Narrowing the Achievement Gap between EFL Students in Oral Expression through Cooperative Learning

Tarek Ghodbane
Department of English
University of Abou Bekr Belkaid Tlemcen-Algeria

Hafida Hamzaoui El Achachi
Department of English
University of Abou Bekr Belkaid Tlemcen-Algeria

Abstract
Any learning is stimulated by the teaching method or technique adopted. When put in traditional competitive settings, students worry more about their self-esteem and tend to shy away from participating in the activities, while, only those with higher level of oral skills volunteer in answering the questions. This inequity in practice causes a discrepancy in students' performance in the oral expression exams and thus, results in a gap in the achievement. This paper suggests cooperative learning as a means to reduce the achievement gap between high and low achievers in the oral expression classes. This study is an endeavor to highlight the effectiveness of cooperative learning in reducing the disparity between high and low achievers and also to accentuate the benefits of this method in the English as a foreign language (EFL) classroom. The study followed an experimental pretest-posttest non-equivalent groups design with a sample of 44 second year EFL students from the University of Khenchela, Algeria. The intervention lasted for a semester. The results showed that the achievement gap was reduced in the experimental group after using cooperative learning instructions, while the traditional method, in the control group, failed in closing the achievement gap between high and low-achievers. As a conclusion, some recommendations will be given with the aim of promoting the use of cooperative learning in the EFL classrooms as well as fostering teachers' awareness of the effectiveness of such teaching method in improving students' performance in oral expression.

Keywords: Achievement gap, cooperative learning, effect size, oral skills

1. Introduction

Achievement gap is one of the most common problems faced in the traditional, competitive, EFL classroom. The greater the gap between high- and low-achieving students the more challenging and complex is the instructors' mission and the less promising it is for the learning process to give its best results. For the high- and low-achievers to have an equal opportunity to advance, some researchers suggest putting students in small cooperative, heterogeneous groups. Indeed, Johnson and Johnson (1998) posit that putting high and low-achieving students in the same boat compels low-achievers to participate in the activities and helps them to emulate and learn from their high-achieving partners. Cooperative learning has been a subject of discussion since the 1960's for it has proven its effectiveness in terms of motivating and engaging low-achievers in the activities where there is no chance for hitch-hiking as every member is held accountable and is compelled to fill his role and take his part in rowing the boat. Based on the above mentioned, this paper endeavors to answer the following question: Can cooperative learning help bridge the gap between high and low-achievers in oral expression?

2. Cooperative Learning

Cooperative learning is a teaching method where students are instructed to work together in small, heterogeneous, groups in order to reach a shared goal or a common end (Johnson & Johnson, 1984). Research into group work and the effectiveness of cooperative learning on students' learning prove that cooperative learning increases students' productivity (Shaw, 1932) not just in terms of quantity but also in terms of quality (Allport, 1924).

In cooperative groups, students' behavior, as a whole group, differs from the sum of their behavior as individuals in that students in cooperative groups become more group-centered and exist as one entity, thanks to the sense of interdependence which amalgamates them together. On the other hand, students in competitive settings are more self-centered (Deutsch, 1949) and care less about others' achievement.

As this section expands, different points will be discussed. First, we will shed light on the five elements of cooperative learning, then, we will discuss the importance of cooperative learning vis-à-vis peer-involvement and how it can help in fostering help-seeking among students. After that, we will go through cooperative learning as a tool to promote self-efficacy. Finally, the effectiveness of cooperative learning in sharpening students' oral skills will be highlighted.

2.1. Elements of Cooperative Learning

For a group work to be cooperative, five elements must be fulfilled which according to Johnson and Johnson (1990) are: Individual accountability, positive interdependence, face to face (promotive) interaction, interpersonal social skills, and group processing.

Individual accountability is one of the main elements of cooperative learning. When students feel responsible for their own roles during group work, there can be no room for passiveness and "free riding" where all members take part in the activity and is obligated to participate and engage. This sense of accountability represents a step forward toward autonomy.

