are offered a greater quantity and variety of second language practice. Furthermore, interaction encourages learners to actively participate in discussions and to be involved in their learning rather than passively wait for the teacher to bestow knowledge on them.

Cooperative Learning and its effect on EFL Learners:-

Research has clearly shown the effectiveness of structured cooperative methods for English learners. Calderón et al (2011) evaluated a program in El Paso, Texas, called Bilingual Cooperative Integrated Reading and Composition, or BCIRC, among English learners who were transitioning from Spanish to English instruction in grades two through four. Compared with a control group of similar English learners, those in BCIRC had significantly higher scores on both English and Spanish reading measures. A second El Paso study, by Calderón and others evaluated a similar bilingual program among third graders that emphasized cooperative learning and systematic phonics. Once again, students in the cooperative learning classes scored higher than controls on English as well as Spanish reading measures.

There have been a number of studies conducted using Cooperative Learning with Chinese students in EFL classroom. Yi (1997) used CL techniques for college students in English writing courses; Lin (1997) conducted a reading class for junior college students by group work project. Wei (1997) used CL to increase college students'

listening, reading, writing, and speaking skills. Yu (1993) advocated CL in training listening and reading for junior high school English curriculum. All of the application of Cooperative Learning methodology mentioned above improved students' language learning.

Tuan (2010) sought to investigate student diversities in terms of learning styles and linguistic competence, and the extent to which students change as regards participation, interaction and achievement through Cooperative Learning activities embracing their diversities. 77 first-year EFL students from the two reading classes, one treated as the experimental group (EG) and the other as the control group (CG), at the Faculty of English Linguistics of the University of Social Sciences and Humanities in Ho Chi Minh City (USSH-HCMC) were invited to participate in the study. The findings substantiated that Vietnamese learners are open to change and Vietnamese EFL teachers should create effective activities for learners to immerse themselves in talking cooperatively instead of talking individualistically in the classrooms.

The purposes of the study by Suwantarathip and Wichadee (2010) were to examine the effectiveness of cooperative learning approach in reducing foreign language anxiety and to investigate its impact on language proficiency of 40 sophomore students enrolled in EN 211 course in the second semester of 2009 academic year at Bangkok University. Three instruments employed were the standardized Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS), two proficiency tests covering reading and writing skills, and a semi-structured interview. The pre- and post- scores from the questionnaire and the tests of the group were calculated for descriptive statistics and compared using a paired sample t-test measure. It was found that the students' top five sources of language classroom anxiety and overall language anxiety were significantly decreased. In addition, they obtained higher language proficiency scores for the post-test than the pre-test at the significance level of .001 after learning through this approach. The students also had a favorable attitude toward cooperative learning as a whole.

In the aspects of cooperative learning, Lacey and Walker (1991) conducted a CL study in the secondary classroom, and conclude that students appeared to participate in the learning process more and generate creative ideas more frequently when they worked together with their peers towards a common goal. Tsai (1998) conducted a research study to examine the effects of Cooperative Learning on teaching English as a foreign language to senior high school students. She found out that the students in the experimental group outperformed the students in the control group in their language skills.

Cooperative learning, compared with traditional instruction, tends to promote productivity and achievement and provide more opportunities for communication (Zhang, 2010). When connected with foreign language learning, it shares the same basic set of principles with the widespread Communicative Language Teaching. It makes clear that the objective of foreign language teaching is not only to teach students some grammatical rules and vocabularies, but also how to use the knowledge in practice to express or narrate thoughts and ideas. Cooperative language learning responds to the trend in foreign language teaching method by focusing on the communicative and effective factors in language learning. It is not surprising that cooperative language learning is beneficial in foreign language learning and teaching.

Critique on Cooperative Learning:-

One of the most consistent effects of cooperative learning is the effect on intergroup relations (Slavin, 1985; Johnson et al. 1983). When students of different racial or ethnic backgrounds work together toward a common goal, they gain in liking and respect for one another. Cooperative learning also improves the social acceptance of mainstreamed academically handicapped students by their classmates (Madden and Slavin 1983; Johnson et al. 1983), as well as increasing friendships among students in general. Other outcomes seen in many studies of cooperative learning include gains in self-esteem, liking of school and of the subject being studied, time-on-task, and attendance. Studies by Sharan and colleagues (1984) have shown that extended experiences with cooperative learning can increase the ability to work effectively with others.

While there is consensus on the broad set of conditions under which cooperative learning will increase student achievement, there is controversy about the specific conditions under which positive effects will be found. One focus of controversy has been a debate between Johnson and Johnson and Slavin that has more to do with different views on what constitutes adequate research than on questions of the essential elements of cooperative learning. According to Slavin (1989), cooperative learning can be an effective means of increasing student achievement only if group goals and individual accountability are incorporated in the cooperative methods.

In addition to this controversy, several other issues have been raised by various writers and reviewers. One issue is whether cooperative learning is effective at all grade levels. Newman and Thompson (1987) question whether cooperative learning is effective in senior high school (grades 10-12). There is ample evidence that these methods are instructionally effective in grades 2-9, but relatively few studies examine grades 10-12.

