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Developing Cooperative Learning in the Efl/Esl Secondary Classroom

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Learner Behaviour and Language Acquisition Project: Developing Cooperative Learning in the EFL/ESL Secondary Classroom

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Introduction

The City University's Strategic Grant supported Project into *Learner Behaviour and Language Acquisition* was a one year pilot research study which started in September 1998. In this pilot project, we aimed to offer a challenge to the negatively constructed notions of English language learners' passivity and lack of motivation in Hong Kong schools which are believed to be influenced by an over-reliance on teacher-fronted and teacher-directed instructional styles (Lai, 1990; Yu, Liu & Littlewood, 1996). We believed that given such assumptions, practically-focussed applied research might be well-directed towards an exploration and examination of alternative teaching and learning modes which may prove facilitative of more active and engaged student language learning. Innovative interactive learning contexts may provide the keys to increasing teaching and learning effectiveness, particularly in terms of heightened English language competence, the desirability of which is consistently advocated by local authorities and researchers (ECR6,

1995; Johnson & Cheung, 1995) and by government policy makers anxious to promote a greater confidence and competence in second language learners as part of a mission to improve productivity and competitiveness (Tung Chee Wah, 1997). Accordingly, we set out the following objectives for the project:

1. to design, develop and monitor innovative modes of cooperative teaching and learning involving pupil:pupil and pupil: teacher partnerships;

2. to study the acquisition and development of pupils' communication strategies, exploring in particular the relationships between learner behaviours (interpretive and accommodating strategies), language data and learning outcomes, in a view of language learning and teaching as social action, and where classrooms are seen as sites of particular texts, social practices and discursive practices;

3. to study the comparative effects of transmissive versus cooperative learning in facilitating the English language development, both formally and functionally, of selected Form 3 secondary pupils, drawing on data from a range of reading, writing, speaking and listening tasks;

4. to characterise the classrooms under study in terms of specific modes of conduct and communication between teachers and pupils and among pupils, focussing in particular on the discourses of the participants while engaged in specific learning tasks;

5. to offer explanatory evidence for the socially constructed nature of participants' preferences for particular modes of teaching and learning, and to assess the potential of alternative modes of classroom interaction both in terms of relative effectiveness and as challenges to traditional ways of behaving.

In this paper, we describe the key components of our research into cooperative learning and the development of tasks. We follow this with an account of the procedures that we carried out and the outcomes of our pilot study. To support these research outcomes, we offer additional insights into the context of the study by offering some insights into the perspectives of those teachers, learners and researchers' engaged in the study. Selected transcripts are included to illustrate the rich opportunities for interaction and learning afforded by cooperative language learning.

Background to Cooperative Learning

What *is cooperative learning?*

Olsen and Kagan, (1992) define cooperative learning as "group learning activity organised so that learning is dependent on the socially structured exchange of information between learners in groups and in which each learner is held accountable for his or her own learning and is motivated to increase the learning of others." Cooperative learning is seen as a process where students work together in groups to "master material initially presented by the teacher" (Slavin, 1990, p.20). According to Slavin (1990), the goal of cooperative learning is for students to help each other succeed academically. Cooperation is working together to accomplish shared goals. Within cooperative situations, individuals seek outcomes that are beneficial to themselves and beneficial to all other group members. Cooperative learning is the instructional use of small groups so that students work together to maximize their own and each other's learning.

The cooperative group is usually three to four students who are connected by a common purpose – to complete the task and to include every group member. Cooperative groups are appropriate for

all ages, subject areas, types of students. Regardless of age, almost everyone loves to socialise, be with others, and to work together (Rimmerman, 1996).

Basic principles of cooperative learning

Kagan (1994) emphasises five basic principles of cooperative learning: positive interdependence, individual accountability, equal participation, simultaneous interaction and group processing. For cooperation to work well, teachers have to structure the five essential elements in each lesson. The characteristics of each principle are summarised below.

- *Positive Interdependence* – This is the heart of cooperative learning as it fosters a commitment to success as each person's efforts benefits not only him- or herself, but the whole group. Cooperation cannot take place without interdependence.

- *Individual accountability* - each member is regarded as important and must be accountable for contributing his or her share of work.

- *Equal participation* – all students have to participate actively in the learning process.

- *Simultaneous Interaction* - encourages face-to-face interaction and the promotion of each other's success by sharing resources

and helping, supporting, encouraging, and praising each other's efforts to learn. The group is regarded as both an academic support system and a personal support system.

Group processing – students are taught how to provide effective leadership, and develop decision-making, trust-building, communication, and conflict-management skills. Group members discuss and monitor how well they achieve their goals which members' actions are helpful and unhelpful as well as make decisions about what behaviours to continue or change.

Cooperative learning can be successful when these principles are in place and when students are actively encouraged to support each other's learning. In a cooperative classroom, a student who tries hard and helps others to learn should be praised and encouraged by groupmates. This very much contrasts with the situation in a traditional class. Hulten and DeVries (1976), Madden and Slavin (1983) and Slavin (1978) all found that students in cooperative learning classes felt that their classmates wanted them to learn. Cooperative learning is dependent upon, and motivated by, the focus on the reward or goal structures under which students operate

(Slavin, 1983). When the students work together toward a common goal their learning efforts help them and their group mates succeed.

General Research on cooperative learning

Social psychological research on cooperation dates back to the 1920s, but research on specific applications of cooperative learning to the classroom did not begin until early 1970s (Slavin, 1977). Research findings in both L1 and L2 contexts suggest that cooperative learning has benefits for many learners (e.g. Long & Porter, 1985; McManus & Gettinger, 1996; Kohonen, Jaatinen, Kaikkonen & Lehtovaara [in press]). These studies indicate that compared with competitive or individualistic learning experiences, cooperative learning is more effective in promoting such values as intrinsic motivation and task achievement. Cooperative learning is also said to generate higher order thinking skills, improve attitudes toward the subject, develop academic peer norms, heighten self-esteem, and increase time on task (Johnson & Johnson, 1985; Slavin, 1983, 1991). When compared with competitive and individualistic efforts, cooperative learning typically results in greater efforts to achieve, more positive relationships among students (Cooper, Johnson, Johnson & Wilderson, 1980; Solomon, Watson,

Schaps, Battistich & Solomon, 1990), and greater psychological health (Bandura, 1977; Schunk, 1987). Among all the positive outcomes of cooperative learning, the most important outcome of cooperative learning is enhanced achievement (Slavin, 1995)

Cooperative Learning and the Second Language Learner

In traditional classrooms, students with limited English proficiency receive less teacher and peer communication, and communication at a lower linguistic and cognitive level (Long, 1980; Schinke-Llano, 1983). Research on cooperative learning, in contrast, indicates that cooperative learning provides second language learners with opportunities to hear more language and more complex language during interaction with peers. This increased complexity of input facilitates language development. Group activity also increases students' chances to be exposed to ideas that may be more cognitively complex. Complexity and variety of input produce higher level cognitive development (Bloom, 1964; Bruner, 1966; Sharan et al., 1984).

