

Effective Ways of Cooperative Learning for EFL Learners at the College Level

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Abstract

This study investigated the effects of peer tutoring as effective teaching methods in the EFL. This study focused on the effectiveness of peer tutoring activities in class to relatively low proficient level of college students and their improvement of English grammar and learners' perception about peer collaboration. The study was found that tutee students had improved their English grammar knowledge and quite satisfied with tutors. Most students showed positive perception of cooperative learning. However, they felt uncomfortable with tutoring to and being tutored by peers. Some tutor students also felt unfair to share responsibility for their group work. There were some gender differences on the perception of their peer collaboration activities. The pedagogical implication and suggestion for the further study were also discussed.

Keywords: *Cooperative Learning (CL), Peer tutoring, Learner's perception on CL, Academic improvement, Gender differences*

1. Introduction

Learning a second language in the EFL classroom takes place not only through independent study but by means of reciprocal interaction with teachers and peer students. But it might be a little hard for students to actively interact with their teachers or their peer classmates in the language classroom. With the diversity of students' English proficiency, variables from classrooms, and instructional challenges, many teachers and researchers have used and applied various peer mediated instruction because of its promising effectiveness and educational benefits to learners.

This study is aimed to investigate the effects of the Cooperative Learning Activities (CLA) as effective and efficient teaching methods in the EFL English learning setting. To promote students' motivation and participation into class and to improve their English grammar skills, this study used peer tutoring activities. It seems like peer tutoring is more valuable and effective for tutors than those students being tutored, but this study examined the

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effectiveness of peer tutoring activities to relatively low proficient level of college students and their academic performance and improvement of English grammar as well as the ones of higher proficient level students. This study also investigated the students' perceptions on peer tutoring. To be more specific, there are two research questions: 1) Can low proficiency students improve their English grammar by participating CLA in class? 2) What are the learners' perceptions of CLA in the study?

2. Literature review

Cooperative Learning (CL) has been widely adopted to produce positive effects to help students develop their English skills in EFL classrooms. The general idea of every CL method focuses that "students work together to learn and are responsible for their teammates' learning as well as their own". Learning something as a group is more important than doing something as a group in the CL classroom (Slavin, 1995) CL is the instructional use of small groups to maximize students' learning in order to accomplish their learning goals. In group learning activity, individual learner is responsible for his or her own learning and influences to increase the learning of others. So, to effectively apply CL model in EFL English learning setting, instructors need to facilitate highly interactive and supportive classroom environment for students to generate opportunities for meaningful input and output while conducting CL activities in classroom (Ghaith, 2003) Under the well-constructed and positive classroom environment, CL methods can successfully contribute for helping low English-proficient students to achieve their academic goals and develop their English language skills and low English-proficient students also learn from more able students than their teacher during CLA (Johnson & Johnson, 2002)

Among various small group activities in CL, peer tutoring as a form of CL has been found to be an effective technique for developing students' academic achievement. Kagan (1985) presented that peer tutoring is one of basic CL types in which "teammates teach each other to carry out given tasks" (as cited in Prapphal, 1991) Topping's definition of peer tutoring is that "more able students helping less able students to learn in cooperative working pairs or small groups carefully organized by a professional teacher." It is obvious that peer cooperation is helpful for transmitting knowledge from more proficient students to less proficient. Moreover, on the process of peer tutoring, learners assist each other to learn and learn themselves by teaching (Topping, 1996) The studies of Lee and Im (2006) showed that the small group activities with differential-level seemed to be more beneficial to learners on their self-efficacy and English learning than whole class activities. Specially, peer cooperation in differential-level of English proficiency group is more effective than the one in similar-level of English proficiency group. Peer tutoring model can contribute for helping low English-proficient students to achieve their academic goals and develop their English language skills.

The Ghaith (2001)'s study indicated that learners' perceptions of their CL experiences about learning the rules and mechanics of a language are generally positive, irrespective of their gender and prior levels of language proficiency. However, while all the low proficient learners valued their CL experience and produced higher outcomes, some of them were not willing to recommend CL nor appreciate the usefulness and affective aspects of CL strategies. In addition, it has been a quite challenge for teachers to encourage high level English proficient students to actively involve into CL activities in class. So, in cooperative learning instruction, teachers play roles of facilitators or mediators or monitors. The instructional use of cooperative learning focuses on more direct, highly structured, and closely controlled by the teacher. Moreover, teachers need to identify learners' perceptions about CL and create the

efficient evaluation rules or appropriate rewards for high level proficient students' endeavors and efforts as well as giving group incentive.

