**Cooperative Learning for a Real Student- Centered Language Classroom**

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**Abstract**

Cooperative learning, which includes pair work or group work, is an integral part of language learning behavior of communicative methodology. This paper tries to prove how cooperative learning can be applied as a good strategy to make classroom teaching student centered. This is considered as a part of classroom management which can be very motivating and effective for the learners as they actively participate in the learning situation and as there is more interaction between the teacher- learners and the learners-learners. Since students exchange and share information and ideas in the classroom and the success or failure in the learning is shared by each of the members of the group, students feel less test anxiety. As a result, their level of performance increases. To make the process of cooperative learning a success, the teacher needs to form the groups properly, design the tasks and assign them to students equally, explain activities to them clearly, plan every stage elaborately and evaluate and grade learners accurately. Though there are some drawbacks of cooperative learning, it can be successful if it is applied thoughtfully and skillfully to a classroom situation which allows its proper function.

Cooperative learning (CL), as defined by Kagan (1994) is a teaching arrangement that refers to small heterogeneous groups of students working together to achieve common goal. It is widely accepted as a range of concepts and techniques that enhance student-student interaction and thus promote effective thinking skills and creativity. When students interact with their peers to brainstorm, explain, question, disagree, persuade and problem solve, they actually get

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involved in thinking interaction. Numerous studies have been carried out to measure the success of CL as an instructional method from primary grades through college leading to a general consensus that it can result in positive students' outcomes in all domains (Johnson and Johnson, 1999). Many take CL as a logical teaching method, assuming that human beings are social creatures by nature and cooperation has been effectively used throughout in history in all aspects of our lives. Thus, it is inferred that if this commonly found aspect of human life is applied in teaching, it will result in positive outcomes. This is arguably a very popular method and many think that in parts of the world where teacher-centered classroom is the norm, the introduction of this method can, regardless of the subject matter, make the learning more effective, motivating and engaging.

## What is Cooperative learning?

CL methods were developed and evaluated in different teaching contexts throughout 1960's. Among others, Johnson and Johnson (1999) developed learning together and alone and constructive controversy, while Kagan (1994) developed cooperative learning structures.

According to Johnson, Johnson, & Holubec, (1993) key concepts of cooperative learning include:

1. Positive interdependence - the feeling among a group of students that they fail or succeed together.

2. Individual accountability-the belief among a group that each member has the responsibility for his/her own learning as well as that of group mates.

3. Collaborative skills – these refer to the cooperative skills that students need to be explicitly taught.

4. Processing group interaction- time spent for groups to reflect on how well they have collaborated and how they can enhance their future collaboration.

5. Heterogeneous grouping - students working with group mates who are different from one another on such variables as sex, past achievement, ethnicity, and diligence.

Research on cooperative learning across a wide range of academic subject areas and age groups suggest that the use of cooperative learning can be associated with gains on the following variables (Bossert, 1988-1989; Cohen, 1994; Johnson & Johnson, 1989; Sharan, 1980; Slavin, 1995):

1. Achievement

2. Liking for school

3. Inter-ethnic relations

4. Thinking skills

5. Self-esteem.

6. Enjoyment

According to Johnson, Johnson and Smith (1991) learning groups can be of three types:

*Informal Learning groups:* these are ad hoc temporary groups of students within a single class session. These groups can either be a group of two students sitting side by side or a group of three to five students which is normally formed by a teacher to give students the opportunity to solve a problem or apply what they are learning in the class.

*Formal groups*: these groups consist of a team formed to complete a specific task like writing a report, performing a lab experiment, etc. Students normally work together until the task is finished and their performance is normally graded.

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*Study teams:* these are long term groups that work together for the entire semester on a complex subject matter.

## Differences between Pair work and Group work:

Both formal learning groups and informal learning groups may include pair work and group work. Though both are regarded as cooperative method, pair work and group work have some distinctive as well as some similar functions. Brown (2007:224) defines group work as "multiplicity of techniques in which two or more students are assigned a task that involves collaboration and self-initiated language." He also terms pair work as simply work done in groups of two. Again, Mcdonough and Shaw (2003) define and contrast these two types of cooperative learning in the following ways:

First, pair work is comparatively simple in its organization. A teacher can activate it by simply allowing learners to work with the person sitting next to them. On the other hand, a group has a more complex structure and a teacher needs to assign different roles to different learners in a group, especially in a communicative setting.

