

Learning to Learn Cooperatively

Cooperative learning, put quite simply, is a type of instruction whereby students work together in small groups to achieve a common goal. Cooperative learning has become increasingly popular as a feature of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) with benefits that include increased student interest due to the quick pace of cooperative tasks, improved critical thinking ability, and the opportunity to practice both the productive and receptive skills in a natural context. The array of benefits extends beyond increased language learning to include increased self-esteem and tolerance of diverse points of view (Johnson and Johnson 1989; Kagan 1995; McCafferty, Jacobs, and Iddings 2006; Slavin 1995).

Although cooperative learning has numerous variations, Johnson and Johnson (1999) indicate five features of a successful cooperative learning activity: (1) students learn that their success depends upon working together interdependently; (2) students are individually accountable while achieving group goals; (3) students support and assist one another's success through face-to-face interac-

tions; (4) students develop social skills by cooperating and working together effectively; and (5) students as a group have the opportunity to reflect on the effectiveness of working together.

When these principles are realized, cooperative learning creates a rich environment for students to learn language and simultaneously develop their capacities for collaborative twenty-first-century communication and problem solving. Students can reap all of these benefits by working cooperatively in the classroom, so it is no wonder that teachers desire to pool the resources in our classrooms, namely our students, to maximize student learning through cooperative learning opportunities.

The culture of cooperative learning

As teachers of English language learners, we often forget that many of the strategies that our discipline embraces as the most appropriate means for reaching our students are, in fact, culturally specific and driven by assumptions about communication that, at times, need to be taught explicitly in order for such activities

to succeed (Canagarajah 1993, 2005; Cohen 1994; Kumaravadivelu 2001; Li 1998). Often there are cultural elements to our expectations of how English learners should interact in groups, and depending on the students' familiarity with those norms, interactions may have varying degrees of success. For example, not all students are used to working in groups to accomplish a task, especially if they are accustomed to a more teacher-centered form of instruction. In addition, students have culturally specific communication styles that can impede cooperation within a group.

In my own third-grade classroom, I found that it is crucial to recognize cultural and individual differences to manage the needs of my diverse students, who consist of both immigrants at various levels of English proficiency and "mainstream" U.S.-born native English speakers, all of whom are responsible for learning academic concepts, vocabulary, and language skills as outlined by a statewide curriculum. Using research and practitioner literature on cooperative learning (Cohen 1994; Genesee 1994; Johnson and Johnson 1999; McCafferty, Jacobs, and Iddings 2006; Sharan and Sharan 1992), I developed a unit based on the legend of frontier hero Johnny Appleseed that was sensitive to the culture of cooperative learning.

Johnny Appleseed: A cooperative learning unit

For our class, we use a picture book written by Steven Kellogg (1988). The U.S. legend of Johnny Appleseed is a favorite story for many children and allows for the easy integration of multiple academic content areas, such as folklore, geography, and history, while simultaneously exploring the English language. This popular legend tells about the adventures of a man named John Chapman as he traveled across the wilderness of early nineteenth-century America, working with both pioneers and Native Americans as he planted apple orchards. There are several versions of this tale, but all of them portray Johnny Appleseed as a man known for his generosity and willingness to help all living creatures. Though gentle, Johnny possessed an almost superhuman strength that allowed him to plant and harvest apple orchards in half the time it took most people. As a classroom reading, the tale of Johnny

Appleseed is intriguing for young learners and is full of entertaining exaggerations typical of U.S. folk legends, or "tall tales." Depending on the version of the legend, Johnny Appleseed battles rattlesnakes, wrestles with bears, and wins tree-chopping contests, all while planting the orchards of apples that made him famous. This tall tale is full of spectacular events that allow students to explore literal versus figurative language, and it also provides a basis for a geographical study of Johnny Appleseed's trek across the United States.

Some of the cooperative learning projects in this unit involve the creation of student-made maps of geographical regions, the performance of dramatic skits and puppet shows, and the creation of recipes using apples. As students work together cooperatively on these tasks, they utilize all four skills and receive opportunities to practice both academic and informal registers of oral English. While this type of instructional design is extremely appropriate for the developmental needs of young students, they do not gain the full extent of its benefits until the culture of cooperative learning is explicitly taught to them. As Rogoff (2003, 14) argues, "assumptions are the things you don't know you're making."

