

# Tips for Using Cooperative Learning Groups effectively in the EFL Classroom

Assoc. Prof. PhD Veneranda HAJRULLA  
University of Vlora "Ismail Qemali", Albania  
Department of Foreign Languages  
venerandahajrulla@yahoo.com

Assoc. Prof. PhD Marsela HARIZAJ  
Logos University College  
marselaharizaj@yahoo.com

## Abstract

*A good amount of research has been done on cooperative learning (or sometimes referred to as collaborative learning). Simply said, it stimulates students learning from one another in a group. What makes this technique distinctive is the way through which students and teachers cooperate together. Students are taught collaborative skills that will enhance their independent cooperation more effectively. We have heard teachers complaining about the limited possibilities of using group work, they have a tendency to evade it seeing that it may lead to an unrestrained process, with no or little sequential learning. In order for group work to go smoothly and be effective, as it should, it needs to be carefully designed and planned. Not all tasks are appropriate for group work, so teachers should have a strong motive to bring group work in the class. This paper aims to suggest some practical tips in creating successful cooperative learning groups in our EFL classes.*

**Keywords:** *group work, collaborate, pair work, cooperative learning, concerns.*

## *Introduction-Literature Review*

“Cooperative Learning, sometimes called small-group learning, is an instructional strategy in which small groups of students work together on a common task. Individual and group accountability: Each student is responsible for doing their part; the group is accountable *for meeting its goal.*”<sup>1</sup>

David Jacques suggests that “*Learning in groups, rather than in formal lectures or training sessions, allows students to have greater scope to negotiate meaning and express themselves within the language of the subject.* It can also play a central part in

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<sup>1</sup> David W. Johnson and Roger T. Johnson, “An Overview of Cooperative Learning,” *Cooperative Learning*, accessed November 9, 2019, <http://www.co-operation.org/what-is-cooperative-learning>.

developing key professional skills, such as *listening, presenting ideas, persuasion, self-direction, self monitoring and team working*.”<sup>2</sup>

A Cooperative Group “...three to four students who are tied together by common purpose to complete the task and to include every group member”.<sup>3</sup>

Collaborative Learning “An instruction method in which students at various performance levels work together in small groups toward a common goal. The students are responsible for one another’s learning as well as their own. Thus, the success of one student helps other students to be successful.”<sup>4</sup>

But according to Sara Matthews, Educator, “The concept of *group work / cooperative learning* was pioneered by two brothers both with Ph.Ds in education. If you look up «Johnson brothers group work» – their story and/or the papers they’ve written on it will come up. *Cooperative learning by definition has to be done in a group - otherwise with whom do you cooperate?* I suppose it could be argued that «*group work*» can be assigned but the teacher would not necessarily expect students to cooperate – to divide up the work between them. But the point of the Johnson brothers idea was that in the work world we tend to work in groups and we are supposed to cooperate with our work peers – and that traditional school did not address the workplace reality that we work in teams, in groups. So in reality the founders of the “*Group Work – Cooperative Learning Movement*” did not intend there to be any difference between those two terms as cooperative learning can only be learned and *carried out – in a group*.”<sup>5</sup>

I. Some teachers’ resulting difficulties to use cooperative learning groups effectively:

- Students can’t move easily
- Teachers can’t move easily
- The seating arrangement seems to prevent a number of activities
- There is limited eye contact from teacher to students
- Interaction tends to be restricted to those closest to the front
- Discipline can be a problem
- Teachers can’t give attention equally to all students

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<sup>2</sup> David Jacques in Abrami et al., *Classroom connections: Understanding and using cooperative learning* (Toronto: Harcourt Brace, 1995).

<sup>3</sup> Robert M. Homan and Christopher Jon Poel, “Developing Interactive Group Skills Through Cooperative Learning,” in *Cooperative Learning. JALT Applied Materials* (EDRS Reproductions No. ED437849, 1999), 128.

<sup>4</sup> Anuradha A. Gokhale, “Collaborative learning enhances critical thinking,” *Journal of Technology education* 7(1) (1995), <https://scholar.lib.vt.edu/ejournals/JTE/v7n1/gokhale.jte-v7n1.html>.

<sup>5</sup> Sara Matthews, Educator, <https://www.quora.com/profile/Sara-Matthews-5>.

