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# COOPERATIVE LEARNING IN ELT CLASSES: THE ATTITUDES OF STUDENTS TOWARDS COOPERATIVE LEARNING IN ELT CLASSES

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## Abstract

In teaching and learning environments, many methods, techniques and/or approaches are used. Among these one of them is cooperative learning. It is defined as working in the soul of a team and in the team, the members help, motivate and trust each other. This study aimed at investigating the University prep school ELT students' attitudes towards cooperative learning. A questionnaire was given to 166 (F=100, M=66) university students whose ages were between 18-20 who were all studying at prep school and of different faculties. A questionnaire inquiring on the students' attitudes on cooperative learning was administered. The collected data was analyzed by using descriptive analysis method. Results showed that 66,9% of the students are at the side of cooperative learning in ELT classes whereas 33,1% of them believed that if they work alone they would have better results and they thought working alone was more enjoyable. A focus group was organized and the students mentioned both negative and positive sides of cooperative work. Furthermore, the findings reported that there was difference in gender in the attitudes towards cooperative learning for the good of females.

*Keywords:* cooperative learning, ELT classes, gender, individual learning.

## 1. Introduction

Over the last thirty years, a more practical and communicative approach has been used in the teaching of language that focuses on the learners' use of language. Learners have become the center of teaching and learning (Johnson and Johnson, 2012). Cooperative learning emphasizes providing students with opportunities to learn by themselves and from their peers.

In the process of learning, students can interact with each other in three basic ways. Individual learning towards the target without paying attention to others' work is a way. In this way, the student's success does not affect other students' success, such as their pass or failure. Competition is another way to see who the best one is and it is the way which is mostly used (Johnson and Johnson, 2012). It may sometimes cause jealousy or hatred among students as there is a winner and a loser. Cooperative learning is the way which the learners have a common aim. In order to reach this aim their working in small groups and knowing that they will share the reward together. It is under certain conditions that cooperative learning is expected to be more productive than competitive and individual learning (Slavin, 1996).

## **1.1. Cooperative Learning**

Various definitions and research have been done on cooperative learning. According to Felder and Brent (2012), cooperative learning is a process that increases the learning and satisfaction rate which is a result of working on high performance team. Cooperative learning environments encourage students help each other, lead collaborations in groups, and awaken common goals by working on the task that they have been given (Huang, Hsiao, Chang and Hu, 2012). Riley and Anderson (2006) define cooperative learning as pedagogical method that learners learn on their own through explaining the subject matter to others and learning from others. According to Yi and LuXi (2012) cooperative learning is students' working and studying together in a group to carry out tasks and accomplish expected goals. They added that it is not just working together so it needs accurate preparation, planning and guidance by the teacher. For Wichadee and Orawiwatnakul (2012), cooperative learning is a teaching strategy, with students of different levels of ability in small groups who use various learning activities to improve their understanding of a subject. Felder and Brent (2012) assert that cooperative learning is by its nature an active method. Cooperation provides benefits for weak students who don't perform well individually. While strong students explain the material for weaker students, they have the chance of filling in their gaps also. While working individually, students may sometimes delay completing the task but as they are responsible for the group members they are motivated to do the work on time.

### **1.1.1. Basic principles of cooperative learning**

Johnson and Johnson (2012) state that, the most successful cooperative learning strategies share five essential factors: positive interdependence, face-to-face promotive interaction, individual accountability (personal responsibility), social skills and group processing. Positive interdependence is defined by as the dual responsibility that the students are demanded in cooperative learning situations learn the assigned material and ensure that every member of the group learns it (Sharan, 1990). Individual accountability focuses on the individual group member's performance, which means each student individually responsible for his or her own and other group member's learning and every member is in charge of the achievement of the group's goal (Johnson and Johnson, 2012; Stenlev, 2003). Social skills are another essential factor in cooperative learning because in order to achieve group goals, group members need to develop not only target language but also social skills. Small group discussions provide higher levels of peer to peer interaction, and more student participation (Bliss and Lawrence, 2009). The purpose of group processing is to improve the effectiveness of the group work by analyzing the collaborative information of group members' performances in order to fulfill the final outcome (Johnson and Johnson, 2012).

