

## **Cooperative Learning: Addressing implementation issues**

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### **Abstract**

Although cooperative learning (CL) has been shown to be an effective method to increase students' levels of engagement in the language classroom, not all teachers use it regularly. Some may not fully understand its theoretical rationales, some may not be aware of its potential language learning benefits and some may just feel that CL takes up too much of instruction time. In this paper, we first provide the key theoretical principles behind CL and discuss four such principles that research has shown to be essential. These are positive interdependence, maximum peer interactions, equal opportunity to participate and individual accountability. In the last part, which forms that bulk of this paper, we discuss common concerns teachers have about CL and offer practical suggestions of addressing them.

**Keywords:** cooperative learning, teaching methodology, ELT

### **Introduction**

If we pick up a recently published English language teaching (ELT) coursebook, we will find that many of the activities involve students working in groups. There are, of course, activities that require students to work individually, but increasingly, modern coursebooks tend to promote group activities in which students sit together in small groups, including groups of two, sharing and exchanging their knowledge, experiences, and ideas. They may be discussing a reading passage in terms of its overall structure and key ideas, or they may be doing a ranking activity in which they try to reach an agreement as to which city in the world is the most livable, the most peaceful, the most business friendly, etc.

Similarly, L2 teachers who are familiar with the communicative language teaching methodology or task based language teaching often rely heavily on group activities in their lessons. These teachers believe that there is a big difference between learning about the language and learning how to

use the language. Although knowledge about the language (e.g., knowledge about how the present perfect tense is formed) can be useful, one of the most desirable goals of language learning is the ability to use the language orally for a variety of communicative purposes. One excellent way to build students' ability to speak the language is by providing students with ample opportunity to use it in social contexts. Group work provides an excellent platform for students to try out their newly learned language elements in a friendly, non-threatening environment where they practice using English with people they know.

However, it is important to note that while cooperative learning (CL) involves students working in groups, not all group activities can be called cooperative learning activities. In Section 3 below, we discuss four key principles of CL that can promote greater interaction and result in enhanced learning outcomes. Before discussing these principles, we will first explore the link between second language acquisition theories and cooperative learning.

## **Cooperative learning and Second Language Acquisition (SLA)**

What is the connection between CL and SLA? Are there specific SLA theories that support the use of CL in the language classroom? These are pertinent questions that any responsible language teachers would ask before they implement CL in their teaching.

Shawn Loewen in his book "Introduction to instructed second language acquisition" (2015) provides a summary of expert opinions about the link between the broad SLA theories and language instruction. Citing Ortega (2007), he explores three possible links between SLA theories and language instruction: (1) no effect on language teaching, (2) little impact on language teaching and (3) beneficial effects on language teaching. Of significant interest to the purpose of this paper are theories that belong to number 3, i.e., those that can support or enhance language learning in the classroom. Loewen (2015) mentions three SLA theories which a majority of researchers consider to be applicable for language instruction: "Skill Acquisition Theory, Input Processing and the Interaction approach" (p. 9).

While the three theories above can be linked in some way to CL, it is the last one, the Interaction Theory, which is probably the most relevant. The interaction theory says that input alone is not enough. It is important for students to receive sufficient comprehensible language input for language learning to begin, but that is just the first step. The next step is for students to use what they have learned from the input in meaningful interactions with other people. When students use language for meaningful interactions, they

typically engage in what has been called ‘negotiation for meaning’ in which they have a chance to express ideas using the target language, rephrase their ideas when people don’t understand them, correct themselves when they make mistakes or when they are corrected by their group mates, and when they try out different ways of expressing the same ideas in different communicative situations. Frequent experience in meaning negotiation in group settings, according to SLA research, is a major contribution to language development. CL provides that valuable opportunity for students to acquire, maintain and extend their proficiency in the target language.

