
Learning to Cooperate/ Cooperating to Learn

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Fourteen learners sit around the outside of a “U” formed by three long tables. There was a buzz of conversation in more than one language, none of them English, when I walked into the room. Now the voices have stilled (it’s early in the year) and fourteen pairs of eyes look expectantly toward the teacher (me). Showtime! The actor in me will rise to the occasion, happy to take the attention and deliver a show.

Many learners as well as teachers bring this assumption to the ESOL classroom—that instruction flows from teacher (keeper of knowledge) to learners (who desire and do not possess that knowledge). What I’ve learned about participatory education doesn’t let me settle for this limited, one-way approach. As a teacher, the most useful and appropriate role for me is to set up conditions that support and encourage learners’ active involvement in content directly drawn from their lives, then get out of the way of the learning that happens in authentic communication. I believe the balance of power in the classroom should rest with the learners, not the teacher. The focus of attention should be on the process of learning—the active use of language for meaningful communication—rather than the product—completing a worksheet or answering the teacher’s questions “correctly.” The shortcomings of a teacher-focused model are particularly obvious in working with the multilevel classes that characterize adult education programs. Delivering one lesson to a group of twenty or twelve or eight learners will necessarily leave some learners lost and others bored. If we hope to engage most of the learners most of the time, we must tailor instruction to respond to the specific learners.

I bring a belief in the values of a participatory approach to my work in a community based program in Chicopee, in western Massachusetts, where I teach

Levels 1 and 2 ESOL. Our classes are multi-lingual, with from three to seven native languages spoken by learners in one class. Like all classes, they are multi-level. Our learners have a wide variety of economic situations (retired, working, unemployed, receiving assistance); religions; ages; class and formal education backgrounds; cultures; and goals they wish to pursue. They struggle to accommodate the dominant US culture, one which may or may not be comfortable or familiar.

Teaching requires creative responses to the complex variables presented by a group of learners. Like many ESOL teachers, one strategy I use in response to the multiple levels in my classroom is small group work. “Count off by 3’s. Number ones sit with Natalya, number 2’s with Teresa....” In small groups learners have increased time to actively engage with the language and interact with others. Last year, I participated in a semester-long cooperative project for a course at UMass, Amherst. As a learner myself, I worked cooperatively with a small group to plan a unit for one of my classes. In this unit, a group of Level 2 learners in our health program worked in the same small groups for several weeks to complete projects. The results were exciting! Over time, they forged friendships across many differences and produced a number of powerful projects. There were challenges: the absence of any group member delayed or set back a group’s work; some learners preferred to work independently and others tended to want to “just do it” for the group. But by the end of the year, there was a warm and exciting classroom climate of mutual sharing of resources, ideas and skills. Learners’ language skills, by their own and by my estimation, had significantly improved through authentic interactions to accomplish shared goals.

My own experiences as a learner in this project not only sharpened my awareness of what exactly I was asking of my students when they worked in groups, but raised many questions. What exactly makes group work cooperative? How do these factors interact to support or inhibit effective group work? How does such cooperation serve the needs of a multilevel group? This year, as a participant in A.L.R.I.'s teacher research project, I wanted to explore these questions and refine my use of small cooperative groups. I had high expectations! In addition to answering the above questions, I hoped that learners would work in the same groups over time; that they would identify and choose to work with content meaningful to them. I wanted to support learners to reflect upon and evaluate their experiences, and I wanted to work with very new speakers of English—Levels 1 and 2.

Defining Cooperative Learning

The literature and I concur—all cooperative learning is group work, but not all group work is cooperative. Here are some vignettes to illustrate what makes group work cooperative learning: 1) Three learners are working together to complete a medical information form. Until each supplies the information only he or she has, they cannot complete their task. *The information each participant has is necessary to complete the task.* 2) A group of learners is sharing their writing and giving feedback to each other. One person's role is to retell the story they've just heard. Another person's role is to tell something she likes about the writing. The third person is the questioner; her job is to ask questions about the piece. *Each learner has a clear role essential to the task's completion.* 3) Learners have completed a task in their groups. Each then individually responds to a questionnaire: Did you speak a lot in your group? What did you do if you didn't agree with other people? How did your group decide to solve the problem? *Learners reflect upon and explicitly learn cooperative skills such as problem solving,*

managing differences and turn-taking.

Cooperative learning requires a classroom atmosphere of trust and respect, one in which learners have gotten to know each other and enjoy learning together. For learners whose only experiences with formal education have been in "traditional" teacher-centered classrooms, or settings in which learners compete with each other, classroom norms of active sharing and interdependence may be unfamiliar. An important first step in facilitating cooperative learning is to provide on-going and ample opportunities for learners to interact, learn about each other and become a community. In my Level 1 class, we started the year by making silhouettes of each learner. Under their silhouettes, learners wrote about themselves in large letters. Throughout the year, we referred to these "profiles" to remind ourselves of what we knew about each other. When a new learner joined the class, learners reminded me that we needed to make her silhouette to put up with the others.