### **1.1.2. Cooperative learning in foreign language teaching classes**

In recent years, cooperative learning has been applied to foreign language teaching in the classroom. Cooperative learning and the English as a second or foreign language in classroom is a well integration (Kagan, 2001). There is a growing research based on the influence and effectiveness of cooperative learning in foreign language teaching in the classroom. According to Crandall (1999), cooperative language learning has the positive factors on language learning, increasing motivation, reducing anxiety, stimulating the motivation, promoting self-esteem, as well as supporting different learning styles. The development of cooperative learning techniques in English as Second Language classrooms seems as an important element in successful classroom management (Bassano and Christison, 1988).

The cooperative learning strategy promotes students' active learning by creating simulated real-life language environment. With the implementation of cooperative learning in the foreign language teaching, students are provided with more opportunities to participate, experience, interact and cooperate in foreign language learning. In the cooperative group, students work together, interacting face to face, with the identical goal of learning, as well as assisting each other (Borich, 2007). Since language teachers should create active learning atmosphere for students to learn by themselves, with its many advantages, cooperative learning might be an appropriate way of achieving that goal.

Suwantarabip and Wichadee (2010) examined the effectiveness of cooperative learning in reducing foreign language learning anxiety and to investigate its effect on language proficiency scores of 40 university students. The pre- and post- test scores from Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) (Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope, 1986), the questionnaire and the proficiency tests of the group were calculated for descriptive statistics and compared using a paired sample t-test measure. It was found that the students' foreign language learning anxiety was significantly decreased after learning through cooperative learning approach. The students also grew favor toward cooperative learning as a whole.

Ning (2011) conducted an experimental research focusing on the adaptation of cooperative learning (CL) methods into tertiary ELT in China. It was aimed at offering students more opportunities for language production and thus enhancing their fluency and effectiveness in communication. The test results showed students' English competence in skills and vocabulary in cooperative learning classes was superior to whole-class instruction, particularly in speaking, listening, and reading.

Wichadee and Orawiwatnakul (2012) led a research in which a variety of learning activities were presented, offering new ideas to apply in EFL classes. In cooperative language learning environments, group instruction which was under the learner-centered approach where the groups were formed in such a way that each member could perform his or her task to achieve the goal. They claimed that previous studies indicated that the effect of cooperative language learning was not only improved learners' language skills, but also created a supportive learning environment. In their study, they put forward that in spite of positive outcomes of cooperative learning approach, some awareness regarding learning process management should be raised in order to avoid the problems that might occur during practice.

### 1.1.3. Cooperative learning and gender

According to Jordan, Walker, and Hartling (2004) although men's self-concepts are based more on separation and autonomy, women are more rooted in connections and relatedness. Men like being in competitive environments more as they perform better and tend to focus on achievement. On the other hand, women avoid being in such environments because they cannot achieve better results. This is probably because they tended to focus more on interpersonal aspects of competition (Inglehart, Brown and Vida, 1994).

Rodger, Murray and Cummings (2007) asserted that 'If women have more positive attitudes than men toward cooperation and social interdependence, then it follows that learning methods that allow for the development of trusting and interdependent relationships among students and between students and teachers should be more effective for women than for men. Thus where interdependence, cooperative attitudes, and desire for affiliation exist, competitive teaching methods may not create the most effective learning environments for women'. Research done in supporting this view has shown that women are superior in

affiliation, cooperative attitude, and interdependence (Fultz and Herzog, 1991; Markus and Kitayama, 1991).

In their research Ellison and Boykin (1994) found that university women gained more success when cooperative learning was followed more than individualistic learning. They also asserted that cooperative learning created more positive attitudes toward the learning experience and more perceived ability.

Fultz and Herzog (1991) reported that women were more oriented to connection with others and nurturance which was closely related to gender difference in cooperative learning. In other words, women were higher than men in affiliation, whereas men were higher than women in working independently and focused to goal achievement.

Springer, Stanne, Donovan (1999), found no significant difference in cooperative and collaborative forms of small-group learning on student achievement between predominantly female groups and heterogeneous or mixed-gender groups.

Klein and Pridemore (1993) investigated affiliation in cooperative versus competitive teaching effects on academic achievement, time on task, and satisfaction in a university whose 85% of the students were women. It was found out that participants who worked cooperatively spent more time on the practice exercises than people who worked individually, whereas the high-affiliation group who worked cooperatively gained high success in the application section of the test. Students worked alone were not as successful as the ones who worked cooperatively. The mean of affiliation score for the mainly female students was higher than the norm.