The cooperative learning structure of this unit allows students to learn both from and with each other, but it is successful only because we specifically explore *how* to work cooperatively during the unit. Language teachers hoping to implement successful cooperative learning activities with young learners might consider the following seven suggestions for helping students to learn to learn cooperatively.

Suggestion 1: Make students aware of the purpose and benefits of learning cooperatively.

In addition to the academic benefits, cooperative learning provides a natural context for students to explore language. It is helpful to begin talking with students about why cooperative learning is something that belongs in the English language classroom. Teachers can address the value that the activities have for the students by asking them to discuss the following questions:

- What are some things that you do by yourself and what are some things that you do with others?

- What things can we do better in groups? Why?
- What skills must we use when working in groups?
- How will we use these skills in the future?
- Why would we want to study this specific topic in groups?

When beginning our unit on Johnny Appleseed, we discuss these questions as well as the importance of the subject itself, including folk heroes and their impact on society. Furthermore, when group work is prefaced with a group discussion, students are already engaged with each other when group activity begins. Thus, before beginning our unit, the class as a group establishes a purpose for and collaborative investment in completing the subsequent activities. It is helpful to make students conscious of the value that working cooperatively has for their language learning and overall academic success. When students are aware of the purpose and benefit of functioning in groups, they will be more willing to adapt their behaviors for successful completion of the activities.

Suggestion 2: Practice cooperation skills with nonacademic games.

Even before using cooperative learning to address an explicitly academic subject, provide situations for students to communicate in small groups for nonacademic purposes. Cohen (1994) provides several games that foster this type of collaboration, and one of the simplest to implement involves the use of a jigsaw puzzle.

In this jigsaw puzzle activity, students are divided into groups of four to complete a puzzle. Each group receives a complete puzzle, and each member of the group receives one fourth of the puzzle's pieces in a bag. The challenge is for the group of students to complete the puzzle without touching or moving each other's puzzle pieces. They may discuss puzzle piece placement with each other, but each person is in charge of assembling his or her individual puzzle pieces within the whole puzzle. Teachers may choose to use store-bought puzzles, or they may wish to have students make their own. To create student-made puzzles, ask the students to first draw a picture that includes ideas and objects that

will appear later as academic subject material, thereby activating the students' background knowledge about the topic. (For the Johnny Appleseed unit, this could be a map of his journey or an apple orchard.) After students have completed their illustrations, ask them to cut their pictures into pieces to create the puzzles. They can alternate using each other's puzzles to complete the activity. By trying out cooperative learning in a game-like setting, students are exposed to the sorts of demands that future academic cooperation will require.

Suggestion 3: Change the culture of your classroom.

Consider providing students with opportunities to practice communication within a group by allowing whole class conversations to occur freely without constant teacher direction. By creating an atmosphere that encourages social interaction within a group, teachers allow students to become more comfortable with the structure of the cooperative learning lesson design. Allow students the freedom to discuss ideas in class discussions openly without raising their hands for permission to speak.

The teacher can create discussions that overlap and build upon the students' ideas by providing a simple "What if" statement to initiate discussion. For instance, using our Johnny Appleseed example, I ask the following:

- What if the story of Johnny Appleseed occurred in the present instead of in the early nineteenth century?
- How would his journey have been different?
- What would he see?

This type of "What if" question prompts students to explore vocabulary that they may not otherwise encounter or use. For instance, one of my students was having difficulty with retrieving the word *skyscraper*. It is not a word that is typical in everyday use, but this type of discussion allowed my students to stretch their vocabulary beyond the words found in the book itself.

In addition, allow students to develop their oral language and critical thinking skills by challenging each other through discussions built upon their own interwoven ideas. By changing the culture of the classroom, students will have the opportunity to practice the skills of cooperation, tolerance of ideas,

and multiparty group communication that are so valuable when participating in cooperative learning.

Suggestion 4: Establish ground rules for all cooperative learning activities.