Another issue is the effect of cooperative learning at the college level. Again, there are relatively few studies at this level and the results are not as consistent as those from elementary and junior high/middle schools. However, there are several examples of positive achievement effects (Sherman and Thomas, 1986; Fraser et al., 1977) of cooperative learning in senior high school and college settings. It can be inferred that CL made an impact on the learners at the tertiary level.

Davidson (1985) has questioned whether group goals and individual accountability are necessary at the college level, and there is some evidence that they may not be. Studies of pair learning of text comprehension of strategies by Dansereau (1988), as well as some of the mathematical studies cited by Davidson (1985), provide examples of successful use of cooperative learning at the college level without group goals or individual accountability. Davidson (1985) wrote, "If the term *achievement* refers to computational skills, simple concepts and similar application problems, the studies at the elementary and secondary levels support Slavin's conclusions" Cooperative learning methods consistently increase student achievement more than control methods in elementary and secondary classrooms. Though having a group goal motivates the learners, it should contribute to their growth.

Contrastive Studies on Cooperative Learning:-

In an experiment conducted by Tan et al (2007), in seven eighth-grade (Ages 13-14) classes in Singapore, the authors evaluated the effects of the group investigation method of cooperative learning versus the effects of the traditional whole-class method of instruction on students' academic achievement and on their motivation to learn. The authors also investigated students' perceptions of group investigation. Students in group investigation and in whole-class instruction advanced to the same extent over the course of the experiment. In other words, the academic performance in both the groups remained the same. As expected, the high-achieving students had significantly higher academic achievement than did the low-achieving students. The group investigation method did not have differential effects on the two groups of high and low achievers. Group investigation affected high achievers' motivation to learn on the criteria subscale only.

A study by Vreven and McFadden (2007) compared student learning and motivation in two large, compressed General Psychology classes, one of which utilized a cooperative learning component. All students improved their knowledge, but the Cooperative Learning group did not show either greater improvement in knowledge or greater motivation to learn. In fact, there was a significant drop in motivation in the Cooperative Learning section. Thus, their data suggest that cooperative learning techniques such as "think-pair-share" do not enhance student performance in courses whose structure is not typical. They did not compare learning outcomes in a large, compressed course to those offered during a regular semester. They cannot be certain if their students were negatively affected by the combination of compressed schedule and large class size. Recognizing these limitations, they conclude that the cooperative learning technique they employed yielded no benefits for student performance. Collaborative and cooperative learning techniques may be effective for more "traditional" courses, where students have more time to contribute to group efforts and where groups can be more readily monitored.

Cooperative Learning and Second Language Teaching:-

In "Cooperative learning as method and model in second-language teacher education," Chamberlin-Quinlisk (2010) describes the integration of cooperative learning (CL) activities into a graduate teacher education course, Collaborative Teaching in English as a Second Language (ESL). The author writes that both the teachers and researchers have identified discipline status and relationship issues as challenges to collaboration, this course focused on relational dynamics such as respect, trust, reciprocity, and approachability as central to the successful implementation of collaborative practice. CL activities were integrated into the program to encourage ESL teachers to explore their own values and expectations for learning as well as their own communication styles which might facilitate or hinder collegiality. The research question asks how CL contributes to teachers' understanding of themselves as communicators, collaborators, and agents of change. From a qualitative analysis of observer notes, journal entries, classroom discussions, group activities, and autobiographies, this paper highlights how dimensions of CL can be used not only as methodology in second-language teacher education but also as a model for developing collaborative relationships between ESL and content-area teachers.

It is imperative to transfer the responsibility of learning and teaching from teachers to students through the use of CL techniques. Researchers have called for a revision in educator's perceptions of the classroom, from the traditional teacher-centered model to a more student-centered ideal (Kaszycza and Krueger, 1994). Smagorinsky and Fly (1994) conducted a CL study for tenth grade English students. They inferred that a certain amount of teacher modeling and scaffolding was necessary to mould a productive and effective discussion. Their stress on the importance of defined tasks and goals for the success of CL also concurred with the findings of other investigators, such as Lacey and Walker (1991), Reid et al (1994) and Tsai (1998).

Cooperative Learning for Engineering Classes:-

Bullard and Felder (2007) implemented CL in the stoichiometry course at North Carolina State University. They incorporated a variety of CL methods designed to maximize learning and skill acquisition. The students performed substantially better than they normally do when the course is taught traditionally. They also used many of the same pedagogical methods in a sequence of chemical engineering courses and demonstrated that the performance and the attitude of these students were consistently superior to those of a traditionally taught comparison group.

Steven (2004) in "Tailoring Cooperative Learning Events for Engineering Classes," designed and applied fifteen distinct cooperative learning events while teaching an undergraduate materials science course of twenty-five students. Three separate instruments were used to collect student perceptions of the learning events and the data was then triangulated to determine and verify trends. The first instrument was a student survey immediately following each event to collect "snapshot" perceptions. The second instrument was an end of term activity in which each student rank ordered the individual events from "most helpful in learning," to "least helpful in learning." The third instrument was end of term qualitative data where the students described in writing what made the "most helpful" events helpful and the "least helpful" events least helpful. Students overwhelmingly indicated that use of effective cooperative events enabled them to more easily master difficult material. The students did not consider effective cooperative events merely "group work." The focus of the present research, however, is on CL methods and their impact on the writing skills of students.

