

# Adapting cooperative learning in tertiary ELT

Huiping Ning

*An updated guideline for tertiary ELT in China has shifted the emphasis to the development of learners' ability to communicate in English. Using group work and getting learners actively involved in the actual use of English are highlighted more than before. This article focuses on adapting cooperative learning methods for ELT with tertiary learners. The adaptation mainly involved three aspects: group formation, technique adaptation, and course evaluation.*

## Introduction

There is a general consensus that 'the ability to communicate effectively in English is now a well-established goal in ELT' (Hedge 2000: 44). Consequently, getting students actively involved in the actual use of English has become a vital part of effective classroom ELT. Recent times have seen endeavours to develop teaching methods that can integrate group work into classroom teaching and enhance peer interaction. This article reports on an adaptation of cooperative learning (CL) methods into tertiary ELT in China, aimed at offering students more opportunities for language production and thus enhancing their fluency and effectiveness in communication. The adapted method was successfully used with a class of 52 first-year tertiary students in China in 2008. The students came from different departments and were taught all together on the English course for four hours/week with the author as the instructor. This 18-week project,<sup>1</sup> as part of the author's PhD research programme, also involved an equivalent class as the comparison group, who were treated the same as the CL group except that the focus for the comparison group was on whole-class instruction. An evaluation of the project, employing a pretest–post-test experimental design for measuring students' English competence in listening, speaking, reading, writing, and vocabulary, found that adapted CL was superior to whole-class instruction, particularly in speaking, listening, and reading (Ning 2008).

## Tertiary ELT in China

At the tertiary level in China, English is a compulsory course and is based on a rigorous curriculum typically with two sets of textbooks, one for listening and speaking and the other for reading and writing. English is usually taught in large classes, and widely used English teaching methods are characterized by teacher-fronted direct lecturing, which mainly involves text explanation, vocabulary illustration, grammar instruction, and intensive drills on language forms (Jin and Cortazzi 2004). These methods place

emphasis on linguistic accuracy and rote learning, with little attention to communicative fluency and actual use of English. Students are treated as passive recipients of teaching rather than active learners.

In spite of over ten years' studying English, many university graduates are still found to be incompetent in communicating in English and are especially poor in listening and speaking. To overcome this problem, in 2007, the Ministry of Education produced a guideline that states that the objective of tertiary ELT is 'to develop students' ability to use English in a well-rounded way, especially in listening and speaking' (Ministry of Education 2007: 25). University English teachers are encouraged to employ innovations in their classrooms, particularly those involving increased language production and effective group work.

However, it is a challenging task to use group work with Chinese tertiary EFL learners because they have been continuously exposed to teacher-dominated classrooms and exhibit limited learner autonomy and willingness to communicate (Jin and Cortazzi *op.cit.*). On the other hand, influenced by Confucian Heritage Cultures, Chinese students tend to value collectivism, cooperation, discipline, and self-effacement (Flowerdew 1998) and are willing to do what they are told by teachers. This facilitates peer collaboration, group cohesion, and therefore the effectiveness of group work. In view of this double-faceted nature of Chinese tertiary EFL learners, teachers must bear two critical points in mind when using group work. Firstly, students are unlikely to benefit from group activities by simply getting into groups and being asked to work together. It is necessary that teachers engage in fostering a safe and non-threatening learning atmosphere to alleviate language anxiety and encourage risk taking in using English. Secondly, group activities must be well structured and integrated as an essential part of daily classroom teaching and course assessment. In other words, students should be clearly informed of the specific procedures to follow in group activities and feel obliged to communicate with peers in English in order to achieve designated learning goals.

## Cooperative learning

CL is defined as the 'instructional use of small groups so that students work together to maximize their own and each other's learning' (Johnson, Johnson, and Holubec 1998, Chapter 1: 5). It is often implemented through a set of well-prescribed and highly structured techniques. Synthesizing the basic components of CL proposed by leading researchers in this field (Kagan 1994; Slavin 1995; Johnson *et al.* *op.cit.*) generates six key elements:

- positive interdependence
- individual accountability
- promotive interaction
- equal participation
- equal opportunity for success
- group processing.

