COOPERATIVE LEARNING – ONE OF FOREIGN LANGUAGE – LEARNING STRATEGIES

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Over the past 10 years there has been a revival of interest among ESL/EFL teachers in using cooperative-learning activities. With cooperative learning students work together in groups of two to six. However, cooperative learning is more than just putting students into groups and giving them something to do. Cooperative-learning principles and techniques are tools that teachers can use to encourage mutual help and active participation of all group members.

A good deal of research exists in different areas of education suggesting that cooperative learning is also associated with benefits in such key areas as developing self-esteem, positive attitude to learning, improving inter-ethnic relations. In foreign language teaching and learning, theorists mention such advantages for cooperative learning as: increased student speech, more varied speech, more relaxed atmosphere, greater motivation and an increased amount of comprehensible input [3].

But, implementing cooperative learning is not as easy as it might seem at first sight. In fact, in planning and executing cooperative learning teachers have many decisions to make.

At the planning stage of cooperative learning there are a lot of methodological questions to consider, such as whether to stress intrinsic or extrinsic motivation, how much choice to give students in matters pertaining to *how, about what,* and *with whom* they will cooperate, and how strictly to structure activities to encourage effective communication. These questions demand the attention of all teachers interested in cooperative learning. However, this article focuses on the more practical aspects of implementing cooperative learning in the classroom.

In our opinion there are 10 most commonly asked nuts-and-bolts questions and the article presents a wide range of options to answer them.

1. First of all, you are to decide how big the groups should be.

Even two students are a group.

Generally speaking, the smaller the group, the more each member talks and the less chance there is that someone will be left out. Also, smaller groups require fewer group management skills and can usually come to decisions faster. Thus, when starting with cooperative learning, groups of two or three may be best.

Larger groups are good because they provide more students for doing big tasks; they increase the variety of students in a group in terms of skills, personalities, backgrounds, etc.; and they reduce the number of groups for the teacher to monitor.

Six seems to be the maximum size that most textbooks recommend. However, many teachers prefer groups of four or less.

2. How should groups be formed?

Most experts on cooperative learning suggest that teacher-selected groups are best, at least until students become proficient at cooperation. Teacher-selected groups usually aim to achieve a heterogeneous mix. Such a mix promotes peer tutoring, helps to break down barriers among different types of students, and encourages an on-task behavior.

On the other hand, random grouping is quick and easy and conveys the idea that one can work with anyone. It provides leadership opportunities for low achievers and builds a perception of fairness and possibilities for learning from a wide variety of different peers. Random grouping is effective for short-term tasks in that one can work with anyone, and there are a variety of social relationships that can be explored.

Many ways exist for randomizing groups. The most common is counting off. Take the number of students in your class, divide by the number of students you want per group, and the result will be the number students should count to.

The number of students in the class may not fit evenly with the number of students per group. If some students are left out, probably, it is best to add them as fourth members of three-member groups. Your knowledge of your students will help you decide to which groups they should be added. You can also assign extra students as observers.

When students become good at cooperative group work, they can group themselves, for example, by interests in self-directed projects.

3. When students are working in their groups, how can the teacher get their attention?

A signal can be used which means that groups should quickly bring their discussions to a temporary halt and face the teacher. One popular signal is the teacher raising a hand. When students see this, they are to raise their hands too, bring their discussion to a close, and face the teacher. Other possible signals include ringing a bell, playing a musical instrument, blowing a whistle, snapping one's fingers, and flicking the lights on and off.

When students lead class activities, they can use the same signals.

One student in each group can take the role of a group checker with the responsibility of watching out for the teacher's signal and making sure the group responds to the signal quickly.

4. What can be done if the noise level becomes too high?

One student per group can be the noise monitor or "quiet captain," whose function it is to urge the group to work actively, yet quietly.

The closer together students sit, the quieter they can talk. Having students sit close together not only helps reduce the noise level but also helps foster cooperation and minimizes the chance of someone being left out.

A signal similar to the one used to get the class's attention can be used as a sign to continue working, but a bit more quietly. For example, for "stop working," the signal might be a hand raised straight up, and for "work more quietly," the signal could be a hand raised with arm bent at elbow.

