



## Enhancing Student Learning Through Cooperative Learning

*Khairunisa Nikman*

### ABSTRACT

*Cooperative learning is one of the many teaching approaches introduced by scholars in which small teams, with students of different levels of ability, use a variety of learning activities to improve their understanding of a subject. There are various researches done on the implementation of cooperative learning strategies in learning classrooms. However, those researches also revealed some challenges in exercising cooperative learning for ESL learners. This paper looks into the overview of cooperative learning, its possibilities and challenges, as well as the benefits of incorporating this learning style in classrooms, thus allowing for pedagogical implications in English language and teaching.*

**Keywords:** *cooperative learning, individual learning, student learning*

### Introduction

The challenge for English language teachers is to maximize the students' potential in learning the language. All teachers realise that language plays a vital role in education; it also functions as the tool for communication. In the past decades, second language teaching and learning was emphasised on grammar and vocabulary. However, in the late 1960s, the method of language teaching shifted to a communicative approach, in which communicative language teaching (CLT) was first introduced (Brown, 1994). Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) is seen as an approach to the teaching of second and foreign languages that emphasizes interaction as both the means and the ultimate goal of learning a language (Brown, 1994).

In line with practicing communicative language teaching (CLT) to enhance learners' ability to acquire language, cooperative learning (CL) – which is also known as collaborative learning – has received renewed interests since the past decades. During that period of time, cooperative learning underwent a renaissance and has generated considerable interest among educators, as well as among researchers concerned with a wide range of educational psychological and social issues (Sharan, 1990, p. 285). The use of cooperative learning approaches has become an alternative to better help the students, especially the low competent ones, to achieve learning goals in the classroom (Miller & Peterson, 2003). Mafune (2006) points that the belief about learning is that cooperative behaviour is stimulating not only socially but also intellectually and hence, that tasks requiring social interaction will stimulate learning (as cited in Miller & Peterson, 2003, p. 13).

The need to improve methods of instruction to promote higher levels of academic achievement is one of the primary goals of curriculum development today. The typical "methods" courses for teaching specific subject matter concentrate primarily on the subject matter and only very little on the "methods" (Sharan, 1990, p. xiv). Students learn best when they are actively involved in the process. Regardless of the subject matter, students working in small groups tend to learn more of what is taught and retain it longer than when the same content is presented in other instructional formats (Davis, 1993). To do so, cooperative learning is viewed as the strategy most used by the teachers to place students of different abilities together so that

they can function better as a group.

There are several developers of cooperative learning theory, yet the most well-known ones would include Robert Slavin, Roger and David Johnson and Spencer Kagan. They have also introduced several structures or approaches to cooperative learning, for example, Slavin is associated with Student Team Achievement Division (STAD) while Kagan develops a Structural Approach (Olsen & Kagan, 1992, in Kessler, 1992).

### What is Cooperative Learning?

In practical term, Slavin (1983) and Sharan et al. (1984) define cooperative learning as students working together to achieve common learning goals (as cited in Nunan, 1992, p. 3). O'Malley and Chamot (1990, p.169) also share the same view as they state that this learning style involves social strategies in which students work together in heterogeneous small groups toward a common goal. In other words, cooperative learning can also be depicted as concepts and techniques for enhancing student-student interaction. The social interactions involved could be as simple as having the students in pairs to discuss a reading text or assigning them in groups to complete a project paper. Each team member is responsible not only for his or her own learning of what is taught but also in helping other teammates to learn, thus creating a better learning environment. All members of the team work together on the assigned task until everybody successfully understands and completes it.

Kohonen (1992) provides a summary of differences between individual and cooperative learning in Table 1 below:

Table 1: Individual learning vs. cooperative learning (Nunan, 1992, p. 33).

Individual learning	Cooperative learning
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Students work alone on their own sets of materials.</li> <li>• Students work at their own speed.</li> <li>• Achievements are evaluated on a criterion-referenced basis.</li> <li>• Students perceive that their achievement is unrelated to what other students do.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Learners work together to accomplish shared goals.</li> <li>• Students are motivated to work together.</li> <li>• Achievements are evaluated on a criterion-referenced basis.</li> <li>• Positive interdependence among learners.</li> </ul>

In general, cooperative learning method shares the following five characteristics:

1. Students work together on common tasks or learning activities that are best handled through group work.
2. Students work together in small groups containing two to four members.
3. Students use cooperative behaviour to accomplish their common goal.
4. Students are positively interdependent, where activities are structured so that the students need each other to accomplish their goal.
5. Students are individually accountable or responsible for their work or learning.

