

## The Effect of Using the Student Teams Achievement Division (STAD) Technique on Improving Iranian Elementary EFL Learners' Reading Comprehension

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### Abstract

Today learner-centered teaching is regarded as a sine qua non of optimal educational environments; therefore, many cooperative techniques are studied. This quantitative study reports the effect of Student Teams Achievement Division (STAD) technique on improving Iranian elementary EFL learners' reading comprehension. After administering YLE Flyers test to 51 male EFL young learners in elementary level at a well-known language institute in Tehran, Iran, they were divided into control and experimental groups. A pretest containing 50 questions was conducted to make sure their level of reading comprehension is similar. The treatment took 13 sessions of grouping students and assessing their reading skill according to the criteria of STAD technique, in the experimental group. The students' performance comparison in posttest through conducting an independent samples t-test, following a paired samples t-test on both tests revealed that the participants in the experimental group made significantly higher progress in reading comprehension compared to control group. The results of the study can contribute to teachers' awareness on the usefulness of this technique as a manifestation of ZPD, and practically in managing crowded heterogeneous classes where students have hardly been taught to complete a task in groups.

**Keywords:** Cooperative and Collaborative Learning, Learner-centered, Scaffolding, Students Teams Achievement Division (STAD), Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD)

### INTRODUCTION

Up to the 1970s, the main focus in language teaching was on teacher-centered methodologies. Gradually language learning and the role of learners became the focal point in later studies. In 1990s, new trends in linguistics, psychology, and sociology opened new perspectives on language teaching, learning, and the role of learners in the process of language learning. As a result of this shift of focus, cooperative learning became particularly fashion of the day in the early 1980s and developed and evolved

afterwards. It is deeply rooted in Vygotsky's views on social nature of learning in Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) which provides appropriate assistance (scaffolding) for students in order to help to succeed in a task. Once students master the task, scaffolding can be removed and they will be able to complete the task on their own (Vygotsky, 1962). One of the manifestations of ZPD which is a technique in cooperative language learning is Student Teams Achievement Division (STAD). This method of teaching can be helpful to enhance learners' knowledge of the subject they are studying, besides enhancing their socializing abilities. STAD technique was first introduced by Slavin in 1991 (as cited in Slavin, 2006). It consists of a regular cycle of instructional activities: teach, team study, test, team recognition.

## REVIEW OF THE RELATED LITERATURE

What was mentioned is in line with Piaget's (1926) idea that children's effort to reconstruct their own mental schema for themselves is considered a *sine qua non* for learning to happen. He also believed that cooperation results in learning and interaction with peers is the source of cognitive development. Piaget (1972) states that teachers need to proceed with caution about interfering in this process because providing students with solutions gives the authority to the teacher which should be avoided in learner-centered classes. The consequence is that in teacher-centered classes, students do not try to build their own knowledge. This view led to the 'discovery learning' school movement in the 1960s in which students were encouraged to discover and explore the principles of subjects by themselves.

Unlike Piaget, Vygotsky (1978) emphasizes the role of teachers as a guide for learning as they can be the source of support for learners in the learning process. The concept for which Vygotsky is best known is ZPD where students and teachers can best interact. According to this notion, children can achieve more than they thought they could with their teachers' support. In addition, more knowledgeable peers can also help other students in the process of learning. Vygotsky aimed to develop Piaget's theory of cognitive development. To him, ZPD is the distance between the actual developmental level of an individual's independent problem solving and the level of his potential development while he is under the guidance of an adult or in collaboration with more capable peers.