Positive interdependence and individual accountability are widely accepted as the two fundamental constructs of CL. 'Positive interdependence is linking students together so one cannot succeed unless all group members succeed' (Johnson *et al.* *op.cit.*, Chapter 4: 7). It can be structured by carefully

arranging mutual goals, group rewards, and individual roles or tasks. Individual accountability requires that every teammate is accountable for completing a particular part of work and no one can piggyback on the work of others. It is important that students know that their contribution to teamwork can be individually identified and assessed. Techniques to structure individual accountability include assigning each member an individual role or task and randomly selecting certain students as team representatives to present teamwork. Promotive interaction refers to students' facilitating each other's success through supportive interaction. Equal participation is considered a natural result of positive interdependence and individual accountability. Equal opportunity for success can be realized through emphasizing improvements in teams and grouping students to ensure heterogeneity and inter-team competition with equals. Group processing involves students reflecting on their learning experience and discussing what actions should be maintained or changed to improve the effectiveness of the cooperative group.

The integration of CL into second language classrooms is considered likely to facilitate optimum development of a learner's ability to communicate in the target language because it provides increased opportunities for comprehensible input, real-life experience of language use, and positive peer interaction (Holt 1993; Jacobs and McCafferty 2006; Jacobs and Goh 2007). It also helps build up a well-structured and supportive learning environment, which is non-threatening and highly motivating for learners. In the context of foreign language learning, typically students have limited access to authentic target language and few opportunities to use it. Therefore, integrating peer interaction into routine teaching is especially valuable in that it creates opportunities for meaningful communication in the classroom and partly compensates for the lack of authenticity in both language input and output. Recently, researchers have reported positive effects of using CL in foreign language classroom teaching on students' language proficiency, learning motivation, and cooperation skills (McCafferty, Jacobs, and DaSilva Iddings 2006).

In China, although teacher-centred direct instruction still plays a dominating role, tertiary students have expressed a strong preference for teaching styles that allow peer interaction and collaboration (Zhang 2006). A few researchers (for example Deng 2007) reported positive experiences with CL in tertiary classrooms in China. Research also found that CL structures generated substantially more language output from Chinese tertiary EFL learners than unstructured group work and whole-class lecturing (Jacobs and McCafferty op.cit.). However, apart from these few preliminary trials of CL strategies, a search of the literature could not find any study focusing on the adaptation of CL methods for ELT in China.

## **Adaptation of CL methods**

There are a wide variety of CL methods that can be adapted to suit different educational settings, language curricula, and teaching objectives (Richards and Rodgers 2001). 'Cooperative methods grow out of the modifications and adaptations made by professional educators in response to the unique demands of their own teaching situation' (Holt op.cit.: 3).

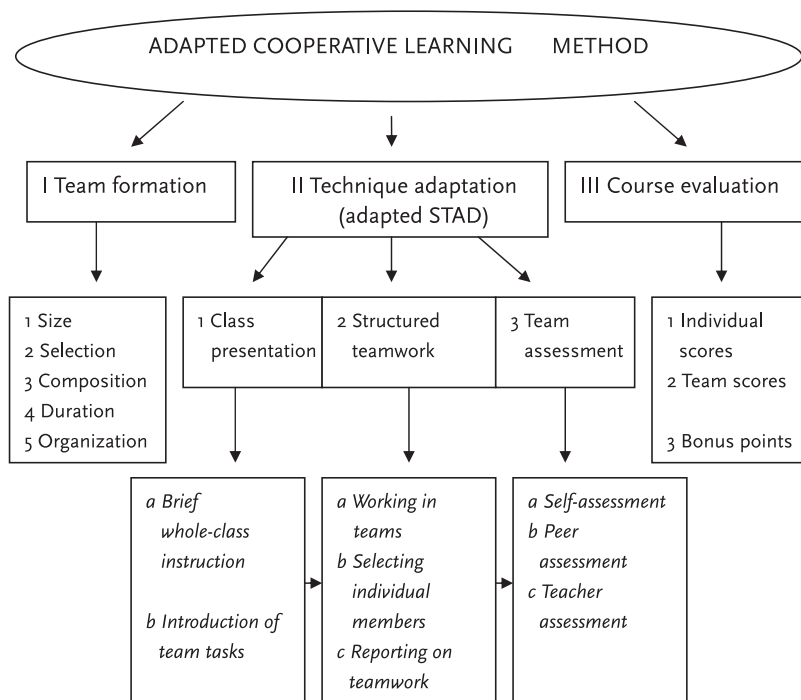


FIGURE 1  
Components and procedures of an adapted CL method with Chinese EFL learners