3. Method

3.1. Participants

The participants of this study were 76 EFL college students from Practical English Grammar classes. The motivations, attitudes, interests, and learning styles of the students were very diverse. Students' English levels were different as well. Their school years were also varied; 9 students were 1st graders, 24 students were 2nd graders, 22 students were 3rd graders, and 21 students were 4th graders. They were 47 male students and 29 female students. Most of them were not very familiar with the concept of peer tutoring, but they already took one or two English conversation courses as their requisite courses in school and had some experience of small group activities in English classes. The participants were divided as tutor students and tutee students on the basis of their scores of pre-tests. There were 38 tutor and tutee students each in the study. There were some gender differences in tutor or tutee groups.

3.2. Procedure

To do the peer tutoring activity effectively, this study modified two well-known cooperative models ('Drill & Review Dyads' and 'Numbered Heads Together') which were developed by Kagan (1989, 1992). The instructor paired the students with different level of English proficiency (one high achiever and one low achiever). For meeting the accuracy of grouping, students took proficiency test in the first class. And this proficiency test could be used as pre-test for evaluating their current English ability. The class met twice weekly for 15-week semester.

There were three steps in class. Firstly, the instructor directly lectured each grammatical concept in the traditional format, and asked the students do the pair group work to get answers of exercises in the text book. Secondly, the students reviewed the grammatical concept by writing group summary notes and reviewed exercises and discussed the answers cooperatively. In this activity, tutor students should write feedback notes if they corrected their peer partners' answers or helped them understand some grammatical concept better. The tutor students could get their reward of helping their peer partners. Whereas tutee students conducted peer-assessment at the end of the study to evaluate their tutors' contribution or assistance to their groups. During peer cooperation activities in this step, the instructor kept the observation diary to check students' participation in their group activity as well as interacted with each peer group more closely. Thirdly, each group presented their answers in the whole class. The instructor used the summary note, feedback note, and observation diary to review and assess students' peer work in each class.

3.3. Instruments

This paper employed instruments to examine the improvement of students' English grammar, to review their peer group work, and to investigate the students' perceptions of peer cooperation. For this, the instructor analyzed students' scores to check their English grammar improvement through pre-test, midterm test, and final term test. This study also examined the instructor's observation diary, students' summary notes and feedback notes, and the result of peer assessment to review students' peer group activities. The instructor observed each group

carefully by taking an observation diary every week to examine students' participation and cooperation to their group. The instructor analyzed group summary notes and feedback notes to check each group's understanding of grammatical concept and their cooperation. The students' peer assessment measured to evaluate students' positive and fair cooperation in their groups by giving 1 to 10 points to their peers. The result of peer assessment could be used for giving appropriate rewards to tutor students' endeavours and efforts in their group as well.

To investigate students' perception of peer cooperation, the instructor conducted a questionnaire survey on their peer cooperation at the end of the study. A questionnaire was devised for defining the students' perception of CL, improvement of their own learning through CLA, enhancement of their academic self-esteem through CLA, improvement of their interest to English grammar through CLA, their participation to peer work, and their satisfaction of CLA.

4. Results and discussion

This section provides the results from descriptive and inferential data analyses based on the scores of students' three tests, the result of a questionnaire on students' perception of CL and their overall opinions from an open-ended question about peer cooperation.

4.1. Improvement of English grammar

In case of overall improvement of their English grammar through peer cooperation, Table 1 showed the three test scores of tutor and tutee group students. The differences could not be found in the tutor group's tests, but the tutee group students scored much higher in mid and final term compared to their pre-tests. According to the test results, the students in the tutee groups got helped from their tutor group members and produced higher outcomes than their high achieving counterparts. The data in Table 1 indicated there were no significant differences in tutor students' tests, but on their feedback notes, most tutor students (N=30) mentioned that they could enhance their self-esteem and clear some grammatical concept by explaining to their peer group members. It is easy to assume peer tutoring activities could help tutor students' grammar improvement in English as well as tutee students.

Table 1. Test scores of tutor and tutee

	N	Test	Score
Tutor	38	Pretest	71.8
		Midterm	79.7
		Final term	79.9
Tutee	38	Pretest	45.2
		Midterm	60.3
		Final term	62.5
Male	47	Pretest	58.6
		Midterm	62.3
		Final term	61.8
Female	29	Pretest	57.4
		Midterm	60.3
		Final term	62.7

4.2. Students' perception of CL

For investigating students' perception of CL, improvement of their own learning, enhancement of their academic self-esteem, and improvement of their interest to English grammar through peer tutoring activities, their participation to CL, and their satisfaction of CL in class, the instructor took a questionnaire survey to the students at the end of the study. There are 12 questions with the scale of 1 to 5 (1 bad, 2 not good, 3 average, 4 good, 5 very good) and one open-ended question. The survey questions were adapted and modified from Ghaith (2001) and Pan and Wu (2013) The results from the questionnaire survey of peer cooperation showed some positive and negative factors.

