

# The Examples of Cooperative Learning (CL) in EFL Classrooms

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## Abstract

This study provides an introduction to the concept, the models, and the theories of cooperative learning (CL). There are five elements identified in CL models described: (1) positive interdependence, (2) individual accountability, (3) promotive/face-to-face interaction, (4) interpersonal/social skills, and (5) group processing. Three main theoretical perspectives on CL are social interdependence theory, cognitive development theory, and behavioral learning theory. Theoretical perspectives and research evidence support that CL is an effective English instructional approach.

This study also describes the integration of a series of CL learning activities into EFL Classrooms. CL provides real life learning tasks, task-based interactions, various learning skills and strategies, an authentic and supportive environment, real world material, as well as intensive oral practice with students. The examples of CL learning activities in EFL classrooms may bring EFL learners together in groups to increase their academic achievement and inspire them with intrinsic and extrinsic motivations to learn English.

**Keywords :** Cooperative Learning, EFL Classrooms, Learning Activities

應用合作學習教學範例於英語 EFL 的教室

# 應用合作學習教學範例 於英語 EFL 的教室

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## 摘 要

本研究介紹合作學習(CL)的定義、CL的五項基本要素與理論，以及介紹合作學習教學範例於英語教學中。合作學習的五項基本要素為：(1) 互賴關係，(2) 個人權責，(3) 面對面的互動，(4) 人際互動 (5) 小組技巧。合作學習的理念包括社會互賴論、認知發展論、和行為學習論。本研究從不同的理論分析和歸納研究證明合作學習能有效促進英語學習。

本研究也探討應用六種 CL 的教學活動範例於 EFL (英語為外國語言的英語教室)，探討合作學習應用在 EFL 英語教學的成效。教師將學生分成幾個小組，小組成員分工合作，共同努力以提昇學習者的英語能力和英語的學習動機。

**關鍵詞：**合作學習、EFL 教室、教學活動

## I. Introduction to Cooperative Learning (CL)

Cooperative learning (CL) is an instructional method where students in small groups can work together to maximize one another's learning and to achieve their mutual goals (Johnson, Johnson, & Smith, 1998). According to Johnson, Johnson, and Smith (1991), "when engaged in cooperative activities, individuals seek outcomes that are beneficial to themselves and to all other members of the group" (p. 3). Johnson, Johnson, and Smith (1991) further note:

Cooperation results in participants' striving for mutual benefit so that all members of the group benefit from each other's efforts (your success benefits me and my success benefits you), their recognizing that all group members share a common fate (we sink or swim together here) and that one's performance depends mutually on oneself and one's colleagues (we cannot do it without you), and their feeling proudly and jointly celebrating when a group member is recognized for achievement (you got an A! That's terrific!). (p. 3)

Slavin (1985) believes that CL involves two important features: cooperative tasks and reward structures. A cooperative task encourages group members to help each other in order to achieve their common goals; each individual's involvement is vital

in order to complete the group task. Reward structures make sure that individuals' efforts can result in group rewards.

Sego (1991) states that since there are different backgrounds, knowledge bases, and abilities in any group, both active and passive learners can share their experiences to teach and encourage each other as well as be responsible for their group's common grades. The ability of students to work cooperatively with others in the workplace can help them to learn educational and social skills. As a result, Sego believes when students learn the experiences of the CL group method in their classroom, they can prepare themselves for their future workplace.

### A. Features of Cooperative Learning (CL)

CL is flexible to any subject, any age group, and any variety of tasks; it is one of the most popular researched methods of group-based learning and has been shown to have positive effects on various outcomes (Johnson, Johnson, & Stanne, 2000). Slavin (1990) believes that CL methods help students work together to share their ideas and learn to be in charge of one another's learning. As group members give and receive support, encouragement, and assistance from each other, this in turn can improve their academic progress and

contribute to cognitive, psychological, and social development (Johnson, Johnson, & Holubec 1994). Kulik and Kulik (1979) also report that when students get involved in discussion groups, their positive attitudes toward learning can be enhanced.

The CL group-based instructional method is used in different content areas to promote interactive learning in the classroom and provide support to the lecture-based teaching method (Johnson & Johnson, 1992). In CL group-centered learning activities, students are encouraged to involve themselves actively rather than merely following the teacher's orders in a traditional class format (Sharan, 1990). CL groups can often enhance critical thinking more than competitive or individualistic learning methods (Gabbert, Johnson, & Johnson, 1986).