One can use stoplight cards. A green card goes on a group's desk if they are working together quietly. A yellow card indicates they need to quiet down a bit. When a red card is put on their desk, the group should become completely silent, and all should silently count to 10 before starting to work again.

5. What if a student doesn't want to work in a group?

Discussing the advantages that students can acquire from learning in groups may help overcome resistance to group activities. These potential advantages include learning more, having more fun, and doing the homework in which cooperation is necessary.

Students may look more favorably at cooperative learning if they understand that talking with others is a language-learning strategy that they can apply outside the classroom as well.

Students should realize that studying in groups is only one of the several ways of learning that are used in class.

Group games may encourage students to look forward to other group learning activities. There are many enjoyable games which also teach academic and social skills. Start with tasks which require the exchange of information. Success here will build confidence in the ability to work in groups.

Students who do not want to study in groups can be allowed to work on their own. Hopefully, after a while, they will want to take part in the group interaction and to join a group.

6. What if some groups finish earlier than others?

Check to see if they really have done the assignment properly.

Have groups that finish early compare what they have done with other groups that have also finished early.

Have groups discuss how they worked together. Then, because sometimes smooth-functioning groups can provide good models for others, you might want to have exemplary groups explain their group process. Hopefully, this will help all groups work together more efficiently.

Develop one or two sponge activities. Sponge activities are short activities, related to the main task, which occupy the extra time between when the first and last groups finish.

Set time limits to discourage groups from dawdling. These time limits are flexible. If groups are working well, but need more time, the limit can be extended.

When students become adept at working cooperatively, ask group members to help other groups that have not finished yet.

Groups that finish early can work on their homework or other assignments.

7. What if a few students are frequently absent?

Assign these students as extra members of groups. For example, if students are working in groups of four, have these students be the fifth member of the group.

Use tasks that can be accomplished in one class period.

Being a member of a group may give these students a feeling of belonging and a reason to come to class that they haven't had before. Also, groups may help them to be more successful in class.

Coach students in how to use appropriate peer pressure to encourage frequently absent members to come to class and to complete their part of group tasks.

Make sure groups have contingency plans in case members are missing. Learning to make such plans is an important group skill [2].

In an ongoing activity, ask groups to update absent members when they return to class. This encourages students to develop peer tutoring skills.

Make groups responsible for contacting absent members to inform them of what they have missed and to make sure they know what their assignments are.

8. How long should groups stay together?

Keeping groups together for fairly long periods – two-to-three weeks – gives them a chance to become comfortable with one another, allows them to form a group identity and bond, and gives them the opportunity to learn how to overcome difficulties they encounter while working together. This is where spending some time during or after cooperative activities to have groups analyze their interaction comes in handy.

Groups that stay together for at least a few weeks facilitate long-term projects, such as those using the cooperative-learning method called Group Investigation [4].

Try to resist the temptation to disband groups that are not working well. Explain to students that they need to learn to be able to work with all sorts of people, including those whom they, at least initially, do not like. Use team-building activities and instruction in communicative skills to help create a spirit of togetherness in groups.

Forming heterogeneous groups according to such criteria as proficiency and personality is a lot of work for teachers. Thus, this shouldn't be done too often.

Even while students are in long-term groups, short one-task activities can be done with different grouping configurations. This may add a bit of variety [1].

9. How should groups be ended?

All groups can end with statements by learners and the teacher about what they have learned as well as about the learning process.

When long-standing groups are disbanded there should be some kind of closing activity for members to thank each other for their help and to sum up what has been learned about working in groups. This can be in oral or written forms.

Group mates can write "letters of reference" to be given to members of the person's new group.

Group pictures can be taken.

Group products can be posted. This fosters a sense of achievement and gives credibility to the group's work.

10. What percentage of time should cooperative learning occupy

No one suggests that students be organized in cooperative groups all the time.

Many cooperative-learning activities combine a group component with the components in which the teacher lectures or demonstrates something and the ones in which students work alone

When students and/or teachers are unfamiliar with cooperative learning, it is best to start slowly.

Discuss with students the whys and hows of learning together.

Making cooperation a content theme also helps students tune in to working together.

Find the right balance according to your philosophy of education, your students' preferences, and what seems to be working best. Students need to know how to cooperate, as well as how to compete and work alone.

Received

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