DOES THE MAGIC OF COOPERATIVE LEARNING STILL WORK?

Risa Leynes Pangilinan
Saint John's Catholic School, BSD City

Abstract: Cooperative learning (CL) has been one of the most widely adopted approaches in language teaching. Many educators jumped into the bandwagon after seeing how it could easily reap results in the classroom and promote a positive condition for language, content and community learning. It provided a stable affective ground that permits English teachers to maneuver group dynamics into creating an environment conducive to learning and meeting instructional goals. However, the peak of CL popularity caused it to plateau and some of its inherent principles to be distorted. The community has overly espoused cooperative learning irrespective of the contexts and structures it requires. This paper aims to realign present-day beliefs and misconceptions in practice to intrinsic cooperative learning fundamentals. Then, based on the theoretical insights, findings in CL researches and first-hand experience in the classroom, a list of recommended structures and strategies is provided to help English language teachers design activities with significant cooperative value.

Keywords: *cooperative learning, group work, positive interdependence, individual accountability, equal participation, simultaneous interaction*

Introduction

When communicative language teaching dominated language education in 1980s, the hype of creating a more relaxed and cooperative learning atmosphere went with it. Larsen and Freeman (2000) specified that negotiating meaning within a cooperative relationship among students would further refine their communicative competence. CL began to earn its distinction.

Cooperative learning is described as students and teachers working together to pursue certain goals and objective. It is structured, prescriptive to teachers about classroom techniques and more directive to students about how to work together in groups (Brown, 2007). Over the years, teachers employ cooperative or quasi-cooperative learning activities in their English classes for so many reasons. Factors like little to no preparation, and lessening teacher talk for small to large classes contribute to its instantaneous popularity. CL merits are assumed to be more immediate and noticeable. Students are more engaged. Active involvement remains to be one of the signs of successful instruction. Moreover, CL is proven to increase students' level of motivation. Dörnyei (1994) mentioned, "Group-based motives form a great proportion of the complex of language motivation; that is, the way learner feel in their classes will influence their learning effort considerably."

Similarly, the effect of cooperative learning in the cognitive and affective development of students is immense to be questioned. It can change behavior into a desirable one. Once norms are established in a group, it rejects unacceptable behavior more effectively than having a teacher address the problem herself (Dörnyei, 1997). In addition, learners working within the same Vygotsky's zone of proximal development share similar interests and range of abilities. Cooperative learning invests in a group of learners with a small difference in cognitive levels. This set up is more ideal for it enables more cognitive growth than a group with bigger cognitive gaps (Kuhn, 1972).

Needless to say that teachers capitalizing on the effects of cooperative learning is on the right track. The knowledge of the correct and most profitable approach and why it works marks the onset of a longer scrutiny. This paper presents the common misconception that caused malpractice of CL in the field and will also enumerate some recommendations to correct and guide English teachers in maximizing the approach. The magic of cooperative learning will once work, provided that teachers are given the correct perception, condition and structures that will help it flourish and do its tricks.

Group Work: False Cooperative Learning
Group work, by itself, is not cooperative learning

This misnomer has permeated language instruction over the last two decades. Teacher and administrators alike use the terms *cooperative learning* and *group work* interchangeably. The two presumed identical concepts may be overlapping with their shared characteristics but are not intrinsically one and the same. Zoltán Dörnyei (1997) mentioned, "while communicative group work is a prerequisite to CL and frequently embodies certain CL principles, small group activities in language classes often are not cooperative in nature, or they underutilize CL principles."

Asking the students to form groups with 4-5 members, assigning roles and responsibilities, and giving uniformed or differentiated goals within an agreed time allotment can be considered as one easy-peasy

culminating group activity to end the discussion on almost about anything. Kagan and High (2002) gave a concrete classroom example in which this procedure is applied. In Classroom A, the teacher has students sitting in groups of four and often calls students for interaction in groups. The teacher gives an instruction. "In your groups talk this over. What are some of the items we find in the produce section of the market? Let the leader of the group facilitate the discussion."

At a glance, the activity may seem cooperative. Everyone in the group is asked to participate in enumerating answers. Each member has an equal chance to be involved and have a share in the group's list. However, that is not the case. Kagan (2002) pointed out that in mixed-ability classroom, more proficient members in the group would likely monopolize such activity. One to two members may opt not to contribute and let their minds drift while the other two work on the task.

Classroom B shares the same topic and group goal with Classroom A. However, the teacher differentiates the structure of facilitating the activity, "In your groups, turn to your shoulder partner and do a Rally Robin. Take turns naming some items we find in the produce section of the market."

Many language teachers have fallen into the trap. Group works like role-plays, mural or poster making, oral dialogues are not completely cooperative. To point out how Classroom A is just an ordinary group work, Kagan and High (2002) enumerated the four basic principles of cooperative learning, P-I-E-S.

