Jacobs, G. M., & Hall, S. (2002). Implementing cooperative learning. In J. C. Richards & W. A. Renandya (Eds.), *Methodology in language teaching: An anthology of current practice* (pp. 52-58). New York: Cambridge University Press.

This is a revised version of Answers to Ten Questions about Implementing Cooperative Learning. Jacobs, G. M., & Hall, S. J. (1994). Answers to ten questions about implementing cooperative learning. English Teaching Forum, 32, 2-5, 13.

IMPLEMENTING COOPERATIVE LEARNING

In the last ten years there has been a growing interest among ESL/EFL teachers in using cooperative learning activities. With cooperative learning, students work together in groups the usual size of which is two to four members. However, cooperative learning is more than just putting students in groups and giving them something to do. Cooperative learning principles and techniques are tools which we teachers use to encourage mutual helpfulness in the groups and the active participation of all members.

These principles can be seen in the cooperative learning technique "Everyone Can Explain" that can be used, for example, in an ESL/EFL reading class. There are four steps in doing Everyone Can Explain:

(1) Each student in a group of two-four members..

(2) The teacher or a student asks a question based on the text the class is reading.

(3) Each group works to develop a response. They check that everyone in their group can give and <u>explain</u> their group's response.

(4) The teacher calls a number at random. The person with that number in each group may be selected to give and explain their group's answer to the class or to another group.
.
Everyone Can Explain encourages successful group functioning because all members need to know and be ready to explain their group's answer(s) and because when students help their groupmates, they help themselves and their whole group, because the response given belongs to the whole group, not just to the group member giving it.

A good deal of research exists in other areas of education suggesting that cooperative learning is associated with benefits in such key areas as learning, self-esteem, liking for school, and interethnic relations (Johnson, Johnson, & Holubec, 1993; Slavin, 1995). In second/foreign language learning, theorists propose several advantages for cooperative learning: increased student talk, more varied talk, a more relaxed atmosphere, greater motivation, more negotiation of meaning, and increased amounts of comprehensible input. (Liang, Mohan, & Early, 1998; Olsen & Kagan, 1992).

However, implementing cooperative learning is not like waving a magic wand: we just say a few magic words, and whoosh everything is working great. In fact, in planning and executing cooperative learning, we teachers have many decisions to make. In the planning stage of cooperative learning, there are many large philosophical questions to think about, such as whether to stress intrinsic or extrinsic motivation (Graves, 1990), how much choice to give students in such matters as how, about what, and with whom they will collaborate, and how tightly to structure activities to help encourage effective cooperation (Sapon-Shevin & Schniedewind, 1991). These questions demand the attention of all teachers interested in cooperative learning. However, the focus of this article are the more mechanical aspects of actually executing cooperative learning in our classrooms.

From our experience doing workshops and courses for teachers about cooperative learning, we have chosen ten of the most commonly asked nuts and bolts questions. The suggestions listed below come from our own ESL and EFL classes, ideas from colleagues and from the teacher participants in our cooperative learning workshops and courses, and from books and articles in the field.

This article presents a wide range of options. Readers will want to choose those options which match their own teaching styles and their learners' backgrounds and needs. Plus, you may well come up with some ideas not mentioned here. (If so, please send them to us. We will add them to our list.) Remember that cooperative learning may be new to you and your students. Therefore, you may all need time to adjust. Our suggestion is to explain to students why you are using cooperative learning, start slowly, be patient, and be persistent.

1. How big should groups be?

a. Even two people are a group.

b. Generally speaking, the smaller the group, the more each member talks and the less chance there is that someone will be left out. If time is short, smaller groups can usually do an activity more quickly. Smaller groups also require less group management skills. Thus, when starting with cooperative learning, groups of two or three may be best.

c. Larger groups are good because they provide more people for doing big tasks, increase the variety of people in a group in terms of skills, personalities, backgrounds, etc., and reduce the number of groups for the teacher to monitor.

d. Many books on cooperative learning recommend groups of four, and students can first work in pairs, and then the two pairs of the foursome interact with one another.

2. How should groups be formed?

a. Most experts on cooperative learning suggest that teacher-selected groups are best to use, at least until students become proficient at collaboration. Teacher-selected groups usually aim to achieve a heterogeneous mix. Such a mix promotes peer tutoring, helps to break down barriers among different types of students, and encourages on-task behavior.

b. In creating teacher-assigned teams, factors to consider include language proficiency, first language, sex, race, and diligence.

c. An effective way of setting up mixed-proficiency groups is to band the learners' names into, say, four proficiency clusters from high to low and then select randomly from within each band so that groups will then involve learners with a range of proficiencies. Other criteria, such as sex, race, and diligence, can be considered when deciding who to choose from which band.

d. Random grouping is quick and easy and conveys the idea that one can work with anyone.

e. Many ways exist of randomizing groups. The most common is counting off. Take the number of students in your class, divide by the number of students you want per group, and the result will be the number students should count to. For example, if there are 56 students in the class and you want groups of 4, 56 divided by 4 is 14; so, students should count to 14.

f. Other ways to set up random groups include using playing cards, giving out numbered pieces of paper, and distributing cards with different categories on them and letting students group themselves according to the category. An example of the latter procedure would be to have some cards with names of animals, others with names of plants, others with names of countries, etc. Then, all the animals would find each other and form a group, all the plants, etc.

h. The number of students in the class may not fit evenly with the number of students per group. For example, if there are 47 students in the class, and you want groups of four, there will be three students left over. Probably it is best to form 11 groups of four and one group of three.

i. When students become good at cooperative group work, they can group themselves, for example, by interests for self-directed projects (Sharan & Sharan, 1992).