In line with the concept of ZPD, Johnson, Johnson and Stanne (2000) claim that by grouping learners we can create a new social context where students have the opportunity to share their individual learning with other peers and finally gain a new understanding based on what they or other members have learned. It is important that the groups are made up of heterogeneous students. This way, students can benefit from being exposed to different ideas where they have the opportunity to challenge incorporation of ideas into a common cognitive process of the group. According to this theoretical perspective advocated by scholars like Donato (1994), Min (2005), Hansen and Liu (2005), and Schwieter (2010), development will occur during collaboration as long as the members who are considered sources of knowledge have different areas of competence and interact positively in oral or written communication. Hence, not only

can learners expand their own L2 knowledge through the process of scaffolding, but they can also extend their peers' linguistic development. Interaction among students will enhance their achievement due to mental processing which takes place during the cooperative activity. Simons, Linden, and Duffy (2002) stated that in heterogeneous classes where students are different according to their gender, age, knowledge, culture and other individual difference, varied abilities among learners can be used efficiently since the weaker students can learn from the clarifications and elaborations which are given by the brighter students and the providers of clarification also can learn better from their own elaborations. Although their abilities differ from their teacher's, they will be actively involved in problem-solving activities; and keeping students involved in class activities is what all teachers attempt to attain.

The bond between cooperative leaning and cognitive aspect is elaborated by Slavin (1995) according to whom the important element in cognitive elaboration is to retain the information in memory and relate them to background knowledge. An effective way is to elaborate and explain the learned material to someone; this is exactly what happens in cooperative classes when students try to explain what they have learned to other peers. This way, they also review and memorize the lessons. The basic principle is to work cooperatively as a team, so that students become interdependent in tasks and goals. To achieve this goal, there are various cooperative learning methods that can be implemented in different ways in the classroom. They may be as simple as grouping students together to discuss or help each other with classroom assignments, or it may be more complex. STAD is one of the techniques in cooperative language learning method which focuses on the group learning of heterogeneous students. It is mostly applied in mathematics, language, arts, and social studies. Slavin (1995) described four instructional activities in STAD:

*Teach:* This component is mainly done by the teachers; they present and explain the materials in an understandable way. Students also need to pay attention since the learning content will be assigned in the next component.

*Team Study:* Students will be divided into groups of four or five depending on the total number of students in each class. Groups consist of heterogeneous members; they might be different in their academic or language knowledge, sex, age, religion, first language, culture, etc. All teammates are supposed to study the materials in order to do well on the quizzes. They also help other members who have difficulty understanding the materials. Teachers will help as facilitators if groups have difficulties. It is recommended that teachers provide students with answer sheets so that they can check themselves and their teammates while they are studying. Among some points to which teachers should pay attention to improve the efficiency of team study is the point that team study is finished only if all the members make sure that their teammates have understood the materials and can make 100 percent in the quiz. They should all understand that the activities or worksheets are not just for filling out and handing in, they are to study, understand and learn.

*Test:* After the group discussion, students take quizzes or tests individually. In this activity they cannot help each other. If possible they may move their chairs back and sit separately from their teams. To score their test results, their scores are compared to their past averages, and they are awarded points based on the degree of their progress; and the team's improvement score is calculated by adding up individuals' improvement score divided by the number of people in the group. This component demonstrates individual accountability that each student is responsible for. All students can improve the team scores if they do better in the quizzes. Students at all levels of achievement; high, average, or low, have equal opportunities to work for the team.

*Team Recognition:* It is recommended that teachers reveal the test result immediately after the test. It can be demonstrated on a bulletin board. Thus, students will realize the value of working cooperatively and help their teammates to understand the lesson. If the team's average score satisfies the criteria, it gets a reward. However, this component focuses on the recognition of the students' accomplishment rather than on the award; it also motivates students to do their best. After 5 or 6 weeks of implementing this technique, new teams can be made up. "Reassigning students to new teams not only allows students work with new teammates, it also keeps the program fresh" (Slavin, 2006, p. 258).

Due to the importance of cooperative learning as an effective teaching methodology, a plethora of studies have been conducted in various contexts exploring its relationship with different aspects of language learning. These studies have been done mostly focusing on the relationship between the acquisition of language macro-skills and cooperative learning as a teaching methodology in general. However, few studies have dealt with different methods of cooperative learning including Peer Tutoring, Jigsaw, Learning Together, Group Investigation, and etc. More specifically, there is an obvious shortage of research when it comes to STAD as an efficient model of cooperative learning. In fact, STAD has not so far been investigated as an alternative method for teaching to Iranian students. Thus, this research aims to provide the rationale for other studies that may suggest different ways to modify and improve the common teaching methods used in Iranian EFL context by posing the following research questions:

Does STAD technique have any significantly positive effect on Iranian elementary EFL learners' reading comprehension?

