The Cooperative Learning Method in Teaching EFL to Armenian Students

Arus Markaryan, Naira Avakyan
Yerevan State University

The challenge for any teacher is finding new teaching methods to hold their students' interest. One of the best ways to get students involved in the class is through the method of Cooperative (Collaborative) learning (CL).

The application of CL to classroom teaching finds its root in the 1970s when Israel and the United States began to design and study cooperative learning models for classroom context (Kessler 1992). Now CL is applied in almost all schools and, increasingly, in colleges and universities all over the world, and is claimed to be an effective teaching method in foreign/second language education. By far the most notable names associated with CL are the Johnsons and the Kagans.[1]

CL is a technique in education based on the idea that two people learn concepts better together than alone. When students collaborate, they learn studying and comprehension techniques from their peers. According to Johnson & Johnson (1998), CL is grouping students together to accomplish shared learning goals. Students work in small groups of three or four to get the most out of their own learning and each other's learning. They encourage and support each other to learn and are responsible for their own as well as their teammates' learning. Unlike individual learning, people engaged in CL capitalize on one another's resources and skills (asking one another for information, evaluating one another's ideas, monitoring one another's work, etc.).

Teachers often frown upon the idea of CL. They feel students will waste their time talking more and studying less. Yet, research has indicated that discussing a topic that is being learnt leads to better retention. Students who study in solitude may have their own techniques of retention. But no one can remember vast amounts of information learnt in solitude; unless, of course, the learnt matter is put into practice.When studying in groups, students automatically put into practice what they learnt by speaking about the topics of study to fellow study-members. A discussion about a topic creates a lot of opinions among the group-members. They start to explain their version of the concept. At the end of it all, a student can actually take an exam without even reading a word.

Ted Panitz lists over 60 benefits provided by CL (Panitz 1996). These benefits can be summarized into four major categories: social, psychological, academic and assessment.

CL promotes social interactions; thus students benefit in a number of ways from the social perspective. By having the students explain their reasoning and conclusions, CL helps develop oral communication skills. Students develop and practice skills that will be needed to function in society and their workplace: leadership, decision-making, trust building, communication and conflict-management.

Students also benefit psychologically from CL. Johnson and Johnson claim that CL experiences promote more positive attitudes toward learning and instruction than other teaching methodologies (Johnson and Johnson 1989). Because students play an active

role in the learning process in CL, their satisfaction with the learning experience is enhanced. CL also helps to develop interpersonal relationships among students. The opportunity to discuss their ideas in smaller groups and receive feedback on those ideas helps to build student self-esteem. In a lecture format, individual students are called upon to answer a question in front of the entire class without having much time to think about the answer. CL creates a safe environment because solutions come from the group rather than from the individual. Errors in conclusions and thought processes are corrected within the group before they are presented to the class.

CL methods provide several academic benefits for students as they learn and retain significantly more information than students taught by other methods. Sharing their ideas with the group, constant explaining and discussing help students to develop clearer concepts. Students also benefit from CL academically in the sense that there is more of a potential for success when students work in groups. Individuals tend to give up when they get stuck, whereas a group of students is more likely to find a way to keep going.

There are also many benefits of CL from the perspective of assessment. It provides instant feedback to the students and instructor because the effectiveness of each class can be observed. As instructors move around the room and observe each group of students interacting and explaining their theories, they are able to detect misconceptions early enough to correct them. Only a few minutes of observation during each class session can provide helpful insight into students' abilities and growth.

Along with so many advantages and benefits, the CL method has a number of drawbacks, which discourages many teachers from using this method in their classrooms. The reasons for which teachers may avoid using this method can be the following:

Loss of control in the classroom - Perhaps the biggest impediment to CL lies in the fact that many teachers feel they give up control of the class if they give more responsibility to the students for their learning. When a teacher lectures s/he gets the feeling that the content has been covered, because it has been presented to the students in an orderly fashion.

Lack of self-confidence by teachers - It takes a great deal of confidence in one's self and one's students to transfer the responsibility of learning to the student. Many teachers lack the self-confidence to try methods which may expose them to potentially difficult situations, for example being asked unanticipated questions.

