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**THE EFFECT OF COOPERATIVE AND INDIVIDUALISTIC GAMES ON WORD SPELLING: A STUDY OF YOUNG IRANIAN EFL LEARNERS**

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**ABSTRACT**

This study builds on the instructional effectiveness and efficiency of two game approaches on word spelling of EFL beginners. The approaches under study were cooperative approach and individualistic approach. The participants of this study consisted of 59 fifth and sixth grade students from two elementary schools in the same district in Firoozeh, Neyshabur- Iran. They received 90 minutes instruction per week for a total of ten sessions in two groups of cooperative and individualistic. The results of the study indicated that there is not a significant difference between the performance of learners in cooperative and individualistic groups. A questionnaire was also given to the learners at the end in order to measure learners' attitude toward the games. The results showed that there is not a big difference between students' attitude toward learning spelling in cooperative group and individualistic group, and both groups have positive attitude toward the games. The researcher concluded that the combination of these two approaches seems more favorable.

**Key Words:** Word spelling, cooperative games, individualistic games.

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**1. Introduction**

Memorizing the correct spellings of words can be a chore, especially for learners of a foreign language. It's in the last few hundred years or so that exact spellings have become the norm. Before that, spellings could and often did vary widely as the language and local usages evolved (Thurlow, 2007). One of the reasons to have an accepted spelling for a word is to streamline communication process. If there were no standard spellings, reading the written works of others would be slower and more difficult. Each time you encountered a word that was spelled strangely enough to be unrecognizable, you would need to stop and try to figure out what was meant. Or you might fail entirely at deciphering the word. With dictionaries and standard spellings, there is no wasted mental energy with regard to how a word is spelled. You either spell each word correctly, or not. Today, almost all major languages have specific spellings, defined for their vocabularies. Thus, as there are accepted spelling for words, learning spelling of a new language can be a challenge for learners because during the time, the shapes of most of the words have changed dramatically from their spelling, and hence learning them needs extra efforts (Thurlow, 2007). Learning the correct spelling of the word is necessary for learners of another language and of course for the most part beginners (Fulk & Stormont-Spurgin, 1995).

Spelling is one of the beginning practices in the way of learning English. If you try to teach beginners through games, they would have a better learning circumstance. Language games are not activities mainly aimed to break the ice between students or to kill time. Lee (1979, p. 3) proposes that "Games ought to be at the heart of teaching foreign languages, games should be used at all the stages of the lesson, provided that they are suitable and carefully chosen."

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Games can be divided into different categories. Rinvoluceri and Davis (1995) divided games into two major categories in his collection: individualistic games and cooperative games. As the name individual indicates, in this type of game, the main action is done individually. The participants do the game alone. This type of game is on the basis of winning or losing. And as the name cooperation indicates, in this type of game, the main action is organized into team-based activities, which encourage cooperation. The participants have to work together towards a common goal.

As the games can have different effects on learners, their attitude can be taken into account. In this research, cooperative games and individualistic games use different methods, which are used to teach the learners the correct spelling, so learners' attitude can be different.

## **2. Literature Review**

Harvey and Bright (1985) defined an instructional game by a set of characteristics. They believed that a game involves a challenge against either a task or an opponent, and it is governed by a definite set of rules. Psychologically, a game is a subjective circumstance, plainly isolated from real-life. The occasions of a game circumstance are considered, all by themselves, to be of minimal significance. A game has a clear number of conceivable arrangements; that is, just a limited number of things can happen during play and it should dependably end, despite the fact that the end may come basically on the grounds that time has run out.

Littlewood (1981) and Hadfield (1996) partitioned language games in two principle sorts: communicative and pre-communicative games. A further subdivision of language games, both communicative and pre-communicative, can be made on the premise of particular aspects such as cooperation and competitiveness. Communication games are those where the accentuation is on fruitful communication, as opposed to on grammatical correctness. Communication games cover such communicative functions as greeting, invitation, request, description, and narration, where the output is open-ended, un-endorsed, or unpredictable. There are numerous cases to be found in books, for example, those by Lohfert (1996), Altenmöller (1987), and Benito, Dreke and Oberberger (1997). Games that stress accuracy of language use are called pre-communicative games. As this kind of games underscore exactness of language use, they have express definitions, for example, "structural games" (Hadfield, 1996), or more straightforward "grammar games" (Ur, 1988; Steinberg, 1992). The point of structure-aimed games is to encourage the linguistic ability for certain syntactic examples, some vocabulary regions and idiomatic expressions, spelling and pronunciation abilities and new vocabulary. In pre-communicative games, the learners' output is close-ended to guarantee the accuracy of language use. The games used in this study are pre-communicative because the main purpose of these games is reinforcing learners' spelling and what is important here is the correctness of spelling not communication.