## **2. METHOD**

### **2.1. Participants**

The students who attend to a foundation university in Ankara participated in this study. Voluntary 166 ( $M=66$ ,  $F=100$ ) university prep school students were obtained with convenience sampling.

### **2.2. Means of Data Collection**

In this study, both quantitative and qualitative data was collected. A questionnaire which was developed by the researchers was administered in order to collect quantitative data. The statements were prepared to learn about the attitudes of students about cooperative learning and individual learning in ELT classes. The statements were formed basing on literature about cooperative learning. The students were asked to tick the column whether 'I agree' or 'I disagree'. In the questionnaire, among 9 statements, 7 of them (1, 2, 3, 5, 6, 7, 9) are about the benefits of cooperative work. 2 of the items (4, 8) are about individual learning. There were also general information questions about the student's gender and the faculty he/she attends. The questionnaires were delivered in the prep classes at the beginning of the lesson. The teachers explained the students why the questionnaire was given and asked them to tick the statement which appealed to them.

For collecting qualitative research data, a focus group interview was organized and volunteer 8 male, 8 female students were interviewed about cooperative learning in ELT classes by the researchers.

### **2.3 Procedure and Data Analysis**

The collected data was analyzed by using SPSS 20.0 and descriptive analysis was conducted. The frequency and percentage distribution were given. Chi-square test was used for dependence of variables. 0,05 was used for the significance level and  $p<0,05$  showed the

dependence between groups and  $p > 0,05$  showed there was no dependence between the groups.

### 3. Findings

Table 1 showed the distribution of the attitudes of the students towards cooperative learning and individual learning.

92,2 % of the students said that cooperative learning environments develop positive relationship among friends in class. While working in groups the students meet each other and rely on each other. They improve their communication skills. They are aware of individual differences so they accept this and they support each other. They find constructive solutions to problems. Through developing good relationships and supporting each other, cooperative learning also leads to increase school success, improve higher order thinking skills, develop self-esteem, grow a positive attitude towards school and courses and gain social skills (Cohen, 1994; Felder and Brent, 2012; Slavin, 1996; Wang, 2012).

88,6 % of the students reported that while studying in cooperation students guide each other. In cooperative learning classes students can construct their own multiple learning environments. They realize that there are individual differences. They have the chance of completing their lack, revising what they know, and learning while teaching to others. By discussing with group members, solving problems, suggesting possible solutions, and finding wrongs they can develop their higher order thinking skills (Borich, 2007; Gillies, 2007; Havard, Du and Xu, 2008; Riley and Anderson, 2006). Piaget (1970) claimed that the most effective interactions are between peers as they are on equal basis and challenge each other's thinking skills.

83,1 % of the students stated that cooperation improves trust on each other. This is an indication of harmony in a class as the students rely on each other and realize that moving together in the right path brings success to all of them. When the group members perceive this, a positive interdependence will occur (Johnson and Johnson, 2012). In order to complete a task the student should realize that he has to combine his work with the group mates'. The student will make use of his mates' studies and vice versa. They will work in small groups to maximize the learning by sharing their resources to provide mutual support and encouragement and to celebrate their joint success (Felder and Brent; 2012; Gunter, Estes, Schwab, 1995). Once positive interdependence is understood by the students, it establishes that each group member's efforts are required and indispensable for group success and each member has a unique contribution to make to the joint effort as he has his own resources, role and task responsibilities. Positive interdependence results in face to face promoting interaction. Promoting interaction leads to positive inter relationships, psychological adjustment and social competence (Felder and Brent, 2012).

79,5 % of the students indicated that they respect to each other's thoughts while studying in cooperation. In cooperative learning classes, during the process of learning, forming groups, participation in the group, putting forward the point of view, having different roles, doing discussions, sharing the reward make the learners gain social skills. They make use of the diversions in heterogeneous classes and learn to be tolerant. As a result, they multiply their feeling of respect towards themselves and the others (Slavin, 1996). Students learn how to cooperate (Bliss and Lawrence, 2009; Wichadee and Orawiwatnakul, 2012).