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Teachers say: “I can’t use group work or pair work, because the class is over-crowded, there are many students ( more than 25) and it’s difficult for them to move from their seats” “or teachers can’t walk easily through the desks, or this classroom arrangement doesn’t help the performing of a variety of activities, etc”. But in fact, the hindering reason might be teachers’ own concern or fear of practicing something new or different from what they normally do. We should take a look here, and see if the problem is an “outside” or an “inside” concern. Sometimes what teachers consider as “outside” constraints (i.e. forced by school, or by government or by curricula) may also be partly “inside” constraints, (i.e. a personal decision not to practice something.)<sup>6</sup> So if we take for example, “*students find it difficult to move easily*” or “*cant move from their seats*” – this really means “*I decide not to move students from their seats because this would result in discipline problems and chaos in the classroom.*” If discipline becomes a problem, it’s better to ask the learners themselves to give advice of how to soothe the situation or what could be better done by the teacher. If possible, agree on a behavior code and punishment in advance of arising problems. By putting the blame on the educational institution, or government, teachers remove the recognition of having few potentials for influencing the circumstances. It may seem dangerous to offer solutions, but all the same, some suggestions or practical tips may be helpful. In order for cooperative group work to go smoothly, it needs “to be carefully designed and planned.”<sup>7</sup>

**II.** A few ideas that may suggest a possible answer that is workable:<sup>8</sup>

- Have a strong argument for using group work (*Go to the school hall for English lessons, if the class is really small*)
- Make collaborating worthwhile
- Do pair/group work in the middle of the lesson
- Instruct before making groups
- Use pair work a lot (storytelling, gap filling, picture dictation, reverse guessing, information gaps, things in common).
- Organize groups quickly
- Arrange endings in advance

*1. Have a strong argument/motive for using group work (Go to the school hall for English lessons, if the class is really small)*

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<sup>6</sup> Jim Scrivener, “*Learning teaching*”: *The essential guide to English Language Teaching* (Macmillan Publishers, 2005), 232-233.

<sup>7</sup> Penny Ur, *Penny Ur’s 100 Teaching Tips* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 37.

<sup>8</sup> Ur, *Penny Ur’s*, 38.

- It's good to have our students cooperate in order to learn, but only if this does result in useful learning.
- The importance of using group work, has sometimes been over-rated in professional literature. Teachers should think twice before deciding to use group work.
- Better understanding of the group, results in more successful lessons. In some classes group work involves only "busy work" with little learning.
- Some tasks are inappropriate for cooperative learning.
- Students learn in different ways, some of them may dislike collaborative learning, others enjoy working in groups, or some others prefer teacher-directed whole - class activities.
- Classes may come from different experience background of group work. If students have done a lot in the past, then it's easier to use it in our lessons. But if they haven't, we may face reluctance or rejection.

So our advice is to use group work occasionally, to use it when we are sure that working in groups will meet the goals in a better way than working through individual or whole-class activity. Normally teachers use group or pair work for speaking tasks, or for oral fluency activities, but we need to hear our students' views on speaking tasks and not to exaggerate or overuse with group working activities.<sup>9</sup> (*Some of their comments are: "I don't want to talk to other students. They speak badly." Or "I speak a lot, they only hear and no one corrects my speech." "There is no point in doing this task in group if we use bad English."*) Teachers need to monitor groups discreetly to avoid such comments.

## 2. Make collaborating worthwhile (Ask the students what they think about these ideas)

Not all tasks are appropriate for group work. If a task can be done in a more convenient way by a single learner, then there is unlikely to be much collaboration if it is done in groups. This needs to have our attention, especially, in *writing activities*. Writing is usually an individual activity. If there is a gifted student in the group, that has a lot of new ideas, then he/she will do the majority of work, though the group has been instructed to cooperate.

*Brainstorming* activities, or *recall* activities are similarly better done in groups. (*How many of the words we have learnt over the last two weeks, can you remember? Close your books and recall as many as you can.*)

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<sup>9</sup> Jack Richards and Theodore Rodgers, *Approaches and Methods in Language Teaching* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001). 100 Secondary Education development Plan (2010) as retrieved from [http://www.hs.gov.sa/pagedetails.aspx?Page\\_ID=17](http://www.hs.gov.sa/pagedetails.aspx?Page_ID=17).

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Or another option is to design a task so that each student has only a portion of information necessary to meet the goal. For example a group of five students each, should collaborate with others in the group and later with other groups to make up a story. (*Scrambled words, or scrambled paragraphs, scrambled pictures* may be convenient).

#### 3. Practice group work in midst of the lesson

It is considered a good idea to organize group work in the midst of the lesson: not to practice it into the beginning, or leave it for the end.

- In general the beginning of the lesson is normally used by the teacher to review/explain/reinforce new language or for interpreting reading texts: this because students' attention span is higher and longer. But when we spend time on focused work on new material, it's worth stepping aside and allow the students communicate with one another rather than being directly guided by the teacher. On the other hand, the ending of the lesson, should normally consist of a whole-class rounding-off activity. Letting group run right to the end of the lesson doesn't allow for this.
- Another argument for timing group work for the midst of the lesson is that it's quite difficult to predict exactly how much time it will take (even experienced teachers are never quite sure how long a particular group task will take with a given class).
- Planning it in the midst of the lesson provides teachers with the necessary tolerance and flexibility.
- If, on the other hand, the process comes to an end sooner than expected, then we are able to stop it earlier, and add another reserved activity.

