



Cooperative learning approach on the academic performance of students in reading comprehension

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Abstract

This study investigated the cooperative learning approach on the academic performance of students in reading comprehension with the use of Discussion Teaching Method compare it. The sample for this study were 52 students in Government schools, they comprise the experimental and control groups. The design of the study was a quasi-experimental design. The reliability of the instrument was determined with the test-retest method using the Pearson coefficient at 0.75. three intact classes were used for the study, which comprises of 170 students in all, 84 males and females and 86 females. The instrument used for the study was the reading comprehension achievement test (R.C.A.T.), it was used to test the student's performance in reading comprehension. The research findings showed that task-based could improve the reading comprehension of the students. The students' achievement test in Cooperative learning approach from pretest to posttest scores were 87.84% and 122.8% respectively while those of discussion method in pretest and post 81.11% and 96.33% respectively. Based on the research findings, the researcher concluded that cooperative learning approach enhances the performance of students in reading comprehension more than the discussion learning approach and therefore, recommended that students should improve more on their reading comprehension with the application of cooperative learning approach.

Keywords: cooperative learning approach, teaching method compare, academic performance, students

Introduction

Reading is one of the skills used by people to know whether a person literate or not. The English reading ability is the most crucial element of English performance, particularly in an academic setting. It is seen as an instrument for obtaining knowledge from all subjects and every book. Ituen (2004)^[5], defines reading as the course of getting information from print, i.e. information stored in written materials (books, newspaper, magazine, etc.). Also, Azikiwe (1998)^[2] defines reading as a set of distinct skills which include eye movement, speech, comprehension and vocabulary. From the foregoing definitions, reading is the ability to translate written words into meaningful language, being able to arrive at the pronunciation of a printed word, constitute word identification in the least sense; however, if the reader is unable to attach meaning to the word, then he or she has not read the word, since reading must end in meaning construction. Reading which is regarded as a multifaceted cognitive process of decoding symbols in order to build or gain meaning has a means of language attainment, communication and sharing of information and ideas. Reading comprehension is the capability to read a text, process it and recognize its meaning. This recognition comes from the communication between words that are written and how they generate knowledge outside the text/message. Comprehension involves creating meaning that is sensible and precise by linking what has been read to what the reader previously knows and thinks about all of the information until it is understood.

Comprehension is the ultimate goal of reading. Reading is the process of understanding and creating meaning from text, (Brown, 2007). From the foregoing definitions, reading must be accompanied with understanding else nothing has been achieved. One of the tasks that confront the secondary school teachers of English is how to employ the right technique in teaching their students of varying ages and

levels of skills to read with comprehension, the reason being that the students might have been unlucky to be deficiently taught reading comprehension in primary schools. They have been taught reading comprehension the erroneous way which according to McGregor (1971)^[10] is unprepared reading skill course books and textbook, with each child in class reading a paragraph while the rest listen. He concludes that in such a reading class, the children mostly listen to mistakes and poor reading. Students require excellent reading skill for attaining understanding and learning new information, majority of these students are unable to do so, because most of the teaching in English language classroom still emphasize teacher-centeredness, teacher-discussion instruction, which involves text explanation, vocabulary illustration, grammar instruction and intensive drills on language form, (Willis, 1996)^[20], (Jin and Cortazzi, 2004). Quality readers are most habitually tactical readers. They apply a number of strategies to get meaning from the text. One of the major challenges for learners and instructors of English is to find ways of improving reading comprehension. The cooperative method is one of the methods selected for this challenge. The relevance of cooperative learning to classroom teaching finds its origin in the 1970s when United States began to devise and study cooperative learning models for classroom context, (Kessler, 1992)^[9]. (Abrami, Poulsen and Chambers, 2004)^[11], define cooperative learning as an instructional approach in which students work vigorously and decisively as one in small groups, helping one another to accomplish an assigned task. Also, (Johnson and Johnson, 1989)^[6], define cooperative learning as a teaching policy in which small teams, each one with students of diverse levels of capability, use a range of learning activities to develop their understanding of a subject. From the foregoing definition, cooperative learning is a training that involves a team of students working towards a general goal, it exercises