Traditional participation structures restrict both teachers' and students' communicative range. Moreover, traditionally teachers dominate classroom speech, often by a factor of three or four

utterances to one short student response (Chaudron, 1988; Long & Porter, 1985). Typical classroom discourse exchanges follow a regular tripartite pattern of initiation-response-feedback, with the teacher controlling the first and third moves and the student's role restricted to that of respondent (van Lier, 1996). Research suggests that the greatest growth in language and cognitive development is made by a child who is in a rich and collaborative environment with an informed teacher (Enright & McCloskey, 1985). The cooperative classroom can be such an environment because it can provide the foundation for a communicative classroom organised to foster collaboration, purpose, student interest, previous experience, holism, support and variety (Enright and McClosky, 1985).

The Teacher's role in cooperative learning

The teacher has many roles in the cooperative learning classroom (Johnson & Johnson, 1987). These roles may be characterised as follows:

Making pre-instructional decisions

- Specifying academic and social skills objectives. Every lesson has both academic and interpersonal and small group skills objectives.

- Deciding on group size. Learning groups should be small.

- Deciding on group composition. Assigning students to groups randomly or select groups. Maximize the heterogeneity in each group,

- Assigning roles, structure student-student interaction by assigning roles such as "reader, recorder, encourager of participation, and checker for understanding".

- Arranging the room. Group members should be 'knee to knee and eye to eye' but arranged so they all can see you at the front of the room.

- Planning materials. Arranging materials to give a 'sink or swim together' message. Give only paper to the group or give each member part of the material to be learned.

Explaining task and cooperative structure

- Explaining the academic task and the objectives of the lessons, the concepts and principles students need to know in order to complete the assignment, and the procedures they are to follow.

- Explaining the criteria for success. Students work should be evaluated on a criteria-referenced basis. Making clear your criteria for evaluating students' work.

- Structuring positive interdependence. Students must believe that they 'sink or swim together'.

- Structuring intergroup cooperation. Having groups check and help other groups.

The teacher plays a leading role in setting up the cooperative learning structures as well as in preparing students for the tasks and in facilitating the accomplishment of the task goals.

Method

Participants

The participants were eight teachers and approximately 520 Form 3 male and female students from three local secondary schools with banding ranged from 1.4 to 4.5 (out of 5). The medium of instruction in the three schools was mainly English, supplemented by Cantonese. Students aged from 14 to 17 with mixed language proficiency across the three schools. Students in the lowest banding school had the lowest standard of English, low motivation and consistently serious class discipline problems, whereas students in the other two schools had an average to high standard of English proficiency and the habitual practice of speaking English in language classes.

Participating teachers' background

The participating teachers were seven female and one male native Chinese (Cantonese) speakers. More than half of the teachers (5 out of 8) were young teachers aged from 20 to 29, whereas the other three were aged from 30 to early 40's. Among the eight teachers, more than half of them (5 out of 8) were experienced teachers with five to ten years of teaching experience, with a specialisation in teaching English at secondary level. The other three teachers also had three to five years of experiences in teaching English at secondary level. Further, the majority of the participating teachers (6 out of 8) were university graduates of different but related disciplines such as English Literature, and teaching English as a foreign language. Two teachers had formal teacher training and teacher certificates. Among the degree-holder teachers, three out of six had received in-service teacher training.

Facilitating cooperative language learning

To facilitate the work of the project, the Project team organised a number of workshops over the duration of the project. The following workshops were conducted by the researchers to assist the

development of teachers' knowledge and skills in carrying out

cooperative language learning:

Workshop 1	Introducing cooperative language learning I
Workshop 2	Introducing cooperative language learning II
Workshop 3	Introducing task-based teaching
Workshop 4	Observing cooperative language learning classes
Workshop 5	Reporting and sharing on implementing cooperative language learning

In addition to the workshops, the Project team also organised several

school visits in order to develop a deeper understanding of

cooperative language learning in the Hong Kong setting.

Materials design

The cooperative language learning tasks were designed by the

Project team and provided for project teachers to try out in their

classes (see Appendix A for an exemplar). Tasks were based on the

respective students' coursebooks and the respective school syllabus.

Each project teacher was asked to try out one to two language tasks

every month. In one of the three project schools, teachers also

designed their own cooperative language tasks and tried out the

tasks with their students every week in addition to the tasks provided

by the Project team. Feedback and comments on the tasks were

collected from the project students and their teachers after every task to help improve the appropriateness, relevance and feasibility of the task design.

Task Characteristics & Procedures

The characteristics of the task such as the its difficulty level, students' familiarity with the task and its procedures all impact the students' response and engagement in carrying out the task. Bygate, Swain & Skehan (in press) and Skehan (1998) suggests five principles for task-based instruction. These are:

1. Choose a range of target structures

2. Choose tasks which meet the utility criterion

3. Select and sequence tasks to achieve balanced goal development

4. Maximise the chances of focus on form through attentional manipulation

5. Use cycles of accountability

To design or select tasks, it is vital to have tasks which focus on the attainment of particular goals. According to Skehan (1998, p.130), tasks and their relevant support activities should be designed and chosen to "make the use of structures easier without their being compulsory". In planning for a number of tasks, the instructional

objectives can then be used as a basis for sequencing the tasks in a balanced manner. To counter this, it is important to design and select tasks which are of the appropriate level of difficulty and focused in their aims between fluency, accuracy and complexity (Skehan, 1998). Moreover, it is also important to provide the learners with "the most effective opportunity available for a focus on form in the context of meaningful language use" (Skehan, 1988, p. 131). Across the different phases of a task, several conditions need to be established. At the initial stage, particular conditions are needed to maximise the chances of noticing the language form of the task. At the task completion phase, effective attentional conditions are essential so that the language form of the task is on focus. Apart from these conditions, opportunity for learners' reflection and awareness is necessary so that "whatever is accomplished during a task is not simply ephemeral, but can be processed more deeply and consolidated" (Skehan, 1998, p. 131).However, as the use of specific structures cannot be guaranteed, it is important to have learners consciously engaged in cycles of evaluation. In other words, learners should be periodically allowed to reflect upon what has been learned.

