

# USING COOPERATIVE LEARNING TECHNIQUES IN TEACHING ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE

Lavrentev S.G.

*Belarusian State University*

**Abstract.** The purpose of this article is to provide teachers with more information on cooperative learning so that a decision to use or not to use cooperative learning is based on a more complete understanding of the process. The article describes the advantages of using cooperative learning strategies in the English as a Foreign Language classroom.

**Key words:** cooperative learning, English as a Foreign Language, cooperative skills, cooperative learning techniques, group activities.

The idea of cooperative learning has been around for decades, but we may still frequently hear comments from foreign language teachers that it's too noisy, they don't have enough space to do cooperative activities and it takes too much time and effort. Some teachers think that they have too many students in their class to work in pairs or small groups. These comments suggest that many language teachers do not know all the facts about cooperative learning.

So what is cooperative learning?

The gist of cooperative learning can be explained by the following Chinese proverb: Tell me, and I'll forget. Show me, and I'll remember. Involve me, and I'll learn.

Cooperative learning can be defined as a strategy for the classroom that is used to increase motivation and retention, to help students develop a positive image of self and others, to provide a vehicle for critical thinking and problem solving, and to encourage collaborative social skills.

There are several strategies for helping teachers understand group dynamics and promote fellow support in the foreign language classroom.

*Restructuring activities.* These activities usually require students to interact physically as a group. In order to carry out the task students are given specific instructions. There is little participation by the teacher. Such activities may help students adjust to future cooperative experiences by breaking down student expectations for the traditional teacher-dominated classroom.

A good example of restructuring is a line-up activity. Students are asked to line up according to a particular criterion, e.g. the date of their birth. In order to accomplish this task students must begin to interact.

*One-Centered activities.* One student is supposed to be in the "spotlight" for a few minutes. These activities are organized so that each student is given individual attention for a limited period of time. Aggressive students can reaffirm their importance to the group. For shy students such experiences increase the likelihood of their contributions in the follow-up discussions and in additional activities later on.

A spotlight interview would be a good example of a one-centered activity. Every student is given a list of interview questions they can ask. They ask the spotlighted student questions on the list. If a student doesn't want to answer a particular question, they can always say they pass or they'd rather not say.

*Unified-group activities.* These activities are aimed at promoting cooperation in the group. Students need to think about group goals rather than individual goals. Praise and positive reinforcement are given to promote group success. Such activities require the participation of each group member. The group cannot be successful if anyone chooses not to participate.

A strip story is a popular unified-group activity. Narrative stories with definite story lines are used for this activity type. The text of a story is cut into strips with several lines of the story on each strip. Students need to work together in their groups to put the story back together. Students are not allowed to show their strip to anyone in order to facilitate talking and discussion. All information has to be exchanged orally.

*Pair activities.* Students have the opportunity to work one-to-one with others in the class. Students can become better acquainted with each other and begin to feel more comfortable sharing values and personal ideas. Almost any activity can be organized for pair work. Information-gap activities with grids and charts are favourite activities for many students. Students will each be given one of the grids which vary slightly. Neither of them contains all the information. Students have to give each other information and figure out strategies for getting information so that they both can complete their grids. All information is exchanged orally.

*Small-group activities.* They have a looser structure than pair activities. These activities require patience, motivation, and good listening habits. The responsibility for success lies with the group itself while the teacher acts only as a facilitator. Students are encouraged to develop techniques for fair group interaction.

For example, you can give students a number of different categories - things you eat for lunch, things you can ride, things that fold, etc. Ask students to think of 10 different things to put in each category.

*Large-group activities.* Their objectives and structure are similar to those of small-group activities. The only difference is the inclusion of a larger number of students. Large-group activities require more skills among group members in fair group interaction.

In cooperative learning, the chief responsibility of the teacher is to set up practice sessions. What cooperative skills to choose for practice will depend on what skills students need to master. According to Johnson and Johnson [1], there are four levels of cooperative skills that teachers can focus on. These are forming, functioning, formulating, and fermenting skills.

Forming skills are directed towards establishing behavioural norms and organizing the group. Groups who have developed the skill of forming can move into their groups quickly and quietly, use quiet voices, stay with their groups for the duration of the activity, encourage participation within the group, and avoid

giving any put-downs. Teachers who say that cooperative group work is too noisy or takes too much time are working with students who have not mastered the skill of forming.

Functioning skills are directed towards completing tasks and maintaining good relationships within the group. Groups must understand what the time limits are and how the activity should be carried out within their groups. Activities that focus on this skill give learners a chance to ask for help, clarify, explain, paraphrase previous comments, and express support.

The skill of formulating is aimed at helping learners develop a deeper understanding of the material being studied and to develop better reasoning strategies, as well as to aid in maximum retention of the material. Activities focusing on this skill help learners develop strategies for remembering material such as summarizing out loud, pointing out information that may not have been summarized properly, adding important information to the summary, relating material from a previous activity to the one being focused on, demanding vocalization in the reasoning process, and seeking clever, useful ways of remembering important information.

The highest-level skill for cooperative work is fermenting. It involves helping learners explore more thoroughly the material they have been exposed to. When students begin to challenge each other's ideas, explore different ways of looking at the material and reanalyze these ideas, they are using the skill of fermenting.

The logical question to ask about cooperative learning in the English as a Foreign Language classroom is what benefits we can get from using cooperative techniques. Most studies investigating the effects of cooperative methods on student learning showed a significant positive effect on academic achievement. In addition high, average, and low achievers can gain equally from the cooperative experience. It is also assumed that students working in cooperative groups will feel more liked by their classmates because of the increased opportunities to

interact. When students feel that they are making significant contributions to the group process and their contributions are valued by other group members, they are more likely to feel successful academically. An important outcome of cooperative activity is improved self-esteem.

Thus cooperative learning can help learners become real partners in the learning enterprise. Since most problems are solved via collaboration, students who learn to work together in an educational setting are better prepared to meet life's obligations. Through cooperative learning techniques students do things in the foreign language classroom that they are asked to do in real life. They take charge of and responsibility for their own learning.

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