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Activities for Cooperative Learning

Making groupwork and pairwork effective in the ELT classroom

Jason Anderson

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Preface

In designing **Activities for Cooperative Learning**, I have attempted to go beyond the traditional photocopiable resource books valued by busy teachers around the world. Alongside the expected ready-to-go activities and teacher's notes, readers will also find introductions to cooperative activity types that are explained in generic terms, complete with learning principles, key advantages and variations. My hope is that readers will not only see ways to adapt the materials provided to suit their own classrooms, but will also think beyond them and develop their own activities appropriate to their learners, contexts and syllabi.

When I wrote my first resource book, Teamwork (2004), I knew very little about cooperative learning, yet the activities therein – which were a compilation of personal favourites that worked in my own classroom – often embodied the key principles of cooperative learning. They seemed to work well, yet I didn't really know why; I had developed them through a process of trial and error. My more recent historical research into approaches and methods in mainstream education led me to the work of writers such as the Johnson brothers, Spencer Kagan and Elliot Aronson, where I found key principles and philosophies that tallied well with my own 'theories-in-action': the principles implicit in what I did as a teacher in my own classroom and the materials that I created.

Materials development and professional development

Much teacher professional development today tends to focus on practices and beliefs, yet the materials we choose (if we have the choice) and use in our classrooms often have a formative influence on shaping such practices and beliefs. While, in an ideal world, these three aspects would develop together, the reality is that we are often more shaped by our teaching materials than they are by us (Thornbury, 2009). It is hoped that by providing a detailed **Introduction**, offering a range of **Micro-strategies** and including overviews of specific activity types, this book can enable readers to create the materials that are best suited to facilitating learning in their own contexts. As well as the benefit of developing creativity, this may also help to bring the three aspects mentioned above into greater harmony to encourage coherence between what we do (our practice), what with (our materials) and why (our beliefs).

Although the Introduction to this book discusses the history and principles of cooperative learning as well as the research evidence supporting it, I did not write this book as an objective introduction to the topic. Rather, it is an unapologetically personal view of cooperative learning, based partly on my own beliefs about what I feel works well in classrooms where I have taught around the world, and partly on how I feel cooperative learning needs to be adapted to suit the teaching and learning of languages. Cooperative learning was not developed for language teaching *per se*, and while several academic works do interpret it from a language teaching perspective (notably: Jacobs et al., 2006), such works often fail to consider our somewhat different role as language teachers, including our need to provide extensive skills practice or to involve learners' other languages in the learning process. As well as providing for these, in this personal vision of cooperative language learning I have also chosen to include a unit on **Reciprocal teaching** (Unit 4d), which, while not traditionally a cooperative learning strategy, nonetheless embodies and extends its key principles. I have also included several units that suggest ways to 'flip' cooperative learning (Units 8a–8c) – useful for teachers who have limited class time yet want to maximise communicative skills practice.

How to use this book

Busy teachers planning for an imminent lesson will find the **Contents pages** and the **Indexes** useful starting points – you'll notice a range of learner levels, activity types, grammar and lexical points covered.

But as you read through the activity introductions and teacher's notes, you'll also notice the 💡 symbol. It indicates a key principle or strategy that is explained in the Introduction or Micro-strategies unit, and you'll be able to find it quickly by checking the page number in the index. This will hopefully tempt you into reading sections of these parts of the book and to learn about the principles of cooperative learning on a 'need-to-know' basis, which is often how many of us come to know much of the shared theory of our profession.

If you are not in immediate need of an activity, I invite you to begin by reading the Introduction and then Unit 1: Micro-strategies, which together will provide a brief but fundamental overview of the ideas behind the approach and the principles of cooperative learning. Then peruse the Contents – some activities will sound familiar, others will not – and take your pick depending on your learners' needs, your syllabus requirements or your personal curiosity.