## **METHOD**

### **Participants**

The participants, chosen based on convenience sampling, were 51 male EFL learners aged 8 to 13 all studying in elementary level (A2) according to the chart of the institute. They had been learning English for about four years based on Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) approach at Kish Language Institute of Science and Technology, one of the well-known and reputable language institutes in Tehran, Iran. Most of the students had started learning English in this institute and they had benefitted from the same

method of education. Therefore, they had the same teachers and the same course books. However, to make sure that the groups were homogeneous, a general proficiency test (YLE Flyers, 2014) was administered at the beginning of the term (the 3<sup>rd</sup> session) by the researchers. There were 28 students in the experimental group and 23 students in the control group. The classes were held twice a week for 90 minutes for 20 sessions.

## **Instruments**

### ***YLE Flyers Proficiency Test***

A sample of YLE Flyers test was used which is an exam for people who can use every day written and spoken English at an elementary level. It covers all four skills. In order to provide a standard elementary test suitable for young learners, YLE Flyers test is designed as an equivalence for the Cambridge Key English Test (KET) in terms of difficulty; however, the lexis and contexts are suitable for a younger age range (Stephens, 2011). It is suitable for everyone who can use English to deal with everyday events, read very simple texts, and write on familiar objects. It covers all four skills - listening, speaking, reading and writing. Listening is normally the first paper, reading and writing part is the second, and finally is the speaking. By applying large colorful illustrations, these tests provide a positive impression for young learner. Besides, the tests emphasize communicative discourse and vocabulary.

The complete test takes approximately 75 minutes. It takes 25 minutes to accomplish listening. It includes 5 parts and 25 questions. Reading and writing include 7 parts and 50 questions which take 40 minutes. Finally the speaking part includes 4 parts and it is administered individually, it usually takes about 10 minutes.

### ***YLE Flyers as Pre-test and Post-test***

In this research, a sample of YLE Flyers test (2013) was used as pre-test and post-test. Although the research question was about students' progress in reading, the researchers used the reading and writing part of this test as their pre-test and post-test, because these two skills were available in one part of the exam paper and they were indivisible.

### ***YLE Flyers Practice Tests***

Since one of the steps in STAD technique is to evaluate individuals' progress in their teams through administering quizzes, a sample of YLE Flyers practice test (2010) was used for this purpose. The researchers administered "Reading and Writing" quizzes every three session. The scores in the control group were calculated individually and everyone was only responsible for his own score, while in the experimental group the scores were summed as team scores so that all members were responsible for their team's scores and they needed to work on the lessons in teams.

## **Procedure**

The procedure of STAD implementation consisted of the following steps:

1. The researchers divided the students into heterogeneous groups from different academic level based on the pre-test, though they were in elementary level in general. Each group was made up of one student with high achievement level, two learners with average achievement level, and one student with low achievement level.
2. The teacher explained the STAD rules. When the students were presented well enough about the procedure, the teacher started teaching procedure. She implemented this method only for reading comprehension skill.
3. Experimental groups were arranged to discuss over the subjects; they worked in groups collaboratively and did the assignment that was given by the teacher. They worked together until each member was sure their teammates would be able to make a total score in the quiz. They were responsible for other members in their teams to understand the lessons.
4. The teacher gave them individual quizzes. Sometimes the quizzes were in the form of reading comprehension tests from the YLE Flyers Practice test, and sometimes the teacher asked oral questions from reading passages in their course book.
5. After the quiz, the teacher counted students' improvement score and determined a group score by adding up all individual improvement scores divided by the total number of members in each group.
6. In the end, she gave reward for group achievement. For example, teams with low improvement received Good Team certificate, teams with average improvement received Great Team certificate and teams with high improvement received Super Team certificate.

