

Implementing Cooperative Learning in Japanese EFL University Classrooms

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Introduction

In recent years, cooperative learning has become an important part of many classrooms around the world, including Foreign Language classrooms. According to Slavin (1995, p. 2),

“Cooperative learning refers to a variety of teaching methods in which students work in small groups to help one another learn academic content. In cooperative classrooms, students are expected to help each other, to discuss and argue with each other, to assess each other’s current knowledge and fill in gaps in each other’s understanding.”

The aim of cooperative learning is to provide teachers with tools and techniques to structure and implement group work in their classrooms to maximize student learning. Cooperative learning not only supports the mainstream theories about successful language acquisition but also provides language teachers practical tools and techniques to implement this learning theory in their classrooms.

There has been an abundance of research showing the benefits of cooperative learning. Slavin (1995) has summarized the benefits of cooperative learning that the voluminous empirical research has shown, which all basically show that having individuals share group goals while taking individual responsibility for them leads to increased learning outcomes. Therefore, it is important to consider ways that we as language teachers can implement cooperative learning in our

classrooms to maximize our students' learning.

In this paper, I will first briefly discuss some of the second language learning theories that support cooperative learning. Then, I will introduce cooperative learning and the cooperative learning principles that should be present in the classroom in order for cooperative learning to occur. Finally, I will present some model lesson plans for two required English courses at our university that implement cooperative learning techniques.

SLA Theories and Cooperative Learning

Many SLA theories support cooperative learning in the language classroom. In this section, I will briefly discuss some of the SLA theories that strongly support the use of cooperative learning in the language classroom.

First, the input hypothesis and zone of proximal development are very relevant to cooperative learning activities. According to the input hypothesis, second language learning occurs through comprehensible input, which is written or aural language that is just a little beyond the learner's knowledge. Krashen famously called this *i+1* language forms (Jacobs & McCafferty, 2006). Since cooperative learning activities encourage maximum interaction between students that allow the students to practice their oral communication skills, this gives them a chance to encounter many *i+1* language forms that will in turn have an affect in their language development.

The Vygotskian concept of the zone of proximal development (ZPD) is related to the input hypothesis. This concept, according to Vygotsky (1978), refers to the distance between the actual development level of a learner as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers. For Vygotsky, mediation played an important role in a learner's potential achievement level that could not be achieved without mediation which for him meant someone else's guidance. Language also plays an

important role in Vygotskian ideas. He treated all aspects of language as a tool in meaning making in learning activities; without language meaning making would be impossible (Williams & Burden, 1997). Through collaboration, using language, students can develop their skills and develop as humans. Therefore, since this idea is the aim of cooperative learning, ZPD supports cooperative learning.

In addition, cooperative learning is also supported by the output hypothesis, which claims that language learners not only need input for development but also need to be able to produce language to improve. Again, since cooperative learning maximizes students' chances for language production in the classroom, it is clear that this SLA theory supports it as well.

Lastly, affective factors in language learning are receiving more and more attention in the SLA literature. This research also seems to support cooperative learning. According to Dörnyei (2001), cooperative learning, a philosophy that maximizes student collaboration, has an important impact on students' motivation. He discusses several studies, such as Sharan and Shaulov (1990) and Clement et al. (1994), that show cooperative learning being superior in terms of higher learner gains and student achievement to other learning styles because it generates a powerful motivational system to stimulate learning. Dörnyei explains that this happens because the motivational level of a social unit of a group under certain conditions can significantly exceed the motivational level of an individual.

Cooperative Learning Principles

By learning about the cooperative learning principles and how to integrate them into our classrooms can enable us, language teachers, to try to make our classrooms into environments that will allow for maximum learning for students based on the previous SLA theories. Deci and Ryan (1985) explain that all humans have three basic needs: relatedness of being connected to others, competence of being able to achieve something in a supportive environment, and autonomy of

having power over their own fate. The cooperative learning principles explained below are based on this idea.

Jacobs et al. (2002) in their book explain the eight principles of cooperative learning that should be incorporated into the activities in the classroom. The first principle stresses cooperation as a value that should be interwoven into the learning environment so that students come to see it as a value that can help them not only in the classroom but also in their lives outside of the classroom. This is also very important for outside the classroom since cooperation is highly valued everywhere; at home, workplace and school. The second principle advises teachers to use heterogeneous grouping when students work in groups for several reasons, such as being exposed to a diversity of people, ideas and perspectives, stronger students being able to help the weaker students which leads to more helping behaviors, and improved discipline. This is based on the idea that we learn the best from people from different backgrounds and experiences. The authors call the third principle, the most important principle in cooperative learning, positive interdependence. This refers to installing the feeling of mutual responsibility to the group members in which they feel that what helps them helps the whole group, and in turn what hurts them hurts the whole group. The fourth principle, individual accountability, is closely related to the previous principle. Each student is responsible for the success or failure of the group, and therefore, each student is responsible for contributing to the learning tasks at hand. Each student needs to work and contribute towards the goal, learn, and also be able to demonstrate their learning. According to the authors, the fifth principle, simultaneous interaction, refers to students having the maximum opportunities to participate in order to learn and build confidence. In the language classroom, for example, this means allowing the students to use the target language as much as possible with their peers while at the same time making sure that each student gets equal opportunities for practicing the target language. This equal participation is the sixth principle of cooperative learning. The seventh principle stresses the