84,9 % of the students put forward the motivation of cooperative work and 75,3 % of students reported that while studying in cooperation friends help each other. According to Sharan and Sharan (1990) cooperative learning encourages students to work in the soul of a team. The team members help each other, accelerate motivation and trust each other's

success (Hornby, 2009). They are responsible for each other and they have to know what each member of the group is doing (Gillies, 2007; Wang, 2012). The group is united around a common goal. They realize that they will win or lose together. Whenever they achieve they know that all group members receive the same reward. Each group member has a portion of resources, information or materials which have to be combined for the group to reach its goals. Having and sharing the feeling of achievement, the encouraging class atmosphere accelerates the motivation of the students and makes them have positive attitude towards school, learning and the class (Borich, 2007; Felder and Brent; 2012).

61,4% of the students said that cooperative learning environments develops individual responsibility. Although the students work as a group, the student has his own responsibility when his individual success is assessed. The result not only affects the student but the group also. The student should know that without doing anything individually, he and the group cannot achieve any goal. The group's one of the main aims is to strengthen each member (Gillies, 2007). Cooperative learning empowers individual responsibility (Cruickshank, Bainer and Metcalf, 1999; Felder and Brent, 2012; Gillies, 2007; Yi and LuXi, 2012). In an effectively organized cooperative learning class, students need to learn the assigned material and ensure that all members of the group learn the assigned material. These two are the students' main responsibilities. The students know that they won't be successful unless the members of the group are successful (Slavin, 1996).

34,9% of the students identified that studying on their own is more enjoyable than working in groups. A research which was conducted by Somapee (2002) indicated students' positive opinions towards cooperative learning. An idea which is supported by experts is that students working in small cooperative teams can understand the presented material by the teacher better than students working on their own. Cooperative learning has crucial social outcomes such as positive inter group relations, ability of working in collaboration and self- esteem development (Cohen, 1994; Slavin, 1996).

31,3% of them stated that they get better results when they study on their own. According to Dunn, Beaudry and Klavas (1989), students learn more when they study in their preferred setting and manner. A preferred particular style may not always guarantee that it is the most effective. Sometimes students prefer the easy or the comfortable way. Some may choose a way because he has no other alternatives. They may benefit from developing new and more effective ways to learn (Weinstein and McCombs cited in Woolfolk, Winne and Perry, 2011). On the contrary, numerous research studies advocate that cooperative learning leads to higher academic success than individual or competitive approaches (Hornby, 2009; Johnson, Johnson and Stanne, 2012). Several researches done in the field of ELT show that learning English reading through cooperative learning have higher achievement scores than other approaches (Seetape, 2003; Tang, 2000; Wichadee, 2005).

There was a significant difference between male and female students in cooperative learning and individual learning. It was found that male students preferred studying individually more than female students. 36,1% of the students were at the side of individual work. Dunn et al. (1989) claimed that students should use their own way- preferred setting and manner-in studying. These students might choose individual study as it was easier or more comfortable. Sometimes there might not be any other alternative of study but most studies said that working in cooperative teams made the students understand the presented material by the teacher better than working alone (Hornby, 2009).According to Jordan, Walker and Hartling (2004) men were more autonomous than women. They were goal oriented which made them to be in competitive environments because they were more successful there. These would be reasons why male students do not particularly want to be in

cooperative environments. The interview results also indicated that because of different learning styles, some students might not want to study in a group as they asserted the difference in learning styles would harm the productivity of the student, fluency of learning procedure and motivation.

### 3.1. Interview with Students

16 students were selected randomly and the researchers conducted an interview with these students. The students put forward their opinions about why they prefer working in cooperation or not in ELT classes. While interviewing a recording machine was used and then it was transcribed by the researchers. The researcher started with saying ‘What do you think about using cooperative approach in ELT classes, such as, forming pairs or groups while studying on tasks?’.

Most students stated the benefits of cooperative work, its gains and its joy. For them they had the opportunity of social interaction, improving their knowledge, putting better works forward. They thought it improves motivation, creativity and productivity as different points of views were blended. So they asserted as follows;

‘Cooperative work lessens the cognitive load of a person. Two heads are better than one.’

‘Besides, studying cooperatively in classes, teachers had better give project works making us working in groups. In this way, valuable, interesting, apart from usual things could be created’.

‘Cooperative work lets us produce more by using less time.’