Fear of the loss of content coverage - Teachers fear a loss in content when they use CL methods because group interactions often take longer than simple lectures. Students need time to accumulate enough information in order to be able to use it within their groups. They need time to work together to fulfill the task.

Lack of prepared materials for use in class - The use of CL requires teachers to build a set of handouts. Current textbooks generally offer a set of questions at the end of each chapter which are usually answered by students individually. This lack of materials greatly increases the teacher's work.

Lack of familiarity with alternate assessment techniques - Assessment is a major concern frequently expressed by teachers. They presume that individual accountability will be lost or that one student will dominate the group or do all the work for the group. They are unfamiliar with how to assess group efforts and assign grades to groups. Techniques available

for assessing groups include: teacher observations during group work, group grading for projects, students grading each other or evaluating the level of contribution made by each member to a team project, and the use of individual quizzes, exams or assignments.

Students' resistance to CL techniques - A cause for concern by teachers starting CL is the initial student reaction. The primary approach in schools is one of competition for grades and recognition. Students feel that the lecture method is easier because they are passive during the class while apparently receiving the necessary information. In contrast, interactive classes are very intense. The responsibility for learning is shifted to the student. This situation is both mentally and physically tiring.

With all its advantages and drawbacks the Cooperative learning method has been adopted by schools, colleges and universities throughout the world and is used with varying success in the teaching of all academic subjects. As to Armenia, there are three high schools in Yerevan which have adopted the method known as *Collective learning.* It was presumably worked out by Alexander Rivin, a Russian pedagogue, at the beginning of the 20th century, in Russia, and later experimented and implemented by his pupils and supporters. As the name suggests, the method greatly resembles the CL method, with a slight difference: though students work in groups and keep helping, teaching, consulting and explaining to one another, in the case of *Collective learning* each student chooses his/her own *route*, i.e. which units s/he wants to study, in what succession and at what speed. Naturally, this creates difficulties in large classrooms with 28-35 students.

When asked to share their impressions of this method, the teachers of English at school #118, unhesitatingly admitted its benefits: a much higher degree of student retention, better understanding of the material, engagement of all the students in active work, and higher scores in formative and summative tests. Among the drawbacks they mentioned the tremendous amount of work a teacher has to do before, during and after each lesson, high noise level in the classroom, frequent switches to the Armenian language, smaller amount of material covered during the term, exaggerated grades in peer assessment, etc.

Being university teachers of English, we strongly believe that if the CL method becomes the one and only method used in class, its obvious benefits and efficiency will undoubtedly be reduced, because repetition and uniformity lead to boredom. However, the peculiarities of this method offer an excellent opportunity for developing communicative skills, which our students need to develop. So, many of the activities and techniques used in the CL method, can be efficiently used in our classrooms to practice a number of skills: listening comprehension, grammar and vocabulary retention; conversational skills (asking and answering questions, agreeing and disagreeing with statements, polite requests, forming and expressing ideas and individual opinions and sharing them with peers, etc.) as well as social skills (agreeing and supporting one another and resolving conflicts).

Some of the activities which we think (based on our own teaching experience) can be successfully used in the English class are the following:

1. The teacher asks a question concerning the topic of the lesson. Students think silently about it then pair up and exchange thoughts. Next, the pairs share their responses with other pairs or the entire group and give the teacher a correct, complete answer.

2. The students are given a topic for discussion. First, individuals interview their part-

ners by asking questions to find out their opinion or ideas concerning the topic. Then they reverse the roles and finally the members share their partner's response with the other students and the teacher.

3. Teachers stop any time during a lecture or discussion and give the teams three minutes to review what has been said, ask clarifying questions or answer the students' questions.

4. Students do an exercise (e.g. a grammar exercise on a unit they find especially difficult) first as a team, then with a partner, and finally on their own. This can motivate students to succeed in solving problems which initially were beyond their ability.

5. The teacher chooses some students to be teachers, assigns them a grammar unit, gives them time to study it, and prepare a lesson for the rest of their classmates. They should make use of visual aids to enhance their lessons and should be ready to answer questions as well.

6. Many textbooks have summarizing questions at the end of each text or unit. Instead of answering them individually, students work in a team. Groups can answer the questions in the book or formulate their own questions and have other groups answer them.