students' common skills interpersonal relationships through interactions with group members, individual accountability, group processing and the opportunity for equal success, i.e., they work on assignments until all members successfully understand complete it. Also, it is a method that permits students to attain additional knowledge and social skills that others studying similar content under individualistic classroom condition will never reach. Besides, it maximizes opportunities for authentic and communicative language, anxiety is relieved, motivation arises and they are willing to participate. The aim of reading is to obtain meaning. Without comprehension, reading is merely going through words on a page. Many students have the problem of reading. Comprehension of reading is tough for some students and it takes time. Students with poor reading skills receive poor grades at school; they are easily distracted and frustrated, seem to hate school, and often fail to develop their potentials, their scores in reading comprehension exercises are very poor, although most of these students' problems emanate from the teachers that had either taught them previously or presently on comprehension of reading in English. Most facilitators of English language either use the discussion method to teach (which involves reading out a comprehension passage to the students and explaining it to them, and asking the students to answer the comprehension questions) or teacher-centred classroom or they may completely neglect the teaching of reading in the classroom. Reading is not a skill that can be openly taught, the teacher needs to apply some modern methods that will help the learners. Lack of reading comprehension skills clearly influences a student's performance in school. Academic advancement hinges on understanding, examining and putting the information conveyed through reading. One of the grounds in which candidates fail examination today is because of the lack of adequate reading. (Ituen, 2004) ^[5], asserts that some reading problems could be mechanical, while others may be intellectual in nature. He went further to explain the mechanical problems, which involves finger-pointing, i.e., pointing at words as one reads; vocalizing, i.e., reading words aloud as one is reading to oneself; sub-vocalizing, i.e., reading under the breath; reading word for word instead of covering a portion of words with one eye span. As the students applied all this while reading, it throws them off balance, putting confusion in them; it likely that the style of teaching/learning applied on the students may have influenced their level of comprehension.

Aim and Objectives of the Study

The aim of this study was examined to probe the effects of cooperative and task-based learning approaches on the academic performance of students in reading comprehension, in specific terms, the study.

1. Determined the effects of cooperative learning approach and discussion learning method on students' academic performance in reading comprehension.
2. Examined the effects of cooperative learning approach and discussion learning method on the academic performance of students in reading comprehension based on their gender.

Research Questions

The following research questions were used to guide the study.

1. What are the differential effects of cooperative learning approach and discussion learning method on the academic performance of students in reading comprehension?
2. What are the differential effects of cooperative learning approach and discussion learning method on the academic performance of students in reading comprehension based on their gender?

Hypothesis

To answer the research questions, the following hypotheses formulated were used at 0.05 level of significance.

- **Ho₁:** There is no significant difference in the effects of cooperative learning approach and discussion learning method on the academic performance of students in reading comprehension.
- **Ho₂:** The effects of cooperative learning approach and discussion learning method on the academic performance of students in reading comprehension based on their gender do not significantly differ.

Cooperative language learning is focused on the idea that teaching should make maximum use of cooperative activities and interactions. Fighting against older ideas that teaching should be teacher-fronted and those strong and weak students should be educated separately. Cooperative language learning maintains that in cooperative group work students are likely to scaffold each other and therefore raise the language level of the class. Cooperative language learning is based on the idea that second language learning can best be done in heterogeneous groups when all students work collaboratively and cooperatively for one common goal. It replaces the idea that students have to work competitively against one another. On the contrary, it rather supports the idea Vygotsky claimed in his Socio-cultural theory, which states that "interaction not only facilitates language learning but is a contributory force in acquisition, Vygotsky was of the opinion that social interaction is seen as the only way of learning a language sufficiently and therefore he came up with his idea of the zone of proximal development (ZPD), an area of potential development, where the learner can achieve that potential only with assistance, (Saville-Troike, 2006) ^[14]. Taking Vygotsky's idea where language learning is done with social interaction, cooperative language learning focuses on language learning in natural settings through the use of interaction in pairs or/and group work. This means that interaction within one heterogeneous group can lead to a maximum of language learning if the students work collaboratively.

As already stated, the theories of Vygotsky and Piaget can be seen as setting the base of cooperative language learning. As shown in the premise, social interaction is maintained to be necessary for language learning and thus corresponds perfectly with the principles of cooperative language learning. Slavin (1982) ^[16] defines cooperative learning as instructional methods in which students of all levels of performance work together in small groups toward a

common goal. In a cooperative learning class, students are involved in a closed interaction in a learning activity that is characterized by the interdependence of all members of the group who have individual accountability to get in touch with the common goal. In addition, Slavin (1991) ^[17] states that cooperative learning has positive effects on students' achievements if the groups have two important features: group goals and individual accountability. These two characteristics are the most important elements underpinning the cooperative learning concept. Interdependence among students involved in groups makes them responsible for their roles and individual accountability. Besides the two aspects, Shaaban (2006) points out that "the effectiveness of cooperative learning largely depends on other specific contextual variables such as time (how long does the researcher do the treatment), the effectiveness is likewise dependent on the quality and dynamics of interaction among learners during a cooperative study, and the composition of the study groups which can consist of different degrees of heterogeneity, gender, proficiency levels of L1 and L2, social skills, and motivation to work with others.