‘Especially, on the first days of school, I had the chance of meeting my friends while working in groups or pairs’.

Besides positive sides of cooperative work mentioned above, students talked about the negative sides with emphasis on the organization of the groups and the attitudes of the group members while studying on a task. The worries were about students whom they didn’t want to work with. Because they might be people who wouldn’t like to work in cooperation or doesn’t want to take responsibility and do nothing or prefer chatting. For them, this was demotivating sometimes, so they mentioned their worries as follows;

‘The productivity of work will change according to the group members as it really depends on the passion and contribution of the other members of the group’.

‘Making the task distribution equally is the most important thing as everyone in the group doesn’t want to take the responsibility properly’.

‘If the group is not organized well, it will become infertile. I mean, some students are not at the side of sharing his/her opinion then nothing created in that group.’

‘Being in the right group is important. Students who like chatting while working together may sometimes bring down the enthusiastic ones.’

‘Some circumstances, such as an unfavorable person in the group would be demotivating.’

‘A person can be more motivated without having pressure of others on him. When a problem arises when working in cooperation, it will affect both the achievement and the relationship among classmates. I believe in individual work’.

Some students thought that they shouldn’t be forced to work in cooperation as it may sometimes be discouraging when it limits personal development and skills development. For them cooperative work would limit creativity and productivity. They said;



‘Studying in cooperation most of the time may give harm to the creativity of a student and may sometimes lead to laziness’.

‘It would lead worse results if you are forcing the person to do a thing that he doesn’t want to. This is discouraging.’

‘In my opinion, this approach is a waste of time. For the sake of person’s own development, individual work is more important and effective’.

‘Working in groups may sometimes be less productive because people have different learning styles. It is not right to force students to work in cooperation. If it is compulsory, the common points of students should be taken into consideration’.

‘Cooperative work creates positive and consistent relations among classmates, motivational and supportive but it has a negative side which is not sharing in common. In spite of its positive sides, I prefer studying individually’.

Few students complained about the physical conditions such as small classes, improper desks and loud noise while studying. They said as follows;

‘Studying around a round table would be more productive as it widens the interaction of the students in the group and it would be more comfortable. Our desks are not suitable for cooperative work.

‘Group work creates a noisy and dispute atmosphere. I am at the side of individual work, with silence and serene mind’.

Although the results of the questionnaire showed that students were strongly at the side of cooperative learning, they asserted more about the negative sides of that approach in the interview. Despite the fact that they talked about the benefits of working in cooperation and its gains, mostly male students talked about the negative sides of cooperative work.

### **3. Conclusion**

In this study, almost every student put forward that through communication, they became aware of individual differences. They realized that there was not only one way in the process of solution to a problem. This led them trusting each other in the group as most of them were at the same side of this idea. As a result of this they understood that moving together would bring success to all of them. On the way to the solution they discussed in groups, suggested ideas, found what was wrong and at the end they developed their higher order thinking skills. Most think that they learned the way of cooperation through showing respect to each other’s thoughts while studying on the common task. They indicated that this was also a way of learning to be tolerant. By this way, they grew the feeling of respect towards both themselves and the others.

The students emphasized the role of motivation and supporting peers were ways of being successful. Students knew that when the group had a common task to achieve, the reward was also common. Because of this, the members encouraged each other to reach the goal and this naturally motivated the group members. As another result of motivation it could be said that students grew positive attitude towards school, learning and the class. It was obvious that male students preferred studying individually more than female students. In learning everyone should use the way they feel better. As men were more autonomous and goal oriented than women they might not want to be in cooperative environments. It was also asserted in the interview that males stressed on different learning styles. The results showed that most students prefer studying in cooperative learning environments rather than working

individually in case doing the distribution of task carefully, arranging the groups sensibly to avoid giving harm to creativity, sociability and motivation of the students.