Once a task has been selected, the task can be executed in a number of ways. Willis (1996) suggests that it is important to consider the activities which *precede* a task. Pre-task activities help to introduce new language, recapitulate what has been taught and recycle language, as well as serving to ease the processing load and push learners to interpret tasks in more demanding ways (Willis, 1996; Skehan, 1998). Pre-task activities can be used to teach new language structures, develop familiarity with these structures through consciousness-raising and assist student planning for the task. Such planning is said to produce improvements in fluency, accuracy, and complexity of student performance (Foster & Skehan, 1996, Bygate, Swain & Skehan (in press)).

To facilitate the implementation of cooperative language learning tasks in classrooms, the Project team prepared the following guidelines for the participating teachers on implementing tasks:

Guidelines on implementing tasks

Pre-task Phase : Pre-task activities

Pre-task activities are necessary to involve learners to explore the task

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topic, give learners relevant exposure to topic language, and, above all, create interest in doing a task on the topic.

- Teachers may tell learners about the topic or recount a similar experience.
- Teachers may brainstorm with learners questions they might ask if they were involved in the situation stated in the task.
- Teachers may show learners a picture related to the task topic or write the main topic word(s) in the centre of the board and then encourage learners to call out anything they know about the task topic.

Identifying topic language

- Teachers needs to help learners recall and activate words and phrases that will be useful during the task.
- Teachers may encourage learners to pool topic-related words and phrases they know already through a teacher-led brainstorming activity. As learners think of words and phrases, teachers should write them on the board and talk about them.
- Teachers may also need to introduce a few vital topic-related words and phrases that learners are unlikely to know.

Giving task instructions

- Teachers should ensure that all learners understand what the task involves, what its goal is and what outcome is required.

- Students who are not used to task-based learning may have difficulties in understanding what to do. For those learners who have experience in doing tasks, teacher may encourage them to read the instructions by themselves.

During task Phase: Facilitating tasks

Allowing preparation time

- Teachers should allow a few minutes for learners to prepare themselves individually before engaging in task work for certain research has shown that this results in language use that is richer in complexity, variety of syntax, breadth of vocabulary, fluency and in naturalness.

Balancing target language and mother tongue

- When task-based learning is being tried out for the first time, teachers should explain to students that if they want to communicate in the target language, they need to practice.
- Teachers should also make sure that they realise that in doing a task, no matter how weak their language, it is a learning opportunity and a chance to practice.
- Teachers may discuss how people learn, the conditions for learning and how speaking can help them learn.
- Teachers may introduce rules on mother-tongue use from the start. Teachers may also involve their students in the rule-making process, and together they can draw up a set of guidelines that the whole class agrees on.

Feedback Phase: Concluding tasks
Reporting after the task
After completing the task, there is usually a natural curiosity among learners to discover how others achieved the same objectives. Reporting to the whole class also gives the learners a natural stimulus to upgrade and improve their language.

- Teachers should allow and encourage the learners to report briefly in spoken or written form to the whole class on some aspect of their task, such as who won the game, how their group solved the problem, or two or three things they found out from each other.
- Teachers should provide learners enough time to prepare for the report.

Feedback on the task
- Teachers may brainstorm with all learners how they feel about the task, such as the task design, the difficulty level, the language involved, the time allowed for the task work, the communication problem that they encountered and any other problems they had with the task or the group.
- Teachers should also allow learners to make comments and give feedback on the tasks in their own mother tongue as it would be easier for them.

Procedures of Students' Assessment

One of the central aims of the project was to compare the oral proficiency of students in traditionally didactic settings with those in Cooperative Language Learning arrangements in secondary school English classrooms in Hong Kong. To address this aim, a standard pretest/posttest design was employed with type of instruction as the independent variable (two levels: traditional and cooperative), and oral proficiency as the dependent variable.

Testing instruments

For the purpose of the project, oral proficiency was operationalised as scores received by learners on a two-part oral examination. This examination consisted of both an individual role-play task, and a small-group interaction task, allowing for learners to demonstrate both their abilities to interact as individuals, as well as their capacity to use English cooperatively to achieve a common conversational purpose. The assessment format was based on the design and procedures of the Hong Kong Certificate of Education (HKCE) Oral English Examination.

Field testing and rater-training

A total of eight students were randomly selected to participate in the

oral proficiency assessment tasks for the purpose of rater training. All students from the same class, that is, Form Three students from a Chinese medium, low banding secondary school, and were divided into two groups of four. The assessment was administered after school hour in the participants' own school setting by the two raters. The assessment procedure was videotaped, audiotaped and transcribed, and observation notes were taken by the two raters. Both raters independently scored the assessment tasks, and inter-rater reliability was calculated for all three parts of the assessment procedure. Results were as follows: Part A1 = 100%, Part A2 = 62.5, and Part B = 75. Following this, the raters discussed the scoring criteria and their application of it in an attempt to minimize future discrepancies in the study proper.

Participants

120 students (approximately 20%) were randomly selected from a total of 15 classes (eight experimental classes and seven control classes) in the three project schools as subjects of the students' assessment (Table 1). Two groups of four pupils each were formed from the 15 classes. To form groups, two boys and two girls from the same class were randomly selected. The same cohort of students,

assessment instruments and assessment procedures were used for the pre/posttest. The pretest was administered in the three project schools in February and early March 1999 to gather base-line data of students' oral language performance whereas the posttest was done in late June 1999. Students' performance was tape-recorded, transcribed and analysed.

Table 1

	Total no. of students	Experimental Group	Control Group
Pretest	120	64	56
Posttest	120	64	56

During the assessment, each subject was given the similar instructions and amount of preparation time. For the individual role-play task, each subject played a role and obtained information from the examiner by asking questions. For the small-group interaction task, each subject discussed a topic given by the examiner in a group of four.

