

# Implementing Cooperative Learning

George Jacobs and  
Stephen Hall  
*Regional Language  
Centre, Singapore*

In the last 10 years there has been a growing interest among ESL/EFL teachers in using cooperative-learning activities. With cooperative learning, students work together in groups of two to six. However, cooperative learning is more than just putting students into groups and giving them something to do. Cooperative-learning principles and techniques are tools that teachers use to encourage mutual helpfulness and the active participation of all group members.

These principles can be seen, for example, in an ESL/EFL reading activity that uses a cooperative-learning technique called “Numbered Heads Together” (Kagan 1992). There are four steps in doing Numbered Heads Together.

1. Each student in a group of four gets a number: 1, 2, 3, or 4.
2. The teacher or a student asks a question based on the text the class is reading.
3. All members in the group put their heads together to come up with an answer or answers. They should also be ready to supply support for their answer(s) from the text and/or from other knowledge.
4. The teacher calls a number from one to four. The person with that number answers for the group.

“Numbered Heads Together” encourages successful group functioning because all members need to know their group’s answer(s) and because when students help their groupmates, they help themselves and the whole group.

A good deal of research exists in other areas of education suggesting that cooperative learning is associated with benefits in such key areas as learning self-esteem, liking for school, and inter-ethnic relations (Johnson et al. 1990). In second/foreign language learning, theorists propose several advantages for cooperative learning: increased student talk, more varied talk, more relaxed atmosphere, greater motivation, more negotiation of meaning, and increased amounts of comprehensible input (Kagan 1992).

However, implementing cooperative learning is not like waving a magic wand—just say a few magic words and everything works great. In fact, in planning and executing cooperative learning, teachers have many decisions to make.

In the planning stage of cooperative learning there are many large philosophical questions to consider, such as whether to stress intrinsic or extrinsic motivation (Graves 1990), how much choice to give students in matters pertaining to *how*, *about what*, and *with whom* they will collaborate, and how tightly to structure activities to encourage effective cooperation (Sapon-Shevin and Schniedewind 1991). These questions demand the attention of all teachers interested in cooperative learning. However, this article focuses on the more mechanical aspects of executing cooperative learning in our classrooms.

From our experience in conducting workshops and courses for teachers on cooperative learning, we have chosen 10 of the most commonly asked nuts-and-bolts questions. The suggestions listed below come from our own ESL and EFL classes, ideas from colleagues and teacher participants in our courses, and from books and articles in the field.

This article presents a wide range of options. You will want to choose those options that match your own teaching style and your learners’ backgrounds and needs. Plus, you may well come up with some ideas not mentioned here. (If so, please send them to us. We will add them to our list.) Remember that cooperative learning may not only be new to you but also to your students. Therefore, you may all need time to adjust. Our suggestion is to start slowly, be patient, and be persistent.

## 1. How big should groups be?

- a. Even two people are a group.
- b. Generally speaking, the smaller the group, the more each member talks and the less chance there is that someone will be left out. Also, smaller groups require fewer group management skills and can usually come to decisions faster. Thus, when starting with cooperative learning, groups of two or three may be best.
- c. Larger groups are good because they provide more people for doing big tasks; they increase the variety of people in a group in terms of skills, personalities, backgrounds, etc.; and they reduce the number of groups for the teacher to monitor.

d. Six seems to be the maximum size that most books recommend. However, many people prefer groups of four or less. For example, Kagan (1992) suggests four-somes and uses many cooperative-learning structures in which students first work in pairs, and then two sets of these pairs interact as a foursome.

## 2. How should groups be formed?

a. Most experts on cooperative learning suggest that teacher-selected groups are best, at least until students become proficient at collaboration. Teacher-selected groups usually aim to achieve a heterogeneous mix. Such a mix promotes peer tutoring, helps to break down barriers among different types of students, and encourages on-task behaviours.

b. In creating teacher-assigned teams, factors to consider include language proficiency, first language, sex, race, and diligence.

c. An effective way of setting up mixed-proficiency groups is to band the learners' names into four proficiency clusters from high to low and then select randomly from within each band so that groups will involve learners with a range of proficiencies. Other criteria, such as sex, race, and diligence, can be considered when deciding whom to choose from which band.

d. Random grouping is quick and easy and conveys the idea that one can work with anyone. It provides leadership opportunities for low achievers and builds a perception of fairness and possibilities for learning from a wide variety of different peers. Random grouping is effective for short-term tasks in that one can work with anyone, and there are a variety of social relationships that can be explored.

e. Many ways exist for randomizing groups. The most common is counting off. Take the number of students in your class, divide by the number of students you want per group, and the result will be the number students should count to. For example, if there are 56 students in the class and you want groups of 4, students should count to 14 (56 divided by 4 is 14).

f. When counting off to achieve random groups, you might want to ask stu-

dents to write down their number so they do not forget or go wandering off with their friends despite their number.

g. Other ways to set up random groups include using playing cards, giving out numbered pieces of paper, and distributing cards with different categories on them and letting students group themselves according to the category. An example of the latter procedure would be to have some cards with names of animals, others with names of plants, others with names of countries, etc. Then, all the animals would find each other and form a group; then all the plants, etc.

h. The number of students in the class may not fit evenly with the number of students per group. For example, if there are 47 students in the class, and you want groups of three, there will be two students left over. Probably it is best to add them as fourth members of three-member groups. Your knowledge of your students will help you decide to which groups they should be added. You can also assign extra students as observers.

i. When students become good at cooperative group work, they can group themselves, for example, by interests for self-directed projects (Sharan and Sharan 1992).