(Jacob & Gallo, 2002, p. 23).

## Cooperative Learning: Possibilities and Challenges

### Coverage

In traditional lecture classes, the main concern of the teacher or instructor is to cover the material related to the topic taught as much as possible. The success of a learning process is determined by the amount of knowledge imparted the students. From this perspective, cooperative learning can be seen as inefficient, since many instructors see about 50% reduction in the topic they can cover (McManus, 1996). Mc Manus (1996) also states that:

*The difference in these two goals was made real when I realized that I could cover only half the topics that I had covered in lectures. The discrepancy shocked me. I later learned that this is about the average reduction. Nevertheless, I felt I had shortchanged the students. Because only about half the topics covered in lectures can be covered by this method, considerable care must go into selecting those topics.*

(McManus, 1996, p. 14)

### Hitchhikers

Watching and listening to students are natural daily activities for every teacher. Therefore, as an observer, teachers are inclined to notice some students on the sideline or dominating the group discussion. There tend to be "hitchhikers" (Kohonen, 1992 p. 35) or dominating speakers in each cooperative learning group. The hitchhikers may be caused by a problem of motivation or immaturity. It may also simply be the case that the student is too shy or too passive to get involved with the group. Another reason would be because they feel that they are weak learners and feel intimidated by the other group members. Shy or unconfident students may be able to get involved with help from the rest of the group; therefore, the first attempt to deal with the problem would be an informal request to the group to make an effort to involve the shy students (Kessler, 1992). The teacher could assign different roles to each member of the group by emphasizing that each student has a vital part to play in order to ensure the success of the task at hand.

### Dominating Personalities

Sometimes, the teacher would notice that there will be one or two students who have high standards or intense involvement with a project to such an extent that they, unintentionally, exclude their group members (Biehler & Snowman, 1997). These students tend to dominate the discussion or the project given to the group. Occasionally, they would complain to the teacher that the other team members are not contributing much to the group. When faced with this challenge, the teacher should carefully monitor the group. The teacher could help the ground to restructure their group dynamics by increasing interdependence, social skills procedures, processing and individual accountability (Biehler & Snowman, 1997).

### Grouping

Group processing and sometimes the work of the group itself may depend on the ability of the teammates to give constructive criticism and their perception that it is alright to do so in their group (O'Malley & Chamot, 1990). Many students have had little experience or a bad experience

with criticizing peers or unwilling to receive criticism in return. Under these conditions, group members may simply each turn in their share of the project, not necessarily even looking at their partners' work, and move on to the next task. This can be a serious problem, especially when they have to work together throughout the entire semester. Therefore, the teacher has to facilitate them on how to peer review their group members' work (O'Malley & Chamot, 1990).

### **Why should Teachers Implement Cooperative Learning?**

Lack of proficiency in the language of instruction is considered as an essential factor in the lower achievement in the students. An efficient way to get students actively involved in classroom learning activities is through cooperative learning strategies. Since they learn to cooperate with others while achieving their goals, it is believed that cooperative learning techniques dramatically increase the amount of time for oral interaction available to each student in the classrooms (Coelho, 1990, p. 38).

The team effort used in cooperative learning will help students' self-esteem and can improve individual performance as they will learn that a team needs the effort from everybody in the group and that the group as a total is counting on each individual. Teachers who employ cooperative learning methods promote learning because these collaborative experiences engage students in an interactive approach to processing information, resulting in greater retention of subject matter, improved attitudes toward learning, and enhanced interpersonal relations among group members. Hence, students placed in cooperative learning groups will find that they learn social skills, oral communication and join in positive relationships more easily and readily. In such a small group, the students are free to talk in exploratory ways, as they speak tentatively, trying out their ideas on each other. These soft skills are essential when it comes to the students' future.

Other than that, leadership ability can also be fostered within cooperative learning groups. Since the nature of this learning style is to cooperate with each other, fast learners will consolidate their own understanding of issues at hand when explaining them to slower learners, thus engaging in cognitive elaboration that enhances their own understanding (Kohonen, 1992, p. 35).