Several basic principles have been proposed to improve CL modifications (Holt *op.cit.*; Kagan *op.cit.*; Slavin *op.cit.*; McCafferty *et al.* *op.cit.*). First, the adaptation must incorporate key elements of CL because it is these elements that distinguish CL from other types of group work and lead to its effectiveness. Second, team assessment and course evaluation systems should offer recognition of teamwork and individual efforts, as well as rewards for teams' improvement and progress. Third, CL practitioners need to be sensitive when translating CL into Asian cultures, where rigid teacher-centred pedagogy is employed, and independent learning and learner autonomy are not traditionally advocated. Thus, when CL is first used with Asian students, full attention should be given to a proper balance between CL and traditional teaching.

Bearing all these principles in mind, the author modified CL for use in ELT with Chinese tertiary learners. The adaptation used in this project involved three aspects of the teaching: team formation, technique adaptation, and course evaluation (see Figure 1).

### Team formation

Using CL in ELT entails appropriately teaming students of differing levels of language proficiency in a supportive environment where promotive interaction can be generated. When forming teams, five factors must be taken into consideration: size, selection, composition, duration, and organization (Kagan *op.cit.*; Johnson *et al.* *op.cit.*; Jacobs and Goh *op.cit.*).

Foursomes were used as the basis for teams for three reasons:

- 1 The seating arrangement allowed pairs of students to turn around and form foursomes with two others behind them.
- 2 Foursomes allowed pair work within a team, which doubled participation and lines of communication.
- 3 Small teams were easy to manage for students, allowing for individual participation and accountability.

Three options exist for selecting team members: by teachers, by students themselves, or on a random basis. In this project, students were from different departments with different class schedules, and the English class was the only time they were all together. So teams were first selected by students according to their availability after class to meet for team assignments, as well as their preference for working together.

On the basis of student-selected teams, adjustments were made to achieve maximum heterogeneity especially in terms of language proficiency. Special efforts were made to build up inter-team comparability and academic balance by avoiding teams either composed of four high achievers or four low achievers. However, due to the restrictions of their class schedules, several teams were still somewhat homogeneous for lack of either a high achiever or a low achiever. In view of this, a remedial evaluation technique emphasizing improvements in teams was applied to minimize the impact of inter-team differences on team success.

The cooperative foursomes were used for the whole semester. This gave students who were unfamiliar with teamwork more time to develop cooperative skills, build group cohesion, and overcome difficulties in working together. The use of long-term learning teams with stable membership is likely to enhance the quality and quantity of learning, improve class attendance, and develop positive attitudes towards learning, and it particularly suits the context of large class teaching where students have diverse abilities and needs (Johnson *et al.* op.cit.).

In addition, three steps were taken to organize teams to enhance team cooperation and cohesion:

- 1 Each team chose its own name, which was something all team members agreed on and could express their team identity.
- 2 The four members in each team were coded as Apple, Bean, Cat, and Dog. (This way of coding was the students' choice.) Assigning each member a stable code was essential for firmly integrating individual accountability into teamwork.
- 3 Considering the class was large and students lacked experience in cooperation and autonomous learning, a captain was chosen by and for each team on condition that she/he was willing to help others and had good organizational skills. The role of the captain turned out to be helpful in improving the quality and efficiency of teamwork since captains managed and led their own teams, like teacher assistants.

## Technique adaptation

CL was introduced gradually in terms of structural complexity, task difficulty, and activity duration. At first, simple structures such as think-pair-share were used. This simply involved three steps: students thought

individually on a given topic (for example introducing one or two local products of their hometowns within two minutes), then took turns to exchange ideas with their partners, and finally they were selected to share their partners' ideas with the class. The activities based on simple structures were relatively easy to handle for beginners for three reasons. First, they mainly involved pair work requiring minimum social skills. Second, topics were specific and closely related to students' interests and current learning materials. Third, the length of activities was kept within ten minutes.

A frequently used technique in this project involved three sequential components—class presentation, structured teamwork, and team assessment—which is derived from Slavin's (op.cit.) Student-Team Achievement-Division (STAD). Since Slavin's STAD involves frequent use of individual quizzes for assessing teamwork, which does not suit big classes with limited teaching hours, the adaptations focused on how to structure teamwork and team assessment in this project.