On the other hand, the control group received a placebo. The instruction was based on CLT method according to the policy of the institute. The readings were taught by the teacher using Presentation, Practice, Production (PPP) method and no group work or group achievement scores were applied. The scores from quizzes were students' individual scores. Although there were some group discussions in the class, the students mostly worked individually, in pairs, or sometimes in groups in order to find the correct answers. Finally the answers were checked in class as a whole without any achievement scores gained by different groups or quizzes.

## Design

To carry out this study, the participants were divided into control and experimental groups.

The independent variable in this study was the use of STAD technique and the dependent variable was reading development. However, as we were dealing with the most complicated of human behavior, language learning and language behavior, it was highly unrealistic and impractical (Hatch & Farhady, 1982) to claim that we could carefully define and control the extraneous variables involved in the present study. Because of the point mentioned and due to lack of true randomization of the participants, a quasi-experimental design was adopted in which the experimental group

received the treatment and the control group received placebo, and finally the pre-test and post-test scores of the two groups were compared. The focus of the study was on the results of a post-test after the manipulation of a specific treatment which was teaching readings in STAD model.

### Data Processing and Analysis

The information elicited both from the control and the experimental groups were tabulated in order to calculate whether application of STAD technique had any effect on learners' reading in elementary level, therefore, to answer the research question put forward in this study, SPSS software was used to analyze the collected data.

To check the differences in the performance of the participants in each group and to test the null hypothesis that STAD technique did not have any significant effects on Iranian elementary EFL learners' reading comprehension, an independent samples t-test was conducted both on their pretest and posttest. The alpha level for achieving statistical significance was set at 0.05. They were applied to examine the effect of using STAD technique on reading; therefore, any significant difference between the means of the groups could be attributed to the effectiveness of using STAD technique. In addition, a paired samples t-test was conducted on each group's performance on pretest and posttest to see how much they have improved before and after the treatment or mere doing the placebo.

### RESULTS

In order to investigate the research question addressed in this study, the researchers needed a standard proficiency test to make sure the participants were homogenous; therefore, they administered a sample of YLE Flyers test (2014) to 51 students, studying at elementary level at Kish Institute of Science and Technology in Tehran, Iran. Table 1 displays the descriptive statistics of the participants' scores on YLE test. It shows the mean and the standard deviation of the scores and also reflects the maximum and minimum scores.

**Table 1.** Descriptive Statistics of the YLE Administration

	N	Min	Max	Mean	SD	Skewness		Kurtosis	
						Statistic	Std. Error	Statistic	Std. Error
YLE	51	61	97	84.41	8.486	-.842	.333	.505	.656
Valid N listwise 51									

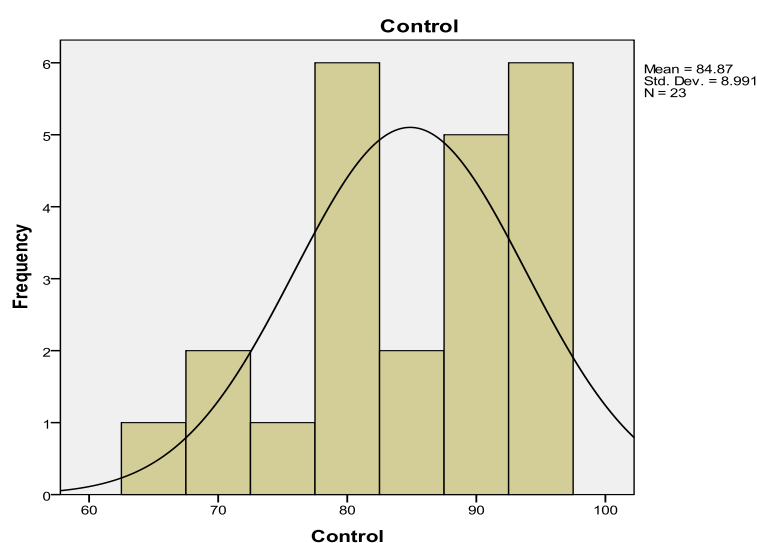
Table 1 shows that 51 participants in this study had the mean score of 84.41 and standard deviation of 8.486. The minimum score is 61, while the maximum score is 97. It can also be concluded that the data is normally distributed, since the ratio of skewness, the statistic over standard error is within the range of plus and minus 1.96. This value is -0.84. The positive value for kurtosis is 0.5 which means that the distribution is rather peaked with long thin tails. Based on the information presented, it can be postulated that the scores are acceptably normally distributed to run parametric statistic like t-test.