Critical reading is encouraged

This book is intended for teachers of both teen and adult learners, cognisant of the significant differences in learner needs, behaviour and motivation in the many contexts that this covers, as well as the widely varying constraints and expectations placed on teachers who may use it. As such, readers are invited to critically evaluate the ideas provided and to ask *'To what extent is this likely to be feasible and useful in my context?'*, and *'What 'tweaks', adaptations or wholesale changes may be necessary to make it work?'* This critical note is continued throughout the Introduction. For example, while the research evidence in favour of cooperative learning is reviewed, the reader is also reminded that the majority of this evidence comes from North America, and such evidence is never specific enough to be proof that it will or should work in *your* classroom.

In trialling the material for this book I have involved teachers working in a wide range of contexts, spanning secondary, tertiary and adult classrooms across four continents. While the final range of activities chosen has been informed by their feedback, remember that what works well in one classroom can fail in another, even in the same school, so I urge you always to be critical, both in failure and success, and I invite feedback and suggestions for improvement from all users to improve future editions.

Thanks and acknowledgements

Many thanks to Nick Boisseau at DELTA Publishing and Bettina Höfels at Klett for commissioning this book, to Fiona McGarry as the ever-patient editor, to the designer Joachim Schrimm and the artist Sven Palmowski. I must acknowledge the inspiration and creativity of all the writers mentioned in the references, particularly Spencer Kagan, Elliot Aronson, David W. Johnson and Roger T. Johnson; I hope I have represented your ideas faithfully and not taken too many liberties in interpreting them for my language teaching colleagues.

I dedicate this book to a number of teachers around the world: firstly to Ahmed Ali from Egypt for reigniting my interest in this project with stories of cooperative success in his classrooms in Saudi Arabia, secondly to the dedicated teachers of Yunnan and Guizhou Provinces in China whose commitment for more cooperative practices in challenging circumstances has inspired me greatly, and thirdly to the many teachers that trialled materials and provided feedback on the activities, particularly Riham Ebrahim, Florence Chong, Figen Tezdiker, Olga Shepel, Olha Zavorotna and Kadir Özsoy.

Note on terminology

The words 'task' and 'activity' are used interchangeably in this book as they often are in daily usage among teachers. While some of the activities described may constitute 'tasks' according to definitions in the task-based language teaching literature (e.g., Ellis, 2009) others wouldn't (e.g., Unit 4b), yet would still constitute cooperative learning activities, the focus of this book.

Activities for cooperative learning – Contents

0 Introduction to cooperative learning

Despite the fairly recent origins of cooperative learning in the 1970s, many of the activities associated with it are so widespread in language teaching classrooms in the UK, USA and other parts of the world that they can sometimes be taken for granted as either international norms or products of communicative or task-based approaches to language teaching. This includes activities such as information gap, jigsaw reading, 'Spot the Difference', and even personalisation tasks, all of which have been adapted for language learning, but ultimately trace their origins back to the same cooperative learning movement.

Yet underpinning these activities are important principles that are less well-known among today's teachers, leading many to presume the terms 'collaborative learning' and 'cooperative learning' are synonymous, which they are not. By understanding more about the history, principles and theory of cooperative learning we can both evaluate it critically and learn how to make use of its ideas and activities more effectively in our everyday teaching.

This chapter serves as a brief introduction to cooperative learning and is written with the needs of all teachers of English in mind, including both teachers of teens and younger learners working in state schools, where classes tend to be larger and learners less motivated, and teachers of adults and teens in private schools or higher education who often have smaller, more motivated classes. Of course, given the significant differences between these two very broad context types, no one approach is likely to fit all, so the reader is encouraged to evaluate this introduction critically and to adapt and appropriate from the ideas and suggestions within.

A brief history of cooperative learning

"It is not the similarity or dissimilarity of individuals that constitutes a group, but interdependence of fate."

Kurt Lewin, 1939

Cooperative learning has its roots in the research of two American psychologists, Kurt Lewin and Morton Deutsch. Influenced by Gestalt psychology, Lewin's early work into group dynamics in the 1930s and 1940s established that the essence of a group comes from interdependence established through shared goals. Based on this, Deutsch identified three types of interdependence that may exist between individuals: positive interdependence (when individuals share the same goal), negative interdependence (when one individual's success requires the failure of others) or no interdependence (when there is no link between the success of individuals). Not surprisingly, Deutsch noticed that cultivating positive interdependence leads to more productive relationships and recognised the importance of his research for group learning and productivity (Deutsch, 1949), although the application of his observations in mainstream education came later.