In working cooperatively, students share the idea of working together and achieving a common goal. Every member of the group has different ideas and skills and in sharing them with the others, the group can take a maximal profit out of it all. Furthermore, different skills mean that every member of the group has the chance to participate and so every group member is important for the success of the group work.

The emphasis of this approach is on cooperative work rather than on competitive work. Cooperative language learning also encourages students in their critical thinking, because in cooperative environments, different approaches to certain topics occur and the students have to think and consider the whys and how's. Therefore they have to analyze possible solutions, which is another reason why heterogeneous groups are an advantage rather than a disadvantage in the cooperative language learning environment.

The teacher's role in this method differs from normal classroom settings. While frontal teaching may be the norm in some other methods cooperative language learning uses this form of teaching only on selected occasions. One feature of this method is the great mixture of teaching styles. A lesson can easily consist of frontal teaching sequences, as well as pair and group work phases where the teacher is more or less left out, depending on the activity. The teacher's task is to provide the material, to set the classroom settings, to set goals for the students, to structure the classroom and the activities and to help and monitor students in the work phase. However, the bulk of the work has to be done before class starts and so it can be said that in cooperative language learning classrooms are much less teacher-centred than some other methods. The learner's role is primarily to work collaboratively with each other and develop and practice social skills. It is important to accept new ideas from other students because the students have to share ideas (not compete to see who has the best), accept criticism and they have to learn to make use of the foreign language also when the teacher is not around. Cooperative language learning makes the students more productive when they are working together in groups than working individually, (Shaw, 1932) ^[15]. In more details, Johnson & Johnson (1989) ^[6] reported that students in the cooperative learning situation involved more effectively in group work,

more intensively in learning, more responsible in managing their role in groups individually. In addition, they were also more helpful to what other's needs, more frequently practising their communication skills, more motivated to attain group goals, and more productive in their achievements than their peers in individual groups.

In cooperative language setting, when communicating in group work, students need to make them understood so they adjust their language to suit the members of that group, the result of this, brings the much higher proportion of comprehensible input, (Crandall (1999) and Kagan (1994)) ^[4, 8].

Discussion teaching method is described as being teacher-oriented. Lessons are usually taught by the teacher introducing skills using a blackboard accompanied by a verbal explanation or lecture. Practical work for students is then assigned, followed by feedback from the teacher.

A disadvantage of this method is that students who have learning difficulties are unable to cope with how the lessons are delivered. Above-average students are also disadvantaged because the lessons are not challenging enough. This means that students in either category are at an instant disadvantage compared to an average student without a learning disability. Some discussion teaching methods that are still being adhered to in the schools: teacher-centric classroom; teachers in the mode of knowledge dispensers rather than facilitators; chalk and talk methods; regimented classrooms; lack of collaboration and group learning; more emphasis on examinations and results rather than understanding of concepts; improper alignment between objectives, activities and assessments. Traditionally, reading comprehension was narrowly thought to encompass answering some multiple-choice questions after reading a story or reading passages. While this may be one form of reading comprehension, it is not comprehensive and does not take into account the stages of reading comprehension, requirements for understanding different types of text, or understanding text when read silently versus orally. The discussion teaching method is concerned with the teacher being the controller of the learning environment. Power and responsibility are held by the teacher and they play the role of instructor and decision maker. They regard students as having 'knowledge holes' that need to be filled with information. Discussion learning approach teacher is of the view that it is the teacher that causes learning to occur, (Novak, 1998) ^[12]. Learning is chiefly associated with the classroom and is often competitive. The lesson's content and delivery are considered to be the most important and students master knowledge through drill and practice (such as rote learning). Content need not be learned in context, (Theroux (2001), Johnson and Johnson (1999)) ^[18, 7]. The most common sitting arrangement used in the discussion teaching method is rows. This work is based on the constructivist theory of learning. It is a learner-centred approach that emphasized the significance of individuals vigorously constructing their knowledge and understanding with supervision from the teacher. In constructivist view, the teacher does not dispense information into the learner's mind rather he reflects and thinks decisively with cautious monitoring and momentous guidance from the teacher, (Halpern, 2006), as cited in (Needom, 2014). Vygotsky's social constructivist theory of human learning describes learning as a social or collective process and the initiation of human intellect in society or

culture. The key subject of Vygotsky’s theoretical framework is that social communication plays an elementary function in the expansion of cognition or perception. (Vygotsky 1978) also tinted the union of the social and practical elements in learning by saying that the most considerable moment in the path of academic expansion transpires when speech and practical activity, meet. During the practical activity, a child creates meaning on an intra-personal level, while speech attaches this meaning with the interpersonal world shared by the child and his/her culture. His theory stresses that learning can best be attained through communication with others in cooperative activities,