The second element of cooperative learning is positive interdependence. This element represents the glue which sticks students together and puts them in the same boat where the notion "sink or swim together" (Jolliffe, 2007) turns students into group-centered members and, thus, responsible for not just their own advancement but for the achievement of the whole group, where no student is left behind.

The third element is the face to face (promotive) interaction. According to Johnson and Johnson (1990), this element supports the idea that learning is a social process and that knowledge can be constructed through interaction, debate and negotiation between peers and socializers.

The fourth element is known as, interpersonal social skills (Johnson & Johnson, 1990). During the interactions with other group members, students not only gain knowledge but, also, sharpen their existing social skills, and learn new ones, in the process, which might come in handy in the future like: conflict-resolution and leadership skills (Kagan, 1986).

The fifth and the last element is group processing. This takes place when students face problems interacting with each other, so, for them to resolve conflicts, they have to discuss and try to tackle any obstacle that might threaten the unity of the group in a student-centered fashion.

2.2. Cooperative Learning and Peer Involvement

Since language is a social phenomenon, and since the only way to learn a language is to practice it, the need for an environment that supports socialization and interaction is, undoubtedly, one of the main concerns in the EFL classroom. Depending on the situation students are put in, interaction with peers might have positive or negative effects on their achievement and self-efficacy. In competitive classrooms, students experience high levels of pressure from peers due to factors such as, social comparisons, different concerns about their self-worth, and fear of embarrassment. By contrast, in cooperative settings, in small groups, students tend to show less reluctance and seem to be less worried about their self-esteem even when asking their partners for help (Nadler, 1998).

Not just on the psychological and cognitive level does cooperative learning prove to be instrumental, but also, in terms of honing language learners' oral skills and communicative competence thanks to different characteristics which distinguish cooperative learning like the fact that it guarantees equal opportunities and allows more time for students to practice the language, verbally, as they get more involved with their classmates for "language is acquired not in the role of spectator but through practice" (Bruner, 1978).

2.3. Cooperative Learning and self-efficacy

The thought of sharing tasks and outcomes and the notion of positive interdependence between group members, which cooperative learning promotes, open an opportunity for students, whether they are aware or not, to share the same momentum and motivate each other. When interacting with one another, students exchange not only ideas but, also, beliefs which might develop into a shared mindset thanks to positive attributions of feedback from their significant peers, and an internalization of positive extrinsic influences (through promotive interactions) which can lead low-achievers to go through a process of becoming more self-efficacious.

Watching other group members solve and cope with what is assumed to be a difficult task, allows low-achieving students to learn from their teammates, thus, fathom the content being studied, but, more importantly, on the psychological level, seeing their partners succeed in a task makes it seem possible for them to succeed as well, and changes students' expectations about the difficulty of the task itself as well as their competence, and this is what Bandura (1995) refers to as vicarious experiences or modeling.

Vicarious experiences, according to Bandura (1995), are the beliefs about effectance, which, one can develop from mirroring other people. In other words, when a learner observes his classmate do well in the activity, witnessing, this positive experience can affect positively his perception about his likelihood to succeed in the same way his partner did and, furthermore, his perception about the difficulty of the problem to be solved. This positive influence helps propel the learner's confidence and, consequently, his willingness to volunteer and participate in similar tasks in the future.

During cooperative learning activities, sitting in mixed-ability groups allows the passive students, who have the tendency to avoid and shy away from certain activities, to find themselves more accountable and responsible for their share of the work and, also, more tolerant with the idea of help giving and receiving as they feel safer in front of a smaller group of people than they do in front of a whole classroom (Rosen, 1983) and, almost, feel that there is less to no threat to their self-esteem and worth, for, in a student-centered context, learners expect less reactions from the teacher, which is a threat that they, usually, try to avoid and fear the most (Newman & Goldin, 1990).

Self-efficacious students are considered as the ones who have the meta-cognitive ability which makes them more aware of their lacks and needs, and since cooperative learning boosts their sense of belongingness, self-efficacious learners find it easier to interact with and ask for help from their teammates promising a self-regulated learning, for both high and low achievers, and better dividends in terms of achievement and competence.