> "Cooperative learning, when it includes heterogeneous teams and team-building, is the single most powerful tool this nation has for improving race relations."
>
> Williams, 2006

Perhaps the key catalyst that sparked off the cooperative learning movement in mainstream education in the USA was the desegregation of public schools during the 1960s. The initial challenges experienced during attempts to integrate classes of learners with diverse ethnicities and prior experiences of education prompted early innovators in cooperative learning to experiment with new strategies, activity types and principles. Many of these were based partly on Deutsch's research and were developed primarily to diffuse tension, increase self-esteem and promote peer-respect within these classrooms. This included Johnson & Johnson's *Learning together* theory (1975), Aronson's *Jigsaw classroom* (Aronson et al., 1978), Slavin's *Student team learning* (e.g., Slavin, 1980), and Kagan's Structures

(Kagan, 1989). These authors became the central methodologists of the cooperative learning movement, and while there were differences in opinion, each developed similar theories around two key principles of cooperative learning described below. Johnson and Johnson went on to conduct important research into cooperative learning, and Kagan, through his own company, began to promote his version of cooperative learning in materials and workshops for teachers around the world (see: www.kaganonline.com).

Key principles in cooperative learning

> "…the crux of the differences between cooperation and competition lies in the nature of the way the goals of the participants in each of the situations are linked. In a cooperative situation the goals are so linked that everybody 'sinks or swims' together, while in the competitive situation if one swims, the other must sink."
>
> Deutsch, 1973

Most teachers who are familiar with communicative language teaching and/or task-based language teaching will know something about collaborative learning, but this isn't necessarily the same as cooperative learning. In this book, I will use the term 'collaborative learning' to refer to the general use of pairwork and groupwork: any activities in which learners collaborate. But I will reserve the term 'cooperative learning' for a more specific type of collaboration, in which two key principles are emphasised in the activities that learners do: positive interdependence and individual accountability. While different writers on cooperative learning mention other factors, these two are often emphasised and agreed upon by some of its most influential figures (e.g., Johnson & Johnson, 1994; Kagan & Kagan, 2009; Slavin, 1995). They also seem to be important to making groupwork effective in ELT classrooms in a range of contexts worldwide (Ghaith & Kawtharani, 2006; Ning, 2010; Panhwar, 2016):

Positive interdependence: For an activity to be truly cooperative, group members must work as a team towards a shared goal, not in competition with each other, so that they sink or swim together.

Individual accountability: Group success depends on contributions from all group members, making each learner accountable, both for their own learning and for contributing to the group as required. Success may be interpreted as completion of a task, solution of a problem, answering of a review question or success in a class quiz taken individually after the team has prepared together.

When combined, these two principles encourage the group to manage itself, taking responsibility for ensuring that each group member is involved in an activity. Usually it is the design of the task that promotes this combination of positive interdependence and individual accountability. A good example of this is a jigsaw reading activity, something that most communicative teachers are familiar with. Not all jigsaw tasks are truly cooperative – many just get learners to read and summarise what they have read. While this may be useful and may work in some classes, it isn't as cooperative as a jigsaw reading activity in which learners have to understand, compare, synthesise, or even evaluate the content of the different texts in order to complete a specific task. The example activities in this book are of this latter, more cooperative type, as in Unit 5a. In this unit, after reading one of three texts about the jobs of three different people, group members work together to answer questions that force them to compare and evaluate all three texts, such as '*Who works hardest?', 'Who makes the most money?'* and *'Who do you think has the most difficult job? Why?*'. If any group member fails to contribute, the whole group may get the answer wrong, so it becomes the shared responsibility of the group to ensure that they participate. Thus, two of the most commonly encountered problems with groupwork – that one or two students dominate or that some don't pull their weight – are less likely to happen when positive interdependence and individual accountability are required. This shared responsibility that cooperative learning cultivates also promotes the development of key social skills, discussed below.