## **Key principles of CL**

As was mentioned earlier, CL is more than just putting students in groups and hoping that they will put equal efforts in completing a task. CL is a structured group activity based on a set of research based principles. We outline below four key principles that can help students work more productively and optimally in their group.

### ***Positive interdependence***

This principle states that when students share a common learning goal and believe that they need to support each other in achieving that goal, they are more likely to work more productively in their group. The principle also means that success in completing a task depends on active participation of each and every member of the group. Unlike negative interdependence that can promote unhealthy competition, positive interdependence promotes cooperation and a strong sense of shared responsibility. When students feel positively interdependent with their peers, learning becomes more enjoyable and effective too.

We can encourage positive interdependence in many ways. For example, one of the most common tasks in ELT that promotes positive interdependence is the information gap activity. Students work in pairs. One partner has a reading passage about Hong Kong, while the other partner’s passage is about Tokyo. They first read the two reading texts individually and then work together to come up with some of the differences and similarities between the two cities on a number of dimensions such as the size of the city, population, pop culture, and language.

For more ideas about creating positive interdependence, please see Jacobs, Renandya & Power (2016) and Jacobs & Renandya (in press).

### ***Maximum Peer Interactions***

In a traditional teacher centred classroom, one person (the teacher) speaks most of the time while students are often passively listening to the

teacher. Research shows that teacher talk can account up to 80% of classroom talk. Because of this, there is hardly enough time for students to speak, much less engage in group interactions with their classmates.

The principle of maximum peer interactions can help students and teachers overcome the problem of too much teacher talk by giving students more talk time. When students work in groups, several students are talking simultaneously. In a class of 36 students, we can form nine groups comprised of four students in each group, and sometimes, the foursomes can interact as twosomes. In theory, we can expect nine students to be speaking at the same time. If we reduce the group size to three per group, we'll have 12 groups and potentially 12 students speaking at the same time. If we do pairwork, half the class (18 students) are speaking simultaneously. Thus, we can see that if we structure the group using this principle, a sizable number of students will get more opportunities to practice using the target language orally.

Furthermore, the cooperative learning principle of maximum peer interactions encompasses not only the quantity of peer interactions (how many peer interactions are taking place at any one time) but also the quality of these peer interactions. Quality of interactions addresses such matters as whether students are merely exchanging answers or are they also explaining their answers. Are student using cooperative skills – such as praising, encouraging participation, and asking questions - when they interact? Research suggests that such quality interaction promote learning.

### ***Equal opportunity to participate***

Equal opportunity to participate is the term for another important principle of CL. When members contribute more or less equally, the group can reap greater benefits than when only one or two members do so. There are many reasons why some members may not be afforded equal opportunity to participate. For instance, there may be a member who enjoys doing more talking than listening; on the other hand, there might be members who don't feel comfortable expressing ideas and opinions with others. Teachers often cite such lopsided participation as a reason for feeling reluctant to use CL activities, as these teachers worry that this uneven interaction pattern CL benefits only those who tend to talk more and thus dominate the group activity. We address this concern in Section 4 and offer tips on how to equalize participation.

### ***Individual accountability***

The principle of individual accountability states that as the group as a whole should strive towards achieving its goal, each member should also be held accountable for making a fair contribution to achieving that goal.

There should not be freeloaders, i.e., those who simply watch others do the work and then claim credit for what those others have done. To promote individual accountability, the performance of each group member must be assessed. Another means to encourage individual accountability involves grading students based on their group participation. In addition to teacher assessment of student participation, self- and peer-feedback can also be used.

Research suggests that when these four principles are adhered to, students tend to be more cooperative, more willing to contribute to the discussion, more willing to support each other, and as a result, gain more language learning benefits. Despite this research support, as well as the theoretical support cited earlier, some teachers have reservations and concerns about the use of CL in their teaching. We discuss some of these concerns in the next section.