Research Design

The research utilized in this study was quasi-experimental, pretest, posttest group design. Nwankwo (2013) [13], defined quasi-experimental study as “a study in which some threats to validity cannot be properly controlled because of unavoidable situations associated with the study when human beings are used for experimental design”. Nwankwo (2013) [13], observes that among other conditions, when subjects for a study are selected and randomization of the study is not feasible rather in-tact classes are used, such is quasi-experimental.

Population for the Study

The population for this study comprised the four Government senior secondary schools two (SS 11) students. There were six hundred and eighty-eight students in all the senior secondary schools.

Sample and Sampling Technique

Purposive sampling was used to select a Local Government Area in Rivers State. Simple random sampling was used to select three government senior secondary schools, out of the four schools in the area.

Instrument for Data Collection

Only one instrument was used for this study, which is, the Reading Comprehension Performance Test (RCPT). It was used to assess generally the lessons carried out on the students, in reading comprehension classes as at the time of this study.

Validity of Instrument

Face and Content validity was employed to check the Validity of the Instruments. The essence was to ensure the

Content Validity of the Instrument.

Reliability of the Instrument

The reliability of the instrument was determined through test-retest method, for a measure of its stability, the reliability coefficient value is 0.75.

Method of Data Collection

Copies of the Reading Comprehension Performance Test (RCPT) were administered directly to the students by the researcher with the help of a research assistant. Instructions guiding the answering of the questions were thoroughly explained to the students. The copies of the Instruments were collected from the respondents at the spot in the classroom by the researcher and research assistant.

Method of Data Analysis

The data collected for the study were analyzed using mean and standard deviation to answer the research questions while Analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) was used to test the hypotheses.

Results and Discussion

In this section, the results of the research questions and their corresponding null hypotheses earlier stated were presented. The presentation of each research question is followed with that of the corresponding null hypothesis, and the discussion of findings.

Research Question 1: what are the different effects of cooperative learning approach and discussion teaching method on academic performance of students in reading comprehension?

Research Question 2: What are the differential effects of cooperative learning approach and discussion teaching method on academic performance of male and female students in reading comprehension?

The research questions were answered using mean and standard deviation. The mean and standard deviation were computed based on the male and female students who were exposed to cooperative and discussion learning approaches to reading comprehension. The results obtained for both research question 1 and 2 are presented together in table 1.

Table 1: Mean and standard deviation of the score of students exposed to cooperative and discussion learning approaches based on their gender.

Group	Gender	N	Pre test		Post-test		Mean Gain
			Mean	SD	Mean	SD	
Cooperative	Males	31	44.48	7.82	59.16	11.66	14.68
	Female	33	43.36	8.15	63.12	9.91	19.76
	Total	64	43.91	7.95	61.20	10.89	17.29
Discussion	Males	22	43.18	8.32	50.54	7.22	7.36
	Female	28	37.93	10.07	45.79	9.90	7.86
	Total	50	40.54	9.62	47.88	8.58	7.64
Total	Males	53	43.94	7.98	55.58	10.86	11.64
	Female	61	40.87	9.41	55.16	12.86	14.29
	Total	114	42.30	8.87	55.36	11.92	13.06

In table 1, it was shown that the pretest and posttest mean scores of the students exposed to the cooperative approach in reading comprehension irrespective of their gender were 43.91, and 61.20 respectively. So their mean gain (Post-test mean score pretest mean score) was 17.29. For the students exposed to discussion approach irrespective of their gender, their pretest and posttest mean scores are 40.24 and 47.88 respectively. Thus their mean gained is 7.64. Based on their mean gained it was clear that both approaches were positively effective on the students reading comprehension. However, the cooperative approach was more effective than the discussion approach with a mean gained difference of 9.72 higher than that of the discussion group. When gender was considered, the male students exposed to the cooperative approach of learning had the mean scores of 44.48 and 59.16 respectively in their pretest and post-test, so their gained mean was 14.68 on the other hand the female students in the cooperative group had the mean scores of 43.36 and 63.12 respectively in their pretest and post-test. This gave rise to a mean gain of 19.76 on that note the female students exposed to cooperative learning approach had a higher mean gained than their discussion group counterpart by a difference of 5.08.