Other theories and principles important to cooperative learning

Sociocultural theory

A number of recent writers on cooperative learning have drawn upon sociocultural theory to provide explanations as to why cooperative learning may be effective (e.g., Jacobs et al., 2006; Kagan & Kagan, 2009; King, 2008). Because of the need for learners to interact with classmates during cooperative learning, learning becomes dialogic (i.e., it involves conversation) as students are required to verbalise what they are learning. This forces them to express ideas using familiar words and concepts, which are also likely to be accessible to classmates. As such, they 'peer-scaffold' each other's understanding of the content. Not only does this help to make that content understandable for others, the need to describe it in their own words helps each learner to assimilate it personally, to 'own' the content. It is an often-repeated mantra in learner-centred education that explaining an idea or fact to someone else helps you to remember it. This is especially important in language learning, when dialogue involves the meaningful use of vocabulary, grammar, speaking and listening skills, and also includes negotiation of meaning, which may help to accelerate the language learning process (e.g., Long, 1991).

Heterogenous grouping

Most writers on cooperative learning emphasise the importance of heterogenous 'base groups' or '**home groups**'. The word *heterogenous* indicates that each group should include the widest possible mix of characteristics such as sex, ability level, ethnicity, age and first language (e.g., Johnson & Johnson, 2002; Kagan & Kagan, 2009). These groups should remain stable for an extended period of time to allow learners to build bonds and peer understanding. This creates an environment that increases peer support and tutoring, both of which are known to increase learning (Hattie, 2009), especially through peer-explanation, but also through praise and peer-correction. Guidelines for grouping learners according to the principles of cooperative learning are provided below.

Learner autonomy

Cooperative learning encourages learners to take responsibility for their own learning and to work independently of the teacher. As such, it promotes and provides the conditions for increased learner autonomy (Jacobs & McCafferty, 2006), something that is known to have a positive effect on learning (Hattie, 2009; see 'self-regulated learning'). Learners develop the organisational, analytical and study skills necessary to work independently of the teacher. What is more, they develop these skills communally, sharing ideas and strategies for autonomous learning. **Peer-needs analysis** (see Unit 3d) helps learners to share these skills and become aware of each other's needs, thereby improving rapport, understanding and empathy within both groups and classes (Anderson, 2017).

> *"Peer needs analysis can be defined as the act of raising the students' awareness of the needs of their co-learners in a class. It aims to turn needs analysis into a social event."*
>
> Anderson, 2017

Task-mediated differentiation

Differentiation, also called 'differentiated learning/instruction', is an important principle in classrooms where learners have varying abilities, strengths and preferences – i.e., most classrooms! Differentiation involves "ensuring that what a student learns, how she/he learns it, and how the student demonstrates what she/he has learnt is a match for that student's readiness level, interests, and preferred mode of learning" (Tomlinson, 2004). Recommendations for differentiation often focus on providing different tasks to different individuals or groups, but this is rarely recommended in cooperative learning, where the emphasis is on

bringing learners together rather than segregating them. Instead, opportunities for differentiated learning occur naturally in the cooperative classroom, especially through what we might call 'task-mediated differentiation', in which differentiation occurs simply in how learners complete a task or activity. Task-mediated differentiation happens in the language classroom whenever we provide enough freedom and flexibility for learners to use the skills and language they have to complete the same task in ways that suit each learner's personal preferences and level of ambition. For example, Unit 5e in this book requires learners to think up their own questions, thus learners with stronger grammar awareness may use more complex question forms, challenging themselves and providing useful exposure to new structures for their classmates. Unit 4e requires learners to take as many notes as possible while listening to a story, thus learners with stronger listening and writing skills can take more notes than classmates who are weaker at these skills. And Unit 2d offers freedom to learners to provide spoken summaries of a section of the text, once more allowing longer or shorter summaries according to ability level.