Rinvoluceri and Davis (1995) divided games into three major categories in their collection: competitive games, cooperative games and individualistic games. As the name competition indicates, in this type of game, the main action is competition. The participants compete in order to win. This type of game is on the basis of winning or losing. As the name cooperation indicates, in this type of game, the main action is organized into team-based activities, which encourage cooperation. The participants have to work together towards a common goal. And as the name individual indicates, in this type of game, the main action is done individually. The participants do the game alone. Increasing the number of game designers, such as Hadfield (1996), and Wright,

Betteridge and Buckby (1989), can emphasize the cooperative element of the language learning games.

In recent years, there has been considerable controversy regarding the best way for classroom teachers to teach spelling. Some educators argue that traditional spelling books have outlived their usefulness and should be abandoned. They assert that spelling instruction should be integrated into other subject areas and dealt with as need arises (Bean & Bouffler, 1987; Wilde, 1990). Others advocate teaching spelling systematically through "word study" sequences created to fit students' varying developmental levels (Bear, Invernizzi, Templeton, & Johnston, 2000; Ganske, 2000). Still others contend that conventional spelling books are helpful devices that, if utilized properly, are a productive and solid approach to educate the spelling framework (Templeton, 1991).

### Research Questions and Hypotheses

The study is intended to address the following questions:

1. Do individualistic games versus cooperative games have significantly different effect on word spelling of young EFL learners?
2. Is there any significant difference in young EFL learners' attitude toward individualistic spelling games versus cooperative spelling games?

In order to gain access to more or less convincing findings to remove the pertinent ambiguities, the following null hypotheses were formulated.

1. Individualistic games versus cooperative games do not have significantly different effect on word spelling of young EFL learners.
2. There is not any significant difference in young EFL learners' attitude toward individualistic spelling games versus cooperative spelling games.

### 3. Method

#### Participants

60 male and female students participated in this study. The participants were fifth and sixth graders of elementary school. So, their age was between 11 to 13 years old. The subjects were not selected by the researcher; they participated in the study on their own will. The study was carried in two elementary schools in the same district in Firoozeh, Neyshabur-Iran. 30 students were assigned to cooperative group in one of the classes, and 30 students to individualistic group in the other class. The participants in each group were Persian native speakers and English true beginners. That is, they had not received any formal instruction in English. The study was carried out in 10 sessions. Each session lasted for 90 minutes, which is identical to the time allotted to English learning in junior high school curriculum.

#### Instruments

##### Spelling posttest

In order to find the relationship between the dependent and independent variables, which were the word spelling ability and teaching methods, a 40 word test of high frequency words was prepared. The test was adapted from the table of high frequency words, presented in Letters and Sounds (DfES, 2007).

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### **Questionnaire**

A questionnaire was prepared by the researchers and was given to the students in two groups. The questionnaire was composed of ten questions. Learners were asked to fill in the option, which best showed their attitude about games and their effectiveness. The questionnaire included a five-point Likert type scale with five options, namely, 'strongly disagree', 'disagree', 'undecided', 'agree' and 'strongly agree'. The items in the questionnaire were prepared under the light of positive attitude toward games. It means that if a student has positive attitude toward the games, he should check agree in each item. Talking about the reliability coefficient of the questionnaire, internal consistency for the questionnaire was calculated to be .072, suggesting moderate reliability. However, as the relevant research suggests, any number above .67 can be accepted as acceptable in terms of the instrument's reliability (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2007).

