

THE BENEFITS AND SCIENTIFIC SIGNIFICANCE OF COLLABORATIVE LEARNING IN TEACHING

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86-umumta'lim maktabi

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Annotation: *The article has a primary aim at attempting to analyze one of dilemmas in the sphere of ELT methodology; the effectiveness of using cooperative learning of teaching English. The problem of using cooperative learning methods in teaching English is of great importance. The culture of cooperative learning are characterized as one of the most effective methods of teaching and learning a foreign language through research and communication, different types of this method allow us to use it in all the spheres of the educational process. They involve activities which focus on a theme of interest rather than of specific language tasks and helps the students to develop their imagination and creativity. The main idea of intensive methods of teaching English are considered to be based on teaching students through research activities and stimulating their personal interest.*

Keywords: *Cooperative learning, work in isolation, English language teaching, language needs, active listening, cooperative learning activities, authenticity of task-based materials, language skills.*

In writing the article we were guided by three beliefs about the importance of cooperative learning: 1) it benefits all students, 2) it is an integral part of current school reform efforts, and 3) it promotes collaboration between educators who have traditionally worked in isolation from others.

1. Cooperative learning is good for all students.

Cooperative learning is of value for all students including those who have been identified as "at risk (new learner)," "bilingual," "gifted," and "normal." All students need to learn and work in environments where their individual abilities are recognized and individual needs are addressed. All students need to learn within a supportive community in order to feel safe enough to take risks.

Some teachers have challenged the use of cooperative learning in classrooms with students who are identified as "gifted," claiming that gifted students become permanent tutors and are resentful of having to work with students of differing abilities. Beyond academic subjects, don't we want all students to be comfortable with and accepting of individual differences (their own and others) Don't we want all students to have sophisticated social skills that will enable them to work with people they perceive as "different" or even "difficult"?

Teachers must be encouraged to be thoughtful about all aspects of cooperative learning and to garner enough support for themselves so that they are not isolated and overwhelmed

by the truly complex task of meeting the needs of many different children within the same environment.

2. Cooperative Learning Is Part of Comprehensive School Reform.

Teachers are confronted on a regular basis with educational innovations that must be incorporated into their teaching: whole language, critical thinking, authentic assessment, and so forth. Some teachers hope they can ignore these "fads" in education, and, by waiting for them to pass and be replaced by "the next thing," save themselves the time and energy needed to learn about and implement new practices. Yet, not only is cooperative learning supported by a compelling research base, it is also fully compatible with other "best practices" currently being promoted.

Important skills such as critical thinking, creative problem solving, and the synthesis of knowledge can easily be accomplished through cooperative group activities in inclusive classrooms. In addition, authentic assessment (anecdotal reporting, portfolio assessment, and observational recording) is fully compatible with cooperative learning and inclusion.

Teachers need not envision cooperative learning as "one more thing" they need to do, but rather as an organizing value and principle for all the instruction in their classroom. Building a cooperative, inclusive classroom community can be the framework within which other teaching strategies and practices are woven.

3. Cooperative learning means teachers cooperating.

In order for cooperative learning to be successful in inclusive classrooms; educators who have traditionally worked in isolation will need to find new ways of collaborating and sharing their expertise. This kind of collaboration can be challenging because it involves sharing responsibilities and communicating with others, but it can also be exciting and rewarding. One teacher commented that planning cooperative learning lessons was stimulating: "For us, it really gets the creative juices flowing." Another teacher said, "It's fun, there are no two ways about it, it's fun. How can it not be fun? Plus [the students] get to know each other's abilities and they can get excited about each other's growth, even though it's not the same as theirs" .

Not only can students get to know each other's abilities within a cooperative process, but teachers can as well. The general education teacher may have a broader perspective on the curriculum and on curriculum integration, whereas the special education teacher may have special skills in modifying instruction and developing adaptations that benefit many children.

Similarly, teachers learning to work together may encounter struggles over turf, expertise, ownership, and responsibility—these also need to be negotiated. Teachers must find ways to support one another as they learn to be cooperative, inclusive educators at the same time they support their students in this goal. Learning how to use the expertise of the speech therapist or physical therapist, for example, or how to balance a child's individualized education program (IEP) objectives with broader classroom objectives requires time for teachers to meet, talk, listen, plan, and develop a trusting working relationship. Implementing cooperative learning in inclusive classrooms can benefit not

only the students, but also provide an important opportunity for educators to develop their own teaching skills. Supportive administrators have found creative ways of providing teachers with adequate planning and preparation time so that inclusion becomes an opportunity for better teaching rather than an imposed burden.

Once teachers have decided that they will begin to implement formal cooperative group lessons in their classrooms, there are many decisions that must be made. Teachers must decide how they will incorporate cooperative learning lessons within their classroom structure, how they will decide the content to be taught using cooperative learning, how they will form groups, how they will ensure active participation for all students, and how they will evaluate students' learning. On the following pages we explore some principles of inclusive cooperative learning that must be taken into consideration for successful implementation.

