

COOPERATIVE LEARNING STRATEGIES:

A reading in literature and challenges facing EFL classes of Biskra University

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Abstract

Cooperative learning is an effective strategy that can develop EFL learning and maximize its outcomes. This strategy proved its positive educational values to apply it in EFL classroom. This paper presents the significance of the cooperative learning elements and methods in promoting learning process of university students. It displays the challenges that face both teachers and students of Biskra University to adopt cooperative learning strategies in EFL classroom. The main challenges reveal in managing the group size, students and teachers' roles, and the evaluation process.

Keywords :

Cooperative learning, strategy, challenges, EFL classroom

ملخص

تعتبر استراتيجيات التعلم التعاوني من أنجع طرق التعليم من حيث التأثير في تحسين التعليم و مضاعفة نتائج التعلم. الاستراتيجيات أثبتت قيمة تربوية ايجابية في اقسام اللغة الانجليزية. يقدم هذا البحث اهمية طرق و عناصر التعلم التعاوني في تطوير عملية التعلم في الجامعة. و بالاحص يظهر المقال التحديات التي يواجهها الاستاذ و الطالب على حد سواء في جامعة بسكرة؛ و التي تتمثل في التحكم في حجم الفوج، ادوار الاستاذ و الطالب، و كذا عملية التقييم.

Introduction

Cooperative learning is one of the best researched of all teaching strategies. The results show that learners who have opportunities to work collaboratively, learn faster and more efficiently, have greater retention, and feel more positive about the learning experience. Why is it so? What is cooperative learning? And why is so beneficial? How can a teacher use this teaching strategy to promote the learning process in an EFL classroom? There are very specific methods to assure the success of group work, and it is essential that both teachers and learners are aware of them. Recently, there has been criticism of this process largely as a result of its misuse. To be perfectly clear, this is not a way for teachers to "get off the hook" as learners work in groups while the teacher corrects papers. It is not a way for teachers to address the needs of "gifted" learners by continually putting them in charge of learning groups. In this paper, we will clarify the traits of cooperative learning starting from its basics, teaching /assessing procedures, its strategies and benefits then ending with challenges facing EFL classes of Biskra University as a sample.

1. Literature review

A Significant number of literature spots light on the positive effects of implementing cooperative learning strategies.

1.1. Definition of cooperative learning (CL)

Cooperative learning can be characterized in the following Chinese proverb:

Tell me, and I'll forget
Show me, and I'll remember
Involve me, and I'll learn

Cooperative learning is defined as a teaching technique which brings learners together to learn in small and heterogeneous groups. In these groups, learners work independently without constant and direct supervision from the instructors. This latter assigns so that they contribute. Challenges as well as rewards are shared. Brainstorming, lively discussions and collaborations are the hallmarks of the cooperative learning.

Based on the constructivist viewpoint to social interaction, cooperative learning provides a social interaction setting, for it is important for learning since higher mental functions such as reasoning, comprehension and critical thinking originates in these interactions which are; then, internalized by the individuals. Kagan (1994) also claimed that communicative language teaching and cooperative learning were natural match in foreign

language teaching. Cooperative learning can be characterized as a social process in which knowledge is acquired through the successful interaction between the group members (Cohen, 1994). Furthermore, cooperative learning is also defined as the instructional use of small groups so that learners work together to maximize their own and each other's learning.

In other hand, group learning and cooperative learning are mutually used as if they mean the same; however, they do not. Group work means several students working together without cooperation; whereas, cooperation is to share goals. Cooperative learning is to arrange learners to work in mixed ability groups and their reward is based on the group's success. Using Cooperative learning technique means teaching learners social skills in a much smaller scope.

1.2. Cooperative skills: Basics

Cooperative skills must be learned. Humans are not born instinctively knowing how to cooperate with others. In the classroom, learners will not automatically start cooperating as soon as you put them into small groups. However, Johnson and Johnson Model (1999) set five basics for guaranteeing the cooperative learning groups:

- **Positive interdependence:**

A learning activity becomes cooperative only when everyone realizes that no group member can be successful unless all group members are successful. Members understand that they must learn together to accomplish the goal; they need each other for support, explanation and guidance.

