

IMPROVING OUR TEACHING QUALITY THROUGH COOPERATIVE LEARNING

Although Cooperative Learning has proved to be a very effective way of learning, many learners are still resisting Collaborative Learning for many reasons. In this article, I am going to shed some light on some ways that might enhance the instructors' awareness and make them reflect on how to make students learn cooperatively

1- Why group work?

a- The current curricula

It is not enough for an instructor to just follow the plan in the textbook, first because each lesson should be "tailored" according to the class to be taught, second because many lessons lend themselves to be taught collaboratively, yet they are not exploited in groups.

b- Cooperative learning value:

- Academic value

No one can deny the academic benefits of cooperative learning. About nine hundred research studies have shown the effectiveness of making students learn collaboratively.

- Social benefits:

By working in groups, students learn how to help each other since the CL philosophy focuses on the group spirit rather than on individualism. This philosophy aims at constructing a nation that believes in solidarity.

-Psychological benefits:

Many students feel embarrassed to express their opinion in a plenary class discussion although they can do well in working in

groups. Besides, the learner faces less testing pressure since the CL is based on ongoing assessment.

c-Some instructors' doubts:

Some instructors still doubt the effectiveness of CL. Consequently, they either refrain from doing group work or they even assail this strategy.

d- Improper teaching practices:

Some instructors believe in CL and try to use it but they can't teach it appropriately for many reasons. Among these reasons is the fact that the teaching staff is still not familiar with the basic elements of Cooperative Learning. Before passing to these elements, I would like to present some definitions by some experts in Cooperative Learning.

2-Definition of Cooperative Learning:

Cooperative Learning is a specific kind of Collaborative Learning. In Cooperative learning, students work together in small groups on a structural activity. They are *individually accountable* for their work, and the work of the group as a whole is *assessed*. Cooperative groups work *face-to-face* and *learn* to work as a team.

Cooperative Learning is instruction that involves students working in teams to accomplish an assigned task and produce a final product under conditions that include the *five elements* (Johnsons 1998)

3- Elements of Cooperative Learning:

a- Positive interdependence

- positive goal interdependence
- positive reward interdependence

- positive role interdependence-
- positive resource interdependence
- positive reward interdependence

b- Individual accountability

c- Social skills

d- Face-to-face interaction

e- Processing group interaction

"By asking group members to identify what behaviors help them work together and by asking individuals to reflect on their contribution to the group's success or failure, students are made aware of the need for healthy, positive, helping interactions when they work in groups." (COHEN and COHEN 1991)

"At the end of an activity, the group answers questions such as: what 3 things did we do well today?- what one thing could we do better next time ?- this type of questioning helps students learn to reflect upon their groups social interactions as well as activity content"

(JOHNSON and JOHNSON 1987)

Another technique in assessing group interaction is the following:

Circle one number

	Strongly agree	strongly disagree			
	1	2	3	4	5
I enjoyed working in my group	1	2	3	4	5
My group mates encouraged me	1	2	3	4	5
Our group worked well together	1	2	3	4	5

One thing I thought was really good about working in this group was.....
.....

Next time, I will
.....

4- Class activities that use CL and their applicability:

In fact, there are many activities that the instructor can use if he wants to make his students learn many strategies and techniques. These activities are of great importance if the teacher knows how to apply them to his classes. Among these activities are the following:

- Think-pair-share
- Team-pair-solo
- Three-minute-review
- Round Robin Brainstorming
- Jigsaw

5- Recommendations to tackle some problems:

- a- Positive noise:** Many instructors avoid or refrain from doing group work because of the noise. In fact as a facilitator I have to see this positively and teach my students how to respect the other groups while working together.
- b- Use of the target language:** While working in groups, most of the learners have an inclination for using their mother tongue; it is my role as a teacher to convince my students that the more they use English, the more they can improve.
- c- Low-achieving learners and high-ability learners:** Many instructors think that in a heterogeneous group the high-achieving learner may learn nothing since he deals with a low-achieving learner. In fact, many researchers prove that both can benefit from working together. “When students of high ability work with students of lower ability, both benefit. The former benefits by explaining

and demonstrating... and the latter benefits by seeing a concept modeled by a peer”

(JOHNSON and JOHNSON 1985)

"SWING and PETERSON (1982) found that students of low achievement benefited from participation in groups heterogeneously composed on achievement in comparison to participation in homogeneously low-achieving groups"

(COHEN 1994)

6- How to improve our techniques:

- a- **Reordering:** the instructor can fragment a passage into pieces of papers (paragraphs), each member within the same group has to read his part/piece/paragraph, paraphrase it to his group mates, and together all the group members try to reorder these pieces to get a coherent text.
- b- **Matching:** each member within the same group has to choose one statement and match it with the suitable paragraph, then explain it to his group mates.
- c- **Information transfer:** each member in the group has to read the text and complete one part/column in the chart then explain it to his group mates who listen to him and complete that missing part in their columns

If I want to be an effective teacher/facilitator in my class, I have to be familiar with the elements and the philosophy of collaborative learning whose main objective is to create a generation of autonomous learners who no longer consider the teacher as the sole source of knowledge.

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