2.4. Cooperative Learning and Oral Skills

In the EFL classroom, the hurdle of being unable to use the language, verbally, for an adequate amount of time, has been a challenging common problem until the present time. In the traditional language classrooms, students suffer the inequity in terms of getting the opportunity to practice what they have learned (Han, 2006). From experience, in the individualistic learning settings, language learning flows in a teacher-centered manner where the teacher asks the question, while expecting students to, only, give right answers, causing the students to avoid the potential embarrassment of giving a wrong answer, as well as fear of losing status among their, alienated, teammates . In cooperative learning classrooms, on the other hand, group work promotes a more student-centered way of learning where the teacher's involvement is limited to a set of roles, and, at the same time, students' talk time is maximized and their oral production can be boosted, from 22% to 47%, (Daniels, 2005) as well as their comprehension of concepts and ideas (Willis, 2007).

Following the Vygotskian notion which regards highly the social aspect of learning (Vygotsky, 1978) cooperative learning not only focuses on students' oral skills but also on their

social skills and the quality of the relationships that bind members of the group, and which correlate with students' motivation and achievement.

In the individualistic classrooms, the practice of oral skills is not given the optimum emphasis, especially when it comes to the lazy students who do not engage in discussions and, only, watch their teammates answer the questions. This lack of oral expression turns passive students into spectators (listeners) and causes a neglect of their speaking kills, where anxiety and reluctance to produce speech builds up leading students to fail to communicate inside and outside the classroom due to the lack of practice.

When interacting within the group, students develop their interpersonal social skills (Johnson & Johnson, 1995) which can help them to communicate, easily, with their teammates and, thus, facilitate the giving (speaking) and receiving (listening) process allowing interlocutors to use each other as sources of knowledge (thanks to the notion of interdependence) aside from the teacher, with less anxiety and fear of embarrassment (Nadler, 1998), for, good friendships among students increase students' motivation and make learning more enjoyable.

3. The Study
This section deals with the research methodology. It begins by stating the research problem and the aims of the study, then, it details the sample population and the research tools used to collect data. The following sub-sections describe and explain the steps followed in the experiment and the procedure of data analysis.

3.1. Statement of the Problem
In the traditional EFL classroom, where competition between students is what steers the wheel, a considerable discrepancy in students' oral skills level causes a disparity in students' achievement, as the absence of equity and equal chance to practice affects negatively their performance and engagement. This investigation suggests cooperative learning as a possible solution to eliminate some of the factors that cause the gap in students' achievement.

3.2. Aims of the Study
This study aims at:
- Highlighting some of the benefits of cooperative learning in the EFL classroom.
- Stressing the effectiveness of Cooperative learning in sharpening students' oral skills.
- Stressing the effectiveness of cooperative learning in reducing the achievement gap between high and low achievers.

3.3. Methodology
The study was conducted following a pretest/posttest true experimental, non-equivalent subgroups design, where the data gathered from the pretest and the posttest were collected and treated quantitatively.

3.4. Participants
The sample population of the study represents a group of 44 second year English students from the Department of English at the University of Khenchela. Using a simple random assignment, the

sample was divided into an experimental group (EG) and a control group (CG). The researcher opted for second year English students at the University of Khenchela because they experienced learning under the traditional, individualistic, instruction, and were never exposed to cooperative learning strategies before.

3.5. Research Tools

As it is common for the experimental design, in this study, the instruments used to elicit data were a pretest, before the intervention, and a posttest. The two tests were in the same level of difficulty and had the same criteria and scale for evaluation. In order to evaluate students' oral skills as accurately and objectively as possible, the examiner adapted the same method used by the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO) testing system, and followed the evaluation criteria of the English for Aviation Testing System (EALTS) exam except for some modifications that were made. Indeed the examiner omitted the criteria which pertain to the domain of Aviation and kept only the ones that were compatible with the objective of the test and that fitted the EFL context.

The test took the form of a dialogue between two students, where the interlocutors selected randomly a certain subject, after shuffling a number of small cards. While the students were given time to interact with each other, the examiner started rating the students' oral skills by assessing what the ICAO system refers to as the holistic descriptors, which are, structure, vocabulary, pronunciation, fluency, comprehension, and interaction. The rating scale includes six levels of efficiency (from 1 to 6). The researcher worked for a year and a half as an ICAO examiner and was familiar with the testing and the rating method.