To continue to build our learning community, we start each class with a paired conversation activity. Each learner is given a card with either a picture or a word/phrase (an article of clothing, a face expressing an emotion, a drawing of a scene with variations, etc.,

depending on the content the teacher wants to practice). They must then find, by asking questions of their classmates, the person who has the matching card. To accommodate a variety of learner skills, learners may be given only a cue for the appropriate question, or the question written out to be repeated. Once



partners have been matched, each person then responds to a question suggested by the teacher. Questions range from concrete (Who is in your family? or Tell me about your weekend.) to the abstract (TV is good for children. Do you agree or disagree? Why?). There is a wealth of activities which foster such interaction (e.g., see Bassano and Christison, *Community Spirit*) and at the same time provide motivating and engaging language activities. Such activities become a familiar part of class routines and establish the central

role of learner-learner interaction in the classroom. Learners find this interactive environment interesting and engaging. In addition to establishing trust among learners, I like to make learner feedback a habit as well. When I wanted learners to specifically reflect and give me feedback on group work, I developed an easy-to-fill-out-questionnaire (see box).

Groupwork Questionnaire

How did your group work together tonight??

Name: _____ Date: _____

What did your group do today?

Circle one:

I feel good/not good about my group today.

I talked a lot/a little in my group.

Other people talked a lot/a little in my group.

My group helped me learn a lot/a little today.

My group got a lot/a little work done today.

In working cooperatively in small groups, learners will use this environment as support in developing cooperative skills. In the course of my teacher research project, I planned and reflected upon many group activities. I found a number of factors influenced a group's success, some brought by learners to the classroom, others contributed by teachers.

Looking at Learners to Compose Groups

Our learners present us with a number of variables—skills, consistency of attendance, native language, learning style, personality and willingness to “try in English.” In one of my classes, Nina, a very new speaker of English, has less vocabulary and grammar than many others in the class. However, she is willing to struggle to express herself with occasional recourse to native language. She rarely misses a class. In groups, she is often quiet, but always attentive to the task at hand. Anna, with much more language and skill, also attends regularly. She's less comfortable with group work, however, and unless the structure of the task requires her to engage with other group members, she

prefers to complete the task on her own, often with simultaneous translation. Marie, a very skilled language learner, attends less regularly. She enjoys group work and tends to be at least as focused on the level of interaction in her group as on successful completion of the task. She draws out quiet members to assure their participation.

Such learner characteristics as those Nina, Anna and Marie bring to the classroom are familiar to any teacher of a multilevel class. How effectively the teacher groups learners, with their various preferences and styles, will determine the quality of the groups' interaction. There are times when I may form groups randomly, or try to group learners that are similar on a particular dimension, or try to create heterogeneous groupings. However, I found that the most highly communicative groups are those that include a member who, like Marie, attends to the participation of each; one like Nina who will struggle to stay in English; and one like Anna who will help the group move to complete its task.

I had hoped to establish groups that would work together over an extended period of time, giving learners the opportunity to become familiar co-learners, to build cooperative skills with the same small group. In fact, only two of the four groups in my class met consistently and worked together well, as reported in their evaluations and also as seen through my observation. The other two groups never quite clicked, due to learner attendance, a mismatch among group members, or inadequate support from the tasks I presented them. Next year, I plan to introduce groupwork with more explanation, more information for learners about why we work in groups and how they might benefit from this way of learning together. Since my class is one with very basic language skills, such background explanation should be offered in the context of experiences with cooperation, experiences which would clarify and illustrate more abstract explanation.

Learner Variables in Cooperative Work

- Willingness to focus on group interaction as more important than task completion
- Regularity of attendance
- Preference for working independently or with others
- Willingness to attempt speaking English in group work
- Level of language skill
- Native language—whether it's shared with others, what degree of dependence upon translation

Putting the Parts Together

When I set out to plan and teach my classes, there are a number of variables that I consider and manipulate. What will be the content of classes and how will it be chosen? How will I accommodate/integrate learner styles and preferences? What methods will I use to structure class time? How will I give learners directions? How will the room be set up? What tone will I set for our interactions?

As in any teaching, the content must be meaningful and engaging for learners and preferably of their choosing. How that content is structured into activities will determine how well they work—the most appropriate and interesting topic can be suffocated in a teacher-centered lecture or drill. The most effective activities I facilitated incorporated the key principles of cooperative learning.



Principles of Cooperative Learning

- Each participant in a group has information necessary to complete the task.
- Each learner has a clear and essential role.
- Learners reflect upon and explicitly learn cooperative skills, such as problem solving, managing differences and turn-taking.

