The Effects of Cooperative Groups on Grammar Learning in a Rajabhat University

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Abstract—This article reports the results of a quasi-experimental study on the use of cooperative groups as Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) techniques to encourage students' participation in grammar teaching and learning. The participants were thirty-eight sophomores majoring English in the Faculty of Education at a Rajabhat University, Thailand. A series of grammar lessons was presented as intensive review of linguistic points. Then, three formative tests on grammatical structures, error identification, and writing correction were given. The scores in tests given were then analyzed by mean score; standard deviation and t-test, and students' written responses were summarized and categorized for content analysis. Summative journal writing was also developed, and the students were asked about their opinions towards experiences within class groupings. The results revealed a low diversity of test scores on error identification and a higher one on writing correction. These reflected the use of cooperative groups as CLT techniques raises grammatical awareness of language learners to attend, recognize and focus on meaningful pattern in sentences, but not yet ability to correct text longer than sentence. Their opinions towards experiences within class grouping were found to be satisfactory, namely in responsibility for contributing a fair share to group's success, and deepening knowledge in language features, respectively.

Index Terms—Cooperative Language, Grammatical Consciousness-Rraising, Grammatical Correction and Revision, Grammar Teaching, Learning.

I. INTRODUCTION

Grammar plays a crucial part at the core of every language as the system of regular patterns which make up a language. It is this system that enables language learners to figure out ideas and get them across, to fit them together and make sense of what they are learning. It is because other language users share knowledge of the same system that they can understand what a statement means and express the meanings they wish to communicate [1]. The system of the rules itself clearly specifies how words can be combined in sentences to bring the number of meanings into a degree of focus. Without knowledge of the system, learners' language development could be restricted [2], [3].

New global context has been certainly becoming internationalized, interdependent and engaging in interconnected activities [4]. English plays a crucial role in the context as a lingua franca in areas of science, technology, commerce and education [5]. It is a subject of learning for countless schoolchildren and has earned an interest from language teachers and educators at all educational levels. English including arts, mathematics, economics, science, geography, history, and government and civics, is considered one of the core subjects essential for students to succeed in work and life in 21st century [6]. The spread of its role has had a significant impact on English language teaching. Language teachers are expected to have competencies required for effective teaching including being knowledgeable in content and skills in methods as well as having positive attitude toward teaching profession [7]. To achieve effective language teaching, teachers must possess knowledge and skills in grammar, sociolinguistics, discursively and strategically profound in instructional approaches and methods.

English Department of the Faculty of Education, Suan Sunandha Rajabhat University, makes a great effort to produce effective English teachers who are professional and skillful in teaching. 5-Year Education Curriculum is designed to equip English teacher candidates with knowledge and skill in learning content, educational psychology, communication, language teaching methods, and technology and innovation in teaching. A study on the program evaluations of 5-Year Education Curriculum reported the satisfaction on the teacher candidatures in regard to their moral sense and intellectual capability. Their knowledge of language content, on the contrary, was reported rooms for improvement [8]. Similarly, interviews with teacher candidates in a study on professional development in practicum placement of English teacher candidates in the Rajabhat University found that the insufficient knowledge in language causes loads of time spend on language content preparation/selection and material design. That obstructed them to fully participate in activities as part of the practicum [9]. The problems existing in English teacher candidates' performance reflects the needs to strengthen knowledge and skills in grammar to meet the requirements of employers who require a higher standard of English grammar, and to be the basis of choices of their teaching methods.

Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) aims to make communicative skills the goal of language teaching and address the primary function of language to allow interaction and communication [10]. The approach considers language not only in terms of its structures and

vocabulary, but also in terms of what people do with these structures and vocabulary when they communicate with each other [11]. Based on this notion, "learning communication" is not an alternative to "learning grammar" since the two is compatible in the nature of language and language use [1]. Within this general framework, variety of teaching methods (e.g., feedback provision, using the target language for purposes) can be implemented to serve the goal of language education. CLT does not look any one particular way or totally rejects any particular practice [10]. What teaching practices teachers may use in class is important only in terms of how the practices promote students learning a language.