Young learners need established boundaries and expectations, but the rules of group work activities may differ greatly from the typical classroom lesson plan. Firm ground rules should be established so that students are clear on what is expected of them during this type of instruction.

Students need to be explicitly taught rules for communicating in groups that may differ from the classroom rules with which they are familiar, including “Is it okay to speak without raising my hand?” and “Is it okay to borrow from someone else’s ideas, or is that considered cheating?” Here are three basic rules for cooperative learning:

1. Always ask for help when something is confusing.
2. Always offer help to those who ask for it.
3. Everyone’s ideas should be heard.

These norms are very different from the competitive and individualistic “eyes on your own paper” classroom environment that students may be accustomed to, so it is important to give them the opportunity to become acclimated to this new way of behaving. During our Johnny Appleseed unit, we revisit these ground rules each day before beginning our cooperative activities. Eventually, students are able to recite the ground rules from memory.

Suggestion 5: Balance student status.

We have all witnessed occasions when high-status students dominate group activities while low-status students tend to withdraw from the activity or defer to high-status students. The idea is that each student has a particular status determined by the expectations created by themselves and their peers within their group before they even have the opportunity to attempt a task. Student status can be determined by characteristics such as academic performance, popularity, or athletic performance.

Due to the fact that self-esteem can play a tremendous role in language learning and fluency, teachers must make an effort to raise the status of low-level students by providing pub-

lic praise and recognition for specific skills. The teacher can help students understand that everyone has important skills to contribute in the classroom, such as visual/spatial relations, rhythm, or sequencing, regardless of language ability. The skills of the low-status students are acknowledged by stating specific observations to the class, such as “Wow, I see David is using excellent spatial skills by drawing a map that covers the entire page perfectly.” In this way, the status levels of students will begin to balance, and all students will gain more equal access to the group’s task at hand.

Suggestion 6: Assign roles.

Offer a framework of responsibilities for the students by providing them with specific roles that change daily within their groups. Many times students are unaware of the individual tasks that are necessary to complete an activity successfully as a group. Here are four examples of possible roles for students to perform in their groups:

1. *Planner.* Before actually beginning an activity, this student can sketch out the ideas of the group members to ensure that all students’ ideas are expressed and seen visually, regardless of language abilities.
2. *Translator.* Armed with an English-English dictionary, this student has the responsibility of looking up words that are troublesome for all of the members of the group. Often, young learners encounter unfamiliar vocabulary in an academic context, regardless of being native or nonnative English speakers. They may not understand some words in the directions of the task or vocabulary from the unit being studied. The translator role helps all students learn academic vocabulary and build their competency for using reference materials.
3. *Group Guide.* This student ensures that the ground rules for group work are being followed and that the ideas of everyone in the group are being heard.
4. *Supply Supervisor.* This student gathers necessary materials before the activity and returns them once the activity is completed.

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Until students have had ample practice and exposure to cooperative group situations, they may need help in pinpointing the roles necessary to successfully perform group tasks without guidance.

Suggestion 7: Provide demanding tasks.

Give students an authentic reason for participating in a cooperative task; that is, provide tasks that the students cannot complete independently either because of the nature of the activity or because of how much time they are allotted to complete the assignment. For instance, in our Johnny Appleseed unit, some of the cooperative tasks include writing and performing a skit about Johnny Appleseed's life, performing a puppet show for other students based on the characters and events of the story, and creating a detailed physical map out of clay to illustrate his journey. Provide activities that are simplified when completed by a group, rather than activities that would be easier to complete alone.

Conclusion

While cooperative learning is often time-consuming, by working together, students simultaneously strengthen both their basic interpersonal communication skills and their academic language proficiency. Even more, it's fun. However, as English teachers both in U.S. and non-U.S. contexts, we cannot assume that our diverse students automatically understand how to achieve the most gains from our methods of instruction. Cooperative learning, like most things, is socially constructed. Just as we provide students with knowledge of subject-verb agreement or vocabulary, we should also lead them to learn why and how to work better together. This is not to say that each and every cooperative activity that we implement in our classroom will be executed seamlessly. There will always be external factors to complicate the dynamics of a classroom, but at least we will have avoided making assumptions about our students by agreeing to learn how to learn cooperatively.

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