After making sure that the participants were homogeneous regarding their English language proficiency; they were divided into experimental and control groups. To make sure of the groups' homogeneity, the related descriptive statistics such as frequencies, and the distribution histograms are presented in Table 2 which shows the descriptive statistics of both groups separately.

**Table 2.** Descriptive Statistics of YLE Administration on Control & Experimental Groups

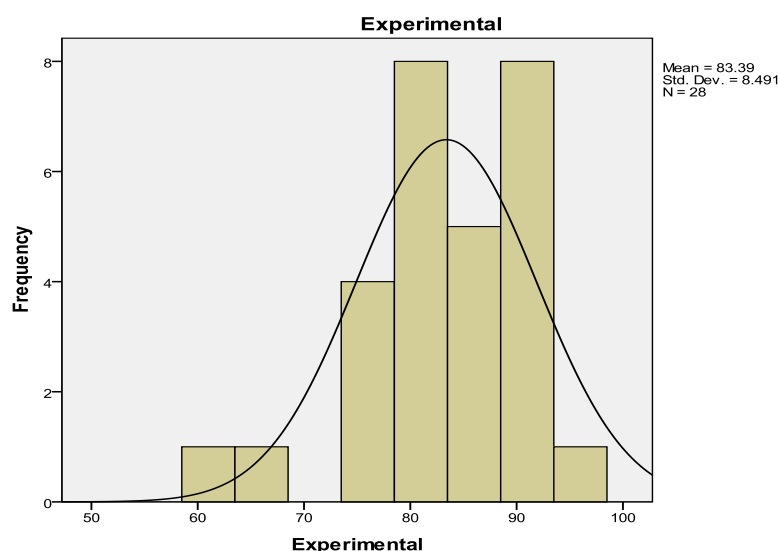
	N	Min	Max	Mean	SD	Skewness		Kurtosis	
						Statistic	SE	Statistic	SE
Control	23	65	96	84.87	8.99	-.70	.48	-.28	.93
Experimental	28	61	97	83.39	8.49	-.87	.44	.94	.85
Valid N (listwise)	23								

As shown in Table 2, both groups are homogeneous, since the ratio of skewness for both of the groups is within the range of plus and minus 1.96. Also both groups are similar to each other to some extent regarding the minimum and maximum scores. On the other hand, the mean and standard deviation of both groups are almost the same with 84.87 and 8.99 for the experimental group and 83.39 and 8.49 for the control group respectively. The distribution histograms of both groups are presented in figure 1 and 2 respectively indicating a fairly normal distribution of the scores.



**Figure 1.** Histogram of the Scores of the YLE Administration on Control Group





**Figure 2.** Histogram of the Scores of the YLE Administration on Experimental Group

### *Answer to the Research Question*

To answer the research question and verify the related null hypothesis of the study, the effect of STAD technique on Iranian EFL learners' reading comprehension, the researchers first conducted a paired t-test to see whether the mean scores of the experimental and the control group changed between the pre-test and the posttest and if yes whether the change was statistically significant. Tables 3 shows the descriptive statistics of the control and the experimental groups regarding their reading scores both in pretest and posttest.

