

## Using Cooperative Learning Techniques in Your Language Classroom

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### *Abstract*

*In this workshop, the presenters will first describe the principles of Collaborative Learning as expressed in Jacobs et al. (2002): “Simultaneous Interaction,” “Equal Participation,” “Individual Accountability,” and “Positive Interdependence.” Learners benefit from working together because each individual member has specific roles and responsibilities during the group effort. The process of learning becomes more meaningful for learners because of the act of discussing and sharing information, and giving and receiving opinions. Through the process of peer scaffolding students can reach higher levels of competency that are unattainable alone. The participants will demonstrate CL activities from their university-level English classes and share student reactions to these activities. Workshop participants will then have the opportunity to experience such CL activities as cooperative shadowing, cooperative creative writing, and cooperative dialogue creation. Possible benefits and drawbacks will also be examined during group discussion sessions with participants in the workshop.*

### **Introduction**

In the language learning classroom, not all group activities are cooperative learning activities. While group activities may leave some students passive and uninvolved, CL activities help make the process of learning more meaningful for learners because of the act of discussing and sharing information, and giving and receiving opinions. Cooperative learning (CL) activities require each individual within a group to have specific roles and responsibilities during the group effort.

### **Basic principles of CL**

Jacobs, Power, and Loh (2002) described the eight basic principles of Collaborative Learning:

- Cooperation as a value
- Heterogeneous grouping
- Positive interdependence
- Individual accountability
- Simultaneous interaction

- Equal participation
- Collaborative skills
- Group autonomy

CL activities that follow these principles will promote learner autonomy and personal responsibility for language learning by allowing individual learner choices and decisions during the learning process. This emphasis on the learning process rather than the product alone is the hallmark of CL language learning. Learners improve not only their linguistic competence but also their communicative competence and collaborative skills.

The basic pattern of CL activities starts with a group of four learners sitting in a square-shape formation. The person sitting next to the learner is his or her shoulder partner, while the learners seated directly behind him or her are their face partners. This pattern is ideal for classrooms with large numbers of learner as well as for rooms with seating arrangements or space that may restrict movement around the classroom.

### **CL techniques and activities**

Three basic techniques of CL that use the basic four-person group pattern include “Write-Pair-Switch,” “Heads Together,” and “Traveling Heads Together” (Kagan, 1994). For the “Write-Pair-Switch” technique, each learner begins the CL activity by working alone at his or her seat. This first step often asks the learner to write answers to specific questions. The second step, “Pair,” involves each learner sharing answers with the shoulder partner, the person sitting next to him or her. In the final step, “Switch,” learners change partners and talk to their face partners seated in front of or behind them.

The second technique, “Heads Together,” expands on the basic four-person group pattern. First, the instructor puts learners into groups of four to work on a task, and then gives each student a number. For example, in a class of sixteen students, the instructor would number the students one through four in each group. Then, after a certain time period, the learners will make new groups with those who have the same number. Learners with the number 1 will make a new group of four with other “number 1” learners, and so on. For classes with larger numbers of learners, the instructors may need to continue numbering learners up to eight or twelve, to ensure that learners maintain the four-person group pattern.

The third technique of “Traveling Heads Together” is a variation of the second technique of “Heads Together.” The instructor can start with four-person groups and then give each group

a number from one through four (again, this depends on the number of groups within the class). After a set time period, learners from groups one through four make a new group with one member from each group. This technique is an effective way for learners to share information and to work on convergent tasks that require learners to work towards the same answer.

CL activities also ensure that each learner within the group has a specific role, and that if each learner does not fulfill his or her role, the group effort fails to meet its overall objective. There are many potential roles, but the most common include:

- Facilitator—a person responsible for ensuring that the group stays on task
- Recorder—a person responsible for writing down group answers and decisions
- Summarizer—a person responsible for summarizing the group answers
- Reporter—a person responsible for conveying the group's ideas to another group
- Time-keeper—a person responsible for checking the time left to finish the task

Other roles such as questioner (a person responsible for asking questions) and praiser (a person responsible for an encouraging atmosphere with praising words) are possible, depending on the nature of the task and the time necessary to complete it.

There are many kinds of tasks with which instructors can utilize the patterns and techniques of Cooperative Learning in the language classroom, starting with simply checking the previous class's homework assignment. One activity we demonstrated in our workshop at Hue University in March, 2006 was a self-introduction activity utilizing the "Write-Pair-Switch" technique.

In this activity, students first write about themselves in a passage of a few short sentences. Then, they introduce themselves to their shoulder partners by making use of the passage. The third step is to switch partners. At this stage, students are to work with their face partners. They introduce not themselves but their shoulder partners to their face partners. If necessary, they can ask questions of their shoulder partners again to confirm the information, while talking to their face partners. This simple activity can help to create a cooperative atmosphere among students and enhance communication in the target language.

A few other cooperative learning activities were presented in workshop handouts. We have not explained them in this report due to the limited space. They are available by contacting the authors.

## References

Jacobs, G. M., Power, M. A., & Loh, W. I. (2002). *The teacher's source book for cooperative learning: Practical techniques, basic principles, and frequently asked questions*. Thousand Oaks, California: Corwin Press.

Kagan, S. (1994). *Cooperative learning*. San Clemente, CA: Kagan Publications.

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