- **Individual Accountability:**

Each group member should have some specific responsibility that contributes to the learning of all group members. At the same time, each group member should reach a certain minimum level of mastery. A performance of each group member is assessed against a standard and members are held responsible for their contribution to achieving goals.

- **Promotion interaction:**

It is also called face-to-face interaction. Learners interact face-to-face, close together; not across the room. Although group size will vary depending on the activity, the optimum size for cooperative learning is between three or four students. For students unaccustomed to this learning style, they keep the group size to about two or three students.

- **Group Processing:**

Groups reflect on their collaborative effort and decide on ways to improve effectiveness. The learners need to understand what is expected of them. They identify the group goal, whether it is to master specific objective or to create a product as a chart, a report, or an illustration. They also identify the specific cooperative skills required for each activity.

- **Development of small-group interpersonal skills:**

These skills such as giving contributive feedback, reacting consensus, and involving every member are necessary for effective group functioning. They must be taught and practiced before the groups tackle a learning task.

1.2. Teaching cooperative skills to EFL learners

Teachers must teach academic skills as well as social skills. Team members need cooperation, motivation and proficiency. To do so, teacher moves through the following steps:

- **Step One:** the teacher makes sure that the learners understand the need for the teamwork. They must see and understand the value in group work. Since most students come to EFL classes expecting the traditional classroom arrangement, with the teacher in front of the class and the learners in straight rows watching the teacher; they will be confused and hesitant when these expectations are not met. If teachers want learners to react positively to their first experiences in cooperative learning, learners must understand at least some of the many rationales for this kind of classroom experience. They need to understand why it is that they are doing things differently and how it will help them reach their goals.
- **Step two:** the teacher makes sure that learners understand what the skill is, how to engage in the skill, and when to use the skill. The teacher should demonstrate and model the skill in order to clarify the instruction to the learner. And it is preferable to focus one skill at a time. So that teachers must explain exactly what they are to do.
- **Step three:** the learner must practice the skill. The teacher sets up practice situations and encourage mastery of the skill. He/she observes each group and record which members are engaging in the skill with what frequency and effectiveness.
- **Step four:** the teacher ensures that each learner (a) receives feedback on his or her use of the skill and (b) reflects on how to engage in the skill more effectively next time. Practicing new skills is not sufficient. EFL learners must also receive

feedback on how frequently and how well they are using the skill. Teachers then can assist learners by preparing a set of questions or worksheets to better help them to evaluate their own performance as well as their peers' performance.

1.3. Assessing cooperative learning

Assessment activities can be categorized as either formative or summative, both of which are appropriate for cooperative learning exercises as they provide opportunities to enhance key components of cooperative learning exercises such as positive interdependence and individual accountability. Johnson & Johnson (1999, p.2) defined assessment as “to judge the quality and quantity of learning and award grades”.

Formative assessment activities are used to provide feedback, evaluating learning progress in order to motivate learners to higher levels. In contrast, summative assessment activities are used to judge final products for completion, competency and/or demonstrated improvement. Assessment activities can be implemented at different stages of the cooperative learning exercise and can be conducted by either the teacher, the learner, or group peers.

1.4. Grouping strategies

Six strategies for grouping EFL learners in their classroom can help the teacher understand group dynamics and enhance peer support:

- **Strategy one:** restructuring

It requires the EFL learners to interact physically in a group, and the teacher plays a minimal role in the classroom.

- **Strategy two:** one-centered

It is to put each learner in the small group in the spotlight for a limited period of time. It is helpful for timid learners to increase the likelihood of contribution in the group and the follow-up discussion in the classroom.

- **Strategy three:** unified group

Unified activities promote cooperation in the group. They require the participation of the entire group; otherwise, it will fail if one member bows out. The learner must think about the group goals instead of his own ones.

- **Strategy four:** Dyad

In this strategy, the learners in the group work with their peers in the other groups in the same classroom. These tasks give them opportunity to work one-to-one with

mates in the classroom. They become better acquainted with each other and begin to feel more comfortable sharing personal ideas and values.