3.6. The Experiment

In order to measure the achievement gap and calculate it before and after the intervention, both the experimental and the control group had to take a pretest. Depending on their scores in the pretest, students were put under two categories: the low-achievers which represent students who scored between level one and level three (1-3) on the evaluation scale, and the high-achievers which represent students who scored between level four and level six (4-6). After that, the intervention, which lasted for almost a semester, took place.

During the intervention, students of the experimental group were exposed to a set of cooperative learning instructions, while, students of the control group were taught using the traditional, Individualistic, method, i.e. activities such as individual brainstorming and reporting. Some of the cooperative learning strategies that were used were role-play activities, like dialogues. We also used Round-Robin, a strategy where students work together in small groups with one member assigned as a recorder and after the question is asked, students are allowed to think and prepare their answers individually, then, they are required to share them with their partners, while the recorder jots them down. Another strategy is Think-Pair-Share; a cooperative learning strategy where students are asked to work individually on a task, then discuss their responses with a partner, as pairs, after that, the teacher calls on some students so they can share their ideas in front of the whole class. Students were also exposed to a cooperative learning strategy called Student Team-Achievement Division (STAD) which is a team learning method where students work together on

the lesson and then take a quiz individually, where the higher they score the higher their team ranks (Slavin, 1985).

After the intervention period which lasted for a semester, students from both groups had to take the posttest. Afterwards, the data from the pretest and the posttest and the size of the achievement gap between high and low achievers were calculated and compared separately in both the experimental and the control groups. The method used to calculate the achievement gap was an effect-size measure known as Cohen's d.

3.7. Use of Cohen's d
The main reason for choosing Cohen's d as the measurement tool for the achievement gap is because effect-size measures can help overcoming and avoiding two common threatening throwbacks for the present experimental study. These two obstacles are the small sample and the seemingly statistically insignificant difference between the means as effects size measures, unlike the probability value, deal with the practical rather than the statistical significance. Effect size measures, and mainly Cohen's d, are effective when it comes to comparing two means. In fact they help to interpret the difference as units of standard deviations as it suggests a rule of thumb for evaluating the effect. According to Cohen (1988), as shown in table 1, the difference d=0.2 represents "small" effect-size, d=0.5 represents "medium", and d=0.8 a "large" effect-size. So, the fact that Cohen's d disregards the size of the sample, gives the results more reliability regardless of how statistically insignificant the values are.

Table 1
Evaluation of Effect Size d Adopted from Cohen (1988)

Significance	Value
Small	0.2
Medium	0.5
Large	0.8

The formula to Cohen's d is as follows:

Cohen's d = (M2 - M1)⁄SDpooled

Where the formula to calculate the pooled Standard Deviation is:

$SDpooled = \sqrt{(SD1^2 + SD2^2)/2}$

Where (M) stands for: The mean and (SD) stands for: Standard deviation

To put it in words, the difference is calculated by subtracting one mean from the other and dividing it by the pooled standard deviation of both groups.

4. Results

In this section, results from, the experimental and the control settings will be discussed, separately, and the achievement gap will be measured in both phases, the pretest and the posttest, and then compared to determine the effectiveness of cooperative learning.

4.1. Measuring the Achievement Gap of the Experimental Group

This sub-section deals with the achievement gap between high- and low-achievers in the experimental group. In order to evaluate the effectiveness of the intervention, results from the pretest and the posttest will be treated quantitatively and eventually compared.

4.1.1. The Pretest. After the pretest, subjects from the experimental group were assigned to two subgroups based on their achievement as it was mentioned before. In order to make it easier to the reader the abbreviations EGH and EGL are used to describe high achievers and low achievers from the experimental group in the remainder of this paper. The means and the standard deviations for both subgroups are shown in table 2.

To measure the statistical significance of the effect-size (achievement gap) between the high and low-achievers the experimenter had to conduct a paired sample T-test. Results from the T-test are shown in table 2 and are to be discussed later in the discussion of the results.

