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Implementing Cooperative Learning Structures in a Collaborative Situation in a Graduate-Level ESL Class

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Abstract

Cooperative learning structures are thought to be valuable methods for enhancing English language instruction in collaborative situations. However, such structures seem to be more typically aimed at younger groups of learners. In contrast, this paper reports on classroom action research using cooperative learning groups and Kagan structures in a graduate-level ESL class in a medium-sized Midwestern university. It is widely recognized that cooperative learning is an effective method of second language instruction and provides increased opportunities for learners to communicate. A series of cooperative learning lessons, as well as the modifications which were necessary for their implementation in an advanced class of adult learners, is discussed. Results indicate that, once both level-appropriate content and activities were achieved, cooperative learning structures were able to be successfully adapted and implemented. Selected students’ responses as well as performance on the assigned task of group presentations are included.

Introduction

The ultimate goal of any language instruction, regardless of age, is effective communication in the target language (TL). This may involve any number of different age- and purpose-dependent tasks, whether spoken or written, and may be described as the accomplishment of said tasks. Still, whatever the type of approach being used for whatever group of learners, most teachers today would probably agree that an essential part of understanding and retaining the TL is using it. Thus, the more time spent engaged in TL use, the better. This is probably truer for some activities than others, but by using the language, students learn. It is in this way that instruction best functions (Aebersold & Field, 1997).

One effective method of providing students with more opportunities to use the TL is the use of in-class group work (Johnson, Johnson, & Holubec, 1998). Group work can be defined as the dividing up of a class into smaller bodies of students in order to achieve a specific goal which may not be attainable as a whole class. For the purpose of this paper, group work will be referred to as dividing a class into teacher- or self-selected groups of no more than five students. This kind of group work, when used effectively in class, takes the focus off the teacher and places it on the students. However, it differs from a question-answer or class discussion type format in that it divides the class into smaller clusters of students. This, in turn, allows for the elicitation of the target language (TL) from multiple students simultaneously. When class time is limited, this simultaneous elicitation can be an effective way to give more students more chances to speak than they would otherwise have. Furthermore, if group
work is structured according to principles of cooperative learning—a method of
instruction employing student-centered small group work in which students work
interdependently to achieve a goal—the participation and involvement of students who
are members of each group can be maximized (Johnson, Johnson, & Holubec, 1998).
If this is the case, whenever students work in cooperative learning (CL) groups during
class time, the amount of structured practice students receive increases significantly.
This is due largely to two key components of cooperative learning: individual
accountability and positive interdependence (Johnson, Johnson, & Holubec).
Cooperative learning groups, when implemented successfully, should require
members of the group to perform some individual task which contributes to the
group’s final product while causing members to rely on one another to complete said
final product. Obviously, this requires communication between members and should
serve to elicit L2 in the ESL classroom.

Interestingly, despite the above benefits of successful CL instruction, for much
of its existence CL seems to have been applied to mostly younger, monolingual
classes. Much of the available literature concerning CL is focused on typical primary
school classes. Indeed, two well-known names in the field of CL, Johnson and Kagan,
gear the majority of their respective material toward this demographic (Johnson,
Johnson, & Holubec, 1998; Kagan Online, 2007). As was mentioned above, however,
CL would seem to be a plausible answer to the question of how an ESL instructor
could maximize class time in such a way as to provide students with as much chance
to use the L2 as possible. Moreover, the goals of CL would seem to be equally
applicable in classes of older students, even adults. Plausibly, CL may also be an
effective method of instruction with advanced language learners, although this remains
to be seen. Still, these issues are both current and under much ongoing investigation,
and there exist several studies dealing with these very topics.

Review of Literature

Despite its being a relatively young field, as well as its being concerned mostly
with pre-college level students for much of its existence, CL has been shown to be an
effective method of instruction at the college level (Burke & Cummins, 2002; Dodge
& Kendall, 2004; Kuech, 2004; Leon & Tai, 2004; Ocker & Yaverbaum, 2004). The
study of CL in the field of ESL, which is an even more recent development, has shown
CL’s effectiveness in that field as well (Ghaith, 2002; Liang & Mohan, 2003; Storch,
2005). In their study of ESL students who were high-school-age Chinese immigrants
to Canada participating in content-based courses, Liang and Mohan (2003) found that
the use of CL provided learners with more chances for L2 improvement while also
allowing for maintenance of their first language (L1) and the acquisition of content.
The authors state that this was possible due to students’ ability to use both L1 and L2
in working out content-area problems, which enabled them to solidify knowledge in
their L1 while simultaneously improving their L2 (p. 45). This was a rather specific
selection of students, but CL was found to be successful for students’ language
learning. Similarly, Jacobs (2000) discusses the value of CL in helping students to
understand different functions of language. Because CL uses roles to ensure
interdependence, students must also learn the language that goes with each role (p. 11).
In his article, Jacobs promotes the use of CL, specifically in combination with extensive reading. Although the level of student dealt with in his article is not clear, Jacobs emphasizes the importance of CL’s relationship to student motivation in the language classroom (p. 13).

