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LEARNING TO LEARN COOPERATIVELY

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Abstract. The article deals with cooperative learning method which makes the learning process interesting. When students of different performance levels cooperate with each other in working towards a desired goal, they are responsible for their peers' learning process as well. Everyone succeeds when the group succeeds.

Cooperative learning 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. Teacher's role changes from giving information to facilitating student's learning.

The array of benefits extends beyond increased language learning to include increased self esteem and tolerance of diverse points of view. Although cooperative learning has numerous variations D.W. Johnson and K.E. Johnson 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 interactions;
- 4) students develop social skills by cooperating and working together effectively;
- 5) students as a group have the opportunity to reflect on the effectiveness of working together [1].

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.

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 for such activities. 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 [2].

Language teachers hoping to implement success in cooperative learning activities with learners might consider the following seven suggestions for helping students to learn cooperatively [3].

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 group?

Furthermore, when group work is prefaced with a group discussion, students are already engaged with each other when group activity begins. 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. 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. The teacher can create discussions that overlap and build upon the students's ideas by providing a simple "What if" statement to initiate discussion. In addition allow students to develop their oral language and critical thinking skills built upon their own interwoven ideas.

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

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.

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 as a group. There are four examples of possible roles for four students to perform as a group:

- planner;
- translator;
- group guide;
- supply supervisor.

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.

While cooperative learning is often time consuming, by working together, students simultaneously strengthen both their basic interpersonal communication skills and their academic language proficiency.

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.

References

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