## **Concerns about CL and how to address them**

Although CL has been around for quite some time and many teachers have already been using it in their teaching, some teachers are not very confident yet about using it in their classes and have raised valid questions and concerns about its effectiveness. Furthermore, many students are reluctant to cooperate with peers. Indeed, some teachers and students have expressed their reservations about CL, fearing that it might hinder rather than facilitate language learning. We feel that these concerns are quite normal as we, too, often feel worried when trying out new ways of teaching our students. We list below some concerns and questions about CL that we often hear from teachers and students, together with our responses to them.

### ***CL takes up a lot of curriculum time***

We hear this concern a lot. CL does take quite a bit of curriculum time, but we feel that it is time well spent. As this article has explained, CL can result in deeper and more robust learning, as students have more opportunities to think more deeply, exchange ideas with their peers and further stretch their understanding about a topic in a socially supportive environment. Yes, in the short run, teacher-fronted teaching can be more efficient in terms of time, but the quality of learning may not be as strong.

If we truly value quality over quantity of learning, then we need to re-assess our conceptions about curriculum time. We believe that curriculum time should be used to increase the level of student engagement in the learning process, and not simply used to cover as much content as possible. We are often reminded that our most important job as a teacher is not to

‘cover’ the curriculum, but to help students ‘discover’ the curriculum. CL is one of the best ways to do this.

### ***The blind leading the blind***

Some teachers and students argue that putting students in groups may be a waste of time as they will not be able to learn much from their peers. In fact, they worry that students may learn incorrect language from their peers, given their generally low proficiency in the target language. We feel that this argument is not supported by research or by our experience implementing cooperative learning in various contexts. First and foremost, classrooms seldom consist of students with exactly the same proficiency level. Even if the classes have been formed according to proficiency levels (e.g., high beginner class or lower intermediate class), based on some placement tests, there are still large differences among them, e.g., some may be good with grammar, but not so good with vocabulary; some may be stronger in listening, but weaker in reading or speaking, etc. So, we believe students can learn from each other when working in groups.

Secondly, two or three heads can be better than one. Working with others can provide a positive learning environment that allows students to explore ideas from a wider perspective than if they work alone. They can generate more ideas, discuss these ideas critically, revise and refine them and eventually select the best group ideas that meet the criteria for the task at hand. Research also suggests that when tasks are doable, students are capable of correcting each others’ language mistakes, and they can also do this in a friendly and less threatening manner.

### ***Teachers may lose control of the classroom***

This concern, while understandable, is a misconception about what classroom learning should be like. Some teachers, students, parents, administrators and other stakeholders still seem to think that teachers’ most important role is to be lecturers, who are expected to do most if not all of the talking and explaining during the lesson, while the students are supposed to be passively listening. Conducting a lesson in this way may give the erroneous impression that the teacher is in control of the classroom and that students are learning optimally, but what is really happening in students’ minds is something that we cannot really control.

As our discussion thus far has hopefully made clear to the readers, when students do CL, they are learning to take more responsibility for their learning with help from teachers. When students interact with CL groups, they have opportunities to deepen and refine their understanding, they get to learn from and with their peers, and as a result, they learn more from the lesson. When students work in their CL groups, teachers are not just sitting

idly but continue to provide ongoing scaffolding so that students get the most from interacting with their groups. Thus, when students work in groups, teachers are not losing control; they continue to be in 'control', monitoring whether students are on task, are interacting productively and are making gains in their language proficiency and in their skill at how to do language learning.

Formative assessment provides a good way for teachers and students to control what happens during class. Summative assessment measures learning after teaching has finished, but formative assessment measures learning while teaching takes place. For example, when students do a task in groups of two and teachers monitor student performance, combined with peer and self-assessment, the class can see how well students are doing. Then, based on the outcome of the formative assessment, students and teachers can use their joint control of the class to decide what best to do during the remainder of the class.

