

Cooperative Learning With in the ESL Classroom

Andrew Grey

Abstract— This paper considers the role of cooperative learning and the benefits and drawbacks that are attached with using this strategy in the classroom. Consideration will be given to this strategy being used in an ESL classroom. In summary, does this strategy belong in classrooms?

Teaching methods are constantly changing or evolving and, with new and improved methods improving the way we teach, there is a phenomenon that is enriching ESL classrooms by leaps and bounds; cooperative learning. This paper will define what cooperative learning is, examine both advantages and disadvantages of it, and how it can be implemented in the classroom.

I. WHAT IS COOPERATIVE LEARNING?

Smith and MacGregor (1992) define cooperative learning as an educational approach involving joint intellectual efforts by students, in groups of two or more, mutually searching for an understanding to solutions in a project. It goes without saying that cooperating in groups or teams can help to improve tasks dramatically. Take cooking a large meal, for example. This task can be incredibly difficult to undertake by oneself. However, with friends or family helping, the workload becomes easier, and one may pick up new skills or discover new information from the peers in which the task is carried out with. The same can be said for learning. Whilst its origins date back many years ago, from the earliest men hunting in groups, little research was made until the 1930s. John Dewey, Morton Deutsch, and Kurt Lewin heavily influenced the theory which we know today, as they believed it gave them tools to develop skills further than simply academics, but rather social skills. (Deutsch, M. 1949). It was still largely unused by schools and teachers, right up until the 1960s, where pioneers of the strategy, Johnson and Johnson, started training teachers at the University of Minnesota. They believed that in a classroom that utilized this strategy, students would learn how to work with others, as well as how to work well as individuals, how to compete for fun, and how to stimulate the leaning process.

Cooperative learning is a simple idea. It is where students work together in groups to complete set tasks by the teacher. Students would then be assessed, both individually and as a group, on how they complete the given tasks. This process allows for students to be able to learn from one another as they complete a task. If students work together, they can help each

other, and those with strengths in a particular area can assist weaker students, actively participating in a teaching-learning process.

II. ADVANTAGES OF COOPERATIVE LEARNING

There are many advantages to cooperative learning. It is becoming more and more widely used in classrooms across the globe because of this. Differing greatly from teacher centred classrooms of the past, cooperative learning encourages the students to take centre stage. This benefits the students in a variety of ways.

Firstly, it allows the teacher free time and access to assess students as they carry out tasks. When a teacher is constantly lecturing, it is difficult to gauge whether a student has understood the information being handed down, yet when students are working together as groups it gives teachers the opportunity to watch and identify student's strengths and weaknesses as they undertake work. It also allows for other students to correct their peers which, according to Edge (1997), allows students to practice the target language, increase social skills, and allows them to work independently without teacher guidance.

Secondly, it can create a happy learning environment. Most students dislike working independently in silence, but interpersonal learners in particular learn best when they are working with others. They love to be social, and so cooperative learning gives them the opportunity to utilize this skill. Interpersonal development is an extremely important skill for students, especially young ones, to develop as it is essential for a happy life. A study of the effects of cooperative learning was carried out in 2014 by Megahed and Mohammed on undergraduate students, and they found that, on average, cooperative learning promoted friendship, enhanced learning, led to a deeper understanding of the material, enhanced social skills, prepared students for the real world, and forced students to take on more responsibility. It can be said from this that cooperative learning can develop interpersonal skills and promote a happier, richer learning environment.

Thirdly, cooperative learning does allow for the acknowledgement of individual differences. When a problem arises, it gives students the chance to answer or deal with said problem in a variety of ways. This is beneficial as one student may be weak in one area whilst another strong in said area. It also allows students to see things in a wider perspective from different opinions. This is especially important when using a top-down processing approach tow work in English. It may require experiences that not all group members have had, thus

Mr. Andrew Grey, Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages Department, Faculty of Arts, International College, Siam Technology College, Bangkok, Thailand.

giving members the chance to share these experiences, in the target language, and promote learning within the group.

Finally, it actively encourages students to contribute more. When students are working as a class- perhaps in discussions, weaker students may shy away from getting involved. They may be too shy to answer questions or participate. Cooperative learning provides an environment where students can 'save face', so to speak, and be confident enough to participate when amongst a group of their close peers. They may even have other skills which directly benefit the group. An example may be a student whose English proficiency was low, but who is very talented at art. A simple project, such as creating an English comic, gives said student an opportunity to participate whilst that student's peers provide support in other areas such as writing.

III. DISADVANTAGES OF COOPERATIVE LEARNING

Perhaps one of the biggest problems with cooperative learning is problems with the dynamics of a group. Cooperative learning places such high importance on the group to be able to work effectively and efficiently. Problems within the group such as arguments or power struggles can create conflict leading the group to break down and not commit set tasks effectively. Also, if students who generally misbehave are placed together, then it can also lead to little or poor work being produced. As one can imagine, a classroom in which students are given permission to speak to each other will inevitably grow increasingly louder eventually.

Another problem with putting students into groups is that a very strong student may not be challenged and stimulated if they are not placed among other strong students (Rubin 2003), and weaker students may find it too difficult if they are placed with only strong students. In fact, lower ability students may feel in constant need of assistance instead of tackling leadership roles or being given the opportunity to show off their own skills.

Finally, and understandably, cooperative learning can take a lot longer to prepare lessons. When a teacher is merely lecturing, said teacher only needs the material that they plan to regurgitate, but when a teacher facilitates student learning, they must prepare a lesson which cultivates this, and that can be difficult. Tasks must be carefully considered to ensure that they fit the needs of all students and all types of learners. They must enhance the learning experience and give students the opportunities to search for new information and to bring their own experiences to the tasks. Groups must be carefully considered as to not disrupt the class and ensure that groups work to an optimal standard.

IV. CONCLUSION

The thought of careful and time-consuming planning, that requires a lot of consideration, can be off-putting to many teachers, but if that is done well then the advantages are tenfold. It's clear that cooperative learning not only has its role in the classroom, but instead could be the shift most classrooms are in need of to successfully engage students, give them a passion for learning, and develop their skills as well as

introducing them to new ones indirectly via their peers. Whilst some students do work incredibly well individually, cooperative learning can be the boost other students need to bring them to new high levels within the class. If a group is well organized, the possibilities are endless for all students within that group; not only on an academic level, but on an interpersonal level as well. Quite simply, with a sink or swim together attitude to learning, teamwork is promoted. Helpful behavior is rewarded, and students are happier overall, leading to a happier classroom- and I think everyone can agree that a happier classroom is a better classroom.

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