> *"Differentiated instruction is a way of living in the classroom so that the broader objectives of education are achieved. … All learning is an individual matter, but teaching is essentially individual guidance in group situations. Properly planned instruction provides recognition of individual capacities, achievements, interests motives, and needs, as well as equal learning opportunities in the classroom."*
>
> Betts, 1946

Differentiation also occurs naturally in the cooperative classroom through interaction between students of mixed ability. For example, peer-tuition and peer-correction both allow students with more knowledge about the language and its usage to provide useful input or feedback to classmates with less knowledge, enabling them to help their classmates and to challenge themselves to use the language effectively and sensitively as they do so. Most adult learners are able to use their current social skills to do this effectively, but younger learners (and even some adults) will need to be trained to do this well – training that will serve them for the rest of their lives. And all learners will be more willing to provide peer-tuition if they know that it improves learning for both parties involved (see **Research evidence supporting cooperative learning** below).

Organising groupwork in cooperative learning

The interaction patterns used in cooperative learning are similar to those in most collaborative classrooms. At different times they will include individual work, pairwork and groupwork, all of which are important in the learning process. Individual work is useful when learners need time to think for themselves, to check that they have personally understood something, or to work on a skill that can be practised individually, such as writing or reading. At such times, the teacher can monitor and provide individual support. Pairwork is useful for maximising speaking practice and for getting students to explore or test out new ideas, as in the **Think-Pair-Share** micro-strategy. As individual and pairwork activities are comparatively straightforward to organise and manage, this section looks more carefully at how to organise groupwork; an area of classroom management where many teachers experience more difficulty, and where the literature on cooperative learning is consequently often more prescriptive.

Much of the writing on cooperative learning includes quite specific guidelines on how groups should be created and used to ensure that learning is as effective as possible. Firstly, groups should be kept small. Four is the perfect group size, partly because it neatly divides into two pairs, and partly because it's the right size to allow for interaction and relationships to develop without the danger of cliques or exclusion (Jacobs, 2006; Kagan & Kagan, 2009). Of course, the number of students in most classes doesn't divide exactly by four, so there may need to be some groups of five or even three (see below for how to manage this). Groups of six or more are rarely recommended for cooperative learning, except perhaps when there are clear roles in the group, for example, in longer, project-based activities.

So, bearing this in mind, let's look at two types of groups:

Home groups

> *"Base groups are long-term, heterogeneous cooperative learning groups with stable membership. The primary responsibility of members is to provide each other with the support, encouragement and assistance they need to make academic progress."*
>
> Johnson & Johnson, 2002

Most writers on cooperative learning recommend organising home groups (also called 'base groups') at the start of a term and keeping students in these groups for a number of weeks. Exactly how many weeks home groups stay together will depend on how often they work together, but there should be opportunities for bonds to form, and for individuals within the group to overcome any initial challenges they meet when working together. It's also important to regroup students several times during a year to ensure that groups don't get too attached, and to provide variety and new friendships for all. Home groups should be heterogenous (i.e., as mixed as possible), with a combination of both sexes, different ability levels and – where appropriate – different ethnicities, races and first languages. For this reason, it's usually best that you select the groups yourself, but only when you know the class well enough to do so. Use home groups for most cooperative learning activities and use them for the first and last stages of a jigsaw activity. Some classes enjoy thinking up names for their home groups, and they can be encouraged to create name cards that can be put on their home group tables whenever they are working together (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Group name card

Expert groups

Expert groups provide an alternative to home groups and don't have to be fixed or consistent between lessons. While they can be used for a variety of activities, they are most common in jigsaw activities (Aronson et al., 1978). For example, if you want learners to read different texts and then to share what they have read, you can use expert groups for the 'reading stage', after which they can return to their home groups to share what they learnt. If your jigsaw activity involves just two texts, you can simply combine two students from Home group A with two students from Home group B to make an expert group. This keeps the expert groups small and reorganisation simple. Alternatively, you may want to create four expert groups for four different texts (e.g., Unit 6a, **Expert Writers**). Thus, you can send one member of each home group to each expert group. In large classes, you may need to divide expert groups into two or three subgroups to prevent them from getting too large. Expert groups can also be mixed-ability, but especially in classes where the ability range is large, expert groups can provide an opportunity for students of similar ability to work together and challenge each other. Often, this can happen simply through the interaction and language choice of the group. However, you can also challenge higher-level expert groups by giving them either a more challenging text or additional questions and tasks (e.g., '*Write a summary of the key points of the text'; 'Do you all agree with the writer? Why/why not?*').