***My class becomes very noisy when students learn in groups.***

In a traditional teacher-centred classroom, there is only one person who speaks most of the time: the teacher. The students are usually quiet, as they are expected to mostly listen to the teacher. With only one person speaking, the class is generally not noisy. But when students work in CL groups, many students often speak simultaneously, thus increasing the noise level of the classroom. Because of this, teachers in the classrooms next door may complain about the sound level. Here are some useful tips for addressing their concern:

- a. Student talk is a good thing. A lot of learning happens when students share and exchange their ideas with their peers. For example, when students work in groups, they will have an opportunity to extend, elaborate on and refine their initial understanding of important points from the lesson.
- b. Teacher talk is not a bad thing. However, when the teacher does most of the talking, students become passive recipients in the learning process and do not learn as much as when they are more actively involved in the co-construction of knowledge.
- c. In order to reduce the sound level, the following techniques can be useful:
  - Use pairwork instead of group work. In pairwork, one student speaks to another student only, so they can sit close together and, therefore do not need to speak in loud voices.

- When doing group work, students control the volume of their voice and use a voice that can be heard by their group members only.
- When in groups, students can alternate between talking and writing. This could reduce the sound level.
- Differentiate between "bad noise" and "good noise". Bad noise is when students talk off topic. In contrast, good noise involves students talking on the task in order to promote each other's learning.

### ***Unequal participation***

Another concern is that when students work in groups, one or two students dominate the discussion, while the rest quietly follow the discussion, give very short responses or do not pay attention at all. We feel that the first thing to do would be to find out why the participation is unequal. Is it because of the dominating members or because of the quieter members or both? Perhaps, the dominating members feel that they should do everything because the work will be done quicker and better that way. What about the quieter members. Do they lack the knowledge, skills and confidence needed for the task?

Once we know the sources of the problem, we can provide more substantial content or language support before and while students work in their groups. For example, students can read relevant materials from the internet and watch a video clip of how competent users of English give opinions, explanations, etc. about the topic under discussion. This way, these students may become more willing and confident in contributing ideas in their groups.

Another strategy to promote more equal participation in groups is to assign roles to students. Examples of roles include summarizer, timekeeper, complimenter, encourager, questioner, materials supplier, scribe and reporter. When students take on roles, they are likely to participate more actively. These roles should rotate, so that students can try out a variety of roles, rather than always do the roles at which they feel more confident and comfortable.

Teachers can also use the 'talking chips' strategy to further equalize the amount of participation. For example, the quieter students can be given five chips, while the more talkative ones can be given only three chips. Every time they speak, students surrender one talking chip. When they have no more chips, students cannot speak. Usually, the dominating students use all their chips first, giving their peers more opportunities to speak. This

continues until they use up all of the chips, at which point all the chips are returned and the game begins again.

### ***Students do not get along with their groupmates***

Rather than helping one another, students may instead argue with each other. Rather than working in harmony, students may sit together in an icy silence. Especially when groups are first formed, students may not feel comfortable working with people they do not know well, in the same way that adults like us also do not find it easy to work with people whom we do not know that well. Fortunately, after working together for a while, students may become comfortable with their new groupmates, the ice may melt and harmony may increase.

Teambuilding activities can promote harmonious feelings among group members. One way to do teambuilding involves groupmates in sharing about themselves with each other, for example, telling about their habits, their families and their likes and dislikes. Students can interview each other in pairs and then share what they learned with the other pair in their group of four.

However, sometimes we notice that groups do not work optimally because students have not learned how to work cooperatively in groups. If this is the case, the teacher can step in and teach students some useful cooperative skills. These skills overlap with conversational skills that students need in many social situations. Students usually find it useful to learn cooperative skills, such as how to respect others' ideas, how to disagree politely, how to praise others and how to ask for clarification. Useful phrases associated with these skills can also be learned. Here are some examples:

- “You have a very valid point, but can I offer a different perspective?”
- “I really like your idea. Thank you very much for sharing that idea with the group.”
- “Can you elaborate on your points so that I understand them better?”
- “It seems that we have different opinions about the issue. Your points are useful, and so are mine.”