**Table 3.** Descriptive Statistic of Experimental and Control Group in Pre- and Posttest

	Groups	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pretest	Experimental	28	32.04	4.418	.835
	Control	23	32.39	5.043	1.052
Posttest	Experimental	28	35.79	4.237	.801
	Control	23	33.00	5.368	1.119

Table 3 shows that there are 28 participants in the experimental group and 23 participants in the control group. The mean score of the experimental group in the pretest is 32.04, while it is 35.79 in the posttest which means that they have made improvement. The mean score of the control group in the pretest is 32.39, while in the posttest it is 33.00, which also means that they also made improvement but as the values indicate, the improvement in the experimental group is more than that in the control group. Table 4 shows the result of the separate paired t-tests for the experimental and the control groups.

**Table 4.** Separate Paired Samples T-test Results of the Experimental and Control Group between Pretest and Posttest

		Paired Differences					t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
		Mean	SD	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
					Lower	Upper			
Pair1	ExPre-ExPost	-3.750	1.076	.203	-4.167	-3.333	-18.445	27	.000
Pair2	ControlPre-ControlPost	-.609	1.118	.233	-1.092	-.125	-2.612	22	.016

As indicated on the paired samples t-test in Table 4, at the  $p < 0.05$  level, there is a difference between the students' performance on both tests; and both groups performed statistically differently on their posttest compared to pretest. This shows that both groups made progress during the process of research. Therefore as far as the comparison of pretest and posttest scores shows, both the experimental and the control group did well enough to make a statistical difference between their pre- and post-test. However, in spite of the fact that both groups did significantly well in the posttest, it can be seen that the mean score of the experimental group was 35.79 and the mean score of the control group was 33 in the post test. To investigate whether the post test scores of the two groups differed from each other significantly or not, an independent samples t-test was run to see the whether the apparent difference between the two groups is statistically significant or not. Table 5 shows the result of the independent samples t-test.

**Table 5.** Independent Samples T-test on Experimental and Control Groups' Pretest and Posttest

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
									Lower	Upper
Pre test	Equal variances assumed	.469	.497	-.268	49	.790	-.356	1.325	-3.018	2.307
	Equal variances not assumed			-.265	44.176	.792	-.356	1.343	-3.061	2.350
Post test	Equal variances assumed	1.594	.213	2.072	49	.044	2.786	1.345	.084	5.488
	Equal variances not assumed			2.024	41.435	.049	2.786	1.376	.007	5.564

The values of significance for pretest and posttest are 0.497 and 0.213, these values are higher than 0.05; therefore, we use the first line in Table 4 which refers to equal variances assumed. It can be concluded that the groups were similar at the beginning of the research and there was not a significant difference between them in their pretests, because the sig (2-tailed) value is larger than 0.05 in pretest scores ( $0.79 > 0.05$ ) and the magnitude of the mean difference is small (0.356). However, there was a significant difference between the control and the experimental groups on their posttest score (sig.  $0.044 < 0.5$  and the mean difference is 2.78.). Thus the null hypothesis of 'STAD technique does not have any effects on Iranian elementary EFL learners' reading comprehension' is rejected. It can be concluded that applying STAD technique had statistically significant effect on the elementary EFL learners' reading comprehension, and learners in the experimental group were able to outperform the participants in the control group and since the homogeneity of both groups was determined and shown, the statistical difference between the two groups can be attributed to the effect of the treatment, i.e. STAD.