Scoring of students' assessment

Each subject in the pretest/posttest was assessed independently by two examiners. Scores were given to each subject according to their performance in the individual role-play task and the small-group interaction task.

For the individual role-play task, each subject received two scores – one score (A1) from 0-7 for his/her performance on eliciting and reporting information with the two examiners; and one overall impression score (A2) from 0-7 on his/her general performance of conversational strategies, intelligibility, and fluency. For the small-group interaction task, each subject was awarded an overall impression score (B) from 0-7 based on his/her participation in the group discussion, interactive skills which included turn-taking, responding coherently, asking for and giving clarification and facilitating the discourse by encouraging and helping the other students; and the meaningful contribution made to the discussion, in terms of quantity, quality and relevance, and intelligibility in terms of coherence, fluency, grammar and pronunciation. Each subject would have a total score (T) from scores gained in the two tasks.

Results of Students' Assessment

The initial aim of the project was to maximise the use of cooperative language learning tasks in *all* of the participating schools, and a great deal of effort by the Project team was expended in this regard. For example, the team offered a number of workshops aimed at developing teachers' skills in carrying out cooperative language teaching and learning activities. They prepared cooperative learning tasks for use by participating teachers, and they carried out school visits to observe participating teachers in action and discuss their classes with them. Notwithstanding this activity, the adoption of cooperative language learning principles in action by teachers in participating schools proved rather difficult, despite the best efforts of the Project team, due to the constraints faced by teachers beyond the Project team's control. In fact, teachers in only one of the participating schools were able to introduce cooperative learning more than five times during the project, and even at this school, cooperative learning tasks were undertaken only once per month on average.

This, of course, makes any real pretest/posttest assessment of the effects of instruction problematic in that learners in the project were not sufficiently exposed to two different treatment types, that is,

both groups received mainly traditional instruction, with a subset of learners receiving minimal exposure to cooperative learning. Given the fact that learners in only one school had more than a nominal exposure to cooperative learning, it was decided that the pretest/posttest analysis be restricted to this group of learners. To that end, a series of repeated-measures ANOVAS were conducted to examine both within-subjects and between-subjects effects, with (as noted above) type of instruction as the independent variable and the oral proficiency scores (for each section as well as the composite score) the dependent variables. Table 2 gives the results of the pre/posttest for the group of learners in one school.

Table 2

		Pretest			Posttest		
Score	Group	N=30	Mean	SD	N=30	Mean	SD
A1	Control	14	3.0357	1.7372	14	4.2857	2.1989
	Exper.	16	2.6250	1.5000	16	4.5000	1.4606
A2	Control	14	2.2500	1.0331	14	3.3571	0.8187
	Exper.	16	2.1875	0.5439	16	3.1875	0.4425
B	Control	14	2.4643	1.0463	14	3.0000	1.1602
	Exper.	16	2.218	0.815	16	2.875	1.1180

	.		8	9		0	
T	Contr ol	14	7.678 6	3.533 4	14	10.92 86	3.9655
	Exper .	16	6.968 8	2.404 6	16	10.56 25	1.4245

A1 = individual role-play accuracy score
A2 = individual role-play impressionistic score
B = small group interaction impressionistic score
T = total score

Discussion on the Results of Students' Assessment & Cooperative Learning

Across the pretest and posttest of students' assessment, results

indicated that while learners in both groups made statistically

significant gains on the posttest (that is, there were clear within-

subjects effects), between-subjects comparisons did not yield

proficiency over the course of the project, but it was not the case that

the group which received exposure to cooperative learning

outperformed the group which did not.

These results of the pretest/posttest comparison need to be

interpreted cautiously; it could easily be argued that given the minimal

exposure to cooperative learning tasks (even by the group which

received the most exposure of learners in all participating schools),

the project does not allow for a robust comparison of traditional and

cooperative learning. It remains to be seen whether learners who

receive greater exposure to cooperative learning would outperform those who did not.

Reflections on Cooperative Language Learning

The following students, teachers and researchers' comments on cooperative language learning further expand and help to clarify the results described above and give additional insights into the developing of cooperative language learning in the Hong Kong school context.

Students' feedback on cooperative language learning

Participating teachers' observation of students' engagement and students' feedback on cooperative learning collected after each cooperative language task provided us with a good idea of how students responded and felt about this mode of learning. The majority of the students liked the idea of undertaking cooperative language learning tasks in the language classrooms. Students felt more relaxed and freer in the classroom. They were also interested in and happy with learning English in this different way. Students enjoyed speaking and using English in group discussions, which they seldom did in normal English lessons, although they had difficulties in accomplishing some tasks. From students' feedback on cooperative

language learning lessons, it seems that more capable pupils appeared to benefit more from the lessons. This may be due to the fact that in traditional classes, high achievers' needs were not usually addressed by teachers because of their felt need to take care of students of mixed abilities by utilising easy teaching materials involving low expectation of student achievement. Through cooperative language learning tasks, these more capable students were provided with more chances to work with challenging materials in which they made progress in learning English. At the same time, less capable pupils also had more chances to communicate with others, which they seldom experienced in more traditionally organised and taught language classrooms. The following excerpts exemplify some of the difficulties which students reported after they had completed cooperative language learning tasks. The excerpts also demonstrate some of the pupils' L2 linguistic problems.

Excerpt 1 Lower Banding School
( ) -- English translation for Cantonese remark
( ) with italic – teacher's actions

T: Do you understand what you are going to do? (Holding the task
   sheet) Do you understand my question?
S: 好難講 (Difficult to say)

T: 好難表達 (Difficult to express) 唔知點講 Don't know how to say?)
   Okay, you, do you like the task?
S: Fun.
T: It's what? Fun, good. How about you? How do you feel about the
   task? Do you like it? Yes or no?
S: Yes.
T: Why?
S: Because it's very fun.
T: San, how about you? Do you like it?
S: Yes.
T: Really? Do you have problems in doing the task? Do you
understand my question?
S: No.
T: Problem. 你做嘅時候有冇問題呀？ (Did you encounter any problem
   when you do the task?)
S: Yes.
T: What are they? 有乜嘢野問題？ (What are the problems?)
S: 唔識點用 (Don't know how to use the thing)
T: Do you understand the task?
S: Yes.
T: So you understand the task. But 你唔知點答(you don't know how to
   answer) Anything else. Good. Do you want to do more of these
   tasks?
S: No.
T: Why don't you want to do some more?
S: 太難 (Too difficult)
T: 太難? (Too difficult?)