On the gender consideration, the male students exposed to discussion group had the mean score of 43.18 and 50.54 respectively in the pretest and post-test, so it meant that their gained mean is 7.36. The females in this discussion learning approach had the mean scores of 37.93 and 45.79 respectively in their pretest and post-test. This gave rise to a mean gain of 7.86. On the basis of their gained mean it was

cleared that the female who was exposed to discussion learning approach gained a higher mean than their male counterpart by a difference of 0.50.

Again when gender was considered irrespective of their learning approaches, it was shown in table 1, that the male students had the mean scores of 43.94 and 55.58 in their pretest and posttest respectively. That means, their gained mean is 11.64. On the other hand, the female students irrespective of their learning approached the mean score of 40.87 and 55.16 in their pretest and posttest respective, so they gained a mean score of 14.29 indicating that the female students generally did better than the male students.

Hypothesis 1: There is no significant difference in the effects of cooperative and discussion learning approaches on academic performance of students in reading comprehension.

Hypothesis 2: The effects of cooperative and discussion learning approaches on the male and female students in reading do not significantly differ.

To test their two null hypotheses a two-way analysis of covariance (2 way — ANCOVA) was employed. When this was computed, F ratio was obtained for the column/group another F- ration was also obtained for row/gender and interaction. The F-ratio for the group was used to test hypothesis 1, while that of the row/gender was used to test hypothesis 2, then the F-ratio for interaction was used test the interaction effect between the group used and gender. The obtained results are shown in table 2.

Table 2: Summary of 2-way analysis of covariance on the effect of cooperative and discussion learning approaches based on their gender

Source of variation	Sum of square	df	Mean squares	F	P-value
Pre-test	2711.83	1	2711.83	37.72	0.000
Learning approach	3261.42	1	3261.42	45.37	0.000
Gender	55.61	1	55.61	0.773	0.381
Learning approach					
Gender (interaction)	275.32	1	275.32	3.83	0.53
Error	7836.05	109	72.89		
Total	16060.25	113			

R square = 0.512 (Adjusted R square = 0.494)

In table 2, it was shown that the F-value obtained for the group (learning approaches) was 45.37 as degrees of freedom of 1 and 109 at 0.000, level of significance ($p < 0.05$). This indicated that there was a significant difference in the effect of cooperative and discussion learning approaches on the academic achievement of students in reading comprehension in favour of cooperative learning approach. Thus hypothesis one was rejected.

Again table 2, shows that the F-value obtained for gender is 0.773 at degrees of freedom 1 and 109 at 0.381 level of significance ($P > 0.05$) which was greater than 0.05 the chosen alpha level. On this basis hypothesis, two was accepted, which indicated that gender did not significantly influence the effect of the cooperative and discussion learning approaches on the students' achievement in reading comprehension.

In table 2, it was also shown that F-value for interaction, effect learning approaches and gender, 3.83 was obtained at degrees of freedom 1 and 109 at 0.53 level of significance ($P > 0.05$), which was greater than, the chosen 0.05 level. This indicated that there was no significant interaction effect between learning approaches and gender.

Conclusion

Cooperative language learning approaches on students' academic performance in reading comprehension were necessary for this study, in the sense that, it helped in a better way of teaching reading to promote comprehension. It also, provided some practical means of improving reading, because, from the study, it was revealed that teaching was traditionally based on students following the rules of English language only and waving the practical side of it.

The conversations in class are based on either teacher to student or vice-versa, as it was in the case with the discussion teaching method and of teaching reading comprehension.

Student to student interaction was rare since the mindset of teachers was seen only as students acquiring knowledge from them and not from their fellow students.

From this study, it can be seen that a cooperative approach suit well in teaching students reading for them to comprehend fully in their reading.

The two methods enhance interaction, communication and practical work amongst students and on the side of teachers as guides, facilitators and motivators and stress the

autonomy and centrality of the students in the classroom. From the foregoing, the researcher advocates that using the cooperative method in teaching reading should be encouraged in order to provide a better understand and greater performance in reading in reading comprehension rather than sticking to the teaching of reading through discussion learning method.

Recommendations

1. Co-operative language learning should be introduced in the teaching of reading comprehension in senior secondary schools.
2. Students should enhance their comprehension of reading by working together in the class, raise problem from their text and bring up different answers to solve the problems.
3. Students should be allowed to learn by giving them of getting more meaning through life experiencing, for instance, knowing more about the computer, getting the meanings of different parts they see like the monitor or mouse, and what their functions are.
4. Teachers should help students in extracting some new vocabularies and ask them to get their meanings by using synonyms and antonyms.

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