## DISCUSSION

The result of the current study seems to be in line with the results of a number of studies on the positive effect of cooperative learning techniques on students' progress. For instance Marzban and Alinejad (2014), Motaei (2014), and Dabaghmanesh, Zamanian and Bagheri (2013), found that cooperative learning approach positively affects Iranian EFL university students' achievement in General English course. Besides gaining support from these studies, the present study in fact fills the gap within the studies mentioned on the proficiency ground. The research mentioned studied the effect of cooperative learning at university level, but the present study dealt with elementary level and showed that the same result and improvement was also observed in the elementary level. This complementation can have pedagogical implication for the teachers in that they can start implementing STAD as an example of cooperative learning from elementary level and do not have to postpone it for higher education on the cultural ground as emphasized by Carson and Nelson (1996). According to the findings of this research, even in foreign language situation like Iran with teacher-centered classes, STAD can be implemented successfully. Another support and complementation comes from Jalilifar (2010) who suggests that STAD is a more effective technique which can improve female students' reading comprehension in college level compared to Group Investigation (GI) technique, and the students for whom STAD technique was applied benefit more than the students for whom GI was applied. The support and complementation becomes more interesting and informative because the participants in the present study were in sharp contrast to the ones used in Jalilifar (adult female vs. young male). As the result shows, the efficiency of STAD as a viable technique seems to be pedagogically useful taking into account both sex and language proficiency factors. This is supported by Nikou, Bonyadi and Ebrahimi (2014) who consider STAD an effective instructional technique which can have positive effects on both genders' improvement of English proficiency (in intermediate levels in that study of course). Comparing STAD with still prevailing GTM in many EFL contexts,

Yoowiwat (2007) believes that STAD is a more effective method, and students feel more comfortable when they are working together; Yoowiwat believes that this kind of cooperation is more interesting, useful, and funnier. Anto, Padmadewi, and Putra (2013) also state that not only is STAD technique a more successful technique of improving students' reading comprehension, but also it significantly raises students' motivation towards learning. Both students with high and low motivation can benefit from this technique. The studies mentioned as well as the result of the present study are in line with well-known concepts of affective factors (Krashen, 1982).

## **PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS**

The findings of this study offer the teachers who are willing to use cooperative techniques as an integral part of their class to be able to face crowded heterogeneous classes with more observation by the help of creating groups and teams. STAD was also shown to be specifically more beneficial in crowded classes because it can obviate the inherent limitation on time and resources imposed on most of teacher-centered classes which inevitably limits teacher feedback to the formal features, if at all (Ferris, 1995; Truscott, 2007). Because of the situation mentioned above, STAD can be regarded as a healthy practice both in the first and the second/foreign language reading comprehension classes. This can allow teachers to help their students receive more feedback on different aspects of the text which might be ignored due to lack of time to delve into content. This in turn can encourage learners in various language proficiency levels to practice a range of important skills, such as meaningful interaction with peers, thereby exposing them to different ideas and various perspectives. The variety of these tasks and the involvement of most if not all of the students can play a role in keeping students motivated more than the case in which students should act passively in teacher-centered classes. The same advantages on using peer or group work as alternative forms of STAD have been studied on writing by Hansen and Liu, (2005), Lockhart and Ng, (1995), Mangelsdorf (1992), and Paulus (1999) and there does not seem to be any reason why it cannot be implemented in reading classes.

Besides advantages for STAD in foreign language contexts, it has some benefits in countries with the great number of immigrants which seems to be rising in number on daily basis due to some crises. In this context, teachers face classes with a large number of students from different countries with different background, age, knowledge, culture and first language. By applying STAD technique, students will be motivated to help their peers. This helps newcomers to communicate, socialize and make new friends in the new society as well as learn English. The positive attitude induced through the optimal use of STAD, can be conducive to acculturation (Chumann, 1990) as a path which can lead to proper integration of immigrants in the main culture.

## **CONCLUSION**

From theoretical perspective, STAD can be an excellent example of Zone of Proximal Development (Vygotsky, 1978), scaffolding (Jacobs, 2001), and cooperative learning (McGroarty, 1989, as cited in Tang & Tithecott, 1999). The cooperative and meaningful

interaction between each team members in STAD technique can have the beneficial effect on decreasing the mental load of challenging task and lead to in-depth processing (Craik & Lockhart, 1972). It can also be conducive to developing or improving social literacy because it necessarily involves negotiation for agreement rather than imposing one's view on the members of one's team. The last but not the least, STAD as an example of peer-feedback exchange can encourage learners' notice, the effect of which has been demonstrated by Schmidt (1990).

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