This aspect of planning is like putting together a jigsaw puzzle. The content, the learning needs and styles of a group of unique individuals, and the language skills to be used will all hopefully fit together within the structure of a specific task. There were times it did and times it didn't. One successful activity was one in which learners shared their writing. After a series of activities that culminated in each learner writing a story, groups met to read and respond to each other's writing. There were four (or five, if there were five group members) roles which rotated among the

participants. One person was the story reader, another retold the story they had just heard, a third asked one or two questions about the story, and the fourth group member told something they liked about the story. All of the roles drew upon skills that had been practiced in the activities preceding the group work. All were

challenging, but within reach of most of the learners. Their contribution to the activity required that they listen to each other, unlike other kinds of activities in which learners may be so focused on preparing their own contribution that they don't heed what others are saying.

Activities didn't work well if I left out one of the principles; for example, when there weren't essential roles for each learner and it was possible for Anna to just forge ahead and do it herself, she did. It was a group task in name only and not in function. Her behavior was instant feedback to me on whether I had designed the activity well. I also found it important to avoid forcing activities into a cooperative mold that were more appropriate for another instructional strategy—work in pairs or individually. When I overplanned in this way, I lost touch with my sensitivity to the group, that teacher radar that helps us shift activities, make choices about how to proceed or about what activities would be effective at a given moment.

Another key element of facilitating groupwork is giving clear directions, ones which draw upon knowledge and skills learners possess, for the task the group will undertake. One notable flop of an activity for me involved coming to consensus about what health topics to cover in class, first in pairs, then in groups of four, then eight, then the entire class. The learners were not familiar with the concept of consensus, and my directions were inadequate. I should have prepared a mini-lesson on consensus—what it is, how to use it—before expecting them to implement the process in an activity. It is better to err on the side of giving directions that may be too detailed for some, if it means that more learners are clear about the activity. I had hoped that, as learners became more adept at working coopera-

tively, they would need less specific directions and could “own” a task or project, shaping it to their own needs. We didn’t get to that point, due in large part to what I needed to learn and practice about structuring groups. I look forward to moving ahead with that goal in future classes.

Finally, another factor to consider when implementing cooperative groups is logistics. Logistical factors include the size of the room and the shape and number of tables or desks. My classroom is far from ideal—it’s small and equipped with three long rectangular tables, usually arranged in a “U” with learners seated on the perimeter. There isn’t room to pull the tables apart and create more individual spaces for groups; I encourage people to sit so that they can see and hear each other and initially am even more directive. From time to time we rearrange the room, looking for a set-up more conducive to group interaction. Essentially, we need a bigger space and smaller tables; in the meantime we work with what we have.

Teacher Controlled Variables in Facilitating Cooperative Groupwork

- Does the structure of the task require the input of all learners?
- Are the directions clear and understood by learners?
- Is the content of the class engaging and meaningful to learners?
- Are there clear roles for each learner?
- Do the strategies used to form groups effectively mesh learner characteristics?
- Do logistical factors (room size, kind and number of tables, noise levels) support success?

In reflecting on this year, my ambitious intent to

elicit content from learners and to have the same groups work over time was not successful. I needed to structure activities in which the class could explore some topics, then make choices about which more specific ideas to investigate further. There were parts of the project that worked well—there was a warm and interactive atmosphere in the class; learners entered into groupwork with energy and enthusiasm; and, according to their self-evaluations, learners found group work enjoyable and a good way to learn. Every year and every group is different: I look forward to building on this year’s successes and ongoing questions in the year to come! •

Annotated Bibliography

- Bassano, Sharon and Christison, Mary Ann (1995). *Community Spirit: A Practical Guide to Collaborative Language Learning*. San Francisco: Alta Books. Gives an overview of reasons to use a student-centered, cooperative approach and how to move to that model, plus a variety of activities.
- Cohen, Elizabeth (1994). *Designing Groupwork: Strategies for the Heterogeneous Classroom*. New York: Teacher’s College Press. Presents a rationale for cooperative groupwork and reviews relevant issues. Includes suggestions for exercises.
- Hill, Susan and Hill, Tom (1990). *The Collaborative Classroom: A Guide to Cooperative Learning*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann. Discusses aspects of cooperative learning and practical suggestions for its implementation. Includes a variety of activities and forms for use in the classroom.
- Scane, J., Guy, Anne Marie and Wenstrom, Lauren (1994). *Think, Write, Share: Process Writing for Adult ESL and Basic Education Students*. San Diego: Dominic Press. Defines process writing and cooperative learning and outlines how the two are compatible. Includes specific suggestions for their use in the classroom.

“Find the Person Who...”

In our class, a favorite and fun activity which helps create an interactive, cooperative environment is “Find Someone Who...” (also known by other names—“Back and Forth Bingo” or “Treasure Hunt”). I draft a list of completions to this sentence, such as, “Find someone who...went to the grocery store this week,” or “Find someone who...came to the US more than two years ago.” These sentences vary according to the level of the class and the particular structures we’re practicing, and can be simplified as necessary by giving the full question for learners to ask, rather than requiring them to formulate the question. Learners circulate, asking each other questions and writing the names of those who answer yes. It can result in music to a language teachers’ ears—the hum of conversation.

—Marta Mangan