### Class presentation

Class presentation by the teacher served as a basis for the structured teamwork and team assessment that followed. The presentation could be related to reading texts, writing skills, vocabulary, grammar, or a replay of audiovisual materials. The presentation took the form of whole-class teaching, but was brief compared with traditional teaching, because many learning materials were set aside to be completed by teamwork. For instance, the team task on judging the narrator's gender (see the Appendix) derived from a reading text depicting the narrator's encounter with a robbery. The presentation on the text started with a five-minute whole-class brainstorming of possible countermeasures when facing armed robbery. This provided a lead-in to engage students in the reading materials. Then the teacher spent 10–15 minutes focusing on the portions of the text involving unfamiliar background knowledge and difficult language points that might impede students' understanding. The remaining part that contained clues to the narrator's gender (for example the way to react to the incident and content of conversation with the robbers) was left for teamwork, in which teammates put their heads together and read for detailed comprehension to complete the task.

Class presentation also included the introduction of cooperative team tasks undertaken immediately afterwards. A worksheet (see the Appendix) on the team task was distributed to each team. The worksheet usually included task requirements and some scaffolding phrases for team cooperation and task completion. Specific grading criteria were given as the rubric for students to follow when doing self-grading/peer grading, which related to loudness, clarity, comprehensibility and length of their speech, and adequate use of eye contact in speaking. Each team was also required to put on the worksheet its team name, individual tasks or roles, and agreed grades for presenting teams.

### Structured teamwork

The ultimate purpose of the teamwork design was to generate more peer interaction and meaningful negotiation in the process of completing designated tasks. More emphasis was placed on communicative fluency as the basis for linguistic accuracy. Students were encouraged to get meaning across instead of simply focusing on accuracy of language forms. Inspired

by the technique of Numbered-Heads-Together (Kagan op.cit.) that emphasizes the role of random selection of team representatives in integrating individual accountability, teamwork was structured as follows:

- 1 Students worked together on tasks within given time limits. The task was based on textbook learning materials and might be a five-minute class activity (for example brainstorming vegetable names) or a team assignment to be completed within a couple of weeks (for example preparing a ten-minute speech on 'brain drains in developing countries: reasons and results' based on their knowledge, information from textbooks, and after-class cooperative research). A small amount of Chinese was allowed for team discussion but not for presenting work. The teacher was available to provide scaffolding when necessary.
- 2 A team was randomly selected as a presenting team and then a particular code was randomly selected for the team.
- 3 The student with the code represented his/her team and reported on the team's work in front of the whole class. The student's performance was assessed and this grade was recorded as his/her team's grade. (This assessment process will be further elaborated in the next section.)
- 4 More teams were chosen to report by repeating (2) and (3). Occasionally, the teacher made the choice so that each team was given equal opportunities for presentation and all teams had the same total number of assessments over the semester.

The purpose of this structure was having some teams present their work while not knowing in advance which teams would be selected and having one student represent his/her team without knowing in advance who this person would be. This technique facilitated involvement of all students as they individually held the responsibility for team success. The students were highly motivated to learn and participate because they did not want to disadvantage their teammates due to their own inadequate work. They also felt obliged to help each other learn because any teammate was potentially the team representative. This technique firmly integrated positive interdependence, individual accountability, promotive interaction, and equal participation in teamwork. It particularly suits large class teaching, where teachers find it difficult to monitor every student's performance. However, for the first couple of weeks, students were allowed to volunteer answers in order to reduce anxiety and provide a model of what was expected.

## Team assessment

In contrast to traditional assessment where grades are simply decided by teachers, the four-step assessment process used in this project also embodied self-assessment and peer assessment:

- 1 Students worked in teams to assess presentations according to the criteria specified on worksheets. Audience teams, who did not have the chance to present, were required to put on their worksheets an agreed grade for each presenting team. Likewise, presenting teams graded themselves by reflecting on their own work. Grades ranged from C to A+.
- 2 The teacher provided her feedback on presentations by pointing out both strengths and weaknesses and giving some constructive suggestions on improving the work. (Peer/self-grading preceded the teacher's

feedback so that it did not influence students' opinions.) At a later stage, students could volunteer to comment on peers' performance.