Language learning in CLT is an internal processing mechanism that learners' knowledge (i.e., grammar and skill) does not consist of conditioned behavior (i.e., a maximum amount of repetition for memorization and imitation) but of assimilated information within his/her cognitive resources that develop her internal consistent grammars [12], [13]. Language learners with their prior knowledge construct new rules or concepts (of language content/use) from connecting newly studied information with the knowledge already presented in memory and by combining new ideas. This internal learning process can be fostered via the activities that encourage learners to consciously think and talk about the language and that learners at all times are active, rule-seeking, engaging in problem-solving process [14]. In such activities, learners' attention is directed to rules and reasons of why and how a grammatical constituent (e.g., word classes, phrase/sentence patterns) are prescribed and used in such a way. The allocation of attention to form raises awareness of grammatical structures and helps learners to notice certain features of them. This consciousness-raising develops declarative knowledge that enables learners to understand/describe rules of grammar and monitor language output. Learners are not required to communicate the structure taught [3], [15].

Cooperative Learning (CL) makes maximum use of interaction in pairs and small groups of students to explore and learn a curriculum topic under a shared goal. Student-student interactions are the key to group productivity and structured in such a way that classroom behaviors (e.g., putting part of ideas to solve group problem, taking turn to complete a worksheet) are obligatory and contribute to understanding of the language being learned. Ways students interact with each other to achieve task objectives cause students to engage in exploratory talk, in which students present and listen to arguments and counterarguments. The idea underpins the internal learning process that one structures (already learned) knowledge when inconsistency in one's reasoning are revealed. Learning therefore can be beneficial from cooperative discourse and CL is found to have a positive effect on learning performance [16]. Considering the problems and barriers that exist in English teacher candidates' performance, as well as a review of theoretical concepts of grammar teaching and learning, the researcher decided to utilize grammatical correction and revision, two of which are common in language lessons and not very motivating for learners, for this study to establish if this use of CL as CLT

techniques could raise learners awareness of language features and demonstrate comprehensions of them in the forms of error identification and correction. The study aims to: (1) Compare the academic achievements of the students with the 70% attainment target during their participation in cooperative groups as CLT techniques used for grammatical correction and revision. (2) Explore the attitudes of the students after their participation in cooperative groups used for grammatical correction and revision.

II. PARTICIPANTS AND METHODS OF ANALYSIS

The researcher conducted a quasi-experimental study in Faculty of Education at Suan Sunandha Rajabhat University, Thailand. The subjects were 38 sophomores attending an English linguistics course carried out during the regular class hours at the Faculty. A series of grammar lessons were given, which provided an intensive review of grammatical points determined by course syllabus. Then, extensive practices of error identification required students to decide which parts of sentences were grammatically incorrect. After that, students edited a writing piece of their peers referring to the grammar lessons. Three formative tests on grammatical structures, error identification and writing correction, were developed and given, two of which during instruction and one at the end of it, to measure to what extend the students progressed towards the 70% attainment target. Summative journal writing was developed and the students were asked about their experiences within class groupings. The scores in tests given were then analyzed by mean score, standard deviation and t-test, and students' written responses were summarized and categorized to identify key patterns.

III. FINDINGS

To determine whether there was any significant difference between the means of the academic achievements of the students with the 70% attainment target, statistic data was collected via three formative tests on grammatical structures, error identification and writing correction as shown in Table I. A t-test was conducted on the achievement means for the comparison and found that there were significant differences between the means of the achievement academics of the group (Grammatical features t=10.86, p<0.05; Error identification t=3.42, p<0.05; Writing correction t=7.87, p<.05; and Final examination t=7.84, p<.05).

The results revealed a low diversity of test scores on error identification (2.38) and a higher one on writing correction (5.68). These reflected the use of cooperative groups as CLT techniques raises students' awareness of grammatical features. Students attended, recognized and focused on meaningful patterns at sentence level, but not yet developed ability to correct text longer than sentence.

To explore the students' opinion towards cooperative groups used for grammatical correction and revision, written accounts towards the experiences within class groupings was collected via summative journal writing. The writing

was anonymous and freed students to express their views towards class groupings. Responses were various and grouped into four categories as shown in Table II.