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## Appendix

Table 1. *The attitudes of students towards cooperative learning and individual learning.*

I like cooperative learning because.....		Gender						Statistical Analysis	
		Female		Male		Total		Chi-square	P
		N	%	N	%	n	%		
Cooperative learning environments develop positive relationships in class	Agree	98	98,0	55	83,3	153	92,2	9,9	0,002*
	Disagree	2	2,0	11	16,7	13	7,8		
	Total	100	100,0	66	100,0	166	100,0		
Cooperative learning environments provide respect to each other's ideas	Agree	88	88,0	44	66,7	132	79,5	9,8	0,002*
	Disagree	12	12,0	22	33,3	34	20,5		
	Total	100	100,0	66	100,0	166	100,0		
while studying in cooperation students guide each other	Agree	91	91,0	56	84,8	147	88,6	0,94	0,332
	Disagree	9	9,0	10	15,2	19	11,4		
	Total	100	100,0	66	100,0	166	100,0		
Individual studying is more enjoyable than working in groups	Agree	24	24,0	28	42,4	52	31,3	5,44	0,021**
	Disagree	76	76,0	38	57,6	114	68,7		
	Total	100	100,0	66	100,0	166	100,0		
while studying in cooperation students help each other	Agree	82	82,0	43	65,2	125	75,3	5,19	0,023*
	Disagree	18	18,0	23	34,8	41	24,7		
	Total	100	100,0	66	100,0	166	100,0		
Cooperative learning environments develop trust towards classmates	Agree	93	93,0	45	68,2	138	83,1	15,7	0,0001*
	Disagree	7	7,0	21	31,8	28	16,9		
	Total	100	100,0	66	100,0	166	100,0		
Cooperative learning environments develop individual learning	Agree	68	68,0	34	51,5	102	61,4	4,56	0,033*
	Disagree	32	32,0	32	48,5	64	38,6		
	Total	100	100,0	66	100,0	166	100,0		
Individual study offers better results	Agree	28	28,0	30	45,5	58	34,9	4,58	0,032**
	Disagree	72	72,0	36	54,5	108	65,1		
	Total	100	100,0	66	100,0	166	100,0		
Cooperative studying motivates the group members.	Agree	88	88,0	53	80,3	141	84,9	1,29	0,256
	Disagree	12	12,0	13	19,7	25	15,1		
	Total	100	100,0	66	100,0	166	100,0		

Table 2. The distribution of attitudes towards cooperative learning and individual learning according to gender of the students

I like cooperative learning because.....		Gender						Statistical Analysis	
		Female		Male		Total		Chi-square	P
		N	%	n	%	n	%		
Cooperative learning environments develop positive relationships in class	Agree	98	98,0	55	83,3	153	92,2	9,9	0,002*
	Disagree	2	2,0	11	16,7	13	7,8		
	Total	100	100,0	66	100,0	166	100,0		
Cooperative learning environments provide respect to each other's ideas	Agree	88	88,0	44	66,7	132	79,5	9,8	0,002*
	Disagree	12	12,0	22	33,3	34	20,5		
	Total	100	100,0	66	100,0	166	100,0		
while studying in cooperation students guide each other	Agree	91	91,0	56	84,8	147	88,6	0,94	0,332
	Disagree	9	9,0	10	15,2	19	11,4		
	Total	100	100,0	66	100,0	166	100,0		
Individual studying is more enjoyable than working in groups	Agree	24	24,0	28	42,4	52	31,3	5,44	0,021**
	Disagree	76	76,0	38	57,6	114	68,7		
	Total	100	100,0	66	100,0	166	100,0		
while studying in cooperation students help each other	Agree	82	82,0	43	65,2	125	75,3	5,19	0,023*
	Disagree	18	18,0	23	34,8	41	24,7		
	Total	100	100,0	66	100,0	166	100,0		
Cooperative learning environments develop trust towards classmates	Agree	93	93,0	45	68,2	138	83,1	15,7	0,0001*
	Disagree	7	7,0	21	31,8	28	16,9		
	Total	100	100,0	66	100,0	166	100,0		
Cooperative learning environments develop individual learning	Agree	68	68,0	34	51,5	102	61,4	4,56	0,033*
	Disagree	32	32,0	32	48,5	64	38,6		
	Total	100	100,0	66	100,0	166	100,0		
Individual study offers better results	Agree	28	28,0	30	45,5	58	34,9	4,58	0,032**
	Disagree	72	72,0	36	54,5	108	65,1		
	Total	100	100,0	66	100,0	166	100,0		
Cooperative studying motivates the group members.	Agree	88	88,0	53	80,3	141	84,9	1,29	0,256
	Disagree	12	12,0	13	19,7	25	15,1		
	Total	100	100,0	66	100,0	166	100,0		