Jacobs & Gallo (2002, p. 8), who did a research on extensive reading activity via students' cooperation, also suggested five potential benefits for blending extensive reading (ER) and cooperative learning:

*"1) students can infect one another with enthusiasm for reading; 2) students can suggest good ER materials to one another; 3) students can be a source of ER materials for one another; 4) more proficient students can help other student; 5) peers provide an audience with which students can share what they have read"*

### **Does Cooperative Learning Really Work?**

According to Johnson & Johnson (1995), Johnson et al. (1995) and Slavin (1995), cooperative-learning methods have proven effective in increasing motivation for learning and self-esteem, redirecting attributes for success and failure, fostering positive feelings towards classmates, increasing performances on tests of comprehension, reasoning and problem solving (as cited in Biehler & Snowman, 1997, p. 419). Johnson & Johnson (1995) also strongly favor cooperative

learning by stating that the previously done studies clearly show that cooperation helps youth to become more motivated and achieved more than competition (1995). Students who have mastered some aspects of cooperative learning and are comfortable working with their peers experience the following benefits:

1. Benefits on motivation

Cooperative learning helps learners to be more motivated in their learning. Slavin (1995) found that cooperative learning produced bigger increase in some aspects of self-esteem than the non-cooperative method with which it was compared (as cited in Biehler & Snowman, 1997, p. 421). As the students work together in the group, the help received from the more competent learners would make the weaker learners to be more motivated to accomplish the task assigned to them. This is also supported by O'Malley & Chamot (1990) when they state that extensive research on cooperative learning indicates that it is effective in increasing achievement on school tasks as well as fostering positive attitudes of students toward themselves and each other (O'Malley & Chamot, 1990, p. 169).

2. Benefits on achievement

Many researches have shown that cooperative learning techniques promote student learning and higher academic achievement. Slavin (1995) found that in several studies students in cooperative-learning groups scored about one-fourth of a standard deviation higher on achievement test than did students taught conventionally (as cited in Biehler & Snowman, 1997, p. 420). According to Dotson (2001, p. 9), in 67 studies of the achievement effects of cooperative learning, 61% found significantly greater achievement in cooperative learning groups than in traditionally taught control groups.

3. Benefits on social relationship

Students would also develop skills in oral communication, as well as the interpersonal skills and responsibility. The learners would become closer to the other group members as they work together to accomplish certain goals. Biehler & Snowman (1997, p. 420) state that in some students the relationships that were formed were deemed to be quite strong. Thus, cooperative learning helps to enhance social interaction, as within the framework of cooperative learning groups, students learn how to interact with their peers and increase involvement with the school community (Dotson, 2001, p. 8).

## **Pedagogical Implication on English Teaching and Learning**

In relation to second language learning and classroom implication, Rivers (1983, p. 77) suggested that we need an interdependent learning model in which cooperation is structured to be as productive of results as competition. Cooperative learning implies full participation of both teacher and student and the interaction of student with student. This is because it implies students helping other students, teacher facilitating students, small-group activity, interacting in pairs or groups, as well as sharing with others what one has discovered. Jacob & Gallo (2002, p. 23) found that students who did extensive reading accompanied by peer interaction significantly outperformed students in the other conditions (did not do extensive reading, did extensive reading without follow-up activities, and did extensive reading accompanied by individual teacher-student conferences about students' reading).

Thus, in the case of UiTM ESL learners, teacher should allow for different kinds of

pedagogical approaches in classroom teaching. As such, the students should also be encouraged to try and experience variety of learning styles other than the traditional lecture approach. To do so, individual learners, especially the weaker ones, should be eased slowly into cooperative learning strategies with greater consideration be given on their strength and weaknesses. Some of them might be reluctant to involve in this type of learning style; therefore, it is the teachers' responsibility to facilitate them in applying this cooperative learning strategies in the classrooms. In education, it is the process and not merely the result that is important (Rivers, 1983).

## Conclusion

From the review of this paper, it can be seen that cooperative is indeed a successful learning style, or some might say, teaching approach to ensure students full involvement in a classroom activity. Although there are some challenges that the teachers have to face, they could be easily rectified in order to suit the classroom environment. Therefore, it is hoped that the review on this topic could give some awareness to the educators in UiTM and later be implemented in their respective classrooms.

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