### **Data collection**

To collect data, 90 flashcards were prepared and copied. The succession of the flashcard was based on the table of high frequency words, presented in *Letters and Sounds* (DfES, 2007). Each card contains the new word, which was going to be taught. The words in each session were chosen in a rhythmic manner in order to be more understandable for learners, for example, the words for the first session were: (cat, rat, fat, hat, and mat). At the end of each session, some papers were given to the learners. These papers consisted of the words of the same session in a way learners could trace and color the new words. As mentioned before, two separated classes were chosen. In one of the classes, spelling was taught through cooperative games and in the other class, spelling was taught through individualistic games. There have been two cooperative games for one class and two individualistic games for the other one. The aims of each game were reinforcing correct word spelling. In the class with cooperative games, learners were asked to practice words through the use of two cooperative games, in which the learners need to cooperate with each other rather than compete. On the other hand, in the class with individualistic games, learners were asked to practice words through the use of two individualistic games, in which the learners need to compete with each other rather than cooperate.

At the end of ten sessions, the spelling post test was administered. For the posttest, 40 words from the table of high frequency words in *Letters and Sounds* (DfES, 2007) were selected. This test consisted of two parts. The first part consisted of 30 pictures of the words that learners had learned by flash cards, and the disarranged letters of each word was given to students along with each picture. In this part, learners were supposed to arrange the letters and put them beside each other in order to make a correct spelling. The other part was similar to the first part. However, in this part, there were ten pictures without any letters, and learners had to guess the correct spelling just by looking at the pictures.

The learners were all beginners with no formal instruction in English. Therefore, a pretest on their word reading assumed unnecessary. According to National Reading Panel (2000), "standardized tests are designed to assess reading and spelling across a wide range of ability levels and hence are less sensitive to differences at any one level in the range. Also, experimenter tests may be more sensitive because they are often tailored to detect the phonemes and graphemes that were taught" (p.20). Therefore, the researcher found it more helpful to conduct and administer the spelling posttest using the table of high frequency words, presented in *Letters and Sounds* (DfES, 2007).

In order to answer the question if there is any difference in the attitude of cooperative group and individualistic group, a questionnaire was prepared. This questionnaire consisted of ten questions, which aimed to measure student's attitude.

#### 4. Results

##### Testing Normality

In order to check the normality of the data, two measures were used. One was the measure of skewness which needs to be smaller than one to guarantee the normality of the data. The second one was the standard error of skewness. In order to assure normality, the standard error of skewness should be smaller than two. The results are shown in Table 1.

Table 1 *Normality of spelling posttest*

	Skewness	Std. Error of Skewness
Cooperative group	0.385	0.427
Individualistic group	0.633	0.433

According to Table 1, the measure of skewness for cooperative group was 0.385 and for individualistic group was 0.633, which are both smaller than 1 (skewness= 0.385, 0.633<1). And the standard error of skewness for cooperative group was 0.427 and for the individualistic group was 0.433, which are both smaller than 2 (Std. error of skewness= 0.427, 0.433<2).

##### Findings of the Study

##### Testing the First Null Hypothesis

RH0 1: There is no significant difference between the effect of individualistic games and cooperative games on word spelling of young EFL learners.

After administering the spelling posttest, the mean scores of the cooperative games and the individualistic games groups were calculated, the results of which are presented in Table 2.

Table 2 *Descriptive Statistics of the spelling Posttest*

	N	M	SD	SEM
Cooperative group	30	19.93	10.31	1.88
Individualistic group	29	18.19	10.28	1.91

A t-test was used to check whether there was any significant difference between the means of the cooperative group and the individualistic group. The result of the t-test is presented in Table 3.

Table 3 Comparing Means of the spelling Post-test

	Levine's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means			Mean Differences
	F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	
Equal variance Assumed	0.07	0.79	0.65	57	0.518	1.74

Since the P-value equals to 0.518, and this is bigger than the level of significance, which is assumed to be 0.05 ( $t(57) = 0.65$ ,  $P\text{-value} = 0.518 > 0.05$ ), the null hypothesis is accepted. This leads to the conclusion that there was no significant difference between teaching spelling through cooperative games or individualistic games. The results of the statistical analysis led the researcher to conclude that cooperative game is not significantly more effective than individualistic game in EFL beginners' word spelling ability, so both methods will result in the similar word spelling attainment.