- 3 After all the selected teams had presented their work, worksheets were collected so that teams' self-grading and peer grading could be referred to by the teacher when making a decision on the grades of presenting teams. Collecting worksheets was also useful for the teacher to provide feedback on the audience teams' work from the notes recorded on their worksheets. This made audience teams feel their work was valued though not formally assessed and graded.
- 4 The teacher decided on the grades for presenting teams, which were notified by posting teamwork records on the classroom wall. If there was any disagreement from students, it would be discussed and the grade could be adjusted if necessary.

Both self- and peer assessment enable learners to reflect on their learning experiences and are integral parts of group processing. They enhance students' academic and social development, facilitate high-order thinking, and can create a favourable learning atmosphere of democracy and equality (Johnson *et al.* op.cit.). The requirement of peer grading was also helpful in keeping audience teams attentive and on task during presentations so as to produce sound evaluation and comments afterwards. It was noted that students took the assessment very seriously and the results of peer grading, in most cases, turned out to be very close to the teacher's.

## Course evaluation

Course evaluation recognized both teamwork and individual efforts. The students' final scores on the course were composed of two parts: 70 per cent from individual scores on the final exam at the end of the semester and 30 per cent from team scores based on team grades.

The team assessment system used in this project stressed equal opportunities for success by incorporating improvement points (Slavin op.cit.) as indicators of teams' improvements over previous work. This innovation involved adjusting team grades from previous work according to the extent of the improvement made at a particular time. For instance, team grades from previous work could be adjusted from B- to B, if they gained a B+ at a particular time. This assessment technique enabled students to compete with themselves rather than with others. It made up for the possible inter-team gaps in overall academic level and incorporated equal opportunities for success between teams.

The teacher also introduced bonus points for teams into the assessment in order to encourage student participation and invite more voices into classroom teaching. Apart from the formal structured teamwork presented by selected teams, there were also many informal class activities that needed volunteer participation. The bonus point technique was specially designed for those cooperative teams that volunteered quick responses to the teacher's questions, offered comments on the performance of presenting teams, and shared ideas with classmates. Chinese students are usually afraid of being thought of as show-offs so they are likely to keep silent even if they have some good ideas. This bonus point technique gave teammates a good reason to encourage each other to speak out and



practise English so as to win bonus points for their teams. Notably, even some initially reticent students were prompted to volunteer and contribute to their team points under peer influence. This was highly conducive to building up a lively and comfortable atmosphere for both teaching and learning.

## Recommendations

It was noted in this project that some students overused Chinese in order to get ideas across and complete tasks quickly. It is therefore recommended teachers make it clear at the very beginning of a course that the main purpose of team tasks is to offer students chances to practise English with peers in authentic situations. Consistent use of English in teamwork should be recognized and rewarded with bonus points.

This adapted CL method confined task cooperation to within teams. That was mainly because inter-team tasks demand additional time for preparation after class, but the students in this project were unavailable to meet with other teams after class due to their different class schedules. The author recommends using more complex structures that involve inter-team collaboration for task completion (for example prepared debates between teams). This is because well-structured inter-team tasks are likely to increase the quantity and complexity of peer interaction. Also these tasks involve extensive collaboration and are conducive to improvement in social and communicative skills essential for their future career development.

Using a new teaching approach is always full of challenges, so it is strongly recommended that teachers with an interest in CL build up a cooperative teaching team to support each other in experimenting with CL. They can work together planning lessons, designing tasks, observing each other teaching, sharing good ideas, and helping each other sort out problems. This team support among colleagues will make the experience more positive and productive.

## Conclusion

This article suggests that CL can be adapted for ELT with Chinese tertiary learners and other language learners in similar learning contexts. This is in spite of challenges such as the design of textbook-based team tasks, large class instruction, limited teaching time, as well as students' unfamiliarity with CL skills and learner autonomy. The adapted method, with the integration of all six key CL elements, is likely to facilitate the development of students' communicative competence through fostering a supportive learning atmosphere, providing more opportunities for authentic peer interaction and generating more meaningful language input and output. The author hopes that the dissemination of this adapted CL method will generate interest from colleagues who would like to make CL a regular component of their teaching repertoire.

*Final revised version received February 2010*

## Note

1 The project reported in this article was funded by the Shanxi Scholarship Council of China (Project No. 200844).

## References

Deng, X. 2007. 'Promotion of interaction in cooperative learning task'. *Sino-US English Teaching* 4/7: 8-13.