Table 2
Results from the Experimental Group's Pretest

Group	Mean	Number	Std. Deviation	Sig. (2-tailed)
EGH	4,6000	10	,84327	,000
EGL	2,2500	12	,75378	,000

From the results shown in table 2, values of the means and the standard deviations are used to calculate the effect-size d where

$d = M_1 - M_2 / s_{pooled}$ and $s_{pooled} = \sqrt{[(s_1^2 + s_2^2) / 2]} = \sqrt{[(0,84327^2 + 0,75378^2) / 2]}$
$$= 1.22016$$

Thus: d=4.6-2.25/1.22016
    d=1.925

Since our difference d=1.925 and according to the guidelines provided by Cohen (1992) (see table 1), we can say that the effect size is large (d>0.8). Or in other words, the gap in achievement of the experimental group in the pretest, in terms of their common standard deviation (calculated from the pretest results) is of a large significance.

4.1.2. The Posttest. After the intervention period, students from the experimental group had to take a posttest, which is at the same level and follows the same method as the pretest. Once again, students were assigned into EGH and EGL based on their achievement in the posttest. To measure the achievement gap between high and low achievers in the posttest, the researcher followed the same steps used in measuring the gap in the pretest. The results are shown in table 3.

Table 3
Results from the Experimental Group's Posttest

Group	Mean	Number	Std. Deviation	Sig. (2-tailed)
EGH	4,8182	11	,87386	,000
EGL	2,2727	11	,64667	,000

For calculating the effect-size, data from table 3 were used to fill the formula
$d = M_1 - M_2 / s_{pooled}$ and $s_{pooled} = \sqrt{[(s_1^2 + s_2^2)/2]} = \sqrt{[(0, ,87386^2 + 0,64667)/2]}$
$= 1.52027$
d=4,8182-2,2727/1.52027 thus: d=1.674
Since the difference between high and low achievers in the posttest (d=1.674) is larger than (d=0.8) we can say that the gap in students' achievement is large.

Table 4
Cohen's d Interpretation (Experimental Group)

Group/phase	Cohen's d	Percentile standing %	Common language Effect Size (CLES) %
Experimental pretest	1.925	97.1	91
Experimental posttest	1.674	94.5	88

Note. Adapted from Cohen (1988) and Mcgraw and Wong's (1992) CLES Index

As shown in table 4, displays two different ways for interpreting effect size "d". Rosenthal and Rubin (1982) have suggested that, effect sizes can be translated and explained in a simple language which non-statisticians can understand easily and which they refer to as Common Language Effect Size (CLES). This statistic represents the probability that a stochastically selected score from EGH will be higher than a stochastically selected score from EGL. As shown in table 4, the effect size d=1.92 between high and low achievers in the pretest means that there is a probability of 91% that the achievement of a randomly selected student from EGH will be higher than the achievement of a student from EGL (the 4th column). Another way to describe our results is in terms of percentile standing (the 3rd column). This type of percentile is a measure which indicates where a treated group member's score value stands in comparison with the untreated group members' score values (Rumsey, 2015). According to Cohen (1988) who stated that there is a risk in using simply "small", "medium" and "large" to define an effect size, effect sizes can be regarded as average percentile standing (of the average participant from EGH, in our case, in comparison with the average of a participant from EGL). From the results shown in table 4, we can say that at for an effect size of d=1.92 the percentage of EGL participants who will achieve lower than the average participant from EGH is 97%. By looking at the results from the posttest, it seems that the effect size, after the intervention, decreased from d1=1.92 to d2=1.67 and that the percentage of the EGL students

who will achieve less than a randomly selected student from EGH plunged from 91% to 88%. From what has been mentioned the conclusion that can be drawn is that cooperative learning helped to reduce the achievement gap between high and low-achievers in the experimental group.

4.2. Measuring the Achievement Gap of the Control Group
   This subsection deals with the data gathered from the control group results in the pretest and the posttest. In order to measure the achievement gap, the same method was used as with the experimental group.