The question still remains, however, of how effective CL can be in post-secondary language instruction. In a study investigating the effect of CL on a college-level ESL writing class, Storch (2005) found that small CL groups “seemed to fulfill the task more competently” than those students who worked individually (p.168). Agreeing that CL provides more opportunities for language use than traditional classrooms (p. 154), Storch performed her study in an intermediate-level class where students’ average age was 23 (p. 157). While CL groups’ final writings were shorter, on average, than the individual students’, Storch found the quality of the CL groups’ writing to have “greater grammatical accuracy and linguistic complexity” and to be “more succinct” (p. 168). She goes on to caution against generalizing her findings but points out that CL especially aided students’ development of ideas during the prewriting stages of the task.

The effect of CL on L2 instruction can extend beyond solely academic areas as well. In a study of introductory-level college students in an EFL setting in a Middle Eastern university, Ghaith (2002) found that CL can have positive effects on students’ perceptions of class solidarity as well as personal support. Ghaith found that, because one of its key components is positive interdependence, CL can “promote cohesion and solidarity among learners” (p. 264). Ghaith also writes that CL is positively related to students’ desire to do their best schoolwork and also helps to make a class more personally and academically supportive (p. 269).

It is evident that CL can be a valuable tool in L2 instruction, even at the college- or university-level. What remains to be seen, however, is whether CL can be implemented successfully in upper-level areas of study in classes which are also at the advanced level of L2 development. The above studies show that CL can be effective for both L2 instruction and at the university level, but no study which was found dealt with university students of an advanced proficiency. In order to determine whether CL can be effective with this kind of learner, further study appears to be necessary. Hence, it may be beneficial for the CL structures, which have existed for some time now, to be applied to upper-level classes of advanced students.

**Tutorial**

There are two kinds of structures dealt with in the discussion which follows. Both employ CL to achieve a goal or goals through the assigning and fulfillment of roles by students while working together to complete a task. The first are those developed by Johnson, Johnson, and Holubec in their book *Cooperation in the Classroom* (1998). These structures are based on five aspects of group work: positive interdependence, individual accountability, face-to-face promotive interaction, interpersonal and small group skills, and group processing (p. 1:32). Because of its involved and complex nature, this CL method requires more than just one activity to be
implemented successfully. To do so, an entire lesson, or even lessons, must be organized according to the above five aspects of CL. For this reason, in the implementation that will be discussed below, each of the first three lessons was structured according to this method and groups remained the same for the entire lesson.

In the fourth lesson discussed below are CL structures originally developed by Dr. Spencer Kagan and adapted by High in her book Second Language Learning Through Cooperative Learning (1993). Kagan structures are similar to the Johnson, Johnson, and Holubec (1998) structures, but differ in the way in which they are implemented. Kagan structures have been developed for use in enhancing lessons, typically by means of employing them as activity structures in a lesson plan, instead of as the entire plan itself. For this reason, Kagan structures are designed to elicit what Kagan refers to as “PIES”: positive interdependence, individual accountability, equal participation, and simultaneous interaction (Kagan Online, 2007). High’s book is a collection of these Kagan structures designed specifically for use in the L2 classroom. Each structure contains the aforementioned PIES and fosters cooperative interaction through the assigning of roles to each student and the setting of such a goal as to make cooperation the only way for a group to be successful. An example of such a structure is “Numbered Heads Together” (p. 1:21), in which 1) all students in a group are assigned numbers, 2) the group is posed a question and given a time limit, 3) students discuss the answer, and 4) the teacher calls a number at random to answer as the designated spokesperson for his or her group. The fourth lesson discussed below was structured according to this method and included three separate Kagan structures as activities.

The components of CL seem to be applicable to ESL instruction; furthermore, they seem just as applicable to adult learners. It is evident from the studies discussed above, however, that CL has not received much attention in the area of advanced adult ESL learners. Thus, the question becomes whether or not CL can be both successfully adapted to and implemented in such a class. Specifically, the research question for this study was the following: Can cooperative learning structures be successfully adapted and implemented in an advanced, graduate-level ESL class?