**Testing the Second Null Hypothesis**

RH0 2: There isn't any significant difference in young EFL learners' attitude toward individualistic spelling games versus cooperative spelling games.

Concerning the second research question, a questionnaire that consisted of ten questions was given to the learners of both groups at the end of the course. Learners were asked to answer the questions carefully. All ten questions were about learner's positive attitude toward learning English like "I feel happy when learning English" or "I am very satisfied with my performance in English class." Each question was graded into four levels: strongly agree, agree, disagree and strongly disagree.

Descriptive statistics of attitude questionnaire for cooperative group are shown in Table 4.

Table 4  
Descriptive statistics of attitude questionnaire for cooperative group

Items	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Strongly Agree	145	48.3	48.3	48.3
Agree	105	35	35	83.3
Disagree	35	11.7	11.7	95
Strongly Disagree	15	5	5	100
TOTAL	300	100	100	

And descriptive statistics of attitude questionnaire for cooperative group are shown in Table 5.

Table 5  
*Descriptive Statistics of Attitude Questionnaire for Individualistic Group*

Items	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Strongly Agree	123	42.4	42.4	42.4
Agree	101	34.8	34.8	77.2
Disagree	43	14.8	14.8	92.1
Strongly Disagree	23	7.9	7.9	100
TOTAL	290	100	100	

Table 4 and 5 show that 83.5 percent of students in cooperative group have positive attitude toward learning spelling, using cooperative games and also, 76.5 percent of students in individualistic group have positive attitude toward learning spelling, using individualistic games. And of course 11.5 percent of students in cooperative group disagreed with this method while about 5 percent strongly disagreed. This statistics for individualistic group is 15 percent "disagree" and 8.5 percent "strongly disagree".

### 5. Discussion and Conclusion

There's no one to one relationship between spelling and pronunciation in English, and it causes difficulty in learners' work to learn the correct spellings of most of the words. Thus, the researcher in this study tried to assess the effect of two most known types of game, cooperative and individualistic, in word spelling of Iranian EFL beginners.

Regarding the first question, the findings confirm the superiority of cooperative games over individualistic games, no such superiority was observed in the present population. When the students were examined on the basis of the number of words they spell correctly, according to the result of the t-test, no significant difference was observed in teaching beginning spelling to EFL learners through cooperative or individualistic games. That is, both methods have similar effect on EFL learners' spelling achievement.

In response to the second research question, the researcher observed that there isn't any significant difference in young EFL learners' attitude toward individualistic spelling games versus cooperative spelling games, but motivation among weak learners in cooperative class was more. One of the most important elements in learning a second language is motivation and motivation is directly related to attitude. In individualistic class, whenever weak learners couldn't keep on the game, they lost most part of their motivation in learning word spelling while in cooperative class, there was not such a situation, and this affected their attitude toward leaning word spelling of another language.

In spite of the fact that this study has concentrated fundamentally on the techniques used to teach word spelling to youngsters, the specialist completely recognizes that word spelling is an amazingly complex subject, which is affected by different elements that are out of control of the analyst such as neurological improvement, insight, their home surroundings, the parental support and enthusiasm for their kid taking in another language, and so forth. However, it is usually acknowledged that showing strategies significantly affect the learners' advancement to become a

good speller. What's more, it ought to be noticed that even the best program, ineffectively taught, won't yield the proposed advantages for learners. Therefore, enhancements to showing preparing are important to ensure that English instructors are furnished with various strategies for educating and are acquainted with the psychological and developmental procedures.

The results of the study indicate that both approaches are fruitful. Cooperative method took shorter time in instruction and weak learners can be motivated more; however, the individualistic class was more lively, energetic and challenging for wiser students. Therefore, we can infer that the best approach to teach word spelling to youngsters is through instruction which incorporates a mix of strategies. It can be proposed that both cooperative and individualistic approaches can be consolidated in classes. In considering this type of approach, teachers would potentially be able to meet a broader range of individual student's needs.

In this research, the researcher compares effects of cooperative games and individualistic games on word spelling of beginners. A further suggestion can be comparison of cooperative approach and competitive approach or competitive approach and individualistic approach.

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