[Table 2] showed the students considered that peer cooperative learning could help to improve their English abilities than self-regulated learning. But tutor groups scored much higher than tutee groups. There were also gender differences to CL activities. Male students thought that CL activities were more effective and helpful to their English study than female students. Table 2 also indicated that tutor students much more actively participated into CL activities than tutee students. In addition, male students participated in their peer activities in more positive ways than female students. Female students felt more uncomfortable working with other peer students in class.

Table 2. Mean scores for improvement in English (M1) and participation (M2)

Group	N	M1	M2
Whole class	76	3.82	3.85
Tutor	38	4.28	4.31
Tutee	38	3.36	3.39
Male	47	3.97	4.0
Female	29	3.58	3.62

Unlike their improved tests results in [Table 1], [Table 3] showed that tutee group students were less satisfied with their group activities than tutor group students. Furthermore, tutee group students felt more comfortable getting feedback from their teacher than their peer partners (M=2.27) According to the answers of an open-ended question on peer cooperation, some tutee group students answered that they got frustrated and felt embarrassed to be corrected by their peers (N=4) They also felt sorry that they could not be actively involved in the group task because of their low English ability and low self-esteem. The interesting point was that even some tutor students were not comfortable to help or correct their peer partners' answers or mistakes (N=5) They mentioned that they had difficulties from insincerity of their peers and gradually lost their interest in this English grammar class (N=3) In this case, they were very unsatisfied with the unfairness to group incentive. But most tutor students were very positive to give feedback to their peer partners (M= 4.31) They answered that giving feedback to their partners helped them understand English grammar clearly (M=4.21) and they could enhance their academic self-esteem through peer tutor activities (M=4.10)

Table3. Mean scores for satisfaction of CL

Group	N	M
Whole class	76	3.81
Tutor	38	4.21
Tutee	38	3.42
Male	47	3.93
Female	29	3.62

Tutee group students were generally satisfied with their peers' efforts and endeavors for their group work. They thought that they had benefits from their peers to learning styles, attitudes, and motivations as well. Unlike their overall opinions on peer cooperation, the result of peer assessment showed different answers to their peer cooperation. At the end of the study, students measured the amount of their contribution to the learning of their peers using peer assessment sheet. Students gave 1 to 10 points to their own contribution (M1) as well as their peers' (M2) They also evaluated their peers' positive and fair cooperation in their group. In Table 4, tutor group students general measured high points to their own contribution and their peers' on peer group activities. However, tutee group students measured lower points to them. The interesting point of this assessment was that female tutee students measured lower points to themselves' (M =6.05) and peers' (M=6.52) contribution. In case of male tutee students measured themselves' contribution a bit lower (M=6.42), whereas they measured their peers' contribution higher than their own (M=7.23) In this study, female tutee students seemed less positive on peer cooperation than male tutee students.

Table 4. Mean scores for their own contribution (M1) and peers' (M2)

Group	N	M1	M2
Tutor	38	8.60	8.76
Tutee	38	6.26	6.92
Male	47	7.65	8.19
Female	29	7.06	7.27

5. Conclusion

The present study investigated EFL college learners' perception of their cooperative experience in CLA as well as the improvement of English grammar of low proficiency students under peer tutoring activities. Firstly, the finding of this paper showed that low proficiency students could improve their English ability by conducting CLA. Though there were no significant improvement of their English grammar in their three tests, but high proficiency students could enhance their self-esteem and understand some grammatical concept clearly on the process of tutoring their peers. Secondly, there were some positive and negative factors of the participants' perception of their cooperative experience in CLA. Depending on their roles as tutors or tutees, the participants' perception and satisfaction on peer cooperation were different and conflicting. The finding also indicated significant gender difference in regard to their peers' contribution and effort of peer tutoring. Therefore, it could be more effective and constructive cooperation if the instructor grouped students with various factual information such as age, prior level of language achievement, gender, learning styles, and interest. It also indicated that the instructor needed to develop proper classroom settings to draw students' positive perception of their role as a tutor and tutee.

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