Cooperative Learning Alternatives for Effective Group Work

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Abstract

The purpose of this article is to show how cooperative learning (CL) can be used to make group work more effective in the Japanese high school context. It begins by first describing Spencer Kagan’s cooperative learning approach and how it differs from less effective forms of group work. The article then looks at a typical reading class and discusses the ways in which CL activities help to avoid classroom management problems, save class time, and meet learning aims. It is not the intention of this paper to portray other manifestations of group work as inherently inferior to CL; instead, the authors of this paper would like to share how they have found CL to be an invaluable means to make the most of learner interaction in, specifically, the Japanese high school context.

Key Words: Cooperative Learning (共同学習), Group work (グループワーク), Japanese high school (日本の高校), Teaching English (英語教育), Individual accountability (個々のアカウンタビリティ), Classroom management (クラスルーム管理), Equal participation (平等参加), Learner interaction (学習者同士の相互作用)

1. Introduction

A troubling pattern is emerging for many teachers in the Japanese high school EFL context. On the one hand, recent revisions to the English curriculum by the Japanese Ministry of Education have emphasized a more communicative approach to language teaching. On the other hand, 'group work' activities that have often been utilized by high school teachers to facilitate communication among learners have been met with frustration and disillusionment at times by both native and non-native teachers of English (Sakui, 2007). Sakui states:

In teacher-fronted teaching, instruction could proceed smoothly even though there were some students who did not fully participate or complete tasks. But in CLT [Communicative Language Teaching],

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group or pair work formats heightened the necessity for each student’s participation, so a small number of students who were unwilling to participate could potentially halt or jeopardise the instructional process. (2007, p. 47)

As the next Ministry of Education English curriculum is expected to further detail the need for communication in the language classroom, these negative views toward not only group work, but possibly communicative language learning in general, can be expected to escalate in coming years.

It should be made clear from the outset that the purpose of this article is not to challenge the effectiveness of group work in general; there is plenty of research to show that certain forms of group work can be a perfectly valid classroom practice in many contexts. Nor is it suggested that cooperative learning (CL) be the only approach in a language classroom (Rogers, 1978). However, in terms of the Japanese high school context, the reality is that simply putting students into groups, assigning them an activity, and expecting them to work often does not work. Instead, we believe that developing strategies for a CL approach is a far more effective means to facilitate communication among groups of learners, maintain control of the class, and still meet learning goals – not just in oral communication classes, but in reading and grammar classes as well.

In this article, we will discuss some of the common criticisms leveled against group work in the Japanese high school context. We will then describe how exactly a CL approach to group work differs from traditional forms of group work (Johnson, Johnson & Smith, 1998). Since it is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss the many variations of CL, we will constrain our discussion to the Structural Cooperative Learning model developed and advocated by Spencer Kagan (1992). We will then turn to a more practical discussion of CL by looking at how an actual CL activity might unfold in a high school reading classroom. Finally, we will return to some of the problems with using group work in the Japanese high school English classroom and discuss way that CL might be an effective alternative.

2. Some Common Criticisms of Group Work

Probably the most commonly cited reason for choosing not to put students into groups is a concern for classroom management problems and a perceived loss of control over the class. McCafferty et al. (2006, p. 3) in the Singapore context observes that “despite the many advantages of group activities, problems also arise – problems, that have led some teachers to give up on using group work”. According to McCafferty these problems range from students not participating or getting along to simply being unable to do the task. Similar problems with group work were reported in a recent publication on classroom management in Japanese EFL classes by Sakui (2007). According to Sakui, a range of classroom management problems (including students being off task, and not paying attention) arise when teachers try to teach English communicatively in Japanese junior and senior high schools:

... if two or three groups were not on task, the teacher needed to move around the classroom and attend to these groups so that they could get back on track. The teacher’s attention often seemed to be consumed in managing these problematic groups and was not focused on academic
matters ... (Sakui, 2007, p. 47)

As a result of these management problems, she concludes (2007, p. 47) that classrooms may be better managed in a teacher centered class: “The difficulties inherent in these seating patterns [pairs and small groups] contrasted strongly with the ease of managing the entire class as a whole group.”