## 3. When students are working in their groups, how can the teacher get the class's attention?

a. A signal can be used which means that groups should quickly bring their discussions to a temporary halt and face the teacher. One popular signal is the teacher raising a hand. When students see this, they are to raise their hands also, bring their discussion to a close, and face the teacher. Other possible signals include ringing a bell, playing a musical instrument, blowing a whistle, snapping one's fingers, and flicking the lights on and off. One teacher we know puts two signs on the board, one to stop working and face the teacher, and the other to continue but more quietly. She knocks on the board to get students' attention and then points to the appropriate sign.

b. Some teachers play music in the background as groups study together. In

*Cooperative learning is more than just putting students into groups and giving them something to do.*

*Find the right balance according to your philosophy of education and what seems to be working best.*

this case, turning off the music can be the attention signal.

c. When students lead class activities, they can use the same signal.

d. One student in each group can take the role of group checker with the responsibility of watching out for the teacher's signal and being sure the group responds to the signal quickly. There are many other types of roles that can be used to facilitate group functioning (Ilola et al. 1989).

e. If some groups are not paying attention to the quiet signal, rewards can be given to encourage this component of smooth-functioning group activities.

#### **4. What can be done if the noise level becomes too high?**

a. One student per group can be the noise monitor or "quiet captain," whose function it is to urge the group to collaborate actively, yet quietly.

b. The closer together students sit, the quieter they can talk. Having students sit close together not only helps reduce the noise level but also helps foster cooperation and minimizes the chance of someone being left out.

c. Along with sitting close together, students can use special quiet voices, e.g., 6-inch voices or 30-centimetre voices.

d. A signal similar to the one used to get the class's attention (see 3a) can be used as a sign to continue working, but a bit more quietly. For example, for "stop working," the signal might be a hand raised straight up, and for "work more quietly," the signal could be a hand raised with arm bent at elbow.

e. Olsen and Kagan (1992) suggest stoplight cards. A green card goes on a group's desk if they are working together quietly. A yellow card indicates they need to quiet down a bit. When a red card is put on their desk, the group should become completely silent, and all should silently count to 10 before starting to work again.

#### **5. What if a student doesn't want to work in a group?**

a. Discussing the advantages that students can derive from learning in groups may help overcome resistance to group

activities. These potential advantages include learning more, having more fun, and preparing for tasks away from school in which collaboration is necessary.

b. Students may look more favorably on cooperative learning if they understand that talking with others is a language-learning strategy that they can apply outside of class as well (Oxford 1990).

c. Students should realize that studying in groups is only one of the several ways of learning that will go on in the class.

d. Group games may encourage students to look forward to other group learning activities. There are many enjoyable games which also teach academic and social skills. Start with pairs and tasks which require exchange of information (Nation 1990). Success here will build confidence in the ability to work in groups.

e. Students who do not want to study in groups can be allowed to work on their own. Hopefully, after a while, they will want to take part in the group interaction and will ask to join a group.

#### **6. What if some groups finish earlier than others?**

a. Check to see if they really have done the assignment properly.

b. Have groups that finish early compare what they have done with other groups that also finished early.

c. Have groups discuss how they worked together. Then, because sometimes smooth-functioning groups can provide good models for others, you might want to have exemplary groups explain their group process. Hopefully, this will help all groups work together more efficiently.

d. Develop one or two sponge activities. Sponge activities are short activities, related to the main task, which soak up the extra time between when the first and last groups finish.

e. Set time limits to discourage groups from dawdling. These time limits are flexible. If groups are working well, but need more time, the limit can be extended.

f. When students become adept at working cooperatively, ask group members to help other groups that have not yet finished.

g. Groups that finish early can work on homework or other assignments.

### 7. What if a few students are frequently absent?

a. Assign these students as extra members of groups. For example, if students are working in groups of four, have these students be the fifth member of the group.

b. Use tasks that can be accomplished in one class period.

c. Being a member of a group may give these students a feeling of belonging and a reason to come to school that they did not have before. Also, groups may help them to be more successful in school and, thus, they will enjoy being at school more.

d. Coach students in how to use appropriate peer pressure to encourage frequently absent members to come to school and to complete their portion of group tasks. (Of course, in some cases, absent students may have family obligations or other non-school reasons for missing class.)

e. If a group is working cooperative jigsaw activities, (Kagan 1992), give the missing piece to the whole group.

f. Make sure groups have contingency plans in case members are missing. Learning to make such plans is an important group skill, because absences are also a common problem in groups outside of school.

g. In an ongoing activity, ask groups to update absent members when they return to school. This encourages students to develop peer tutoring skills.

h. Make groups responsible for contacting absent members to inform them of what they have missed and to make sure they know what their assignments are.

i. Be prepared to adjust grading if such students leave their group in the lurch.