   4.2.1. The Pretest. To measure the achievement gap for the control group in the pretest, the researcher conducted the same procedure, where the subjects were divided into a subgroup of high achievers (CGH) and a subgroup of low achievers (CGL), according to their achievement in the test. Results from the pretest and the T-test are shown in table 5.

   Measuring the difference d between CGH and CGL pretest results:
   d= $M_1 - M_2 / s_{pooled}$ and s_{pooled}= $\sqrt{[(s_1^2 + s_2^2) / 2]}$ = $\sqrt{[(0,68755^2 + 0,75076^2) / 2]}$
   = 1.43831
   d=4,5455-2,1818/1.43831   thus: d=1.643

Table 5
Results From the Control Group's Pretest

Group	Mean	Number	Std. Deviation	Sig. (2-tailed)
CGH	4,5455	11	,68755	,000
CGL	2,1818	11	,75076	,000

The effect-size (achievement gap) between CGH and CGL in the pretest is (d=1.643) significant; since it is larger than (d=0.8).

   4.2.2. The Posttest. After the pretest, subjects from the control group were not exposed to the independent variable which is the cooperative learning method. In the following steps the experimenter calculates the effect-size between high and low achievers in the posttest, where students' results in the latter as well as the T-test's are shown in table 6.

Table 6
Results from the Control Group's Posttest

Group	Mean	Number	Std. Deviation	Sig. (2-tailed)
CGH	4,8000	10	,91894	,000
CGL	2,1667	12	,71774	,000

   To calculate the effect-size between high and low achievers in the posttest the same method to calculate Cohen's d in the pretest was followed, where:
   d= $M_1 - M_2 / s_{pooled}$ and s_{pooled}= $\sqrt{[(s_1^2 + s_2^2) / 2]}$ = $\sqrt{[(0,91894^2 + 0,71774^2) / 2]}$

$$= 1.27781$$

d=4,8-2,1667/1.27781   thus: d=2.06

After calculating the difference between CGH and CGL in the posttest it appears that, the gap between high and low achievers was significantly large where (d=2.06) which is higher than (d=0.8). By comparing the effect-size between students' achievement in pretest and the posttest, it appears that the gap in the control group's achievement increased significantly from (d=1.643) to (d=2.06)

Table 7
Cohen's d Interpretation

Group/phase	Cohen's d	Percentile standing %	Common language Effect Size (CLES) %
Control pretest	1.643	94.5	87
Control posttest	2.06	98	98

Note. Adapted from Cohen (1988) and Mcgraw and Wong's (1992) CLES Index

From table (7), it appears that the achievement gap between CGH and CGL in the pretest is d=1.643 and that the percentile standing represents 94.5%, while the common language effect size indicates a percentage of 87%. After the posttest, the data show that the effect size between high and low-achievers increased from d=1.643 to d=2.06 and that the percentage of the CGL students who will achieve less than the average student from CGH jumped from 94.5% to 98%. Furthermore, the probability for a randomly selected participant from CGH to achieve higher than a student from CGL increased from 87% to 92% thus, the traditional method failed to reduce the achievement gap between high and low achievers in the control group.

5. Discussion

Findings of the study show that the effect size between high and low achievers in the experimental group in the posttest was smaller than that in the pretest. Also the percentile standing and the CLES values indicate that the achievement gap between EGH and EGL decreased from a percentile standing of 97.1% and a CLES value of 91% to a percentile standing of 94.5% and a CLES value of 88%. The results support the notion made by Slavin (1985) which states that cooperative learning strategies like STAD and Jigsaw help low achieving students to engage in the activities and value their contributions in the group. The results obtained have further strengthened our conviction that cooperative learning is useful in eliminating alienation among students, and that it helps in tackling a number of social obstacles that disturb the learning environment such as social comparisons, anti-social attitudes, and lack of help-seeing and transfer of learning between students. For the shy language learners to practice their oral skills, cooperative learning, in our case, seemed to be the instruction of choice, for, it not only preserved the students' self-esteem but also, helped them to create friendships and develop their pro-social skills in the process, and played a role in lowering anxiety and fear of embarrassment when students decided to seek help from their partners. By creating such a supportive environment, cooperative learning fostered a sense of

interdependence and enabled the low-achieving students to model their partners and learn from them.