How to cope with odd numbers?

Learning to teach cooperatively certainly improves your arithmetic, especially division! Sometimes we need to create an odd number of groups, and sometimes we may have uneven numbers in the home groups due to absenteeism or other factors. In such situations, organising groups can be quite challenging. Let's use an example to show an easy way of doing this:

Imagine that you have 26 students in your class organised in five groups of four and two groups of three, but only 25 are present today, and you have the following home groups (each group is a fruit name, each letter is a student and 'A' is the absent student):

Apples	Oranges	Peaches	Strawberries	Mangos	Grapes	Lemons
B C D	E F G H	I J K L	M N O P	Q R S T	U V W	X Y Z

Now let's imagine you need to put them into three expert groups for a jigsaw reading activity with three texts (e.g., Unit 5a). Remember that it's okay to put to learners from the same home group into the same expert group. The easiest way to do the division is to go around the class, numbering the learners 1, 2, 3, 1, 2, 3, etc. as follows:

Apples	Oranges	Peaches	Strawberries	Mangos	Grapes	Lemons
B C D	E F G H	I J K L	M N O P	Q R S T	U V W	X Y Z
1 2 3	1 2 3 1	2 3 1 2	3 1 2 3	1 2 3 1	2 3 1	2 3 1

Double check that all have remembered their number by saying: '*Number ones raise your hand! Twos raise your hand!*' etc. Now tell the 'ones' to sit together, the 'twos' to sit together, etc. This creates the following expert groups, with at least one student from each home group:

Expert group 1	Expert group 2	Expert group 3
B, E, H, K, N, Q, T, W, Z	C, F, I, L, O, R, U, X	D, G, J, M, P, S, V, Y

These groups are too large, so you can now ask each one to split into two subgroups, and you can recommend that learners from the same home group (e.g., E and H from the Oranges group) join different subgroups, as follows:

Expert group 1		Expert group 2		Expert group 3	
1A	1B	2A	2B	3A	3B
B, H, N, T, Z	E, K, Q, W,	C, I, O, U,	F, L, R, X	D, J, P, V,	G, M, S, Y

This ensures that when they get back to their home groups, each will have the necessary knowledge to complete any task, and home groups with four members will benefit from knowledge shared in different expert subgroups, which can vary, even if two students have worked with the same text.

This method of simply counting round the class usually works well to create the right balances when regrouping students. Nonetheless, the first time you do it, you may want to plan groups a little in advance. And once classes are used to regrouping, you can even involve the students in organising the groups, which helps to embed practice of real mathematical problems in their English lessons!

Research evidence supporting cooperative learning

Cooperative learning is one of the most comprehensively researched approaches in mainstream education. Over 1,200 studies have been conducted on it (Johnson & Johnson, 2009), and there is strong evidence that it improves learning from a number of meta-analyses*, although it should be noted that the largest of these (Hattie, 2009) reports a lower effect size than studies conducted by advocates of cooperative learning (e.g., Kagan & Kagan, 2009). When compared with 'competitive' and 'individualistic' learning, Hattie reports effect sizes** of 0.54 and 0.59 respectively, and a lower, but still impressive, effect size of 0.41 from studies that compared it to 'heterogenous classes'. These studies have been conducted over several decades and include findings from all age groups, although the majority are from studies in secondary

> *"If you want to increase student academic achievement, give each student a friend."*
>
> Roseth, Fang, Johnson and Johnson, 2006

* A meta-analysis is a research study in which the findings from a large number of smaller studies on a topic are brought together.

** Effect size is a scientific measure of how big the difference is between two things being compared in a study. The effect sizes cited here use Cohen's D."