3. When students are working in their groups, how can the teacher get the class's attention?

a. A signal can be used to tell students that groups should quickly bring their discussions to a temporary halt and face the teacher. One popular signal is the teacher raising a hand. When students see this, they are to raise their hands also, bring their discussion to a close, alert other students who have not seen the teacher's hand raised,

and face the teacher. One way to remember this is RSPA (**R**aise hand, **S**top talking, **P**ass the signal to those who haven't seen it, **A**ttention to teacher). Alternatively, teachers can clap, with students clapping in response.

b. Other possible signals include ringing a bell, playing a musical instrument, blowing a whistle, snapping one's fingers, and flicking the lights on and off. One teacher we know starts to sing!. Another puts two signs on the board, one to stop working and face the teacher and the other to continue but more quietly. She knocks on the board to get students' attention and then points to the appropriate sign.

c. Some teachers play music in the background as groups study together. In this case, turning off the music can be the attention signal (Saeki, 1994).

d. When students lead class activities, they can use the same signal.

e. One student in each group can take the role of group checker with the responsibility of watching out for the teacher's signal and being sure the group responds to the signal quickly. There are many other types of roles that can be used to facilitate group functioning (Ilola, Power, & Jacobs, 1989).

f. If some groups are not responding quickly to the attention signal, rewards, such as praise, can be given to encourage this component of smooth-functioning group activities.

4. What can be done if the noise level becomes too high?

a. One student per group can be the noise monitor or quiet captain whose function it is to urge the group to collaborate actively, yet quietly.

b. The closer together students sit, the quieter they can talk. Having students sit close together not only helps reduce the noise level but also helps foster cooperation and minimizes the chance of someone being left out.

c. Along with sitting close together, students can use special quiet voices, e.g., group-size voices, which contrast with louder, class size voices.

d. A signal similar to the one used to get the class's attention (see 3a) can be used as a sign to continue working but a bit more quietly. For example, for "stop working," the signal might be hand raised straight up, and for "work more quietly," the signal could be hand raised with arm bent at elbow.

5. What if a student doesn't want to work in a group?

a. Discussing the advantages that students can derive from learning in groups may help overcome resistance to group activities. These potential advantages include learning

more, having more fun, and preparing for tasks away from school in which collaboration is necessary.

b. Students may look more favorably on cooperative learning if they understand that talking with others is a language learning strategy that they can apply outside of class as well (Oxford, 1990).

c. Students should realize that studying in groups is only one of several ways of learning that will go on in the class.

d. Group games may encourage students to look forward to other group learning activities. There are many enjoyable games which also teach academic and social skills.

e. Start with pairs and tasks that require exchange of information (Nation, 1990). Provide language support in terms of useful vocabulary and structures, so that students are more likely to succeed (Richards, 1995). Success here will build confidence in the ability to work in groups.

e. Students who do not want to study in groups can be allowed to work on their own. In our experience, after a while, they will want to take part in the group interaction and will ask to join a group.

6. What if some groups finish earlier than others?

a. Check to see if they really have done the assignment properly.

b. Have groups that finish early compare what they have done with other groups that also finished early.

c. Have groups discuss how they worked together. Then, because sometimes smooth-functioning groups can provide good models for others, you might want to have exemplary groups explain their group process. Hopefully, this will help all groups work together more efficiently.

d. Develop one or two sponge activities. Sponge activities are short activities, related to the main task, that soak up the extra time between when the first and last groups finish.

e. Set time limits to discourage groups from dawdling. These time limits are flexible. If groups are working well, but need more time, the limit can be extended.

f. Ask students to help other groups that have not yet finished.

g. Groups that finish early can work on homework or other assignments.

7. What if a few students are frequently absent?

a. Assign these students as extra members of groups. For example, if students are working in groups of four, have these students be the fifth member of groups.

b. Use tasks that can be accomplished in one class period.

c. Being a member of a group may give such students a feeling of belonging and a reason to come to school that they did not have before. Also, groups may help them to be more successful in school and, thus, enjoying being at school more.

d. Coach students in how to use appropriate peer pressure to encourage frequently absent members to come to school and to complete their portion of group tasks. (Of course, in some cases, absent students may have family obligations or other non-school reasons for missing class.)

e. If a group is working cooperative Jigsaw activities (Kagan, 1992), give the missing piece to the whole group.

f. Make sure groups have contingency plans in case members are missing. Learning to make such plans is an important group skill, because absences are also a common problem in groups outside of school.

g. In an ongoing activity, ask groups to update absent members when they return to school. This encourages students to develop peer tutoring skills.

h. Let groups be responsible for contacting absent members to inform them of what they missed and to make sure they know what assignments are.

i. Be prepared to adjust grading if such students leave their group in a lurch.

8. How long should groups stay together?

a. Keeping groups together for fairly long periods, four to eight weeks, gives them a chance to become comfortable with one another, allows them to form a group identity and bond, and gives them the opportunity to learn how to overcome difficulties they have working together. This is where spending time during or after cooperative activities to have groups process their interaction comes in handy (Dishon & O'Leary, 1993).

b. Groups that stay together for at least a few weeks facilitate long-term projects, such as those using the cooperative learning method Group Investigation (Sharan & Sharan, 1992).

c. Try to resist the temptation to disband groups that are not working well. Stress to students that we need to learn to be able to work with all sorts of people, including those whom we, at least initially, do not like. Use team-building activities and instruction in collaborative skills to help create a spirit of togetherness in groups (Kagan, 1992).

d. Forming heterogeneous groups according to such criteria as proficiency, sex, first language, and personality is a lot of work for teachers. Thus, we would not want to do that too often.

e. Even while students are in long-term groups, short one-shot activities can be done with different grouping configurations. This may add a bit of variety.

f. Avoid keeping groups together if they begin to become cliques (Dishon & O'Leary, 1993).

9. How should groups be ended?

a. All groups can end with statements by learners and the teacher about not only the content learned but also about the learning process.

b. When long-standing groups are disbanded, there should be some kind of closure activity for members to thank each other for their help and to sum up what has been learned about working in groups. This can be in oral or written form.

c. Groupmates can write "letters of reference" to be given to members of the person's new group.

d. Group pictures can be taken.

e. Group products can be posted or published. This aids a sense of achievement and give credibility to the group's work. Also, group products can serve as vehicles for assessment by individuals, groups, and teachers.

10. What percentage of the time should cooperative learning be used?

a. No one suggests that the class be organized in cooperative groups all the time.

b. Many cooperative learning activities combine a group component with components in which the teacher lectures or demonstrates and ones in which students work alone (e.g., Slavin, 1995).

c. When students and/or teachers are unfamiliar with cooperative learning, it is best to start slowly. Use one cooperative learning technique, such as Write-Pair-Switch or Everyone Can Explain), several times to let students become accustomed to collaboration.

d. Discuss with students the whys and hows of learning together.

e. Making cooperation a content theme also helps students tune in to working together. For example, once we asked students to write individually about a successful group experience in which they had participated. Then, groups were used to provide feedback.

f. Interact with colleagues for support and ideas.

g. Find the right balance of teaching modes according to your philosophy of education, your reading of the research (including your own research), students' preferences, and what seems to be working best. Students need to know how to cooperate, compete, and work alone.

References

Dishon, D., & O'Leary, P.W. (1993). A guidebook for cooperative learning: A technique for creating more effective schools (revised ed.). Holmes Beach, FL: Learning Publications.

Graves, T. (1990). Are external rewards appropriate or desirable in a cooperative classroom? Cooperative Learning, 11, 15-17.

Ilola, L.M., Power, K.M., & Jacobs, G.M. (1989). Structuring student interaction to promote learning. English Teaching Forum, 27, 12-16.

Johnson, D.W., Johnson, R.T., & Holubec, E.J. (1993). Circles of learning. (4th ed.). Edina, MN: Interaction Book Company.

Liang, X., Mohan, B.A., & Early, M. (1998). Issues of cooperative learning in ESL classes: A literature review. TESL Canada Journal 15:2, 13-23.

Nation, I.S.P. (1990). Language teaching techniques. Wellington: English Language Institute, Victoria University.

Olsen, R.E. W-B, & Kagan, S. (1992). About cooperative learning. In C. Kessler (Ed.), Cooperative language learning: A teacher's resource book (pp. 1-30). Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.

Oxford, R.L. (1990). Language learning strategies: What every teacher should know. Newbury House: New York.

Richards, J.C. 1995. Easier said than done. In A.C. Hidalgo, D. Hall, & G.M. Jacobs (eds.), Getting started: Materials writers on materials writing (pp. 95-135). Singapore: SEAMEO Regional Language Centre.

Saeki, K. (1994). Stimulating classes with background music. English Teaching Forum, 32, 30-31.

Sapon-Shevin, M. & Schniedewind, N. (1991). Cooperative learning as empowering pedagogy. In C.E. Sleeter (Ed.), <u>Empowerment through multicultural education</u> (pp. 159-178). Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.

Sharan, Y., & Sharan, S. (1992). <u>Expanding cooperative learning through group investigation</u>. Colchester, VT: Teachers College Press.

Slavin, R.E. (1995). <u>Cooperative learning: Theory, research, and practice</u> 2nd ed. Boston: Allyn & Bacon.