On the other hand, in the control group, the data show that there is an increase in the gap between high and low achievers, where the effect size calculated from the posttest results appears to be greater than the one calculated from the pretest. Also, the CLES and the percentile standing values jumped from a CLES value of 87% and a percentile standing of 94.5% (from the pretest results) to a CLES of 92% and a percentile standing of 98% (from the posttest). According to a great deal of previous research conducted by experts in the field (Johnson, Johnson & Stanne, 2000), our values have been found to be typical of the individualistic teaching method. Researchers have always seen the individualistic classrooms as an environment where students work alone in the absence of interaction, where instead of motivating each other, like in our case, students who are presumed to be high achievers contribute to the factors that cause the achievement gap, between them and their low-achieving peers, to increase. Such factors are social comparisons, competitiveness, dull social skills, and the lack of good friendships. Among numerous studies that compared cooperative learning with the individualistic strategy, our experiment corroborates with previous results from previously published studies. A good example can be a meta-analysis of studies which compared the Jigsaw strategy with the individualistic teaching method conducted by (Johnson, Johnson & Stanne, 2000) where the Jigsaw strategy yielded higher achievement compared to the one promoted by the individualistic method with an effect size of 0.13 (as detailed in table 8):

Table 8

Jigsaw vs. Individualistic Method

Methods	Effect	Sd	K
Cooperative vs. Individualistic	0.13	0.29	5

Note. Adapted from (Johnson, Johnson & Stanne, 2000)
Where: sd= standard deviation and k= number of averaged effect sizes.

Another example that highlights the effectiveness of cooperative learning over the individualistic method is the one provided by the same authors (Johnson, Johnson & Stanne, 2000) as it is displayed in table 9, where it shows the effect size between STAD strategy and the individualistic method outcomes in terms of their effect on achievement where (n) represents the number of comparisons. As demonstrated in table 9, it appears that the STAD strategy surpassed the individualistic method with an effect size of 0.29.

Table 9:

Ranking of Cooperative Learning Methods

Methods	Effect	Sd	K
Cooperative vs. Individualistic	0.13	0.29	5

Note. Adapted from (Johnson, Johnson & Stanne, 2000)

If we now turn to our current results, regarding the T-tests results, it seems that the *p* value (Probability value, which determines the significance of the result) (Rumsey,2010) is *p*<0.001, which means that the findings were highly significant and that the results did not happen by chance, and based on that, in response to our research question, we can say that our work has led us to conclude that cooperative learning seems to be effective in bridging the achievement gap between high and low-achievers in oral expression.

Even though the aims and methodology of our study, which focuses only on the achievement gap in relation with students' performance in oral expression, are different from those of the previously mentioned examples (where previous work have, mostly, focused on the achievement gap with respect to variables like gender, race and economical status, or targeted different skills like reading and achievement in math) based on our findings, we can say that there is evidence to suggest that cooperative learning can be a useful tool when it comes to improving students' oral skills and that it seems to be a possible remedy to cure the problem of the achievement gap in the EFL classroom.

6. Conclusion

Cooperative learning strategies seem to be a key to equity and a great solution to tackle the problem of the achievement gap. Since, EFL students come in different levels of intelligence and backgrounds, a best way to celebrate variety in the EFL classroom is through creating small heterogeneous communities inside the classroom, where, the elements of cooperative learning, namely, positive interdependence and individual accountability come to play their role in binding group members and fostering individual responsibility, at the same time, promising less disparity between high and low achievers, which is the aim of the study at hand. In the light of what has been said, this study encourages EFL teachers and education planners and motivates them to implement more cooperative learning activities in their classrooms, for a more learner-centered learning. It also suggests cooperative learning as a means to avert the consequences of neglecting the minority of low achievers and, finally, accentuates the effectiveness of such method in terms of sharpening students' oral skills.

About the Authors:

TAREK GHODBANE is, currently, a Ph.D student at the University of Abou Bekr Belkaid Tlemcen-Algeria. Tarek has taught Research methodology and Oral Expression at the English Department at the University of Abbes Laghrour Khenchela- Algeria. ORCID iD: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4517-7438.