Jacobs (in Kimura 2009, p. 15) outlines a six-step procedure that can be productively used to teach cooperative skills:

- discuss with students why the skill is important
- help students understand the verbal and non-verbal aspects (the words, gestures and facial expressions) of using the skill

- allow students to practice the skill separate from their course content (e.g., in a grammar course, doing a role play involving the cooperative skill of asking for reasons)
- encourage students to use the skill as they work together to learn course content (e.g., asking each other for reasons while doing a grammar task)
- involve students in discussing how and how well they have been using the skill, perhaps with the aid of the teacher and student observation
- aid students over a long period of time in using the skill regularly and automatically.

***Students use their L1 during group discussions.***

We understand that students may speak in their L1 when they are working in groups. However, instead of being overly concerned, we can try to find out why students are reluctant to use the target language in their groups and find ways to address this. Our experience shows that students tend to use their L1 when discussing something that they are not familiar with. If this is the case, the teacher can pre-teach some of the vocabulary words and sentence structures that students would need when discussing the unfamiliar topic. Another way to build vocabulary for group tasks is for the class to watch a video clip of competent speakers discussing the unfamiliar topic.

If students are generally reluctant to use the target language in their groups, the teacher could use a variety of techniques to get the students to use more English. Here are some useful techniques suggested by Gilbert et al. (1997):

- a. The class tries to come to a consensus as to how much L1 can be used in class. As this is a collective decision, most students are likely to follow the rule they themselves had a role in formulating.
- b. One group member becomes a language monitor. Their job is to encourage group members to use more English.
- c. Students have talking chips. Every time they use their mother tongue, they lose one talking chip. Those who use up their talking chips have to write a brief reflection describing why they used their L1 and their future plan to use more English.
- d. Students have time to think or write before they speak to their partner. When students have time to think first or to write down their ideas before talking, they are more likely to use more English in their

discussion, because they have had time to remember or look up the English vocabulary they will want to use.

Students do not need to be 100% correct when using English. Instead, they should focus more on getting their ideas understood by their group members using whatever L2 resources they have (yes, they can use gestures and other body languages to express their ideas). This way, students will not be afraid of making mistakes and will not switch to their L1 too quickly.

### ***Students talk about other things not related to the topic***

Yes, students may go off topic when in their groups. They may get sidetracked during the discussion and talk about unrelated topics. Actually, some of this is normal for any group. For instance, when teachers have a team meeting, we often do some chit-chatting before we get down to business. This chit-chatting, just like the teambuilding mentioned earlier in this chapter, promotes a friendly feeling in the group.

To help students stay on task, the following suggestions might be useful:

- Explain the task clearly
- Put the instructions on the screen or on the board
- Ask one student in the class (or one student per group) to repeat the instructions
- Set a clear and reasonable time limit (but be flexible about enforcing the time limit, e.g., if students have five minutes to do a task, but after five minutes have passed, they are still on task, give a bit more time)
- Appoint a group leader whose job is, among others, to make sure that the group is on task
- Circulate among the groups and remind students to stay focused on the task
- Use an online countdown timer (e.g., <http://www.online-stopwatch.com/countdown-clock/>) and show this on the screen.

### **Final Thoughts: Vocabulary learning and the four strands**

We have been using CL in our own teaching, both when we teach language skills (e.g., reading, writing and speaking skills) to younger and older adults and when we do in service workshops for novice and experienced teachers. The feedback we receive has been largely positive. While not all of our students enjoy working in CL groups, the majority find CL to be an

effective method for learning language skills and for learning new ideas about teaching the language.

Mother Theresa once said: “I can do things you cannot, you can do things I cannot; *together* we can do great things”. We believe that when carefully planned and properly implemented, CL can help our students learn much more than if they do things alone.

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