**Flowerdew, L.** 1998. 'A cultural perspective on group work'. *ELT Journal* 52/4: 323–9.

**Hedge, T.** 2000. *Teaching and Learning in the Language Classroom*. (Handbooks for Language Teachers Series.). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

**Holt, D. D. (ed.)**. 1993. *Cooperative Learning: A Response to Linguistic and Cultural Diversity*. McHenry, IL: Centre for Applied Linguistics.

**Jacobs, G. M. and C. C. Goh.** 2007. *Cooperative Learning in the Language Classroom*. Singapore: SEAMEO Regional Language Centre.

**Jacobs, G. M. and S. G. McCafferty.** 2006. 'Connections between cooperative learning and second language learning and teaching' in S. G. McCafferty, G. M. Jacobs, and A. C. DaSilva Iddings (eds.).

**Jin, L. and M. Cortazzi.** 2004. 'English language teaching in China: a bridge to the future' in W. K. Ho and R. Y. Wong (eds.). *English Language Teaching in East Asia Today*. (Second edition). Singapore: Eastern Universities Press.

**Johnson, D. W., R. T. Johnson, and E. J. Holubec.** 1998. *Cooperation in the Classroom*. (Seventh edition). Edina, MN: Interaction Book Company.

**Kagan, S.** 1994. *Cooperative Learning*. San Clemente, CA: Kagan Publishing.

**McCafferty, S. G., G. M. Jacobs, A. C. DaSilva Iddings (eds.)**. 2006. *Cooperative Learning and Second Language Teaching*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

**Ministry of Education.** 2007. *College English Curriculum Requirements*. Shanghai, China: Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press.

**Ning, H.** 2008. 'An experimental study of cooperative learning with tertiary EFL learners in China'. Paper presented at the 14<sup>th</sup> ALANZ Symposium, Auckland, New Zealand. Available at <http://www.alanz.ac.nz/files/2008/11/alanz-symposium-programme-book-20081.pdf> (accessed on 14 March 2010).

**Richards, J. and T. S. Rodgers.** 2001. *Approaches and Methods in Language Teaching*. (Second edition). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

**Slavin, R. E.** 1995. *Cooperative Learning: Theory, Research, and Practice*. (Second edition). Needham Heights, MA: Allyn and Bacon.

**Zhang, L.** 2006. 'Preferred teaching styles and modes of thinking among university students in mainland China'. *Thinking Skills and Creativity* 1/2: 95–107.

**The author**

**Huiping Ning**, an associate professor in the Faculty of Foreign Languages of Shanxi University of Finance and Economics in China, has been engaged in ELT at the tertiary level for 15 years. She is completing her PhD in Education in the College of Education, University of Canterbury, New Zealand. Her current professional interests focus on the use of CL in the ELT classroom and its impact on learners' language proficiency, learning motivation, and social skills.  
**Email: huiping\_ning@hotmail.com**

**Appendix**

An example of a worksheet

**Team name:** \_\_\_\_\_ **Time limit:** 20 minutes

**Individual roles:** Recorder \_\_\_\_\_ Time monitor \_\_\_\_\_  
 Understanding checker \_\_\_\_\_ Taskmaster \_\_\_\_\_

**Self-grading:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Grade of the presenting teams:**

Team name	Grade	Team name	Grade

**Task requirements:**

Read through the text and have a team discussion about whether the narrator is a male or female. Please give reasons.

Apple: (opinions from Apple)

---

---

Bean:

---

---

Cat:

---

---

Dog:

---

---

**Team conclusion and supporting details:**

---

---

**Grading criteria:**

- 1 You speak loud enough to be heard by all.
- 2 Your ideas are clearly expressed, well organized, and easy to follow.
- 3 The length of your speech is no less than two minutes.
- 4 Eye contact is needed. (You may use notes but shouldn't read.)
- 5 Your team is attentive and quiet when others are speaking.

**Scaffolding phrases and expressions:**

- 1 We assume/think/believe the narrator is a male/female for the following reasons: first/second/third . . .
- 2 We've found some evidence/clues in the text that the narrator is probably a male/female. Firstly/Secondly/Thirdly . . .
- 3 Sorry, I didn't get what you mean. Say it again, please.
- 4 We'd like to know your opinion, Bean.
- 5 Let's focus on the topic. We're a bit off track.
- 6 Come on, guys. Only two minutes left.