Second, pair work may not always require setting an extensive task that takes a long time whereas for group work the time scale often needs to be more extensive.

Finally, there is a wide range of tasks suitable for pair work, such as structure and vocabulary practice, simulation, etc. Group work, on the other hand, often requires interesting and stimulating tasks which the group is able to perform successfully.

However, teachers can organize either pair work or group work to facilitate cooperative learning in the class according to the complexity or the types of the tasks, duration of the class, needs of the learners or the learning situation. Again, groups and pairs are not 'mutually

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exclusive' as "individuals out of a pair can re-form to make a different pair" (Mcdonough and Shaw p. 197).
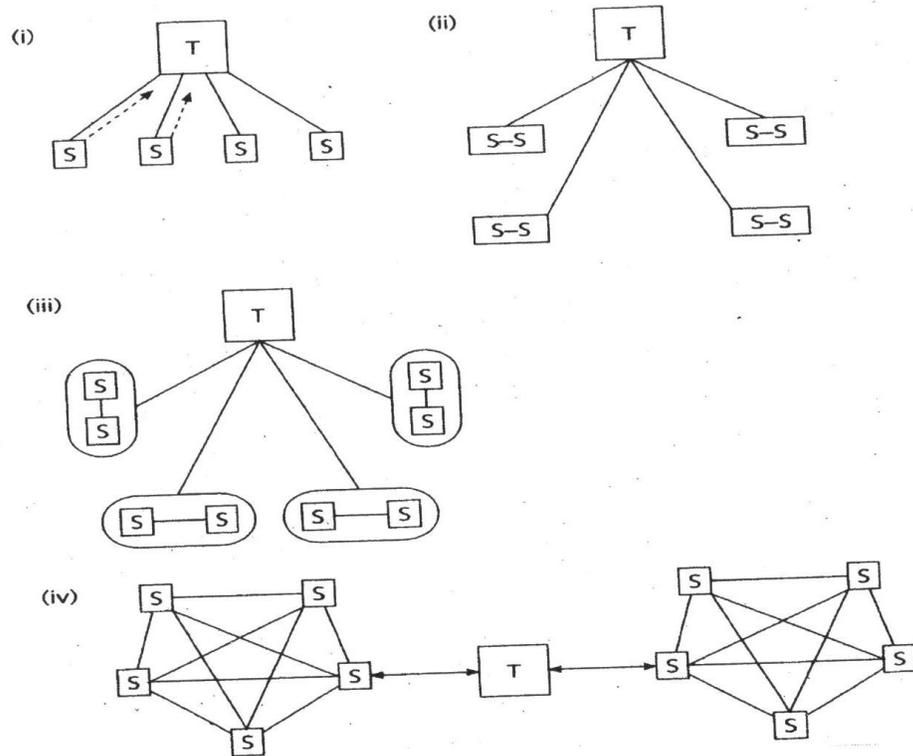
## How to form groups:

Pair work, as said earlier, is simple in its organization while group work requires careful planning beforehand. There are many possibilities for the physical arrangement of the classroom although there are no set rules. Kippel (1984) offers a few basic setting designs (circle, half circle and block) while Hermer (1989) suggests some procedural setups (pair, buzz groups, consensuses, debates). He also poses some limits on the size: no more than seven. However, as there is no firm research to give an ideal answer to the ideal combination of students of mixed levels, it is the teachers who need to decide whether they will combine strong students with the weak students or whether they will vary the combination of the pairs from class to class considering their needs. (Harmer, 1989)

Mcdonough and Shaw (2003) also think that the physical properties of the classroom itself, such as room size or the nature of the classroom furniture (tables, benches, worktop space, and mobility) determine participative working patterns. So these arrangements should not be static and "in a flexible classroom may change during the course of the lesson, both physically as well as in terms of roles and interaction." (Mcdonough and Shaw, 2003 p.198)

Mcdonough and Shaw (2003) show the following setup as an example in their book *Materials & Methods in ELT, A Teacher's Guide* (2003, p. 198).