#### 4. Instruct before making groups

It is crucially important to let students know what will do before moving into groups. Setting students into groups can be quite a challenging moment. The mistake teachers normally do is that they complete the organization into groups first and then give instructions, which seems most straightforward. It's better to do it the other way around. If the students work in groups or in pairs, they face each other and their attention is directed to the group not to the teacher. So we advise to have our students undivided attention for our instructions, they should be facing us with full eye contact and they will listen and understand perfectly what they will be doing once they are left in groups of their own.

- With less advanced classes, we suggest the instructions be given in the students' mother tongue.

- Or to write up the instructions on the board as we give them.
  - To make sure they are understood by all learners if the instructions are given in English we ask one student to repeat them in the mother tongue.
  - It's good to do a demonstration of a sample task with a volunteer group of students while the rest watch.
  - Finally give students the opportunity to ask questions if they feel anything is unclear; we should have a "yes" to the question "*Do you all understand what to do?*".
  - Only then we recommend to divide our students into groups and tell them to go ahead.
5. Use pair work a lot (*picture dictation, reverse guessing, information gaps, things in common*)

Sometimes pair work gets better results than group work: it's easier to set up and control and provides more participation. It is considered time-consuming to get in and out of groups, but pairs are much easier to organize: just get students turn to the person next to them or in front of or behind and that's it. Pair work is a lot easier to control than groups of three or more. The main advantage of pair work is the amount of active participation. There are a lot of fun tasks that are particularly suitable for pair work, *for example*:

- *picture dictation* – one student tells the other what to draw or there is one basic drawing and the students take it in turns to tell each other what to add, change or color.
- *Reverse guessing* – each student has a pile of words or pictures or situation descriptions. He or she *provides hints or descriptions until the partner guesses the answers*.
- *Information gaps* – each student has a table partially filled in, the missing information in one student's table is shown in that of his or her partner. They ask and answer questions in order to fill in all the missing information.
- *Things in common*-students talk to each other in order to find out at least three things they have in common.

6. Organize groups quickly

Teachers spend a lot of class time getting students into groups. Some strategies are recommended to help us achieve this, *quickly* and *smoothly*. It is time-consuming to ask students to form groups on their own, but also tends to result in unbalanced group compositions, often with the more gifted students getting together and the less proficient left to form other groups. Also we may have groups of wildly varying sizes

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or sometimes less distinguished students may find themselves left out. So it's the teachers' duty to take the initiative in deciding who will work with whom.

*Two strategies* that we frequently practice, especially, with ESP classes (*Albanian literature and linguistic courses*) to divide students into groups are:

1. If they are sitting in rows tell each pair of students in a row to turn to face the pair behind them-and so on.
2. We number off all the students in the class, according to the number of the groups we want. So if we want five groups we number them off "*one... two... three... four... five... one... two... three...*" Then all the ones get together, all the twos and so on.

Sometimes there is the problem of the students who refuse to work together. But once we get to know the class, we find ways to make sure to avoid putting them together. It is recommended to keep the groups fixed for a few weeks before changing them. Thus if students know their groups then they move in and out of them quickly and smoothly.

#### 7. Arrange endings in advance

It's difficult to draw group work to a close, it helps a lot to build in arrangements for ending within our initial instructions.

Teachers need to make sure from the beginning that the students know what the signal to stop will be. It could be simply that we call out "*pens down*" or "*stop*"/ "*a buzzer*". It is also very useful to give a time limit in advance: "*In ten minutes time you should be ready*". If students know time has run out, it's much easier to stop them and teachers can always add extra time if required, or finish early if we see that the activity has come naturally to an end. A useful tip here is to give notes to the students like: "*In two minutes, the time limit is up*".

Though some tasks can go on indefinitely, others clearly end when the goal of the task has been achieved. This means that some groups will finish earlier than others. Therefore, teachers must prepare a reserve activity in advance to keep them occupied. But in any case teachers have to let students know in advance, what will be asked, if they finish their task early.

### *Conclusion*

Using cooperative learning groups effectively in the EFL Classroom help various small group students' work together on academic tasks. They help themselves and their classmates to learn together. It might be an effective way to:

- stimulate students
- stir up active learning

- expand critical-thinking skills, communicative abilities and decision-making capabilities.

Cooperative learning as a strategy is not new, it has existed for many years, and there is abundant research evidence to support learning activities in the classroom. It operates with three principles: *group goal, individual accountability, and equal opportunity for success.*

While implementing cooperative learning groups effectively, the role of the teacher, includes not only instruction and monitoring students, but also active involvement in helping students to get the advantages of collaborative learning. The above-mentioned tips will help novice teachers use cooperative learning groups in the right way in their classrooms. If we tend to have student-centered classes, good critical thinkers and skillful future teachers, those tips will be efficient.

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