Excerpt 2: Upper Banding School
( ) -- English translation for Cantonese remark
( ) with italic – teacher's actions

S1A: Yes, I like it. It is interesting. And it can help us to learn more
   about um …
T: Learn more about?
S2: Learn more about talk.
T: Yes, talk, speaking. Student 3, how about you?

S3: I like it.
T: Is that true?
S3: Yes.
T: What do you like in particular?
S3: My role.
T: What is your role? Are you Jenny or Mrs. Chow?
S3: Mrs. Chow.
T: What did you learned from playing the role?
S3: (unintelligible)
T: Louder.
S3: I have learned how to interview.
T: Or how to be interviewed. What things do you need?
S4: Speak loud.
T: What else?
S4: Don't laugh.
T: Yes, don't laugh. It's not fun. What else? I give you one word which means when you speak, you have to express yourself clear. *(Wrote on the board)*. Okay, you have to articulate, that means, you have to be

very clear. What else do you want to say about the activity? Yes?
S5: I have to say things very carefully.
T: Yes, you have to say things very carefully.
S6: So boring.
T: You feel it is boring. What makes you so bored?
S6: Not enough information.
T: You don't have enough information about the case. Do you remember the information I have given you yesterday. Or you have forgotten? You don't remember it.

Teachers' feedback on cooperative language learning

Feedback on cooperative language learning from the eight

participating teachers was collected through interviews in early

September 1999 after the completion of the project. Teachers'

work with these tasks. Teachers felt that they need to have more time and flexibility to carry out their teaching more effectively.

Researchers' Cooperative Language Learning Lesson Observation Comments

During the course of this pilot one year project, all the researchers visited cooperative language learning classes in the three schools. The Project team offered the following observations regarding cooperative language learning:

Task Design and Tasks Procedures

➢ The design of some tasks, content and procedures needed to be simplified and less complicated for teachers to carry-out;

➢ The topics of some tasks were not interesting for some learners especially those in the lower banding school; some of these learners wanted to discuss more personally relevant topics than those provided by the set textbooks, such as basketball;

➢ The presentation of the tasks needed to be improved. There were too many different pieces of paper giving the respective roles of the participants together with the task worksheets

➢ The researchers sometimes had difficulties in designing tasks which catered to the exact needs and level of the specific learners.

feedback centred around the usefulness of adopting the cooperative language learning approach and the constraints of carrying out its associated tasks. When teachers assessed the usefulness of adopting the approach, the majority of those participating thought that it was valuable to implement cooperative language learning in Hong Kong because it was more interactive and interesting for the students when compared with the traditional teaching approaches used in the language classrooms. Moreover, teachers found that both the higher achievers and the low achievers benefited from doing the cooperative language tasks in that they had more opportunities to talk and to use the language and the students were more involved and more active in their learning. However, teachers also found that some of the students particularly the low-achievers did not possess sufficient and adequate English language to express themselves in discussions and so needed more help and support. The majority of the participating teachers reflected that their main constraint was the tight teaching syllabus and their limited teaching time. Teachers found it very difficult to squeeze sufficient time to carry out cooperative language tasks in classes and to give the students enough language input to

In general the researchers felt that the tasks were often constrained to be too tightly constructed and restrictive in order to accommodate the language structures, vocabulary and topics of the textbook. More creative solutions to this problem need to be sought in order to adapt to the limitations imposed by teachers' syllabus requirements.

Pupils

> Pupils in the three schools exhibited high levels of engagement in carrying out the tasks;

> Pupils in the three schools could understand their assigned roles;

> Pupils in the three schools exhibited oral language difficulties in carrying out the tasks; these difficulties were manifested in pupils' limited use of structure and vocabulary;

> Pupils particularly in the lower banding schools used Cantonese to support the attainment of the tasks.

However, despite the language difficulties referred to earlier, it was very encouraging to see that most of students were able to use some English to assist the accomplishment of the tasks and above all, were motivated to try.

Teachers

All the teachers on the project were dedicated and devoted to improving the English language proficiency of their pupils. Additionally, almost all the teachers were proficient in managing the class discipline and conduct necessary in the process of carrying out the task.

However, the researchers found one main area of concern in observing the lessons:

➤ Even though students had been given input on the language and vocabulary to carry out the tasks in previous lessons, most teachers spent a large proportion of time setting up and explaining the task procedures as well as reviewing the language and vocabulary needed for the task. This sometimes resulted in an inordinate amount of the lesson time being spent on preparing the students to do the task and less time for carrying out the task and evaluating it.

The following excerpt is representative of the procedures adopted by the teachers in setting up the task conditions for students. The procedures are similar to the recommended procedures which we

described in the earlier section on task design. The task which is

being done here is described in Appendix A.

Excerpt 3 Middle Banding School

11:04:4   Warming up and eliciting students' experience related to the task theme (approx. 3 minutes)

T: What will you do in the summer? Can you tell me what you will do in the summer? S1?

S1: Swim.

T: Right, go swimming. Well, may be girls would do something else, right? Um … S2?

S2: Go to picnic.

T: Going on picnic. Good. You are supposed um.. you are boy scouts. What are you going to do? For summer activities? Yes, S3.

S3: Camping.

T: Yes,very good. Going camping. Well, where will you choose to camp, to build your campsite? (Silence) Yes?

S4: Sai Kung.

T: Yes, Sai Kung. Good. Sometimes in the country parks, sometimes to the beaches, near to the beaches, right? Now you have a chance. Suppose you are boy scouts or girl guides of the Ming Tak College. (Wrote the name 'Ming Tak College' on the board) and you are boy scouts or girl guides (wrote the words 'boy scouts' and 'girl guides' on the board). You want to go camping. Some of you suggest to go to Sai Kung, some of suggest to build your campsite on the beaches in Hong Kong. But now this time you go overseas (wrote the word 'oversea' on the board). Do you know 'overseas'? That means not in Hong Kong. Overseas means um … go to other countries. So you don't have to build your campsite in Sai Kung anymore, but campsite in other cities besides Hong Kong, right? Where will you choose?