- **Strategy five:** small group

They are more loosely structured than pair activities. The teacher acts as a facilitator, the responsibility for success lies with the group itself. It develops techniques of fair group interaction.

- **Strategy six:** large group

They are similar to small-group activities in the objectives and structure; however, they differ in the inclusion of large number of the learners. Working with a large group needs more skills among the small group members in fair group interaction.

1.5. Benefits from Cooperative Learning Techniques

The logical question that any teacher may ask about cooperative techniques is: what are the benefits from using such techniques in the in the EFL classes? The answer is that through the cooperative learning techniques, the learner can become a real partner in the learning process. Collaboration and cooperation was and is still a way out to solve problems. Also, learners when they collaborate and cooperate to learn and work in an academic setting are better prepared to meet life's obligations. They, in other words, take part in their own learning of English language.

On the learner's behalf, Johnson et al. (1991) synthesized over 375 studies on the effect of cooperative, competitive and individualistic efforts on learner achievement and productivity. They found that learners in cooperative learning settings performed better than learner in either competitive or individualistic settings. They also noted that cooperative learning occurred in more high reasoning, more repetitive fluid of new ideas and solutions (i.e., process gain), and greater transfer of what is learned from one situation to another (i.e., group to individual transfer) than did competitive or individualistic learning.

On the teacher's behalf Cooperative learning can also benefit the teacher. Hamm and Adams (1992) noted that teachers who began using cooperative leaning started to be more cooperative in their own professional interactions and more willing to cooperate with the work mates. Teachers who use cooperative learning may feel that their time is spent more effectively.

- ***Celebration of diversity:*** Students learn to work with all types of people. During small-group interactions, they find many opportunities to reflect upon and reply to the diverse responses fellow learners bring to the questions raised. Small groups also allow students to add their perspectives to an issue based on their cultural differences. This exchange inevitably helps students to better understand other cultures and points of view.
- ***Acknowledgment of individual differences:*** When questions are raised, different students will have a variety of responses. Each of these can help the group create a product that reflects a wide range of perspectives and is thus more complete and comprehensive.
- ***Interpersonal development:*** Students learn to relate to their peers and other learners as they work together in group enterprises. This can be especially helpful for students who have difficulty with social skills. They can benefit from structured interactions with others.
- ***Actively involving students in learning:*** Each member has opportunities to contribute in small groups. Students are apt to take more ownership of their material and to think critically about related issues when they work as a team.
- ***More opportunities for personal feedback:*** Because there are more exchanges among students in small groups, your students receive more personal feedback about their ideas and responses. This feedback is often not possible in large-group instruction, in which one or two students exchange ideas and the rest of the class listens.

2. Challenges facing both students and teachers in BISKRA EFL classes

The challenges that both teachers and students face to implement CL strategies are

1. Some groups of students do not effectively work cooperatively. They distract from the group, and their individual work can make the class noisy.
2. The classroom management is difficult to monitor with large size classes.
3. Additionally, the teacher face challenges to prepare for teaching materials and to design activities with humble teaching materials.
4. The teacher has to train the students to adapt to cooperative learning situations and to raise student's awareness to take part in their group activities.
5. Another challenging fact is to use effective methods to measure students' performances in the group.

6. Absence of students can deeply influence the group discussions, cooperative atmosphere and group performances assessment.

Conclusion

In Biskra University context, it is particularly interesting how cooperative learning can contribute to attaining better learning outcomes in foreign language teaching. If the aim - which everyone seems to agree on - is ultimately to make the students gain communicative competence, the teaching then ought to be communicative and real-like. In other words, it provides a sense of community where groups work together to learn a foreign language. The greatest possible extent here is to give the students the opportunity to communicate with the group in the classroom instead of practicing individual works aimed at future communication outside the classroom. Cooperative learning strategies can provide a real-like atmosphere where students can reflect upon newly acquired knowledge, process what they are learning by talking with and actively listening to their peers, and develop common understanding about real-like topics.

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