**Method**

**Participants**

The class was a graduate-level advanced ESL seminar course in academic communication focusing on presentations, reading, and vocabulary, which met twice a week for 75 minutes each class period. Students were placed in this class based on either Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) Internet-Based Test (iBT) scores ranging from 63 to 69 or Michigan English Language Assessment Battery (MELAB) scores ranging from 63 to 75. The class consisted of 10 graduate students initially, but that number reduced to nine as one student was absent for much of the semester. Students were from a variety of language and cultural backgrounds, including Korea, China, Taiwan, India, United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Turkey. The main text used for the course was one in which two opposing
viewpoints concerning a number of current issues were given (Easton, 2005). The four implemented lessons were taught at different points during the semester; the first being taught near the beginning of the semester, and the fourth being taught near the end. The participants were available because the graduate student was the graduate assistant (GA) for the instructor of record and was observing the class once a week.

Procedure

In order to investigate CL’s effectiveness in an advanced ESL setting, the GA implemented four lessons which were reviewed by the instructor of record, who provided feedback before their implementation. The instructor of record served as an observer during the lessons and then provided post-implementation feedback to the GA after each lesson. Each lesson had several goals and objectives of its own. The first lesson sought to introduce the skill of giving an oral summary of a text while simultaneously acclimating students to the structure and roles of cooperative learning. The second lesson sought to produce an outline from a written text. The third lesson dealt with drawing logical inferences concerning a text by previewing an article’s abstract. The final lesson’s objectives were a series of previewing skills to be used in pre-reading. The goals of the above lessons, from the GA teacher’s perspective, were the implementation of cooperative learning structures, the reflection on the lessons by means of a journal, and the gathering of feedback from students concerning implementation, what they had observed, and what opinions they had concerning it. The first three lessons were based on Johnson, Johnson, and Holubec’s (1998) method, while the final lesson was designed using three Kagan (2007) structures selected according to appropriateness for level of students and adaptability to a graduate-level advanced setting: team word-webbing as a brainstorming activity, a modified think-pair-share structure as a prediction of content activity, and a modified jigsaw as a previewing activity.

Lesson 1

The first lesson, which was taught near the beginning of the semester, served as the jumping-off point for teacher-student interaction. Each teacher-assigned group was composed of five students who had read either the pro or con article from the textbook on the topic of the Internet (Easton, 2005, p. 252-270). The academic objective for this lesson was students’ being able to orally summarize their respective articles. Students orally summarized the texts they had read to the other members of their group who had read the same pro or con article, with the other members checking for accuracy. If discrepancies arose, group members were to discuss them until the disagreements were resolved with all members who read the same article in agreement. Then, group members switched so that students who read the pro article were with students who read the con article. Both sides then summarized their articles for the other in order to give one another an idea of what the opposing viewpoint’s article discussed. Once groups had completed this, an informal debate within the groups was held in order to give students a chance to express their thoughts and ideas about the topic discussed in the text.

Lesson 2

The second lesson had as its final academic objective the creation of an outline from a text. For this lesson, students had all read the same article in the textbook concerning the
Lesson 3

The third lesson focused on making logical inferences from an academic article’s abstract and bibliographic information. Three abstracts in the students’ content areas of study had been selected by the instructor before class, and students were allowed to select one abstract from three which they found interesting. Groups were thus student-selected in that the students who chose the same abstract were together. Groups were then given a handout with questions pertaining to the abstract and bibliographic information which they were to answer. Questions on the handout focused on previewing and predicting what the article would be about. After class, groups found the full articles and read them to determine the accuracy of their previewing and predicting. The academic objective for this lesson was the prediction and its subsequent evaluation for accuracy by the students. This third lesson taught by the GA led into a unit taught by the instructor of record concerning group presentations. The content for the presentations were the articles dealt with in the third cooperative learning lesson, and the groups were the same, save one student. Because students were allowed to select which article they would read based on personal preference, once the previewing and predicting was completed during the cooperative learning lesson, one student opted to change groups in order to work with a different article he felt would be more beneficial. The outcome of the group presentations will be discussed in the Discussion section below.