HAFIDA HAMZAOUI EL ACHACHI is a professor at the University of Tlemcen (Algeria), Department of English. She is specialized in applied linguistics and TEFL. She is also the head of the research team "English Language Education Policy" in the ESP Teaching Laboratory. ORCID iD: https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0030-9721

References

Allport, F. H. (1924). Response to social stimulation in the group. *Social psychology*, *11*, 260.
Bandura, A. (Ed.). (1995). *Self-efficacy in changing societies*. Cambridge university press.

Bruner, J. (1978). The role of dialogue in language acquisition. *The child's conception of language*, *2*(3), 241-256.

Cohen, J. (1988). *Statistical power analysis for the behavioral sciences*. Hillsdale, N.J: L. Erlbaum Associates.

Daniels, K. M. (2005). Cooperative learning structures for English foreign language classroom. *Journal of tourism studies*, *4*(1), 143-149.

Deutsch, M. (1949). A theory of co-operation and competition. *Human relations*, *2*(2), 129-152.

Han, H. S., & Kemple, K. M. (2006). Components of social competence and strategies of support: Considering what to teach and how. *Early Childhood Education Journal*, *34*(3), 241-246.

Johnson, D. W., & Johnson, R. T. (1990). Using cooperative learning in math. *Cooperative learning in mathematics: A handbook for teachers*, 103-125.

Johnson, D. W., & Johnson, R. T. (1995). *Teaching students to be peacemakers*. Interaction Book Company.

Johnson, D. W., Johnson, R. T., & Smith, K. A. (1984). *Cooperative learning*. New Brighton: Interaction Book Company.

Johnson, D. W., Johnson, R. T., & Smith, K. A. (1998). *Active learning: Cooperation in the college classroom*. Interaction Book Company, 7208 Cornelia Drive, Edina, MN 55435.

Johnson, D. W., Johnson, R. T., & Stanne, M. B. (2000). *Cooperative learning methods: A meta-analysis*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota.

Jolliffe, W. (2007). *Cooperative learning in the classroom: Putting it into practice*. Sage.

Kagan, S. (1986). Cooperative learning and sociocultural factors in schooling. *Beyond language: Social and cultural factors in schooling language minority students*, *231*, 298.

McGraw, K. O., & Wong, S. P. (1992). A common language effect size statistic. *Psychological bulletin*, *111*(2), 361.

Mullen, B. (1991). Group composition, salience, and cognitive representations: The phenomenology of being in a group. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, *27*(4), 297-323.

Nadler, A. (1998). Relationship, esteem, and achievement perspectives on autonomous and dependent help seeking. In S. A. Karabenick (Ed.), *Strategic help seeking: Implications for learning and teaching* (pp. 61-93). Mahwah, NJ, US: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates Publishers.

Newman, R. S., & Goldin, L. (1990). Children's reluctance to seek help with schoolwork. *Journal of educational psychology*, *82*(1), 92.

Paltridge, B., & Starfield, S. (Eds.). (2012). *The handbook of English for specific purposes* (Vol. 120). John Wiley & Sons.

Rosen, S. (1983). Perceived inadequacy and help-seeking. *New directions in helping*, *2*, 73-107.

Rosenthal, R., & Rubin, D. B. (1982). A simple, general purpose display of magnitude of experimental effect. *Journal of educational psychology*, *74*(2), 166.

Rumsey, D. J. (2015). *U Can: statistics for dummies*. John Wiley & Sons.

Shaw, M. E. (1932). A comparison of individuals and small groups in the rational solution of complex problems. *The American Journal of Psychology*, *44*(3), 491-504.

Slavin, R. E. (1985). Cooperative learning: Applying contact theory in desegregated schools. *Journal of Social Issues*, *41*(3), 45-62.

Thibaut, J. W. (2017). *The social psychology of groups*. Routledge.

Vygotsky, L. (1978). Interaction between learning and development. *Readings on the development of children*, *23*(3), 34-41.

Willis, J. (2007). Cooperative learning is a brain turn-on. *Middle school journal*, *38*(4), 4-13.