From the perspective of Cooper et al. (1990), students can be encouraged to participate actively in non-competitive small groups. A positive result of non-competition group situations is that it promotes a less threatening environment; self-esteem is often fostered as a result (Johnson & Johnson, 1987). Bulmahn and Young (1982) indicate that students can explore knowledge and feel safe to make mistakes in a more supportive environment.

## B. Theoretical Foundations of

### Cooperative Learning (CL)

The theories of CL consist of three main theoretical perspectives on CL: social interdependence theory, cognitive development theory, and behavioral learning theory (Johnson & Johnson, 1999).

#### 1. Social Interdependence Theory

According to Johnson, Johnson, and Holubec (1998), the premise of social interdependence theory is that "the way in which social interdependence is structured determines who individuals interact with and determines outcomes" (p. 1). In short, the social interdependence theory (Johnson & Johnson, 1999) puts emphasis on learning within a social context. Social interdependence theory states that intrinsic motivation and interpersonal drives are the foundation of cooperative learning (Johnson & Johnson, 1999). Vygotsky (1978) states: "Every function in the child's cultural development appears twice: first, on the social level, and later, on the individual level; second, between people (inter psychological) and then inside the child (intra psychological)" (p. 57). Vygotsky further indicates that people can learn through interaction with parents, teachers, peers, and their environment; thus, group activities can achieve the best learning development for individuals. As a result, one of the responsibilities for teachers is

to design social and interactive activities in their curriculum to enhance students' maximum learning.

## 2. Cognitive Development Theory

The premise of the cognitive development theory is "when individuals cooperate with the environment, sociocognitive conflict occurs, thus creating cognitive disequilibrium, which in turn stimulates perspective-taking ability and cognitive development" (p. 1). The assumptions of the theory focus on "what happens within a single person" (Johnson, Johnson, & Holubec, 1998, p. 1). In addition, the theories of Piaget and Vygotsky are the center of cognitive development theory (Johnson & Johnson, 1999).

In a few words, the cognitive development theory (Johnson & Johnson, 1999) point out that learning is associated with cognitive development. Learning will be meaningful if the students can actively participate in the learning process instead of just passively absorbing material. Learning involves perception, acquisition, organization, and storage of knowledge. One of the tasks of CL in Piaget's theory is to facilitate students' intellectual development through discussion and negotiation with their peers to reach a consensus in their group. Thus in Piaget's theory, not unlike social interdependence theory, active participation

is crucial to the learning process.

Vygotsky (1978) believes that learning can be produced from the correlation between social interactions and cognitive development. According to Vygotsky, only when children interact and cooperate with their peers and other people in their environment, can learning work in the internal developmental processes (as cited in Johnson & Johnson, 1999). In other words, in Vygotsky's theory, social interaction is important in order to increase cognitive development.

## 3. Behavioral Learning Theory

Johnson, Johnson, and Holubec (1998) note that the assumption of the behavioral learning theory is "actions followed by extrinsic rewards are repeated" (p. 1). The foundation of this theory is that "cooperative efforts are powered by extrinsic motivation to achieve group rewards" (p. 1).

In brief, in the behavioral learning theory, extrinsic motivation drives cooperative efforts through mutual concern, collaboration, and encouragement (Johnson & Johnson, 1999). Behaviorist theory considers that language and knowledge develops from learning experience. CL tends to provide learners with better conditions for learning (Osgood, 1957). For example, through interaction and discussion with group members, each member can try his/

her best to achieve the common goal in his/her group and obtain any offered extrinsic reward such as a grade or a reward. In the end, not only is learning likely to be advanced, but social skills and interpersonal relationships can also be developed during the cooperation process.

In summary, social interdependence theory, cognitive development theory, and behavioral learning theory are three main theoretical perspectives on CL. Social interdependence theory focuses on intrinsic motivation and interpersonal factors. Both are the foundation of cooperative efforts to help students accomplish their mutual goals. Cognitive development theory with emphasis on learning is productive when students can participate actively in cognitive, critical thinking ways in their learning process. Extrinsic motivation is the basis of the behavioral learning theory. In positively manipulation, the environment and emphasizing collaboration, encouragement, and mutual concern, students may strive more effectively to attain their goals and rewards.

### C. Components of Cooperative Learning (CL)

Five elements are included in CL: positive interdependence, individual accountability, promotive interaction, group processing, and interpersonal skills

(Johnson, Johnson, & Smith, 1998).

According to Johnson and Johnson (1990), the CL method consists of five chief elements: positive interdependence, individual accountability, promotive/face-to-face interaction, interpersonal/social skills, and group processing. These five elements describe the skills and procedures useful to motivate students to get involved in their groups and increase cooperation.

Positive interdependence means group members need to take care and help each other to achieve their common goals (Johnson & Johnson, 1990). Johnson and Johnson believe that shared goals and rewards can increase positive interdependence among groups. They state strongly that teachers need to convey the idea that students sink or swim together in their groups. This idea can enhance cooperation in the classroom. Cooper, Prescott, Cook, Smith, Mueck, and Cuseo (1990) indicate that teachers need to observe each group to ensure individuals are responsible for their own learning and for their group task. Interdependence is the primary characteristic of cooperative interactions and often helps students' successfully cooperate in each group (Johnson & Johnson, 1990).

The second element is individual accountability, and it means individuals need to make their own contributions to

a CL group. Each member can acquire assistance, support, and encouragement from group members to finish their tasks. Cooper et al. (1990) state that both group results and individual accountability are necessary mechanisms of effective CL. Both point out that each member's contribution is indispensable and affects the performance of his/her group.

Johnson, Johnson, and Smith (1991) indicate that individual accountability can be structured in several common ways: create small groups (4-6 numbers), administer a test to each individual student, check each individual student's oral ability by present having him/her in class, observe and record the group's work, and encourage peer-teaching.

Thirdly, face-to-face/promotive interaction means that members can face one another when working together in small groups. Since interaction in CL is plentiful, the interaction is helpful especially for learning a new language. Students can share their learning experiences and knowledge in order to help each other attain the common goals in their group (Johnson & Johnson, 1990). Another positive side-effect, according to Johnson and Johnson, is that CL can also reduce tension and misbehavior among group members.

The fourth element of CL, social skills, involves skills such as negotiation and

discussion. Along with these skills, Cooper et al. (1990) note that active listening, empathy, constructive conflict management, and consensus building can also be learned through CL methods.

Finally, group processing means that the whole group works together to achieve the final goal in its learning process. Individuals can reflect on their cooperative behavior and evaluate their in-group processing performance. Group participation and agreement can enhance harmony, resolve problems, and build consensus (Spolin, 1963). Spolin believes that the CL environment provides students with increased learning guidance from their teachers and their group members. From the perspective of Johnson, Johnson, and Smith (1991), successful group processing must provide enough time, make group processing specific, encourage students to get involved, exercise their social skills, and communicate the expectations of group processing to students.

#### D. Strengths and Pitfalls of Cooperative Learning (CL)

##### 1. Improving Language Skills

Three major benefits of CL on language learning, as described by Olsen and Kagan (1992), are that CL provides students with greater opportunities to practice language skills, encounter more content-based tasks,

and enhance social interaction among group members.

In enhancing student learning, Long and Porter (1985) agree that CL can develop critical thinking and problem-solving skills, improve social skills, and increase student satisfaction with classes. Although it was noted earlier that lower achievers in a group are likely to benefit from CL experiences, higher achievers may benefit as well. Noel (1985) indicates that meaningful discussion in CL groups can increase students' learning satisfaction and promote their retention of course information.

From the perspective of Totten, Sills, Digby, and Russ (1991), applying CL in the classroom can not only transform students into active learners instead of passive learners, but also provide students with the positive effects of working together rather than the negative effects of competition. Finally, Totten concludes that CL can bring about success to benefit the greatest number of students.

## 2. Promoting Motivation to Learn

According to Johnson, Johnson, and Smith (1991), the motivational system “promoted in cooperative situations includes intrinsic motivation, high expectations for success, high incentive to achieve based on mutual benefit, high epistemic curiosity and continuing interest in

achievement, high commitment to achieve, and high persistence” (p. 35). The goal of motivational theory is to understand the influences on individuals' choices and how to guide people to make their tasks more interesting. Motivational theory talks about the importance of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation for learners.

Intrinsic motivation comes from doing an activity for the pleasure of the learning itself whereas extrinsic motivation refers to doing something for other external reasons. Although teachers cannot control the motivation inside their students, they can provide a positive, safe, and optimal learning environment that makes the learning meaningful by using CL methods to enhance students' curiosity and to spark their intrinsic motivation (Johnson, Johnson, & Smith, 1991).

Kohn (1991) believes that infusing CL with appropriate rewards can inspire students with intrinsic and extrinsic motivations toward learning. Increasing intrinsic motivation can contribute to the greater likelihood of success in academic outcomes. Positive feelings toward group members, such as willingness to work together to help each other succeed, are some basic influences on intrinsic motivation. Johnson and Johnson further indicate that intrinsic motivation also includes high expectations, incentive,



curiosity, commitment, and persistence that can function well in CL groups (Johnson & Johnson, 1989).

According to Thompson (1981), CL provides a learner-centered environment in which students can practice decision-making opportunities, increase their intrinsic motivations to learn, and reduce their anxieties in performing a group-related task. Student participation in the class activities can offer and cultivate their sense of responsibility and their motivation toward learning (Coleman, 1961).

Liang (2002) suggests that “Only with ongoing motivation to learn, can the language achievements be sustained and can life-long education be realized” (p. 141). As a result, from the perspective of Liang, “Achievement and motivation are closely correlated” (p. 153).

### 3. Free-Rider Effect

Slavin (1990) argues that one of the pitfalls of CL is the free-rider effect that sometimes occurs in classroom situations. The free-rider effect describes the loss of productivity that results in groups because one or two members do not participate to contribute to the group. The free-rider takes advantage of other's effort to avoid work.

As noted earlier, there are ways to increase individual accountability if using CL models. Another pitfall of CL, diffusion

of responsibility, might be diminished or controlled in two ways: make individual members responsible for the task of the group and make students responsible for their own learning. Therefore, according to Slavin, CL needs to be planned carefully to promote more effective and positive interdependence and individual accountability, face-to-face/promotive interaction, interpersonal/social skills, and group processing.

### 4. Higher-Noise Level

A higher noise level is another limitation for teachers while they are applying CL in their classrooms. The teachers who want to use CL well in their classroom need to develop their classroom management skills. Teachers can tell students they have a set amount of time to complete this group activity and observe them during the CL process. Since the teacher's inexperience with CL can cause difficulties of employing it, it is essential for teachers to receive the training in CL skills in order to create effective cooperative classrooms (Ladson, 2003).

## II. Cooperative Learning (CL) Activities in EFL Classrooms

Cooperative learning can be used in a variety of activities to develop students'

English language skills.

#### A. Real Life Learning Tasks

In CL small groups, EFL learners can have more authentic two-way communicative opportunities to practice the target language (Tucker, 1993). Kagan (1995) states that students learn language by moving short-term understanding to long-term acquirement. Teachers should design real life learning tasks in CL groups to expose EFL students to questions, arguments, and to persuade them to learn how to communicate in their daily lives (Enright & McCloskey, 1985). Tucker (1993) notes authentic communications in real-life language are often task-oriented (i.e., related to getting something done such as making a purchase or expressing an opinion).

#### B. Task-based Interactions

Task-based interactions can express meaning and provide EFL students with an active role in the learning process among students (Long, 1985). Interaction and negotiation with other students can provide comprehensible output and hopefully improve language skills (Swain, 1985). CL group interaction provides EFL students with many opportunities to become learners and tutors (Kraft, 1985). In addition, Mackworth (1970) notes that receiving

personal and immediate feedback can increase students' motivation to learn as well. However, interaction is important for students to enhance their communication competency.

#### C. Learning Strategies and Skills

From the perspective of Smith, Cudaback, Goddard, and Myers-Walls (1994), EFL learners can improve their English proficiency through various learning skills and strategies. For example, through asking questions in CL group discussions, EFL students can participate actively in the classroom and exercise their language communicative skills. In addition, teachers should encourage learners to speak more and receive feedback to help them acquire competence in English competency. Smith et al. (1994) further note that oral communication can help students clarify and enhance their understanding of various concepts. Thus, through working or playing games with their peers in CL groups, EFL students can participate in interactions and thus increase their oral language development overall.

#### D. Creating an Authentic and Supportive Environment

EFL students need to be immersed in an authentic environment in which they can encourage each other to practice and make

mistakes in order to enhance their English skills. As Phillips (1992) has pointed out, students are often interested in developing their ability to communicate orally in the target language. Still, learning anxiety hinders EFL students' motivation and ability to practice the target language in public. From Krashen's perspective, language acquisition is more likely to occur when learners' process input in a low anxiety context. To reduce their anxiety in language acquisition, teachers need to create an authentic and supportive CL environment through group discussions where perhaps everyone feels that they are in it "together" (Terrell, 1991).