One of the most serious classroom management issues that arise when using group work is unequal participation among learners. When students are placed together to work in groups, there is very little preventing some students from opting out of the activity while others in their group shoulder the responsibility for the work (Wee & Jacobs, 2006).

3. How is a Cooperative Learning Approach Different from Traditional Group Work?

While CL groups can be distinguished from traditional group work in several ways (Traditional versus Cooperative Groups, n. d.), there are two specific respects in which CL differs. The first can be summarized as the ‘what’ of cooperative learning, or the set of conditions that must be present for an activity to be cooperative. These necessary conditions or basic principles (Kagan, 1992) can be easily remembered by the neat acronym “PIES”. The “P” in PIES stands for “Positive Interdependence”. In other words, the activity must be structured as such that the students need or rely on each other to complete the task “… so one cannot succeed unless all group members succeed. Group members have to know that they sink or swim together.” (Johnson, Johnson, & Holubec, 1998, p. 4: 7). The “I” means “Individual Accountability”. The contributions that individual students make must be made public to their peers or teacher or both. “[Individual Accountability] is the measurement of whether or not each group member has achieved the group’s goal”. (Johnson, Johnson, & Holubec, 1998, italics added). It is not sufficient for the “group” to demonstrate its understanding; each individual must also be made accountable for his/her contributions. The “E” (equal participation) and the “S” (simultaneous interaction) can be understood simply by asking the following questions at the end of an activity: Did all students participate equally? Were all students participating at the same time? One of the distinguishing characteristics of cooperative learning is that it emphasizes the academic success for each individual of the group through equal participation of all members (Slavin, 1991, as cited in Stahl, 1994). If all four of these basic principles are evident in an activity, it can be said to be a cooperative learning activity.

A teacher using group work may consciously or unconsciously strive to realize these basic principles. However, there are no inherent mechanisms built into most forms of group work to ensure that these basic principles are actually realized. When a teacher using group work asks students to work together to answer comprehension questions from a text, what is preventing one student from doing most of the work and the others from getting a free ride, or worse distracting those who are prepared to do the work? Possibly among more mature and highly motivated learners we might reasonably expect some level of equal participation, but among high school students, to borrow Kagan’s wording, “group work is wishful thinking” (1999, ¶ 10).

This problem precipitates the second way that a CL approach differs from traditional group work. Unlike traditional group work, in CL, there are mechanisms built into classroom
activities to ensure that the basic principles are realized. For Kagan, these mechanisms are called “structures”. If the basic principles then are the ‘what’ of cooperative learning, the structures can be understood as the ‘how’. These structures function as recipes or a set of rules for organizing how students behave during pair and group work. The structure that a teacher selects for a specific activity will depend on the desired learning outcome, such as critical thinking, mastery of content or communication. (For a thorough discussion of the relationship between structures and learning objectives, see Kagan, 1992.) When structures combine with content or subject matter such as a reading text or an oral communication worksheet to realize a specific learning objective, the result is a cooperative learning activity. Figure 1 below shows the relationship between these constituents of a cooperative reading activity that uses the structure “Numbered Heads Together” (Kagan, 1992, p. 28).

This visual also illustrates the departure point of CL from traditional group work. In the case of traditional group work, there would be no structure in place to organize the interaction of groups to ensure the basic principles, or the learning objective, are achieved. Instead, the success of the activity would depend predominantly on the willingness of the learners. To better understand how structures can be utilized to realize the basic principles, it will be useful to go through the steps of a cooperative reading lesson.

4. A Cooperative Learning Reading Lesson

The first reason for selecting a reading lesson is that reading is typically considered a solitary act that does not easily lend itself to group interaction. And secondly, to dispel the myth that CL is an approach limited to oral communication classes.

The time required to complete these activities will differ according to each teacher’s context; the two main variables being the complexity of the text and the number and difficulty of detail questions.

Content: A six-paragraph academic essay.

Lesson Objectives:
Stage 1: Recognizing the main ideas of an essay’s body paragraphs
Stage 2: Identifying details in the essay
Stage 3: Understanding cause and effect grammar and test literacy

Structure:
Stage 1: Lettered Heads in the Corner (Round Robin)
Stage 2: Heads Together (Round Robin)
Stage 3: Stand and Share

Stage 1: Activity Procedure
1. Having studied pre-reading exercises in the previous lesson, the students (Sts.) are now ready to look at the organizational aspects of the essay. The teacher (T.) begins by examining the thesis statement and how this will inform the topic and controlling ideas in sub-

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Objective:</th>
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<td>Students will be able to improve their ability to read for details.</td>
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<table>
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<th>Content + Structure:</th>
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<td>Academic Text + Numbered Heads Together</td>
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</table>

= Cooperative Activity

Figure 1  A cooperative reading activity.
sequent body paragraphs.

2. Having the Sts. sat in rows, the T. explains the objective of the activity thereby ensuring Sts. are clear about what needs to be done and, importantly, aware that they will be accountable to both their teams and to the T. for contributions they make during the activity.

3. The T. informs the Sts. of their groups (ideally four members in each) assigning the letters A, B, C, or D to each student in a group. (This allows the T. to call on and organize particular individuals efficiently thereby facilitating management in larger classes.)

4. The T. sets the timer, and Sts. work individually to answer the questions. At this stage of the activity, Sts. are seated in rows. ‘A’ Sts. read the first body paragraph and try to identify the main idea, ‘B’ Sts. read the second, ‘C’ Sts. the third, and ‘D’ Sts. the fourth.

5. **Lettered Heads in the Corner:** The T. now instructs all ‘A’ Sts. to move into one group, all ‘B’ Sts. to another, and so on. (A visual layout on the blackboard is usually effective at this stage.) Where the physical movement of seating is not possible, students can simply turn to face their groups.

6. **Round Robin:** Sts. standing and starting with ‘A’ Sts., take turns to share their ideas with the group. Sts. discuss their answers until consensus on the main idea of each paragraph is agreed and understood by all members. The Sts. can then sit down. The teacher circulates assisting and monitoring the level of comprehension within the groups. (With junior and senior high school students, having the Sts. stand during the task ensures focus. Having them sit when finished allows the teacher to clearly recognise when a group has completed its task.

With university level learners ensuring task focus might not be a concern. Accordingly, students can remain seated during the task raising their hands to indicate that they have finished.)

7. The T. instructs Sts. to return to their original groups (comprising of A, B, C, D members). Starting with ‘A’ Sts., each student stands and shares their information with their team. Once all members of the team have shared their answers, each member should have a clear idea of the main ideas of each body paragraph. (The jigsaw nature of this activity ensures that the principle of individual accountability is understood by all members of the group.)

8. The T. can now randomly call on individual Sts. to stand and present their answers for accountability in front of the class.

Stage 2: Activity Procedure

1. The T. begins by explaining the objective of this stage of the lesson and directs Sts. toward the text and the comprehension questions.

2. The T. says there are 8 comprehension questions and Sts. will have 6 minutes (the length of time will depend on the nature of the task).

3. The T. then sets the timer, and Sts. work individually to answer the questions. At this stage of the activity, Sts. are seated in rows.

4. **Heads Together:** When the time is up, Sts. are asked to rotate their desks back into their groups and change their pens/ pencils for a red pen. The T. then randomly selects a student from each group. The students selected this time are B Sts.

5. The T. explains that B Sts. are to say the answers to questions 1 and 2, C: 3 & 4, D: 5 & 6, and A: 7 & 8.
6. B Sts. are then instructed to stand up and read their answers to their teammates. After reading his/her answers B Sts. must confirm with his/her group members that they all have the same answer. It is this discussion stage where this structure gets its name Heads Together. If Sts. do not have the same answers, they will have to discuss until either consensus on the correct answer is reached (or until they cannot come to a decision). For those Sts. who change their answers as a result of the discussion, they will use a red colored pen. This will permit the T. to distinguish who is getting the answer right first time thereby allowing for accurate grading.