7. For creative writing or summarizing, the teacher gives the students a sentence starter and asks each team to finish that sentence. Then, they pass their paper to the right, take another one from the left, read the one they received, and add a sentence to that one. After a few rounds, several great stories appear. The students can add a conclusion or edit their favorite one to share with the class.

8. When reading out the homework exercises, some students get bored, or their attention shifts to other things and they stop following. Instead, they can be asked to compare their homework (e.g. an exercise requiring to insert the correct articles, or prepositions, or use the correct tense-forms, exercises on the vocabulary of the unit, etc.) with their partner, and if there are any differences, discuss them together, try to find the correct answer by explaining, and proving the correctness of their choice. When they come to a joined conclusion, they compare their homework with that of other groups. In the end, the teacher corrects their mistakes, if there are any left, and settles the arguments.

Students enjoy working in groups for a short period during the lesson. However, a study group might become a failure. It could change from a study group into a gossip group. Concentration levels may recede, and students may start talking about something not relevant to the assignment. This can be avoided if the teacher walks about the classroom, visiting each group, assisting those that are facing problems, and helping them solve the issues. At the same time, s/he must remember to praise the students and teams who are making an effort to cooperate and who are progressing nicely with the assignment.

Notes:

1. Roger T. Johnson and David W. Johnson are brothers who were on faculty at the College of Education, University of Minnesota. Their research regarding cooperative learning initiated in the 1960's as they began investigating cooperation and competition in learning situations.
   In 1985, Dr. Spencer Kagan introduced the structural approach to cooperative learn-

ing, which is now used worldwide in classrooms at all grade levels. His wife, Laurie Kagan, former Director of Elementary Education for the state of Nevada, develops all Kagan training materials. Rather than stressing complex cooperative learning lessons, theme units, projects, and centers, the Kagan structural approach makes cooperative learning part of any lesson through the addition of cooperative structures.

References:

1. Cohen, E.G. (1994) *Designing Group Work*: *Strategies for the Heterogeneous Classroom*. New York: Teachers College Press.
2. Johnson, D.; Johnson, R. (2001) *An Overview of Cooperative Learning*. <http://www.clcrc.com>
3. Johnson, D.W. & Johnson, R.T. (1998) *Learning together and alone: Cooperative, competitive, and Individualistic Learning* (5th edition). Boston, MA: Allyn and Bacon.
4. Johnson, D.; Johnson, R.; Holubec, E.; Roy, P. (1984) *Circles of Learning: Cooperation in the Classroom*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.
5. Kagan, S.; Kagan, L. (2001) *Structures for Emotional Intelligence*. Kagan Online Magazine, 4 (4). <http://www.kaganonline.com>
6. Kagan S. (1994) *Cooperative Learning*. San Clemente, CA: Kagan Publishing. <www.KaganOnline.com>
7. Kessler, C. (Ed.) (1992) *Cooperative Language Learning*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall Regents.
8. Slavin, R.E. (1990) *Cooperative Learning: theory, research, and practice*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.
9. Panitz, T. (1996) *67 Benefits of Cooperative Learning.*<home.capecod.net/~tpanitz/starterpages/articles.htm>
10. Panitz, T. (1996) *A Definition of Collaborative vs Cooperative Learning.* <www.londonmet.ac.uk>
11. Epshtein, M.; Rusakov, A. (2000) *Kollektivnyi sposob obucheniya, ili paradoksy metoda Rivina.* <rus.1september.ru/article>

Համագործակցային ուսուցման մեթոդի կիրառումը հայ ուսանողներին անգլերեն դասավանդելիս

Հոդվածն անդրադառնում է համագործակցային ուսուցման մեթոդի որոշ առավելություններին և թերություններին, և այն հմտություններին, որ ուսանողը ձեռք է բերում մեթոդի կիրառման շնորհիվ: Ըստ հեղինակների՝ իր մի շարք առանձնահատկությունների շնորհիվ այս մեթոդը կարող է հատկապես օգտակար լինել օտար լեզվով հաղորդակցվելու հմտություններ զարգացնելու համար: Առաջարկվում են նյութի կրկնության, տնային աշխատանքի ստուգման, հարցերի քննարկման մի շարք եղանակներ, որոնք ուսանողի համար կարող են հետաքրքիր և օգտակար լինել: