Cooperative Learning and Its Role in Japanese University EFL Classrooms

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Introduction

This paper will review current literature on cooperative learning as well as explore the benefits of incorporating cooperative learning into Japanese EFL classrooms. Johnson *et al* (1993) define cooperative learning as "instructional use of small groups so that students work together to maximize their own and each other's learning." However, cooperative learning is not just a matter of putting students into groups and hoping they will cooperate. It is important to make a distinction between groupwork and cooperative learning. In groupwork, cooperation between students may or may not be a part of accomplishing an assigned task. Conversely, working together for the benefit of the group and toward a common goal lies at the core of cooperative learning. Woolfolk (2001) emphasizes that in true cooperative learning, students are put in groups of varying ability and work together toward a common goal and/or reward.

Cooperative learning encompasses a variety of methods which concern organizing and carrying out classroom instruction. Research in this area has repeatedly shown that cooperative learning "is a highly effective classroom intervention, superior to most traditional forms of instruction in terms of producing learning gains and student achievement, higher order thinking,

positive attitudes towards learning, increased motivation, better teacher-student and student-student relationships accompanied by more developed interpersonal and empathic skills, and, finally, higher self-esteem and self-efficacy on the part of students" (Erhman & Dornyei, 1998, p. 245). Cooperative learning strongly encourages self-regulated learning both inside and outside the classroom.

Regarding language education, research into classroom organization and classroom tasks provide strong support for cooperative learning. The use of tasks which require negotiation of meaning by students working in small groups has shown positive effects on language development.

Cooperative learning has its roots in a social psychological approach to the study of small groups. We can view cooperative learning as a philosophy which promotes an environment conducive to student collaboration; the ultimate goal being self-regulation.

The main principles of cooperative learning can be summed up by the following factors:

1. Learners spend most of the class time working together to learn in small groups, usually consisting of between three and six members.
2. Group members are responsible for one another's learning as well as their own: The classroom is structured in such a way that learners can attain their own personal goals only if the whole group is successful, thereby generating an intensive process of interaction.
3. Consistent with the previous point, evaluating and rewarding the group's achievement is at least important as evaluating and rewarding individual achievement, and sometimes more so.

(Erhman & Dornyei, 1998, p. 247)

Roots of Cooperative Learning

Before further examining cooperative learning, we will now take a brief look at the roots and early proponents of cooperative learning. The individuals focused on in this section represent only a small portion of the many researchers who have contributed to cooperative learning.

Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712－1778)

Jean-Jacque Rousseau, having received no formal education himself, proposed an educational model based on 'natural education' (Benson, 2001). In natural education, a child learns through direct interaction with nature as opposed to conventional education in which knowledge is transmitted via language in abstract forms. Rousseau held the view that institutional learning suppressed autonomy, and that the child should learn by discovering things on his/her own. In relation to language learning, the same principle emerges in the widely accepted method of exposing learners to authentic language samples and situations. Rousseau also emphasizes learners taking responsibility for their learning with teachers assuming a support role.

Lev Vygotsky (1896－1934)

Lev Vygotsky was a Russian developmental psychologist who is best known for his idea of the 'Zone of Proximal Development', which assumes that a child's existing knowledge and experience is the starting point of learning and develops through social interaction (Benson, 2001). Vygotsky heavily stressed the importance of social interaction with adults or more advanced peers. Vygotsky proposed that learning is a process where "children internalize meanings acquired through linguistic interaction as the

direct communicative speech of others is transformed into self-directive inner speech" (Benson, 2001, p. 39). When a learner is working individually, processes such as analysis, planning and synthesis are performed internally. Conversely, learners who are working collaboratively on a task perform these same processes externally. Simply put, Vygotsky considers collaboration as the key element in developing an autonomous learner.

John Dewey (1859−1952)

John Dewey was a philosopher and educator of the Pragmatist school. The Pragmatist school holds that "truth consists of tentative conclusions drawn from experience and that philosophy should be oriented towards solving problems of everyday life" (Benson, 2001, p. 26). Dewey stressed the relationship between education and social participation, education as problem solving, and classroom organization. Dewey viewed the classroom as a 'microcosm of the community, in which learners work cooperatively to solve a shared problem (Benson, 2001). Central to this philosophy was the requirement that educational goals originate not from the teacher, but from the students themselves. In Dewey's problem-solving method, the teacher serves as a resource for students as they direct their own efforts.

William Kilpatrick (1871−1965)

William Kilpatrick was originally an elementary school mathematics teacher who challenged the status quo by abolishing report cards and textbooks in his courses, and encouraging his students to learn cooperatively. In place of conventional mechanistic learning, he advocated a project method in which students are given the freedom to plan and carry out their own learning projects (Benson, 2001). Kilpatrick believed that through such group work, "students might acquire skills and attitudes needed for

democratic social participation" (Benson, 2001, p. 27).

Ivan Illich (1926－)

Ivan Illich, like William Kilpatrick, was a strong critic of institutionalized learning, which he viewed as robbing children of the opportunity to learn and amounted to transmission of "prefabricated blocks of subject matters" (Benson, 1991, p. 30). As co-founder of the Center for Intercultural Documentation, he proposed radical ideas on technology and education in the 1970s. Stating that teaching was not necessary for learning, Illich (1971) advocated "the possible use of technology to create institutions which serve personal, creative, and autonomous interaction and the emergence of values which cannot be substantially controlled by technocrats" (p.2). Of particular importance was his concept of "learning webs" which would help facilitate autonomous learning outside educational institutions. Illich proposed the following four types of networks that would help learners set and accomplish their own goals: 1) Reference services to educational objects, tools and resources; 2) directories of individuals willing to share skills; 3) peer matching, or communication networks for students to find partners for similar learning projects; and 4) reference services to 'educators-at-large', or experts willing to provide assistance or instruction (Benson, 1991, p. 30-31).

Carl Rogers (1902－87)

Rogers worked in the field of humanistic psychology and viewed teaching as facilitation. Rogers defined people as "self-actualizing beings striving for health, individual identity, integrity and autonomy, with a natural tendency for exploration, growth and higher achievement" (Benson, 2001, p. 32). He believed that true learning resulted from the unique experiences of

each individual learner, and the teacher's role is one of a facilitator who limits his/her intervention in the learning process (Benson, 2001). This concept is now at the core of classroom-based approaches to autonomy in language learning.

The work of the preceding researchers and teachers are clearly evident in constructionist theories of learning which view knowledge as something that must be created by the learner rather than something that is transferred from a teacher. Cooperative learning provides an ideal vehicle for the implementation of this belief in the language classroom.

Competitive Versus Cooperative Classroom Structures

Deutsch (1962) identified two main types of social situations in classrooms, competitive and cooperative. In a competitive classroom structure, an individual's probability of achieving a reward is reduced by the presence of a competition. Thus, students work against each other and only the top students are rewarded. This creates a negative interdependence between students "in which individuals are linked together in such a way that there exists a negative correlation between their goal attainments" (Deutsch, 1962, p. 276). There is a perception among students that the poor performance of others increases their own chances of a higher grade. In addition, while negative interdependence could encourage some students to work harder, there could also be other students who will become discouraged and possibly give up.

Conversely, cooperative classrooms are so structured that teamwork becomes an essential part of successfully completing a task. In other words, a student's success is tied to the success of other students. By linking

success with mutual efforts, a positive interdependence is created in which "students sink or swim together." Erhman, Dornyei (1998, p. 247) explain positive interdependence as a process in which "learning takes place in small groups through peer teaching, joint problem solving and brainstorming, varied interpersonal communication, and individual study monitored by peers."

Cooperative Learning and Motivation

Now that cooperative learning has been defined, we now turn our attention to the question of how to motivate learners to cooperate in order to achieve learning goals. Olsen and Kagan (1992, p. 248) suggest the following steps.

1. Structuring the goal. Groups work together to achieve a common goal.
2. Structuring the rewards. Joint rewards/grades are given to the group's production.
3. Structuring the students' roles. Every member is given a specific responsibility.
4. Structuring materials. Allotting materials so that they must be shared or put together to achieve a goal.
5. Structuring rules. Laying down rules that make clear the shared nature of responsibility.

   To this list, I would like to add a sixth factor as follows:

6. Explain the reasoning behind the cooperative learning. Understanding the benefits will enhance motivation.

It is evident that structure is at the core of learner motivation. By

providing a clear structure for working cooperatively, teachers can create a challenging environment which at the same time provides a sense of security for the participants. In other words, establishing the shared nature of responsibility within a safe haven will stimulate facilitating anxiety. Facilitating anxiety will in turn encourage students to put forth an honest effort to fulfill their roles in the group. Research has shown that when students are working together toward a shared goal, their behavior suggests they are more willing to do what is necessary to accomplish the goal (Slavin, 1995). Students will then be motivated by their own contributions to the group as well as by the overall team effort. In addition, there is the added benefit of students becoming more engaged in their own learning processes. Studies indicate that becoming more engaged in learning processes also fosters pro-academic attitudes. Slavin (1995) found that students working in a cooperative learning environment are able to stay on task for significantly longer periods than students working in a more conventional learning situation.

Homogeneity Versus Heterogeneity

Japanese university classes obviously have a high degree of homogeneity in terms of interests, attitudes and personality. Many students hold the view that having similar interests is important to good classroom dynamics. Conversely, many educators believe that a heterogeneous mix of students results in better interaction and higher achievement (Jaques, 1987). After carrying out extensive research in cooperative learning, Johnson and Johnson (1995) found that heterogeneous grouping was more beneficial for both advanced and less advanced students alike than homogenous grouping.

One of the biggest challenges a language teacher faces is dealing with classes of mixed ability students. Despite placement based on admission or placement tests, proficiency differences will invariably emerge and present potential problems in the classroom. Erhman and Dornyei (1998) point out two areas which are rooted in competence differences. First, students lacking competence may not be actively involved in group processes resulting in lower status in the classroom hierarchy. Conversely, advanced students may enjoy a higher social status in the classroom hierarchy. At first inspection, this may seem likely to spawn a situation where 'the poor get poorer and the rich get richer.' However, there is a substantial body of research which indicates that this is not the case. Luft (1984, p. 181) identified two types of status hierarchies in educational settings, "one associated with grades and competence, the other associated with social skills and other emotional capacities." These two types of status hierarchies make themselves evident in the implementation of teacher-set tasks and cooperative tasks. As opposed to teacher-set tasks in which individual competence plays a large role, cooperative tasks require different characteristics such as social skills, creativity and organizational skills (Levine and Moreland, 1990). Further support is offered by Dornyei (1995) who investigated two intensive English courses in which two types of tasks were used, teacher-controlled tasks and student-controlled tasks. In the former, where students had no opportunities to organize by themselves and cooperate, students with higher competence demonstrated the highest levels of participation. In the latter, where students were allowed to organize by themselves with little intervention by the teacher, a student's level of competence had no bearing on the level of participation. Therefore, in student-controlled tasks, the level of participation "was a function of an internal social hierarchy independent of academic status (Erhman and Dornyei, 1998,

p. 118). Cohen (1994), researching small group work, also identified similar status hierarchies, labeling them as "academic" and "peer" status.

The research presented in this section strongly suggests that cooperative group work is an effective method to deal with heterogeneous mixed ability classes.

Group Cohesiveness

Learning and teaching in any classroom revolves around interaction. This is especially true of ESL/EFL courses in which students perform real world communicative tasks to develop communicative skills. In other words, establishing positive relationships becomes a central factor in the success of these types of activities. This section will examine the role of group cohesiveness in cooperative learning.

In addition to possessing the right set of social skills, students must also develop into a cohesive group in order for groupwork to be successful. Cohesiveness is defined by Agazarian and Peters (1981, p. 112) as "the internal force that maintains the group as a system." Erhman and Dornyei (1998, p. 136) state that cohesiveness is "often attributed to a sense of liking among group members, usually resulting from perceived similarity and then from mutual acceptance." Lott and Lott (1965) suggest cohesiveness is linked to mutual dependence especially in the classroom context of the successful completion of group tasks and shared rewards.

Mullen and Cooper (1994) defined cohesiveness by identifying the following three constituent components: interpersonal attraction, commitment to task, and group pride. Interpersonal attention, as the name suggests, refers to a desire to belong to a group which is rooted in liking the other members (Erhman & Dornyei, 1998). Group members can be likened to friends so the

effort put forth is for each other's benefit. "A positive and accepting group atmosphere also can have a beneficial effect on the morale, motivation, and self-image of its members, resulting in positive attitudes toward the second language and the language learning process" (Erhman & Dornyei, 1998, p. 140). Next, task commitment refers to a positive assessment of the task goals by the group thereby resulting in increased effort towards the accomplishment of that goal. Finally, group pride encourages members to put forth effort to raises the standing of the group.

Levine and Moreland (1990) confirmed that "a cohesive group is far more likely to engage in conversation and the give and take behavior necessary for carrying out language tasks effectively." This takes place because individuals in the group are bound together by obligation and moral responsibility to carry their weight for the good of the group. Johnson and Johnson (1995) identified a reciprocal relationship between cooperative learning and group cohesiveness in which each promotes the other. All of the cooperative skills associated with team building—establishing trust, taking leadership and dealing with conflicts all work to develop group cohesiveness. In a study of the role of cohesiveness in second language motivation, Clement, Dornyei & Noels (1994) found evidence that group cohesiveness had a positive effect on learning achievement. The promotion of group cohesiveness through students' interaction with each other will have a profound effect on their motivation.

Pitfalls of Cooperative Learning in Japanese EFL Settings

In this section we will examine potential pitfalls of cooperative learning in Japanese EFL settings. One of the biggest obstacles that an instructor faces in a Japanese EFL setting is dealing with students who lack or have

not mastered certain social skills such as effective communication, conflict management, and leadership and decision making. Placing socially unskilled students into learning groups without first developing their collaborative competence and social intelligence is naïve and a formula for failure. Johnson and Johnson (1995, p. 122) state that the ability to engage in effective interaction is not something that we are born with. Battistich, Solomon, and Delucchi (1993) point out that negative interactions which can impede learning and achievement are not uncommon in group situations. These types of interactions may include passivity, overactive students, giving and dealing with criticism, and leadership issues.

In order to avoid this type of pitfall, it is of the utmost importance to provide students opportunities to observe and practice cooperative skills before attempting any task involving cooperative learning. Erhman & Dornyei (1998, p. 263) provide a partial list of student behaviors required by cooperative learning.

1. Asking for other people's opinion
2. Asking for help or clarification
3. Listening to each other
4. Explaining ideas and supporting them
5. Paraphrasing, clarifying and summarizing other member's contributions
6. Negotiating ideas and working out compromises
7. Managing conflicts
8. Tactfully managing negative emotions such as disappointment, anger, and frustration
9. Encouraging others to talk or contribute
10. Organizing, coordinating other members
11. Giving constructive feedback or criticism

However, there is always the possibility that some students will be reluctant to buy into the concept of cooperative learning despite the teacher's best efforts to introduce and develop cooperative skills. In such cases, teachers may have no choice but to recognize individual learning styles and preferences, and exercise some flexibility through compromise.

Cooperative Learning in the Japanese University Context

In the Japanese university context, so-called seminar courses, are, in my opinion, well suited for cooperative education project work. In this section I will describe a unit of project work involving lesson plan development for teaching English to Japanese junior high or high school students. Here, it must be stressed that a considerable amount of time should be spent nurturing cohesion and a sense of 'esprit de corps' in the weeks leading up to the lesson plan assignment. These activities should include ice-breaking activities, competitive games, and the freedom to use Japanese when deemed necessary. In other words, students must be given ample opportunity to establish their identities in a new setting and familiarize themselves with their classmates before moving on to activities that require teamwork and self-regulation. At the same time, student behaviors required for cooperative learning outlined earlier should also be introduced to the students and practiced.

One of the areas covered in my seminar course is English teaching methodology based on TESOL principles, grounded in the belief that linguistic knowledge alone is not enough to effectively teach a language. In particular, I stress the importance of linking form and function to help learners acquire a chosen grammatical form, and the use of real world tasks to reinforce the form-function relationship.

Before assigning the project, two class periods will be spent explaining how to link form and function, along with examples of real world tasks. Students will then be given the assignment of devising a lesson plan for a grammatical form of their choosing.

The procedures to be used to carry out the assignment are as follows.

Class period 1

1. Put students in groups of three or four and have them select a group leader.
2. Have the students brainstorm potential grammatical forms for their lesson plan.
3. Have the students select one grammatical form. For homework, assign each student to think of ideas which will demonstrate the form-function link of their chosen form..

Class period 2

1. In their groups, have the students present their ideas to each other. They will then spend the remainder of the period choosing, refining and further developing the ideas into a lesson plan.
2. For homework, have the students think of ideas for a real world task using their chosen form.

Class period 3

1. In their groups, have the students present their ideas to each other. Then, as in class period 2, they will choose, refine and further develop the chosen task.

Class period 4

1. The students prepare and practice a presentation of their lesson plans. Each lesson plan will include two sections as follows: 1) the first section will explain the form-function relationship of a chosen

grammatical form; 2) the second section will present a real world task designed to provide communicative practice for the same form.

Class period 5

1. Presentations and Peer Evaluations

After the presentations, it is suggested that all participants answer a brief questionnaire to stimulate self-reflection and provide feedback to the teacher (See Appendix 1).

Conclusion

It is hoped that this paper will encourage more teachers to adopt a cooperative learning approach for their foreign language classes. This will require a leap of faith from some teachers to transform his/her role from a transmitter of information to a facilitator of knowledge creation. However, the potential rewards more than justify the risk. Through the use of real world tasks in cooperative learning situations, teachers can create truly meaningful experiences for their students. When placed in a supportive cooperative learning environment, students will learn to achieve not only for themselves, but for the benefit of their group. There is also strong evidence that shows cooperative learning promotes advanced thought processes and more retention of information (Johnson & Johnson, 1986). Furthermore, students will become more involved in their own learning process, learn to become critical thinkers, and take one step further to becoming self-regulated learners. The effects of cooperative learning experiences could very well extend beyond the classroom and the academic lives of the participants.

Good second language instructors encourage their students to take risks

in the learning process. Cooperative learning likewise offers instructors an opportunity to take risks in their approaches to teaching in order to provide a learning environment conducive to self-growth and discovery.

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Appendix A

Group Assessment Survey

Name:

Project Title:

1. Write the names of your group members and the contributions they made to the group.

Name:

Contribution:

Name:

Contribution:

2. What contribution did you make to this group?

3. How did you enjoy working with this group as opposed to working alone?
4. How could your group performance be improved?
5. Were there any problems in your group? How were they resolved?
6. What grade do you think your group should get. Why?

（2008年7月29日受理、8月5日採択）