7. This process is repeated until each student has had a chance to report his/her answers to their team.

8. During the activity, the T. is monitoring the room praising teams and individuals for work well done and checking for the amount of red pen used to gauge the level of difficulty students are having with the task.

9. When all Sts. are sitting, the T. can see that they have completed the activity, and all team members have agreed on the same answers.

10. T. randomly selects a team and randomly selects a student from within that team to answer the first two questions in front of the class. This process is repeated until the answers to all 8 questions are checked as a class.

11. At the end of the class, the T. collects the worksheets and assigns individual scores.

Stage 3: Activity Procedure
1. The T. begins by explaining the objective of this stage of the lesson.
2. At this stage of the activity, Sts. are seated in rows while the T. fronts a grammatical explanation of the relevant cause and effect grammar.

3. **Stand and Share:** After the instruction, the T. gives the first comprehension check question and applies a time pressure to complete. Sts. are still seated in rows at this stage. In a 10th grade class the question which requires Sts. to arrange the options in the correct order and discount the distractor, might appear as follows:

   1. a. species are
c. consequently
d. due to
   1. b. rainforests are
disappearing being destroyed
c. consequently
d. due to
   a) cab
   b) bca
   c) dab
   d) acb

4. When time is up, Sts. are then asked to rotate their desks back into their groups and follow the procedures for Heads Together. Discussion during this stage can be in the students’ first language.

5. When all groups are seated the T. calls on either A, B, C or D Sts. from each team to write their answer on a sheet of paper, stand up, and display it.

6. From the front of the class, the T. can easily see which groups are answering correctly, indicating to those who are not to remain standing while their group tries to produce the correct answer.

7. Sts. return to rows and the T. can now call on one student from the class to stand (or come to the front) and explain the reason for their choice, that is explain the grammatical rule for that question, to the class. This additional stage can easily be added to discour-
age those needing to correct their answers at stage six from simply looking at another team’s paper.

8. The process is repeated for stages 3–6/7

5. Cooperative Learning Alternative for Effective Group Work

These activities clearly show the differences between traditional group work and cooperative learning groups. First, there is a clear structure that ensures the basic principles are evident throughout each activity. Positive interdependence is brought about with the requirement that all team members have the same answers. Importantly, by ensuring that groups are heterogeneous that is, there is a judicious balance of learner abilities, the principle of positive interdependence will support and promote the development of lower level learners as well as encourage the higher levels to further consolidate their comprehension of materials through explanation – a concept central to the Vygotskian (1978) theory of the zone of proximal development. Individual accountability is present in a variety of ways. First, individuals are accountable to their teams when sharing their answers with each other. Each member has to present his/her answers while their teammates evaluate them. Furthermore, the optional step in which teammates change their answers using a different colored pen makes the students’ contributions accountable to the teacher, since he/she can quickly evaluate the extent to which students are having trouble with the questions by simply glancing at the amount of red pen on the page. If the majority of students successfully achieve the objective teachers can save valuable class time that would otherwise be spent going over material unnecessarily. Also, the random selection of students to present their team’s answers to the class keeps individuals on their toes because they cannot rely on the students most likely to volunteer their answers. In terms of equal participation, there is no opportunity for students to escape from the activity or get a free ride; each student has a responsibility to present his/her answers and defend them. Finally, simultaneous interaction is clearly evident, as each student is speaking, listening, reading or writing at any given time. One point worth noting here is that it is not the teacher who has to walk around and motivate individuals to participate; it is the structure in place that keeps the students from opting out of the activities.

6. Conclusion

Of course, CL is not the only methodological resource available to teachers; an old fashioned lecture can at times be a valuable means to disseminate information. But when it comes to a comparison of the effectiveness of CL compared with other forms of group work in the Japanese high school EFL context, we believe that the benefits of using CL are clear. We don’t expect that the contents of this article will lead to immediate improvements in classroom management. Instead, we hope that this discussion will encourage teachers to learn more about how to encourage more effective groupwork in their classrooms.

References


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