Figure-1

The figure shows some possible physical arrangements of classroom. Here, T represents teacher, S students and the lines represent the main direction of interaction. The 'lockstep' class is represented by figure (i). In this type of classroom the activities are teacher fronted. The next two figures (ii) and (iii) show pair format while figure (iv) shows small group format.

### Breaking away from 'Lockstep' tradition:

Deciding on grouping of students is a part of classroom management, which according to Richards (1990:10), "is the ways in which student behavior, movement and interaction during a lesson are organized and controlled by the teacher to enable teaching to take place most effectively.' "Classroom organization" is another term which Wright (1987) uses in which group work is included as one of the organizational possibilities.

Researchers now give attention to 'lockstep organization' of classroom which is 'teacher fronted' and where there is little or no interaction between the teacher-learners or the learners-learners. Mcdonough and Shaw (2003) refer to Long as one of the principal researchers in this field and explain the concept in terms of a simple sequence such as the following:

Teacher stimulus -------- student response---------teacher evaluation of student response.

This is the classroom situation where all students are 'locked' into the same activity and where the teacher is the only initiator. In this classroom most students are likely to be passive. This 'psycholinguistic' research, according to Mcdonough and Shaw (2003), supports the pedagogical reason for group working. Breaking the class down into smaller size units (groups, pairs) will lead to a greater amount of language being spoken by every individual. It will also result in increasing role differentiation that will lead to a wider variety of language being used.

### Designing work for the group:

Elaborate planning in every stage is required on the part of the teacher to make the process of cooperative learning a success. Decisions have to be made on topics, themes or projects while designing a syllabus. If students have never worked on groups before they need to be told how they will operate and how they will be graded. If the task is new for them, they should be provided with adequate information well before the group work, and to set the limit of time for the task, a deadline must be issued. Davis (1993) cites others who instance examples of faculty members who give their students written contracts that list members 'obligations to their group and deadlines for the task.

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i)      Davis (1993) makes the following points while discussing group work designs. Teachers should select a task that requires interdependence, a task for which students will share responsibilities and be dependent on each other. Students should know that they 'swim or sink together' i.e. the success or failure will be shared by all members of the group. To promote such interdependence teachers can specify common rewards, encourage students to share their work, or formulate tasks that force students to come to a common point of view. ( Johnson, Johnson and Smith 1991)

ii)     The work should be relevant and integral to course objectives. In other words, the task should be discipline-specific and should involve students. For example, in the English classes for students of Civil Engineering a report on transportation problem is relevant and can make students think about proper solutions to the problem.

iii)    Students should have the abilities and skills to finish the task. In this respect Davis (1993) suggests that teachers should start with relatively easy tasks and gradually increase the difficulty level as students become more knowledgeable.

iv)     Teachers should assign tasks in which students contribute equally. For example, if the teacher asks the group to prepare a report, each member should be given the responsibly to finish a particular part of it. Later, they will correct or improve the whole thing together.

v)       Teachers should set up competitions among groups. For example, a teacher can ask different groups of students to write a story based on the same

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pictures. Later, when the students complete the task, he/she can ask one student from each group to read the story aloud and give positive comments to the good ones. This will make the students perform better next time.

## Evaluation:

Since group work involves more than one student' performance, grading should be done carefully. Teachers should make sure that individual performance is assessed and, also, each member should know how the group is progressing. To do so Davis (1993) suggests the following techniques:

i.    Giving spot quizzes

ii.   Calling individual students to present their group's progress. Students should also evaluate the effectiveness of their group by discussing two questions:

   a) What action has each member taken that was helpful for the group?

   b) What action could each member take to make the group even better?

While grading, some teachers like to assign all students in the group the same grade on the group task. Grading students individually, according to these teachers, might lead to competition which might work against the purpose of group learning. However, other teachers grade the contribution of each student on the basis of individual test score on the group's evaluation of each member's work.

## Benefits of Cooperative Learning:

Whether CL should be advantageous or not is relative to the classroom situation and the social environment of the country. In many parts of the world, especially in Asian countries, the teacher remains the centre of all activities and commands great respect from students. In this

situation the teacher may not be able to take a strong interactive role. Again, the nature of the subject can also be a determining factor. For example, subjects like physics and history require lecture method as knowledge needs to be transmitted here. Nevertheless, in a wider context and as a teaching technique, CL can have the following benefits:

First, cooperative learning creates a learning atmosphere where students feel connected with other members of the group. As students get more opportunities to speak in this learning situation, they become more involved in language use. Thus it increases the amount of student talking time which is an important strategy of making the class student-centered.

Second, cooperative learning enhances students' confidence and self esteem as they share "suggestions, hypothesis, insights feedback, successes and failures" (Nielson, 1989). Tinto (1997) observes that it helps them develop learning communities within classes and institutions. As a result, it may raise the level of performance of each student of the group as its members help each other. In doing so, they can build a supportive community (Kagan 1986).

Third, cooperative learning can be effective in a class with mixed levels of students. It can benefit both weak and strong students working in the same group. In many researches (e.g Johnson & Johnson, 1985) it is often seen that when students of high ability work with students of lower ability, the former benefit by demonstrating, and the latter by seeing how their fellow classmates solve problems efficiently.

Fourth, cooperative learning can promote an anxiety-free classroom environment or what Long and Porter (1975) call 'affective climate". Since the teacher does not focus on the individual learner, he/she will feel less threatened about being criticized for making mistakes. It may also reduce test anxiety (Johnson and Johnson, 1989). Less anxiety may, in turn, raise the

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performance of students. Brown (2007) also thinks that a further benefit of group work is increase in student motivation

Fifth, it decreases the ratio of mistakes much as students get sufficient time to reflect on their mistakes. Unlike a classroom where the 'lecture method' is emphasized, in cooperative learning  students are continually discussing, debating, and clarifying their understanding of the concept (Panitz 1997)

Finally, many teachers including the authors of this paper have found out that the learners enjoy working in groups and pairs and prefer group work over individual work.

### Drawbacks:

There are, however, students or parents or sometimes even administrators who might not favor cooperative learning. The reason is 'the language model' that a teacher can provide may be missing in this classroom situation as students are not likely to know as much as the teacher. Also, the following problems may arise while organizing group or pair work:

First, class size can be an important factor in organizing group/pair work. In a large class cooperative learning may seem uncontrollable and the teacher may not monitor properly whether each student in a group is working on the topic or is engaged in a sociaizing.

Second, even though class size is okay for organizing group work, students' participation may not always be the same. Weak or shy students may prefer to sit at the back and remain inactive all through a task.

Third, if it is a language classroom, students might prefer to use their L1 instead of a target language while working in a group.

Fourth, classes may become very noisy and uncontrollable while group work is going on. Discipline may be difficult to maintain as students often get carried away while engaging in any

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interesting activity. Sometimes administrators or colleagues may find the extra noise objectionable.

Fifth, age is also a factor as group work is difficult in case of young learners who are still to learn about sharing their ideas or work as a group.

Finally, there may also be problems with physical facilities. The furniture, for example, may be fixed to the floor thus making it impossible for students to interact comfortably.  In case of furniture that is moveable, the students may sometimes leave them in disorder after they finish the class, and thus annoy the group who come to the class later.

In spite of these drawbacks, a teacher can successfully organize group work or pair work if he/she becomes alert about the task and group design and skillful about the learning situation. For example, if large class size is a problem, group members may be assigned to find out unproductive group behavior during group work. If any student does not contribute much to the activity, he/ she may be awarded less points. Davis (1993) advises creating group tasks that require interdependence and that allow for a fair division of labor.

**Conclusion:**

Cooperative learning thus actively involves students in the learning process to create an ideal learning situation and thus makes learning very effective and attractive for them. The reason is learners can apply their own ideas along with their peers to solve a learning problem which was originally meant for them. Students can actively solve the learning problems while the teacher is there in the classroom to facilitate and guide them. If the teacher wants to make learning a success applying the cooperative method, he/she should be very skillful, thoughtful and cooperative at the same time. According to Cooper and Associates (1990) they need to explain their "rationale, design well-structured meaningful tasks, give students clear directions ,

set expectations for how team members are to contribute and interact , and invite students to try it". (Source: Cooper and Associates, 1990).

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