Positive interdependence promotes the link among the members of the group in which one cannot succeed with others' aid. Accomplishing a task is impossible without the contribution of all members of the group. In the previous example, Classroom A lacked positive interdependence. The gain of one member is not the gain of all (Kagan, 2002). Positive interdependence is concordant with the concept of 'sink or swim together' (Johnson, 1995). Classroom B, on the other hand, stresses the idea that one person cannot do it all. To operate a Rally Robin, you need to work with a partner.

Individual accountability requires all members in the group to participate. Students cannot opt out from the activity since individual public performance is needed (Kagan, 2002). Classroom A does not require all students to participate. One or two persons may accomplish the task given to the group. Students are physically present in Classroom A, but they can be preoccupied and be less involved in the assignment. Whereas, Classroom B requires all members to be a speaker or listener at one time, and then, switch roles.

Equal participation necessitates the activity to provide an even opportunity for all members of the group to participate. In ordinary groupings, leaders are oftentimes doing all the work. Members rely on what the leader will do. They also accomplish the least amount of work, and oftentimes only when they are demanded. Effective cooperative grouping happens when there is an equal distribution of work, not burdening one party while lessening the role of the other.

Classroom A needed *simultaneous interaction*. As much as possible, the students take on the active role in mingling with other members of the group. They must not remain passive listeners for a long period of time. Kagan (2002) presented how simultaneous interaction works in a cooperative classroom. In Classroom A, one student speaks at a given time, that is, one fourth or 25% of the class. In Classroom B, however, one student speaks to his/her partner, thus giving us, 50% of the class engaged in communication at a given time.

These four principles must be satisfied to ensure that the magic of cooperative learning will work in class. The four areas provide us with the holistic perspective on the prerequisites of CL.

Suggested Cooperative Practices
Group Formation

Experts suggest that teacher-selected groups work best in a language classroom (Jacobs & Hall,). Mixed-ability groups promote peer tutoring and supportive environment, remove barriers across different levels of proficiency and effectively tap students to work on tasks based on their strengths. To effectively create a heterogeneous mix, teacher may employ the results of language pre-tests or diagnostic tests, previous scores in English, remarks of former teachers and profiling reports from guidance counselors.

English teachers may form four proficiency clusters. Then, spread the members of each cluster to different groups. This scheme will ascertain that each group will have a share of students with high, intermediate, basic and emerging proficiency.

Seat Assignment

In the initial stages of grouping, the students may still have inhibitions and reservations. To address issues like these, Shaw (1981) mentioned factors like proximity, contact and interaction to be critical in forming group cohesion. By asking the members of the group to be seated together in the classroom, the teacher builds an atmosphere of belongingness. Students will enjoy opportunities for them know more of each other and establish rapport. It creates a place where they feel safe, supported and motivated. Also, when students are seated with their group mates, correction of misbehavior is immediate and giving of praises is almost automatic.

Delegation of Tasks

While other experts argue that assigning group leaders is necessary and others say that leadership can be distributed among members, it is indubitably necessary for every member of the group to have certain roles and functions. They must be given a clear set of expected behavior and output during cooperative activities. True cooperative learning transpires when the success of the group is dictated by the individual successes of the members comprising it.

It is critical to give different roles, not repetitive and not overlapping, to every group member. The job of each student gives him or her *group value*. A member who feels and is regarded important is claimed to perform better. Delegation of tasks satisfies the principle of positive interdependence. The members need to be assured that when they accomplish their individual goals, it will lead to the accomplishment of team goals. For example, in a group, one will be the "note-taker", "summarizer", "checker", "explainer", etc. The group will not be successful if the summarizer failed to do his part. This thinking obliges all members to do their job; each has a role to play and no one remains in the background.

Slavin (1995) cited in his article the research findings of Donald Dansereau and his colleagues at Texas Christian University. They tried a method that requires the students to take roles as recaller and listener. The pair reads a text, and is then summarized by the recaller. The listener corrects and feeds some pieces of information that were left out. The two switch roles in the next session. They concluded that both the recaller and the listener learned more than the students working alone.

Activities vs. Structures

Cooperative activities are limiting compared to cooperative structures. Activities have specific content-bound objectives. For example, students will write a dialogue about the pros and cons of social networking. The activity is very specific and thus, it cannot be used for other language content. On the other hand, structures maybe used repeatedly with almost any subject at a wide range of grade levels and at various points in the lesson (Kagan, 1990).

Teachers who wish to maximize cooperative learning in the classroom must explore the adaptability of cooperative structures rather than exhausting themselves with various CL activities. Numbered Heads Together, for instance, can be used for a wide array of topics in English. In Numbered Heads Together, each student in a group has 1, 2, 3 or 4. The teacher asks a question. The teacher tells the students to "put their heads together" to make sure everyone knows the answer. The teacher calls any number. Students with that number raise their hands to respond.

