

## COOPERATIVE LEARNING IN THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE CLASSROOM

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Învățarea prin cooperare reprezintă modul de organizare a activității didactice pe grupuri mici, astfel încât – lucrând împreună – elevii (studenții) își maximizează atât propria învățare, cât și cea a celorlalți colegi. Cercetările arată că elevii (studenții) care realizează sarcini de învățare prin cooperare în grup tind să aibă performanțe, un număr mai mare de competențe sociale pozitive, o mai bună înțelegere a conținuturilor și deprinderilor pe care și le formează.

Învățarea prin cooperare trebuie utilizată în mod strategic. Cu timp și răbdare, orice profesor, la orice nivel, poate integra învățarea prin cooperare în procesul de predare-învățare. Cheia succesului constă în menținerea unor rezultate bune, răspunderea individuală și de grup a elevilor (studenților) și crearea unui mediu în sala de clasă în care să prevaleze cooperarea.

Cooperative learning has been part of the language learning for the past two decades. The approach principally aims to enhance the quality of learning by having learners cooperate in small groups or pairs [1]. It is a mode of learning that promotes mutual helpfulness and active participation from all students in solving a problem and is in harmony with strategic learning, whereby learners use their cognitive resources to master a particular language skill as efficiently and effectively as possible [2].

Kagan S. describes the cooperative learning system as consisting of team building, management techniques, and rewards based on a complex system of points.

Richard-Amato P.A. views cooperative learning as a management technique. She suggests that “in cooperative learning, students help other students within groups of four or five persons in an effort to reach goals. Adaptations of cooperative learning can be effective at many age levels from the late elementary grades up to adult levels. It can be used in both second and foreign language teaching situations” [3, p.193].

Cooperation is working together to accomplish shared goals. Within cooperative activities individuals seek outcomes that are beneficial to themselves and beneficial to all other group members. Cooperative learning is the instructional use of small groups so that students work together to maximize their own and each other's learning. The idea is simple. Class members are organized into small groups after receiving instruction from the teacher. They then work through the assignment until all group members successfully understand and complete it. Cooperative efforts result in participants striving for mutual benefit so that all group members gain from each other's efforts, recognizing that all group members share a common fate, knowing that one's performance is mutually caused by oneself and one's colleagues, and feeling proud and jointly celebrating when a group member is recognized for achievement. In cooperative learning situations there is a positive interdependence among students' goal attainments; students perceive that they can reach their learning goals if and only if the other students in the learning group also reach their goals [4]. A team member's success in creating a multi-media presentation on saving the environment, for example, depends on both individual effort and the efforts of other group members who contribute needed knowledge, skills, and resources. No one group member will possess all of the information, skills, or resources necessary for the highest possible quality presentation.

Students' learning goals may be structured to promote cooperative, competitive, or individualistic efforts. In contrast to cooperative situations, competitive situations are ones in which students work against each other to achieve a goal that only one or a few can attain. In competition there is a negative interdependence among goal achievements; students perceive that they can obtain their goals if and only if the other students in the class fail to obtain their goals [5]. Norm-referenced evaluation of achievement occurs. The result is that students either work hard to do better than their classmates, or they take it easy because they do not believe they have a chance to win. In individualistic learning situations students work alone to accomplish goals unrelated to those of classmates and are evaluated on a criterion-referenced basis. Students' goal achievements are independent; students perceive that the achievement of their learning goals is unrelated to what other students do [4]. The result is to focus on self-interest and personal success and ignore as irrelevant the successes and failures of others.

There is a long history of research on cooperative, competitive, and individualistic efforts. Since the first research study in 1898, nearly 600 experimental studies and over 100 correlational studies have been conducted [5]. The multiple outcomes studied can be classified into three major categories: achievement/productivity, positive relationships, and psychological health. Cooperation, compared with competitive and individualistic efforts, typically results in (a) higher achievement and greater productivity, (b) more caring, supportive, and committed relationships, and (c) greater psychological health, social competence, and self-esteem. The positive effects that cooperation has on so many important outcomes makes cooperative learning one of the most valuable tools educators have.

Educators fool themselves if they think well-meaning directives to "work together," "cooperate," and "be a team," will be enough to create cooperative efforts among group members. Placing students in groups and telling them to work together does not result in cooperation. Not all groups are cooperative. Sitting in groups, for example, can result in competition at close quarters or individualistic effort with talking. In order to make students work cooperatively with each other requires an understanding of the components that make cooperation work. Mastering the essential components of cooperation allows teachers to:

1. Take existing lessons, curricula, and courses and structure them cooperatively.
2. Tailor cooperative learning lessons to meet the unique instructional circumstances and needs of the curricula, subject areas, and students.
3. Diagnose the problems some students may have in working together and intervene to increase the effectiveness of the student learning groups.

The essential components of cooperation are positive interdependence, face-to-face promotive interaction, individual and group accountability, interpersonal and small group skills, and group processing [6]. Systematically structuring those basic elements into group learning situations helps ensure cooperative efforts and enables the disciplined implementation of cooperative learning for long-term success.

*The first and most important element in structuring cooperative learning* is positive interdependence. Positive interdependence is successfully structured when group members perceive that they are linked with each other in a way that one cannot succeed unless everyone succeeds. Group goals and tasks, therefore, must be designed and communicated to students in ways that make them believe they sink or swim together. When positive interdependence is solidly structured, it highlights that (a) each group member's efforts are required and indispensable for group success and (b) each group member has a unique contribution to make to the joint effort because of his or her resources and/or role and task responsibilities. Doing so creates a commitment to the success of group members as well as one's own and is the heart of cooperative learning. If there is no positive interdependence, there is no cooperation.

*The second basic element of cooperative learning* is promotive interaction, preferably face-to-face. Students need to do real work together in which they promote each other's success by sharing resources and helping, supporting, encouraging, and applauding each other's efforts to achieve. There are important cognitive activities and interpersonal dynamics that can only occur when students promote each other's learning. This includes orally explaining how to solve problems, teaching one's knowledge to others, checking for understanding, discussing concepts being learned, and connecting present with past learning. Each of those activities can be structured into group task directions and procedures. Doing so helps ensure that cooperative learning groups are both an academic support system (every student has someone who is committed to helping him or her learn) and a personal support system (every student has someone who is committed to him or her as a person). It is through promoting each other's learning face-to-face that members become personally committed to each other as well as to their mutual goals.

*The third basic element of cooperative learning* is individual and group accountability. Two levels of accountability must be structured into cooperative lessons. The group must be accountable for achieving its goals and each member must be accountable for contributing his or her share of the work. Individual accountability exists when the performance of each individual is assessed and the results are given back to the group and the individual in order to ascertain who needs more assistance, support, and encouragement in learning. The purpose of cooperative learning groups is to make each member a stronger individual in his or her right. Students learn together so that they subsequently can gain greater individual competency.

*The fourth basic element of cooperative learning* is teaching students the required interpersonal and small group skills. Cooperative learning is inherently more complex than competitive or individualistic learning because students have to engage simultaneously in task work (learning academic subject matter) and teamwork (functioning effectively as a group). Social skills for effective cooperative work do not magically appear

when cooperative lessons are employed. Instead, social skills must be taught to students just as purposefully and precisely as academic skills. Leadership, decision-making, trust-building, communication, and conflict-management skills empower students to manage both teamwork and taskwork successfully. Since cooperation and conflict are inherently related [7], the procedures and skills for managing conflicts constructively are especially important for the long-term success of learning groups.

*The fifth basic element of cooperative learning* is group processing. Group processing exists when group members discuss how well they are achieving their goals and maintaining effective working relationships. Groups need to describe what member actions are helpful and unhelpful and make decisions about what behaviours to continue or change. Continuous improvement of the processes of learning results from the careful analysis of how members are working together and determining how group effectiveness can be enhanced.

Here are some class activities that use cooperative learning:

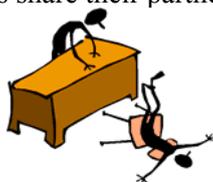
**1. Jigsaw** - Groups with five students are set up. Each group member is assigned some unique material to learn and then to teach to his group members. To help in the learning students across the class working on the same sub-section get together to decide what is important and how to teach it. After practice in these "expert" groups the original groups reform and students teach each other. Tests or assessment follows.



**2. Think-Pair-Share** - Involves a three step cooperative structure. During the first step individuals think silently about a question posed by the instructor. Individuals pair up during the second step and exchange thoughts. In the third step, the pairs share their responses with other pairs, other teams, or the entire group.



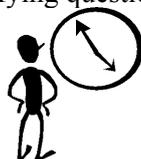
**3. Three-Step Interview** - Each member of a team chooses another member to be a partner. During the first step individuals interview their partners by asking clarifying questions. During the second step partners reverse the roles. For the final step, members share their partner's response with the team.



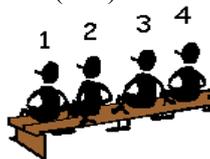
**4. Round Robin Brainstorming** - Class is divided into small groups (4 to 6) with one person appointed as the recorder. A question is posed with many answers and students are given time to think about answers. After the "think time," members of the team share responses with one another round robin style. The recorder writes down the answers of the group members. The person next to the recorder starts and each person in the group in order gives an answer until time is called.



**5. Three-minute review** - Teachers stop any time during a lecture or discussion and give teams three minutes to review what has been said, ask clarifying questions or answer questions.



**6. Numbered Heads Together** - A team of four is established. Each member is given numbers of 1, 2, 3, 4. Questions are asked of the group. Groups work together to answer the question so that all can verbally answer the question. Teacher calls out a number (two) and each two is asked to give the answer.



**7. Team Pair Solo** - Students do problems first as a team, then with a partner, and finally on their own. It is designed to motivate students to tackle and succeed at problems which initially are beyond their ability. It is based on a simple notion of mediated learning. Students can do more things with help (mediation) than they can do alone. By allowing them to work on problems they could not do alone, first as a team and then with a partner, they progress to a point they can do alone that which at first they could do only with help.



**8. Circle the Sage** - First the teacher polls the class to see which students have a special knowledge to share. For example the teacher may ask who in the class was able to solve a difficult math homework question, who had visited Mexico, who knows the chemical reactions involved in how salting the streets help dissipate snow. Those students (the sages) stand and spread out in the room. The teacher then has the rest of the classmates each surround a sage, with no two members of the same team going to the same sage. The sage explains what they know while the classmates listen, ask questions, and take notes. All students then return to their teams. Each in turn, explains what they learned. Because each one has gone to a different sage, they compare notes. If there is disagreement, they stand up as a team. Finally, the disagreements are aired and resolved.



**9. Partners** - The class is divided into teams of four. Partners move to one side of the room. Half of each team is given an assignment to master to be able to teach the other half. Partners work to learn and can consult with other partners working on the same material. Teams go back together with each set of partners teaching the other set. Partners quiz and tutor teammates. Team reviews how well they learned and taught and how they might improve the process.



[8]

In conclusion, cooperative learning seems to be a promising humanistic approach which encourages student participation in English classes. It helps promote positive attitudes towards English and peer teaching, as well as teaching students to work together and developing their cognitive abilities. Moreover, it helps lower affective filters, which may hinder the process of language acquisition, by creating a relaxing and friendly atmosphere in the classroom.

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*Prezentat la 14.05.2010*