importance of teaching collaborative skills to the students. We do not naturally know how to work effectively and efficiently with others. Therefore, students need to be trained in collaborative skills while engaging in activities that allow this. The eighth principle advises teachers to instill group autonomy in students. This principle refers to promoting self-reliance and self-direction in the groups; for example, checking with everyone in the group first and thinking about a problem together before asking the teacher for help.

For many teachers, the most difficult task for cooperative learning is the role of the teacher. In the cooperative learning classroom, the role of the teacher is less teacher-centered than in the traditional classroom. According to Hyland (1991), the teacher has six specific roles in the cooperative classroom. First, the teacher together with students shares the responsibility for managing both interaction and learning in the classroom. Second, the teacher aims to structure the learning environment to maximize the opportunities for students to cooperate to obtain the learning goals. Third, the teacher should stimulate interactive language and collaborative problem solving through group activities. Fourth, the teacher needs to choose tasks that involve information sharing, cooperative reasoning, opinion sharing and values clarification. Fifth, coordinating the group activities is the responsibility of the teacher. Lastly, the teacher needs to provide the students with clarification, feedback and motivational support throughout the activities that take place in the classroom.

As Ushioda (2003) summarized, using cooperative learning activities that follow these principles increases learner motivation, promotes collaborative group dynamics and increases students' sense of self-competence and self-worth since the activities promote learner autonomy and personal responsibility for language learning.

Now, let's look at how we can use these principles in practice.

Practical Implications of Cooperative Learning for EFL Classrooms

As shown above, cooperative learning can be a valuable methodology

for the language classroom. In this last section of the paper, I will show practical ways of using cooperative learning techniques in the language classroom. In this part, I will show two lesson plans for two different but connected required first-year English courses at our university. These two lesson plans can be tried out by all section teachers for these two required courses, Writing 1 and Communication Skills, or hopefully can illustrate and give suggestions on how to incorporate these principles in your own lesson plans.

The two cooperative learning techniques used in the lessons that follow are Circle of Speakers and Carousel, which will be explained here. Circle of speakers (Jacobs et al., 2002) is a cooperative learning technique that facilitates the principle of equal participation. In circle of speakers, each group member has a chance and is expected to share some information with the other group members. By taking turns and using a time-limit for each member's turn, each member has a turn to talk. Carousel (Kagan, 1994) is a technique that facilitates simultaneous interaction as students rotate around the room to listen to, observe, and discuss the work done by other students in the class. As Jacobs et al. (2002) explain, there are three steps to this activity: 1) groups do some kind of project that results in a final product, 2) groups take turns rotating around the room to read and watch the other group's work while asking questions and giving feedback on the final product, and 3) groups use the comments and feedback they received during step two to improve their product.

The following two lesson plans are connected and meant to be used with the same group of students in two of their English classes.

Writing 1 Lesson Plan:

Exciting Destinations (Unit 6 in the textbook)

Content: Paragraph Writing

Level: 1st year university students (intermediate to high intermediate)

Objectives: Writing a five-paragraph composition for a travel

magazine

Time: 90-minute lesson

Materials: Textbooks, note paper

Brief description of lesson:

In the previous lesson, the following steps have been completed:

1. Students have studied the sample composition and writing tips in Unit 6.
2. Teacher divides students into groups of three by counting off. The students get into their groups and also get a number (1-3).
3. Teacher explains to the students that in their groups, they are going to write a multi-paragraph composition on a famous city for a travel magazine. The teacher lists famous cities in the world on the board and asks each group to choose one, first-come, first-serve basis.
4. Now that all groups have chosen their cities, the teacher explains that the topics for the three body paragraphs in the composition are: 1) accommodations and food, 2) famous sights, and 3) shopping (with the corresponding student numbers).
5. For homework, students need to find the relevant information for their topic. The teacher provides the students with a worksheet to fill out with information and details about their topic (for example, for shopping, the teacher provides a worksheet with slots for good souvenirs to buy, famous shopping malls, example prices etc. to help the students focus on appropriate information). Students need to bring the completed worksheet with any additional resources they have found to the next class.

This week, the following steps will be completed:

1. In their groups of three, to warm up, students first orally share the information found by using Circle of Speakers (Jacobs et al., 2002).
2. Then students are given the task of writing the first drafts of the body paragraphs of their composition on one paper. Two students verbally produce the sentences (while using the sample

composition as a guide, if necessary) while one student writes them down. The teacher advises the students to do the following (I will call this collaborative writing):

Step 1: Students 1 and 2 look at student 1's hand out (producer) and verbally formulate sentences for the first paragraph on accommodation and food. Student 3 writes down the sentences (recorder).