T : Which country you would like to choose to build your campsite? Um .. some of you suggest Japan, where else do you like to go, S5?

S5: Singapore.

T:　Yes, Singapore. Or you may choose other countries outside Asia.
　　S6, where do you want to go to?
S6:　美國　(America)

11:07:30 Introducing the task and explaining the task procedures
(approximately 5 minutes)
T:　Right, to (America), to Canada, or to States. You are very lucky.
　　You have the chance to go now. The boy scouts of Ming Tak
　　College has four places, four cities for you to choose. The cities
　　are Sydney of Australia (Wrote down the word 'Sydney' on the
　　board). Some of you suggest Singapore. Some of you suggest
　　Tokyo, a big city of Japan. And then one city in China, Beijing.
　　Well, you have four different places, four cities for you to choose.
　　You have to consider about the food of these places. And then
　　some of you may like Chinese food, western food, Japanese
　　food, and Malaysian food. Besides considering the food, when
　　you have to choose one among the four cities, you have to
　　consider not only the food, right, but also the attractions, the
　　places for sight seeing, for example, museum, the parks, some of
　　the famous beaches. May be some other places which have
　　historical values. For example, in Beijing, there are lots of
　　historical places, the Great Wall. So you can consider the
　　attractions, the food, and then the journey time, the time for
　　journey. And then the cost. Money is very important. Cost of air
　　ticket. And so on. So you have to consider all these, and then

there are four roles. Four students will make up a group. You will have
four roles: Benjamin. Benjamin is the leader, and then Chris will be the
secretary, and then you have two other boy scouts, Patrick and Eric.
Groups which are made up of three students, you can choose these
three out of four. You can cancel Eric. I'll give you these. You choose
one and then read the instruction, and then try to understand what you
are supposed to do. Now you are holding the first meeting for the Ming
Tak College boy scouts club. And then you have to choose the roles
among yourselves.

Student Planning (approx. 8 minutes)
11:12:55

T : 5 minutes for you to read the roles and then try to understand what you will do in this meeting. If you have any questions, please raise up your hands, and I'll try to help.

11:14:05
Students started reading the task sheet. Teacher walked around to check.

11:15:00
T: Now each role will have a different table. Each of you will have a different table representing the different places. Those are Items. You have to read it and understand what you are supposed to do. I'll explain another.

11:15:30
Teacher walked around the classroom to provide students with help.

11:19:30
T: Just divide yourselves into different roles and then read the instructions. I'm going to explain now what you are suppose to do for the different roles. You don't have to be worried. Some of you may have problems with the words. I'll try to help you with those words.

Teacher explains the content of the task discussion (approx. 9 minutes)

11:21:00
Teacher switched on the OHP.
T: This is to remind you for what you are going to do today. You are the boy scouts of Ming Tak College. And you are holding a meeting. And this is the reason for holding the meeting. And there are four students namely Benjamin, Chris, Patrick and Eric. Benjamin the chair is the leader. You should lead the discussion. Why you are having the meeting? Because you have to make a decision in camping destination. Destination means the place to go. Now, for example, do you still remember you have four places to choose, Sydney, Beijing, Singapore, and Tokyo. So you have to choose. You cannot go to the four cities. You can only go to one of these four cities. So you have to choose. So this is the reason

why you have to meet your group mates. This is very important. You have to decide where to go for camping for summer vacation. Are you clear what you are supposed to do now. So you have to make decision which city to go. Before you make your decision, before you make up your mind, you have several things to do. The actions to take, four things for you to do, right. You have to find out from your group mates. Each of you will represent different places, like if you are Chris, you may represent Sydney. So each of you has a table which is different from your group mates, other group members. If you are Benjamin, you are presenting Tokyo. If you are Chris, you are representing Sydney, and then others are Singapore and Beijing. Don't let your classmates to look at it, the information of weather, attractions, cost, air ticket, etc. So it tells you all about these, all right. Don't let your classmates look at it. No. Then I'll give each group handout, worksheet A. each of you will get one later on, but not now. So each of you will have to ask to find out information about the places. For example, you are representing Tokyo, you have to find out and fill in all things about Tokyo. I'll give you one or two minutes for doing it. When you have finished, you have to ask your group mates to find out information about Singapore, Sydney and Beijing. So you have to finish, filling in this worksheet, information about the places.

T: Any questions so far. And then when you have finished, would you try to make comparison, try to

compare these four places, and then on climate, warm, cold, for example, cool, hot. When you try to compare climate, write a sentence, like it is colder, it is warmer. That means you have to do worksheet B. (Pointed to OHP) Find out from your group mates the climate, attractions, food and cost of air ticket and journey time for Tokyo, Beijing, Sydney, and Singapore. On worksheet A. When you've finished number one, compare their good and bad points. Write a sentence for one of the um on worksheet B. And then afterwards, try to talk to your group mates to choose the best camping tour. You have to do one, two and three in twenty five minutes. And after that, I'll ask one from each group to make an oral report to tell where you have decided to go. May be the leader

of each group can do this, number four, and tell me the reasons for that. You may tell me the climate, the cost, the attractions. You may use the worksheet B. Are you clear what you are supposed to do this morning. I'll give one of you one of these handouts. So don't worry. It will remind you what you have to do. Now I'll give you this to remind you what you are supposed to do, and then worksheet A and worksheet B.

11:30:00

Teachers distributed the worksheets. Students started reading them.

11:32:06 Giving language support for the task (approx. 8 minutes)

T: You are not supposed to do it now. You have to ask your classmates questions to get information. If you want to know about the climate, What question you will ask? Give me a question word.

S6: What.

T: What, yes. Or how. What kind of climate or how is the climate in Tokyo, Singapore, Beijing or Sydney. So you can make up the question to help you, a or b. So you can make up the question. And then you can get the answers form the handout. It is hot. It is warm. So you may also have, get answers from your worksheet. So this is about worksheet A. When you do worksheet A, you can use a or b as questions, you can use this as answer. It may be cold or warm. Don't use it for each answer. You may have different answers for different places. It is listed in your handout. Any questions. You can use if you have to do worksheet A, you can use question here and answer here, okay? Well, some of you may use the word 'museum', m-u-s-e-u-m, how to say that? The names of the places, just ask your groupmates. Don't worry about the historical places, the names of the places. You can use the question 'How many places of attractions are there in ....?' And the answer would be like 'There are .... Places of attractions.'. Those famous places. Read it 'attractions'.