TABLE I: MEANS, STANDARD DEVIATIONS AND T-TEST OF ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT OF THE STUDENTS PARTICIPATED IN COOPERATIVE GROUPS AS CLT TECHNIQUES

Academic achievement	Total Scores	70% of total scores	CLT techniques		t-test	p-values
			$\overline{X}$	S.D.		
Grammatical features	30	21	28.97	4.52	10.86	0.000
Error identification	10	7	9.46	2.38	3.42	0.002
Writing correction	40	28	35.26	5.68	7.87	0.000
Final examination	30	21	24.72	2.92	7.84	0.000

TABLE II: STUDENTS' OPINIONS TOWARDS THE EXPERIENCES WITHIN CLASS GROUPINGS

Opinions	The number of students*
Responsibility for contributing a fair share to group's success	30
Deepening knowledge in language features	22
Groups of heterogeneous teammates	14
Putting the formal language of the discipline into the- informal language students use	12

* A student differed in their opinions towards the experiences within class grouping.

In this study, the students' opinions towards the experiences within class grouping were analyzed by content analysis from journal writing of 38 teacher candidates. The opinions were organized, summarize and categorized via the use of codes to identify key patterns emerging from the responses and to group them according to convictions favoring a disposition. All the students liked the activities and viewed that the activities (a) increased their sense of responsibility to the other group members for contributing their efforts to accomplish group goals, (b) deepened their knowledge in language features, (c) experienced variety of ideas resulting from heterogeneous groups of teammates, and (d) eased their understanding of language rules due to a replacement of informal language for the formal language of discipline.

IV. DISCUSSIONS

Having reported the findings of the achievement tests and journal writing of the thirty-eight sophomores participating in cooperative groups as CLT techniques to encourage their participation in grammar learning, this section provides the discussions summarizing the findings and the key points resulting from the analyses. The two research questions raised in Section I are revisited and used as a guide to formulate the discussions through this Section IV.

The activities raised higher level of student engagement in grammatical awareness, error identification, writing correction, and final examination as compared to 70% of total scores. Students were encouraged to consciously think

and talk about rules and reasons of how and why the form is prescribed and used in such a way. Though knowing a rule might not assure that students will retrieve it when communicating, "teaching reasons" would make students to realize there is an underlying logic to the rules—that grammar is rational [17]. Understanding the logic of the language will not only enable students to comprehend exceptions (e.g., use of a stative verb in progressive tense to show intense emotion of the verb in *I am loving it.* in a food company advertising) but also avoid many of the pedagogical problems.

The activities create opportunities for information exchange among members and thus lead to profound understanding on language content. In the exchange of views, cognitive conflicts are revealed and put students in the situation of intellectual talk (i.g., negotiation of meaning due to the gap between their language hypothesis and target forms). Students with prior knowledge interpret taught rules in a unique ways possibly different from other members. They then engage each other to negotiate different perspectives and to fix the disparity between their inter—and target language. The higher achievers learn more in the talk (i.e., discuss and argue possibly with the lower) since explanations require them to recall, organize and structure knowledge stored in memory. The explanations become comprehensible input for the lower. This win-win situation can be viewed as an alternative practice that learning might not be best promoted by being instructed, but by instructing others.

Students were committed to task accomplishment since tasks were framed for collaborative learning to have students present their ideas, as well as allow them to hear and reflect on the ideas of others,. A great deal of learning autonomy is initiated and free students to direct conversation, initiate questions, changing topics of talks, negotiating choices/portion of tasks, for instance to reach task objectives. Students become master of the tasks. Such a context provides students opportunities wherein they construct their own way of understanding language features. The function of content (namely structures and vocabulary) shifts from a body of knowledge to a means for students to learn about learning -- strategies or techniques that they use when they need to learn material in particular disciplines (e.g., use of texts to confirm their viewpoint, recourse to learning sources instead of being depending to only a source). Consequently, students construct their own ways of thinking and learning.

V. RECOMMENDATIONS

1) CLT technique should be included in all subjects, if possible CLT technique should be developed as part of English student teacher development.
2) Theories and practices of teaching techniques such as CLT technique, cooperative group work, project-based learning, task-based activities, should be included in any curriculum.
3) It is necessary for English university instructor to clearly about the concepts of CLT before apply it to learning management.
4) The current study is merely based on the data from the

English student teachers of Suan Sunandha Rajabhat University. Therefore, in order to gain more accurate results, a boarder study should be conducted.

5) The findings of the current study might not be inadequate for student teachers development on English studying. However, the findings of the study can be integrated into English teacher preparation programs as a learning management guideline.

APPENDIX

Fig. 1. A sample of an achievement test on grammatical structures.

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