### 8. How long should groups stay together?

a. Keeping groups together for fairly long periods—four to eight weeks—gives them a chance to become comfortable with one another, allows them to form a group identity and bond, and gives them the opportunity to learn how to overcome difficulties they have working together. This is where spending time dur-

ing or after cooperative activities to have groups process their interaction comes in handy (Dishon and O'Leary 1984).

b. Groups that stay together for at least a few weeks facilitate long-term projects, such as those using the cooperative-learning method called Group Investigation (Sharan and Sharan 1992).

c. Try to resist the temptation to disband groups that are not working well. Stress to students that we need to learn to be able to work with all sorts of people, including those whom we, at least initially, do not like. Use team-building activities and instruction in collaborative skills to help create a spirit of togetherness in groups.

d. Forming heterogeneous groups according to such criteria as proficiency, sex, first language, and personality is a lot of work for teachers. Thus, we would not want to do that too often.

e. Even while students are in long-term groups, short one-shot activities can be done with different grouping configurations. This may add a bit of variety.

f. Avoid keeping groups together if they begin to become cliques (Dishon and O'Leary 1984).

### 9. How should groups be ended?

a. All groups can end with statements by learners and the teacher about what they learned as well as about the learning process.

b. When long-standing groups are disbanded, there should be some kind of closure activity for members to thank each

continued on page 13

*George Jacobs (standing, right) and Stephen Hall (standing, left) are teacher educators at the Regional Language Centre (RELC) in Singapore. Here they are shown with some participants in a course at RELC.*

## Implementing Cooperative Learning

continued from page 5

other for their help and to sum up what has been learned about working in groups. This can be in oral or written form.

c. Groupmates can write "letters of reference" to be given to members of the person's new group.

d. Group pictures can be taken.

e. Group products can be posted or published. This fosters a sense of achievement and gives credibility to the group's work. Also, group products can serve as vehicles for assessment by individuals, groups, and teachers.

### 10. What percentage of the time should cooperative learning be used?

a. No one suggests that the class be organized in cooperative groups all the time.

b. Many cooperative-learning activities combine a group component with components in which the teacher lectures or demonstrates and ones in which students work alone (e.g., Slavin 1990).

c. When students and/or teachers are unfamiliar with cooperative learning, it is best to start slowly. Use one cooperative-learning structure, such as Three-Step Interview or Numbered Heads Together (Kagan 1992), several times to let students become accustomed to collaboration.

d. Discuss with students the whys and hows of learning together.

e. Making cooperation a content theme also helps students tune in to working together. For example, once we asked students to write individually about a successful group experience in which they had participated. Then, groups were used to provide feedback.

f. Interact with colleagues for support and ideas.

g. Find the right balance according to your philosophy of education, your students' preferences, and what seems to be working best. Students need to know how to cooperate, as well as how to compete and work alone.

### REFERENCES

- Dishon, D. and P. W. O'Leary. 1984. *A guidebook for cooperative learning: A technique for creating more effective schools*. Holmes Beach, Florida: Learning Publications.
- Graves, T. 1990. Are external rewards appropriate or desirable in a cooperative classroom? *Cooperative Learning*, 11, pp. 15-17.
- Ilola, L. M., K. M. Power and G. Jacobs. 1989. Structuring student interaction to promote learning. *English Teaching Forum*, 27, 3, pp. 12-16.
- Johnson, D. W., R. T. Johnson and E. J. Holubec. 1990. *Circles of learning*, 3rd ed. Edina, Minn.: Interaction Book Company.
- Kagan, S. 1992. *Cooperative Learning*, San Juan Capistrano, CA: Kagan Cooperative Learning.
- Nation, I. S. P. 1990. *Language teaching techniques*. Wellington: English Language Institute, Victoria University.
- Olsen, Roger W. B., and S. Kagan. 1992. About cooperative learning. In *Cooperative language learning: A teacher's resource book*, ed. C. Kessler. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall.
- Oxford, R. L. 1990. *Language learning strategies: What every teacher should know*. New York: Newbury House.
- Sapon-Shevin, M. and N. Schniedewind. 1991. Cooperative learning as empowering pedagogy. In *Empowerment through multicultural education*, ed. C. E. Sleeter. Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press.
- Sharan, Y. and S. Sharan. 1992. *Expanding cooperative learning through group investigation*. Colchester, VT: Teachers College Press.
- Slavin, R. E. 1990. *Cooperative learning: Theory, research, and practice*. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall. 