Teaching Writing for Second Language Learners:-

Sun (2009) in "Process Approach to Teaching Writing Applied in Different teaching models," deals with English writing, as a basic language skill for second language learners. It is quite an arduous task for English teachers to achieve better results and to develop students' writing competence. Based on the review of the concerning literature from other researchers as well as a summary of the author's own experimental research, the author of this essay for the first time tries to give definitions of the process approach to writing, make a comparison between product and process approach to teaching writing and accordingly make suggestions about the basic principles of teaching writing with the application of the process approach. With this understanding of the process approach to writing, the author focuses on a discussion about the two classroom teaching models by using the process approach, namely teaching models with minimal control and maximal control to different English level students. Experimental study shows that the subjects were all making significant progress in their writing skill.

Although cooperative learning techniques are used by thousands of teachers and have been thoroughly researched as instructional methods (Johnson et al., 1991; Slavin, 1987, 1990), its use is not widespread. Execution remains the primary challenge to successful cooperative learning (Benjamin, 1991; Higbee et al., 1991). In summary, cooperative learning provides a nonthreatening learning context for interaction among students who exchange different perspectives, ideas, and critical feedback. Cooperative learning is amenable even to distance education when structured to provide student interactions and critical feedback. The next section deals with the theoretical base for cooperative learning.

Cooperative Learning and its Theoretical Base:-

Having analyzed the research that has been done on cooperative learning and its impact on the writing skills of second language learners, the study proceeds to elaborate the theoretical framework for cooperative learning. The concept of cooperative learning was based on three theoretical perspectives (Murray, 1994): Piagetian Theory, Social Learning Theory and Vygotskian Theory.

Piagetian Theory

Piaget viewed learners as active participants in their own learning rather than recipients of information and knowledge. This theory suggests that if students should experiment on their own instead of listening to the teacher

lecture, learning would be more meaningful. In addition, one aspect of Piagetian theory emphasizes that solving conflict will benefit students (Murray, 1994). Students can clarify their doubts among themselves through negotiating and discussing the solution with one another. This increases their comprehension and accelerates their intellectual growth. This approach also assumes that there is an agreement between the students to work together on the problem. This gives rise to a so-called CL group (Olsen and Kagan, 1992; Tsai, 1998). To some extent it can be considered as only group work.

Social Learning Theory:-

The social learning theory of Bandura (1971), the second of Murray's theoretical perspectives, emphasized the importance of modeling and observing the attitude, behavior, and emotional reactions of others. This theory also emphasizes teamwork, which is one of the main characteristics of CL (Murray, 1994). When all the efforts of the group members are towards a common goal, the mutual dependency will motivate them to go on for the benefit of the team, and in the process they themselves will succeed. In addition, when all the members of the team succeed in learning from an assignment, it provides students with an incentive to participate in a group effort by giving a joint reward.

Vygotskian Theory:-

According to Murray (1994), Vygotskian theory is the most theoretical rationale for cooperative learning. Vygotsky (1978) provides educators with key understandings of the relationship between the learning of the individual learners and the influence of the social environment. He believes that learning is social and further stresses that people learn best when they learn through social interaction. He claimed that social relationships were obviously related to human mental functions and accomplishments, and proposed his concept of the "zone of proximal development" in order to make sense of the relationship of society and the individual and social and cognitive development.

Vygotsky viewed learning as a social activity and a process of making sense. In many ways, Vygotsky's view of language and learning is similar to that of Halliday's (1989). Both view language and learning as a process of making sense and as a social activity. For Vygotsky, human learning is always mediated through parents, teachers and peers and these interactions themselves are mediated. He also places more emphasis on the nature of the interaction between the child and the teacher. One element that is essential to these interactions is cooperation. This theory also presents a view of teaching as a process of mediation, which is consistent with the cooperative learning approach (Moll, 1988). CL provides an environment that fosters students' to work together and to form a learning community. CL is also an approach that deals with the nature of language teaching and learning.

Conclusion:-

Johnson and Johnson (1999) find classroom practice is still dominated by an individualistic structure, which places the emphasis on each learner working alone toward the goal independently of other learners, and by a competitive structure, which matches learners against each other in win-lose situations to find out who is "best." Cooperative Learning can produce a synergic effect through cross-ability grouping which maximizes complementary learner strengths (Bell, 1991). It can facilitate English language proficiency among the learners.

The review of related literature gives evidence to the fact that research work is carried out in implementing CL as a learning strategy. It can be concluded that very little research has been done in CL in order to analyse the listening, speaking, reading and writing skills of the students at the tertiary level. The future research can analyse the impact of CL in an ESL/EFL context and prove the efficacy of CL in English language learning for students at the tertiary level.

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