Many adolescents and adults are not brave enough to talk in public (Motley, 1988). As indicated by Kagan (1995), sometimes sharing with one another is easier than sharing with the entire class. Cooperative groups provide a supportive context and a safe environment; it is easier for students to share in a CL group than with the entire class. Thus, EFL students are encouraged to speak more because their fear has been reduced and their willingness to take risks has been increased in CL groups. Neer (1987) indicates that students should be provided a comfortable environment to express themselves, one that reduces the fear and anxiety of public speaking. For this reason, CL is valuable for EFL students

to practice and improve their English competency.

Farmer (1991) believes that CL group learning puts students in an all-win atmosphere and benefits them by inspiring and promoting interest, active participation, clear ideas, appropriate socialization, training cooperation, and critical feedback to improve language learning. A risk-free environment can encourage students to speak more (Olivares, 1993). Teachers should create a risk-free environment which promotes social interaction among the students to help them learn social skills (Sharan, 1994). Kagan and McGroarty (1993) state that CL groups can lower EFL learners' anxieties and cultivate language development by helping them take more risks.

#### E. Real World Materials

In order to promote an authentic environment, EFL teachers can use real world materials, such as radio, TV, Internet, newspapers, magazines, advertisement brochures, catalogs, or menus that can be integrated into CL groups to allow for real-life communications. In addition, teachers need to know students' interests and learning styles and design curriculums to meet students' learning needs. They also need to encourage students to speak the target language anytime inside and outside the

classroom to practice accuracy and fluency. Tucker states that paraphrasing and retelling a story is another effective technique in enhancing students' oral skills. At the same time, Tucker points out that it is essential for EFL teachers to correct students' oral errors directly in order to improve EFL students' oral communication (Tucker, 1993).

According to Olivares (1993), students in CL groups can practice buying groceries from a supermarket catalog, expressing an opinion about a hot news item in a newspaper, and ordering food from a restaurant menu. These materials are employed to help bring content to life and supplement instructional materials. Therefore, teachers who integrate real world materials into CL groups can create more opportunities for EFL students to practice real oral communication in their lives.

#### F. Intensive Oral Practice

Language acquisition requires meaningful interaction in acquiring first and second languages; hence, Postovsky (1974) argues that the first stage of instruction in learning a new language should be based on intensive oral practice. Regardless of when the learning occurs, speaking and listening are the most commonly used skills in the classroom. Listening requires learners to receive and process information by an interactive process of constructing

meaning whereas speaking requires learners to pay attention to pronunciation, grammar, or vocabulary and to understand how to produce language (Brown, 1994).

Hiebert and Raphael (1998) state “through talk, students learn to negotiate ideas, to clarify confusions and elaborate on their initial thoughts, to debate and question, to solve problems, and to both create and respond to print” (p. 12). As a result, providing communication opportunities is essential for EFL learners because communication competency is part of language competence.

EFL Teachers can design enriched activities to promote responsibility and empower students to learn from teacher-directed talk to student-led discussions (Hiebert & Raphael, 1998). Thus, CL balances attempts to include both teacher-directed teaching and student-directed learning. EFL learners can model skills as they move to fulfill their group tasks (Kagan, 1995). It is noted that students require time to talk and to receive important feedback to carry out their language growth. CL has shown its positive influence by improving the quality of talk (Long & Porter, 1985).

### III. Conclusion

This paper provides an introduction to the concept and the theories of Cooperative

learning (CL). There are five features identified in CL model described: (1) positive interdependence, (2) individual accountability, (3) promotive/face-to-face interaction, (4) interpersonal/social skills, and (5) group processing.

Many findings in this paper suggest that CL not only improves interpersonal skills and increases students' academic achievement, but also inspires students with intrinsic and extrinsic motivations to learn English. The strengths and pitfalls of CL are described as well.

The paper highlights how to employ CL learning activities in EFL classrooms for developing EFL learners' English proficiency. CL provides real life learning tasks, task-based interactions, various learning skills and strategies, an authentic and supportive environment, real world material, as well as intensive oral practice with students that can increase the number of interactions overall which can enhance EFL students' English competency, communication skills and learning motivation levels. In a CL authentic environment, students are encouraged to immerse themselves in in-group discussions, to practice their skills in order to improve their English learning skills.

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