Step 2: Students 2 and 3 look at student 2's hand out (producer) and verbally formulate sentences for the second paragraph on famous sights. Student 1 writes down the sentences (recorder).

Step 3: Students 3 and 1 look at student 3's hand out (producer) and verbally formulate sentences for the third paragraph on shopping. Student 2 writes down the sentences (recorder).

3. Students write the introduction and conclusion of the composition together using the sample composition and hand in the first draft to the teacher.

The following week, the following steps will take place:

1. Teacher returns the drafts to groups with the editing symbols used for all compositions in this class. In their groups, students try to correct their errors based on the teacher's editing symbols. Then, the students write the final draft of their composition in pen and hand it into the teacher. One student copies down the final draft in pen while the other two students monitor and check for any problems and mistakes. Students hand in the final draft to the teacher.

How does this activity conform to the CL principles?

There are three students in a group because this writing activity has three main body paragraphs so this will allow each student be responsible for the research of one paragraph. Students are divided into groups randomly. The CL technique used is circle of speakers to verbally share their research with each other before writing and collaborative writing to make the writing process interactive. The

groups need to produce a 5-paragraph composition together combining each student's individual research, which encourages positive interdependence. As for the reward, the group receives one score for their composition and one score for their individual research worksheet. Individual accountability is encouraged during circle of speakers and during collaborative writing when each student needs to present their research that is basis for one of the paragraphs in the composition. Equal opportunity to participate is encouraged all through the task because everyone has a chance to take part in various roles and to share their research and to write during the task. Maximum peer interaction is encouraged in two ways: 1) Quantity of interaction: During circle of speakers, 33% of the class should be speaking at the same time. During collaborative writing, 33% of the class should be writing at the same time and 66% of the class should be producing sentences/speaking, and 2) Quality of interaction: Sharing their research, dictating sentences while paying attention to grammar/spelling etc and writing while paying attention to grammar/spelling. In addition, one collaborative skill can be emphasized during the lesson; in this case, the teacher could choose polite turn taking, for example. Taking turns politely is a very important skill and since this activity requires a lot of back-and-forth interaction between the students, it gives a good chance to practice this skill. Before the activity, the teacher can explain this concept and give students a hand out with polite expressions and phrases that can be used during this activity. The groups process their interaction through peer feedback; students discuss how they did in regards to turn taking and give each other comments and suggestions about this skill. Learning is assessed by the written composition.

**Communication Skills Lesson Plan:
Exciting Destinations Poster Presentations
(adapted from Apple, 2006)**

Content: Poster Presentations based on a composition already written

Level: 1st year university students (intermediate to high-intermediate)

Objectives: To prepare and participate in a poster presentation about a composition written for a travel magazine

Time: 90-minute lesson

Materials: Poster Boards

Brief description of lesson:

1. Prior to today's lesson, students have written a composition about a famous city in their Writing 1 class in groups of 3 students. Students have also prepared a poster board with the important details and photos etc. for each section of the composition that they will use for today's lesson.
2. As class begins, the groups are divided into two: one half will first be the tour guides talking about their cities and the other half will be tourists visiting these different cities. The groups that will be tour guides will be given a corner in the classroom where they will set up their poster and get ready to greet the tourists. A blank poster board will also be provided by the teacher and attached on the wall next to each group's prepared poster board. This is for tourists to write a comment about that group's poster.
3. Using the Carousel (Kagan, 1994) technique, the tourists wander around and look at the tour guides' posters. Each tourist must ask at least one question from each group and the tour guides take turns answering the questions. Tourists also must leave one comment on the feedback poster board for that group.
4. Halfway through the class, the groups change roles and repeat step #3.

How does this activity conform to the CL principles?

There are three students in a group because this activity is based on the writing assignment that was completed in the same groups. This activity uses the carousel CL technique, which is used to facilitate simultaneous interaction, which is the main goal for this course. Positive

interdependence is encouraged by having the groups produce a poster based on the information in their composition. Each student is responsible for creating the part for the poster of the body paragraph that they were responsible for (choosing what information to include, finding pictures etc.), so each student is an expert in one area when the tourists come around to ask questions. During the carousel activity, the student should answer the questions that concern their section of the poster, which encourages individual accountability as well as equal opportunity. Maximum peer interaction is achieved because during Carousel, 50% of the class should be speaking at the same time. Giving feedback to peers can be the one collaborative skill emphasized during this activity because it's an important skill and this task provides a good opportunity for practicing this skill. Tourists circulating and watching the posters could be required to write one comment as feedback for each group.

Conclusion

As the research has shown and as I have mentioned in this paper, cooperative learning can lead to learning gains in the language classroom. The cooperative learning classroom provides a comfortable and anxiety-reducing environment for learning, and therefore, cooperative-learning techniques can provide valuable tools for the language teacher. The sample lesson plans in this paper hopefully illustrate some ways that language teachers can do this in their classrooms with their own lessons.

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Keywords

Cooperative learning, EFL classroom