Lesson 4

The fourth lesson, which was comprised of Kagan structures (High, 1993), focused on the pre-reading strategies of brainstorming to instantiate background schemata, previewing a text, and predicting its content based on brainstorming and previewing. As one student was absent, for this lesson, the class was divided into three groups of three students each, with operative roles being leader, scribe, and representative. For the purpose of this lesson, the Kagan structures had to be adapted in order to suit a graduate-level ESL class. High’s book seems to be geared more toward younger students, and the structures used were necessarily adapted to the higher level. The text used for this lesson was an article from a local newspaper dealing with the topic of population control, an issue which had just been covered in the textbook. In the first activity, brainstorming was used to instantiate background schemata. This was done by giving the students only the title of the article and then having groups brainstorm possible content in the team word-webbing format. Once groups had formulated ideas, they shared their results with the rest of the class. The second activity was a predicting exercise, in which groups were given the title, subtitle, captions, source, and first and last paragraphs with which to predict the content of the article.
This activity utilized a modified version of the think-pair-share structure. The structure, which typically consists of group of four, was modified for three groups of three students. Also, instead of thinking and discussing in pairs before reporting back to the group of four, groups thought and discussed as trios and then reported back to the class as a whole. The final activity was a modified jigsaw activity where each student received a portion of the article and was responsible for reading it and finding the main idea. Instead of contributing his or her part of the jigsaw to a group, each student shared his or her main idea on the board. This created a rudimentary outline with which students were to then, after class, read the article and see how much brainstorming, predicting, and previewing had given them about the article’s content, which was the ultimate academic objective for this lesson.

Results
Results were gathered using three methods: teacher observations made by the instructor of record, the GA’s journal, and feedback from students. The instructor of record, serving as observer during implementation of CL lessons and primary instructor for all other lessons, provided immediate feedback and reported her observations upon the conclusion of each lesson. The GA then kept a detailed teacher’s journal concerning the design, implementation, and outcome of each lesson. The journal included teacher-observed outcomes recorded by the GA. Additionally, feedback received directly from students served as a third source of data, with feedback being received in the form of post-class e-mails sent directly to the GA. This feedback was then recorded and tabulated for analysis.

Based on the data collected, the first lesson was determined to be the least successful of the four. Students were able to demonstrate some ability to orally summarize a text, to some extent, but many students were unsure or somewhat confused in their summaries. Out of the seven students who completed the post-class self-evaluation, four expressed a lack of confidence in their debating, stating that they did not feel comfortable, found it difficult to debate in English despite L1 experience, or responded that their in-class performance was merely “so-so.” Likewise, the GA recorded that, while all students participated consistently, only four were actively engaged voicing ideas and opinions, and only three students demonstrated an in-depth understanding of the content.

The second lesson was evaluated to have been more successful than the first based on the data collected. Both instructors’ observations concurred that students were more engaged and participating more actively. The GA recorded that all groups were actively cooperating and engaged in discussion. All three groups were successful in completing their group outlines and sharing them with the class. Similarly, in post-class self-evaluations, students reported more confidence in their work, with three students expressing hesitation as to the quality of their work.

The third lesson received the highest evaluations, both by teachers and students. Students appeared more comfortable with cooperative groups than in the previous two lessons. Both instructors’ observations agreed that the groups cooperated successfully and produced a complete set of predictions concerning their abstracts. All three groups
completed their task of prediction based on the abstract. Furthermore, all groups also rated their work as excellent, which corresponded with teachers’ observations. All nine students reported that their work was completed, and that they were successful in producing feasible and logical predictions.

In the fourth lesson, which used Kagan structures, groups were able to complete their tasks, and academic objectives were achieved; an in-class outline was created based on student previewing, which students used to evaluate their predictions about the reading. Five of the eight students who submitted a post-class self-evaluation wrote that their predictions had not been accurate, but this was not considered to be a failure to achieve goals, as students had actively predicted the content and then evaluated their predictions based upon their post-class reading of the article. One student wrote that she appreciated the content learned. Another wrote that his group had “more time to think about different views” and that this “led us to communicate [with] one another for discussion.” All groups were observed actively participating and discussing content.

Discussion

As evidenced in the Results section, of the first three lessons which were based on the Johnson, Johnson, and Holubec (1998) cooperative learning method, the third lesson seemed to be the most successful. This appears to be true for a number of reasons. At the beginning of the semester, both students and the graduate student teacher were not familiar with the class or cooperative learning, which likely functioned to limit the effectiveness the lessons may have had. Additionally, students were not entirely comfortable with one another at the time, which seemed to make group work and interaction more difficult than desired. Also, for the first lesson, students were divided into two groups of five students; this was felt to have been too large a group for CL, which corresponds with ideas discussed by Johnson, Johnson, and Holubec. Both instructors agreed in post-class discussion that the academic content of this lesson was not appropriate for the students’ level.