For cooperative learning to be maximally effective, it must take place within an overall context of cooperation and peer support. Attempts to implement cooperative learning activities when the classroom norms are those of isolation, competition, or interpersonal indifference are apt to result in contradictory messages to students and have limited positive impact on the goal of creating a safe, inclusive community.

A feeling of cooperation, community, and connection should be part of everything that happens in the classroom. For example, hanging up for display only those papers graded with "As communicates to students that not everyone's work is valued. Teachers might instead want to hang up a "proud paper" from every student or let students decide what they would like to display. Having students line up for music and gym in a girls' line and a boys' line communicates that gender divisions are important ones (and pity the boy who accidentally gets in the girls' line). There are an infinite number of other ways to line students up that encourage them to interact with a variety of their classmates across boundaries of race, gender, and ability. Classroom holiday celebrations, posters on the wall, and the racial and ethnic representation of the books in the classroom library all affect the school community and the extent to which students feel that they are (or are not) a valued part of the classroom. Teachers must be encouraged to think about all aspects of their classroom practice in reference to questions such as the following:

Will this practice contribute to or detract from a sense of classroom community? Will what I say or do in this situation encourage students to see each

Helping establishing norms about when, how, and why we help others is critical to the full implementation of cooperative learning. Because many teachers and students have received cultural messages that say that "needing help is bad or shameful" and "offering help to others will embarrass them," it is important to establish new classroom norms. Two of the most critical values are: 1) Everyone is good at something and can help others, and 2) Everyone is entitled to and can benefit from help and support from others.

Unfortunately, neither deciding to have an inclusive classroom nor implementing cooperative learning guarantees that the curriculum will be creative or meaningful.

Cooperative learning in inclusive classrooms will be more effective when it is multilevel, multimodal, and integrated across subject areas. Multilevel teaching involves students working on similar objectives or with the same material, but at different levels.

Multimodality teaching involves moving away from pencil and paper tasks to other forms of active involvement. Writing and performing a puppet show, for example, might involve writing, reading, building a set, singing, cutting, talking, dancing, and so forth. An activity like a puppet show or a unit on space can also be used to integrate curriculum across subject matter.

In classrooms where teachers are working to communicate norms of cooperation, students can work together in a number of different ways. In many cooperative classrooms, students sit in heterogeneous base groups so that teachers can structure both informal and formal opportunities for cooperation between students throughout the day. For example, students can start their day with an informal group activity at their desk clusters; complete class jobs with a partner from their group; and engage in formal, structured cooperative learning activities with group members. In most classrooms, teachers leave cooperative learning groups together for 1 month or 6 weeks so that students have an opportunity to get to know and work together with group members, but then also have an opportunity to learn to work with other classmates throughout the year. The goal is for students to have worked in cooperative groups with all their classmates by the end of the year.

One important aspect of creating cooperative learning groups is maximizing the heterogeneity of the students within the small groups. Students should be placed in groups that are mixed by academic skills, social skills, personality, race, and sex. It is often helpful for teachers to work with others who are familiar with their students when groups are being formed.

In forming groups, some teachers focus on student choice, asking students who they would like to work with. Although it makes sense for teachers to provide students with multiple opportunities to choose within the school day, student choice may not be the best way to form groups. When students choose their own groups and work only with others they already know, the groups often tend to be same gender, race, and ability. These more homogeneous groups work against the broader goals of cooperative learning in which teachers are striving to help the students learn to value the diversity that exists in the classroom and in society.

Cooperative Learning Provides Opportunities for Ongoing Evaluation. One important and often complex aspect of instruction with cooperative learning is evaluation.

There are several strategies that can be used to provide a more comprehensive examination of progress within cooperative learning activities. The following methods are more qualitative in nature and provide rich information about students that could not be ascertained as readily through traditional testing. For example, some teachers use a cumulative record file review system that outlines teachers' comments in subject areas, patterns of strengths as well as areas that need improvement, and affective observations. This information includes observations of students in cooperative learning groups and

comments about their growth in academic and social skills. Other teachers collect both individual and group work in portfolios that can be reviewed by teachers, parents, and students on a periodic basis. The student—teacher interview is another option. Through interviews the teacher can glean much information about students' interests, motivation, knowledge, and perspectives on their contribution to the group. All of these approaches are compatible with cooperative learning and the use of authentic assessment, which is gaining attention as an important approach to determining whether students have acquired skills to select and use important concepts in authentic open-ended situations .

Cooperative learning activities provide a unique opportunity to evaluate important collaborative outcomes, such as interactive communication, active listening, taking the perspective of others, acceptance and accommodation of individual differences, and the evaluation of a final product developed through group effort.

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