S: Attractions.

T: Places of attractions.

S: Places of attractions.

T: Right, you have to know how to say these probably, the words of places. And this is the question, and may be the answer to help you. So you have to fill in the form and do worksheet A. And when

you come to the food, you may have many different kinds of restaurants. Look at your role. And then you may have many restaurants. Chinese, Japanese, Malaysian, different kind, so you have to say, 'What kinds'. So you have to say 'What kinds of restaurants are there in Tokyo?' . And then about money. What question words to ask about money?

S7: How much.

T: Yes. How much money for air ticket to Tokyo. Or you may say 'What is the cost for air ticket to Tokyo?" and then five thousands and so on. And then the last one when you want to know the time, you should say?

S: How long.

T: Yes, how long. So you have the answer here, question and answer here. 'How long is the journey time to ....?' Or 'How many hours does it take to travel to ......?' and the answer would be 'It takes .....' For worksheet A, these are the questions and answers may be. When you do worksheet B, you are doing the comparison, right? Comparison on climate and so on. So Tokyo, you can use warmer than, or as hot as. Do you still remember comparison? You can use warmer than. If you have places that have the same climate, you can use 'as hot as'. This is for attractions. And then for food, you can use the word 'more' or 'fewer', right? And then, when you are talking about the money, cheaper than or more expensive. And the last of all, you can use 'shorter' or 'longer' or 'nearer', 'farther' or 'further' as opposites. Okay, do your conversation now, in twenty five minutes.

11:40:35 Pupils' group discussion (approximately 20 minutes)

G1S1: And air ticket to Tokyo cost?
G1s2: Five thousand.
G1S1: How long is the journey time to Tokyo?
G1S2: Um, short as um ... (unintelligible)
G1S3: Beijing?
G1S4: How is the time to Beijing?

G1S3: Three hours.
G1S4: How many places of attractions are there in Beijing?

G1S3: there are four places of attractions.
G1S4: What kinds of restaurants are there in Beijing?
G1S3: Chinese food only.
G1S4: How much is the air ticket to Beijing cost?
G1S3: Three thousands.
G1S4: How long is the journey time to Beijing?
G1S3: Three hours.
T:　Okay, class. Will you turn around your tables. It will be easier for you and your classmates to have discussion.
G2S1: You can start yours.
G2S2: 到你啦(It's your turn)
G2S3:　What is the climate in Singapore?
(Silence)
G2S3: How is the climate in Tokyo?
G2S1: It is warm in summer.
G2S3: How many places of attractions are there in Tokyo?
G2S1: Um … there are five places of attractions.
G2S3: What food? Chinese restaurants or Japanese. What kind of restaurants are there in Tokyo?
G2S1: Um ..
G2S3: How much of air ticket to Tokyo cost?
G2S1: It cost five thousand dollar.
G2S3: How long is the journey time to Tokyo?
G2s1: It takes about three hours.
T:　Go ahead.
G2S3: 你問我先(You ask me first)
G2S4:　　　How is the climate in Sydney?
T:　Singapore?
G2S2: Finished.
T:　Okay, go on then. And Beijing.
G2S4: Beijing is about um …
T:　Use the information here.
G2S1: How is the climate in Beijing?
G2S2: It is very hot in summer.
T:　Write very hot, very hot.
G2S3: There are some Chinese restaurants in Sydney.
G2S2: How much is the air ticket to Sydney cost?

G2S4: Nine thousand dollars to Sydney.
G2S2: How long is the journey time to Sydney?
G2S4: Nine hours.

12:06:00
T: Have you finished?

Observations

In the above excerpt, we observe that the teacher used approximately 17 minutes of a 70 minute lesson to set up the task for the students, while students spent 8 minutes to plan and 20 minutes engaged in task discussion. Even though in this excerpt students had an adequate amount of time to plan and carry out the task, the timing of the lesson is still very tight. Students need time to share the general results of their discussion with the class, and the teacher needs to obtain specific feedback from each group on their group's interaction processes. Even though the Project team felt that, in general, teachers were taking too long to set up the task, teachers felt that this time was needed to reduce student anxiety and increase their awareness of what to do and what to say. We would argue that if teachers had prepared students in previous lessons with the structure and vocabulary needed to do the task, less time could be devoted to this in the actual lesson in question, and more time

consequently devoted to student planning, discussion and feedback. During the student's planning time, the language of the tasks should be simple enough so that the students can read and understand for themselves what they are required to do. The teacher could offer individual help to those needing it. It appeared to the researchers that most teachers were reluctant to "free" their students and wanted as much as possible to make it easier for them to perform well. Because of the amount of time teachers were devoting to setting up the tasks, many of them were unable to carry out cooperative learning because it simply took too long. From the students' groups discussions it could be observed that students in this group were functioning capably, were motivated and highly engaged in language learning and we wonder what our final results would have been if they had been given more opportunities to learn in this way. These caveats and constraints need, however, to be taken seriously in that they offer some realistic appraisal of the difficulties of transferring laboratory-based studies of task performance (see Skehan 1998, Bygate, Swain & Skehan (in press)) to the realities of the curriculum-in-action in normal classroom conditions.

Conclusion

This pilot project has taken the bold initiative to study an alternative approach to teaching English in Hong Kong secondary classrooms. The project proposed to offer a challenge to the traditional teacher-fronted style of teaching English in Hong Kong, and to make use of interesting and motivating tasks designed to give each learner in the group a specific role to play in collaboratively meeting the demands of the task. We familiarised teachers with the characteristics of cooperative language learning tasks and we provided support to assist them in designing and carrying out the textbook-based tasks. Given the extremely limited experimental data, even though we found no significant differences in the oral performance of the experimental and control groups of students, this pilot research does demonstrate what students can do if given the right learning tools or tasks within a supportive language learning environment. Over the next three years, with more time in an extended version of this project, we plan to demonstrate the language learning potential of a range of secondary and primary students in cooperative learning.

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Appendix A   Cooperative Language Learning Task

Task 3   Where should we go?
Language focus : Making comparisons with adjectives
Objective   : To make decision on camping tour destination.
People involved : Group of 4 pupils
Mode of task   : Problem solving

Task description:
A team of boy scouts of Ming Tak College are planning an overseas camping activity in the coming summer holiday. They need to choose the destination. They have ideas of several places such as Tokyo, Sydney, Singapore and Beijing. They have to think about the weather, the cost of traveling, food, journey time and most importantly the attractions of the different places.

Suggested Teacher's Procedures:
1. Get students into groups of four.
2. Distribute to students a task sheet which includes task description and brief notes of different task roles. Give students 2 to 3 minutes to read through the task sheet and make sure that they understand what they are expect to do in the task.
3. Check students' understanding of the task by briefly explaining to students the task and different roles in the task.
4. Distribute to students the role cards and worksheets.
5. Give students 5 minutes to read the role cards and to decide which role they want to take.
6. Make sure the students understand what to do before they start the group task.
7. Walk around the classroom to observe the students. Try not to disturb them unless they ask for your help.
8. After finishing the task, encourage the students to share their work with other groups.
9. Give each group of students 5 to 10 minutes to give feedback on the task design, the strategies and the language they used in the group task, and anything that happened in their group.

Role 1:   Benjamin
• You are Benjamin, the leader of the boy scout club in your school.

- The club is planning a camping tour abroad for the summer holiday activity.
- The club secretary, Chris, two other boy scouts, Patrick and Eric and you are discussing together to decide on the camping destination among the choices of Tokyo, Australia, Singapore and Beijing.
- You have had idea of going to Tokyo for you have had heard about it from your parents who had been to Japan for holiday.

Task:
- List out the good things and bad things about Tokyo with the information you collected.

	Tokyo
Climate	warm (in summer)
Attractions	Disneyland, Segaland, Mount Fuji, Waterworld, shopping
Food	Japanese, Korean, Chinese restaurants
Cost of airticket	$5000
Journey time	4 hours

Tokyo is warm.
The journey time is about ....
The airticket is about ...., etc.

- Tell the other three members what you know about Tokyo including weather, journey time, cost of airticket, food and attractions there.
- Ask the other members what they know about the other three suggested places.
- Compare the good points and bad points of the different places with the three members using the words "better, nearer, shorter, cheaper, hotter, etc."
    " Tokyo is warmer than Sydney.'
    "The journey time to Beijing is shorter than Tokyo.", etc.
- Choose the best destination with the other three members.
- After discussion, design a poster about the camping tour to post on the club notice board.

Role 2:   Chris
- You are Chris, the secretary of the boy scout club in your school.
- The club is planning a camping tour abroad for the summer holiday activity.
- The club leader, Benjamin , two other boy scouts, Patrick and Eric and you are discussing together to decide on the camping destination among the choices of Tokyo, Australia, Singapore and Beijing.
- You have been staying in Sydney when you were a child. You have ideas about Australia.

Task:
- List out the good things and bad things about Sydney with the information you collected.

	Sydney
Climate	cold (in summer)
Attractions	Golden Coast, Warner Brothers Movieland, Beach, Opera
Food	Western, some Chinese restaurants
Cost of air ticket	$9000
Journey time	9 hours

Sydney is cold..
The journey time is about ....
The airticket is about ...., etc.

- Tell the other three members what you know about Sydney including weather, journey time, cost of air ticket, food and attractions there.
- Ask the other members what they know about the other three suggested places.
- Compare the good points and bad points of the different places with the three members using the words "better, nearer, shorter, cheaper, hotter, etc."
  'Sydney is colder than Tokyo.'
  "The journey time to Sydney is longer than Tokyo.", etc.
- Choose the best destination with the other three members.

- After discussion, write the meeting minute (report) to the teacher-in-charge about the camping tour with Eric.

Role 3:   Patrick
- You are Patrick, a member of the boy scout club in your school.
- The club is planning a camping tour abroad for the summer holiday activity.
- You are invited to join the organizing committee with the club leader, Benjamin , the club secretary, Chris and Eric to decide on the camping destination among the choices of Tokyo, Australia, Singapore and Beijing..
- You have uncles and cousins living in Singapore. You know Singapore quite well through your correspondence with them.

Task:
- List out the good things and bad things about Singapore with the information you collected.

	Singapore
Climate	very hot (in summer)
Attractions	National Park, university, Sentosa
Food	Chinese restaurant, Malaysian restaurant
Cost of airticket	$5000
Journey time	4 hours

Singapore is very hot..
The journey time is about ....
The air ticket is about ...., etc.

- Tell the other three members what you know about Singapore including weather, journey time, cost of air ticket, food and attractions there.
- Ask the other members what they know about the other three suggested places.
- Compare the good points and bad points of the different places with the three members using the words "better, nearer, shorter, cheaper, hotter, etc."

'Singapore is hotter than Sydney.'
"The journey time to Singapore is shorter than Tokyo.",
etc.
- Choose the best destination with the other three members.
- After discussion, help Benjamin design a poster about the camping tour to post on the club notice board.

Role 3:   Eric
- You are Eric, a member of the boy scout club in your school.
- The club is planning a camping tour abroad for the summer holiday activity.
- You are invited to join the organizing committee with the club leader, Benjamin , the club secretary, Chris and Patrick to decide on the camping destination among the choices of Tokyo, Australia, Singapore and Beijing..
- You have been staying in Beijing when you were a child. You know Beijing very well.

Task:
- List out the good things and bad things about Beijing with the information you collected.

	Beijing
Climate	very hot (in summer)
Attractions	Historical places, museum, park, palace
Food	Chinese restaurant,
Cost of airticket	$3000
Journey time	3 hours

Beijing *is very hot..*
The journey time is about ....
The air ticket is about ...., etc.

- Tell the other three members what you know about Beijing including weather, journey time, cost of air ticket, food and attractions there.

- Ask the other members what they know about the other three suggested places.
- Compare the good points and bad points of the different places with the three members using the words "Better, nearer, shorter, cheaper, hotter, etc."
    'Beijing is as hot as Singapore.'
    "The journey time to Beijing is shorter than Tokyo.", etc.
- Choose the best destination with the other three members.
- After discussion, help Chris write the meeting minute (report) to the teacher-in-charge of the club about the summer camping tour.

Ming Tak College --Boys Scout Club
3rd Meeting

Date: ....

Time: ....

Participants: ....

....

Chair-person: ....

Item(s) for Discussion:

....

....

Actions to Take:

....

....

....