The second lesson was observed to have been smoother than the first, which was most likely due to its being later in the semester as well as the second CL lesson. Students were more used to one another and the instructor and able to work together more easily because of it. Groups were also made smaller for this lesson. This seems to have been more successful than larger groups, as noted in the GA’s journal, where he noted that smaller groups not only provided students with more chance to participate, but also maximized student roles and the responsibilities they were to have fulfilled by eliminating any overlap. Furthermore, the academic content of the second lesson was felt to be closer to students’ level but was still not exactly appropriate.

The third lesson based on Johnson, Johnson, and Holubec’s (1998) approach was determined to be the most successful for a number of reasons. First, students were comfortable with CL by this time and also familiar with roles and how to fill them. This was evident in student responses received, which were both unprompted and overwhelmingly positive. Second, this being the third lesson, the appropriate level of academic content was realized—dealing with professional journal abstracts. Students
were also observed to have been more enthusiastic about this lesson, as they were able to select the article with which they wanted to work. Students in post-class self-evaluations all regarded their group’s work as excellent. This corresponded with both instructors’ observations. What is more, students also responded positively to the unit which followed the third CL lesson. The unit, taught by the instructor of record, used as its subject matter the respective articles from the third CL lesson’s abstracts and concerned the delivery of group presentations. In self-reports, students themselves wrote that they had learned more by working together than they would have alone. As the GA had been adapting cooperative learning structures for use in the graduate-level ESL class, this lesson seemed to achieve the appropriate level for the students. Dealing with academic abstracts in students’ content areas of study appeared to be effective in engaging students and eliciting participation. Another reason this lesson was more successful than the previous two was that the instructor of record had been using group work in the class throughout the semester, and students now seemed comfortable with being in groups. This is not to say that all groups functioned the same, however. Different groups had different dynamics, some louder and excited, some quieter and more reserved, but all groups completed their tasks successfully.

The fourth lesson, based on Kagan structures, also seemed to be largely successful. After the third lesson, an appropriate level was reached for the fourth lesson, and a newspaper article was used as the text. The pre-reading strategies that were covered were also appropriate for the students’ level as well as their future academic endeavors. As noted in the Procedure section, however, the Kagan structures had to be adapted in order to be appropriate for the students’ level as well as class size. Many of the structures, taken as is, seem aimed at younger children and, thus, inappropriate for older, more advanced, learners. Once adapted, though, the Kagan structures seemed to be sufficiently successful. This is also likely due to both instructor and student comfort in dealing with CL and its accompanying activities. This was the final lesson, so the class was used to CL, and it also took place near the end of the semester.

Limitations

There are limitations to this implementation, however, which must be addressed. First, and foremost, the four lessons discussed here were taught in one class of, ultimately, nine students. This cannot be expected to approach a representative sample for ESL settings in general. Likewise, the inexperience of the GA in working with CL while adapting it to graduate-level students may have hampered the lessons’ implementation. This was determined to be unavoidable, however, as no studies concerning the adaptation of CL to this demographic of students was found. In addition, much of the evidence used to evaluate the effectiveness of implementation was highly subjective. Observations made by the instructor of record, reflections in the GA’s journal, as well as feedback and self-evaluation by students were necessarily subjective. Granted, this was an action research study, but no quantitative data, other than achievement of academic objectives, was considered necessary, and results must be taken as such.
The first and second lessons appear to have not been at the appropriate content level for the graduate-level ESL class in which they were taught. However, by the third lesson, this was no longer true. The content of this lesson appeared to be appropriate for the students. At the same time, the article abstracts which were used were in students’ content areas of study, which probably provided additional incentive to participate. Additionally, because of this appropriateness of level, as well as students’ comfort in groups, the subsequent unit on group presentations was very successful, both from a teacher’s standpoint and according to prompted and unprompted student feedback.

**Conclusion**

Due to the final success of cooperative learning in this graduate-level ESL class, it would appear that cooperative learning may be an effective tool for higher-level ESL instruction. Formal research with additional supportive data is necessary before any positive claims can be made concerning cooperative learning’s effectiveness in the ESL classroom. Still, if adapted appropriately, cooperative learning structures seem to have the capacity to suit upper-level ESL students. The key would seem to be adapting structures and their content to the appropriate level. Again, though, before this can be firmly supported, further research must be conducted concerning both the effectiveness of cooperative learning in upper-level ESL classes as well as the adaptation of cooperative learning structures for higher-level students. Further study, with a larger, more representative sample, is necessary to determine whether the results of this study would be replicated. As CL is adapted to higher-level students, it may also become necessary to study different methods of adaptation, or perhaps whether one approach—e.g., Johnson, Johnson, & Holubec (1998) versus Kagan (2007)—is more adaptable than others.

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