Another popular structure is called Think-Pair-Share. Students think to themselves on a topic provided by the teacher. They pair up with another student to discuss it. They then share their thoughts with the class. Kagan created and presented a lot of structures that teachers can use in the classroom in his journal articles (1990, Kagan & High, 2002, Jacobs & Hall, 2002). They differ in their usefulness in the academic, cognitive and social domain.

Materials Distribution

One way to create positive interdependence is limiting the material given to the group. Distributing only one copy of the reading text forces the students to share the material to their friends. A member may even decide to read it aloud to assure that everyone receives the content of the material. The Jigsaw procedure can also be utilized. Members of the group receive different items that need to be fitted to together so the group can create one complete "whole". One part is integral to the completion of the whole.

Rewarding

Teachers, by practice, give group rewards to the most outstanding group. The rewards can take the form of certificates, perks and other privileges. There is nothing wrong with them. In fact, evidence in the field confirms the essential role of group rewards to the effectiveness of cooperative learning. However, one qualification must be satisfied at all cost, group rewards should be based on the individual learning of all group members (Slavin, 1995).

One student in each group was tasked to be the average expert. He/She computes for the overall average of the scores of all team members. The group with the highest average earns points for their team. It came almost instinctive for the more proficient members to assist the weak ones, or the weak ones seeking help to improve their standing. It is very significant to stress the value of individual performances for the group to succeed, all for one and one for all.

Role of the Teacher

The commitment of individual members to their groups mirrors the level of commitment that the teacher demonstrates in the classroom. The teacher sets the standard of how a student must behave towards group norms and goals by showing how consistent he/she is in upholding them. It is not for the teacher to lead

them in doing tasks, but to produce the correct climate and to facilitate the groups so they can work on their own. To be an excellent facilitator, the teacher must have these traits: emphatic ability, acceptance of the members (positive regard) and congruence (Dörnyei & Malderez, 1997).

Empathy can be seen as the teacher's ability to establish rapport and feel for the members of the group as if he/she is one of them. Congruence refers to the teacher's ability to be in a state of realness and authenticity while assisting groups. The teacher who exhibits an all-knowing image assumes an autocratic position, which will not work. Cooperative learning demands the teacher to accept his or her own limitation. This will be setting an example that one is only able with the assistance of others.

Conclusion

Although every teacher in the field is familiar with cooperative learning and why it works in the classroom, this familiarity acts as an extinguishing element that stopped them to question and explore. The complacency among language teachers allowed distorted CL beliefs to thrive. Cooperative learning is a formidable approach that can be used across different levels of proficiency and motivation, language backgrounds, focused contents, and age groups. What is needed is the correct execution in the classroom along with the application of the correct guiding principles, PIES. This paper is just a tip of the iceberg; CL experts and experienced teachers provided the community with a rich bank of articles and researches that will guide them to streamline the application of CL in their own classroom. Cooperative learning is a long intricate process, but the reward will be magic unfolding before your eyes.

Bibliography

Brown, Douglas. (2007) Teaching by principles. An interactive approach to language pedagogy.3rd ed. Pearson Education. p. 47-8

Dörnyei, Z. (1997). Psychological processes in cooperative language learning: Group dynamics and motivation. The Modern Language Journal 81. (pp.482-493).

Dornyei, Z., & Malderez, A. (1997). Group dynamics and foreign language teaching. System, 25,65-81.

Holt, D. D. (Ed.). (1993). Cooperative learning. Washington, DC: Center for Applied Linguistics & ERIC Clearinghouse on Languages and Linguistics.

Kagan, S., & McGroarty, M. (1993). Principles of cooperative learning for language and content gains. In D. D. Holt (Ed.), Cooperative learning (pp. 47- 66). Washington, DC: Center for Applied Linguistics & ERIC Clearinghouse on Languages and Linguistics.

Kagan, S. & High, J. (2002). Kagan structures for English language learners. ESL magazine. July/August issue.

McGroarty, M. (1993). Cooperative learning and second language acquisition. In D. D. Holt (Ed.), Cooperative learning (pp. 19-46). Washington, DC: Center for Applied Linguistics & ERIC Clearing- house on Languages and Linguistics.

Oxford, Rebecca. (1997) Cooperative learning, collaborative learning and interaction: Three communicative standards in the language classroom. Modern Language Journal 81:443-56.

Shaw, M. E. (1981). Group dynamics: The psychology of small group behavior (3rd ed.). New York: McGraw-Hill.

Slavin, R. E. (1995).Research on cooperative learning and achievement: Whatwe know, what we need to know. Contemporary Educational Psychology.