

# Infusing Cooperative Learning into An EFL Classroom

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## Abstract

This study sought to investigate student diversities in terms of learning styles and linguistic competence, and the extent to which students change as regards participation, interaction and achievement through Cooperative Learning activities embracing their diversities. 77 first-year EFL students from from the two reading classes, one treated as the experimental group (EG) and the other as the control group (CG), at the Faculty of English Linguistics of the University of Social Sciences and Humanities in Ho Chi Minh City (USSH-HCMC) were invited to participate in the study. The findings substantiated that Vietnamese learners are open to change and Vietnamese EFL teachers should create effective activities for learners to immerse themselves in talking cooperatively instead of talking individualistically in the classrooms.

**Keywords:** Cooperative learning, Learning styles, Reading proficiency, English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners

## 1. Introduction

Learners not only bring their age, gender and culture, but also their own individual approach, talents and interests to the classroom. Laird (2005) refers to learner diversity as an asset to be capitalized on to promote profound, meaningful learning. Sarasin (1999) acknowledges the values of learner diversity: “We improve our courses because our classes benefit from the diversity of our students, [...]” whereas most Asian teachers ‘ignore’ learners’ ways (Renandya *et al.*, 2001). Instead of embracing diversity, most teachers are attending to their learners’ diversities by using classroom activities *pleasing* most of the learners, leaving a few learners feel left out. Thus, whether they are working alone or in a group, learners are learning individually and even competitively with other learners. Johnson and Johnson (1999) find classroom practice is still dominated by an *individualistic structure*, which places the emphasis on each learner working alone toward the goal independently of other learners, and by a *competitive structure*, which matches learners against each other in win-lose situations to find out who is “best”. In numerous classrooms, Vietnamese EFL teachers are changing seating arrangement to cluster learners, but not changing the way learners interact with each other as they learn. Therefore, the steady hum of voices teachers encourage in learners does not assume a synergic effect. Cooperative Learning (CL), one of the buzz words in new paradigm of teaching, can produce this sort of effect through cross-ability grouping which maximizes complementary learner strengths (Bell, 1991).

Cooperative Learning allows learners the opportunities to process externally, to work with their peers, and to share responsibility for a task. However, high-ability learners complain about being held back by their slower teammates; low-ability learners complain about being discounted or ignored in group sessions; and resentments emerge when some team members fail to pull their weight. The teachers who used to experiment with Cooperative Learning in their classrooms became discouraged and reverted to the traditional teacher-centered teaching paradigm. EFL teachers also express three other frequent responses to the Cooperative Learning approach. One is uneasiness about “giving up control” of their classrooms. The second is that Cooperative Learning may sacrifice the amount of material that can be “covered” in a course if class time is turned over to learner work. The third is a feeling that they are not fully doing their job unless they are giving a polished lecture (Monk, 1983).

Learner avoidance to cooperate in learning comes from traditional beliefs in teacher-learner relationship, learner’s reluctance, and learner’s assessment methods. Although Confucianism has not survived as an organized contemporary philosophy, its values continue to wield influence on the daily lives (Bannai, 1980: 153); especially in education, it continues to sustain a high profile in teachers’ function as the norm of knowledge, wisdom, and behavior (Medgyes, 1986). Learners assume that learning only comes from the teacher, not from the group; as a result, they are reluctant to accept group members as their collaborators let alone tutors. They do not appreciate peer error correction and peer rating, which are essential aspects of interdependence in Cooperative Learning.

Learners’ reluctance to interact may come from their linguistic deficiency, which makes them concerned about making errors and appearing foolish in front of peers (Phillips, 1999: 126). It may also stem from the fact that a

fair degree of harmony is often more admired and desirable in some Asian societies, as O'Sullivan (1997: 51) notes:

It is hard to maintain a discussion, and a confrontational exchange of ideas, such as a debate, is very difficult to arrange in the Asian classroom. Asians prefer to try to find a general compromise solution to which the whole group can agree, rather than voice an individual opinion which they would consider to be unnecessarily decisive.

Vietnamese learners are concerned with the consequence of their speech and how it may be accepted, which also derives from Confucian philosophy stressing the importance of care in words (Scollon, 1999: 18), in attempts to represent themselves well in accordance with the "maxims of modesty" (Littlewood, Liu and Yu, 1996: 81) and to avoid group conflict, honored by Cooperative Learning, which helps learners develop conflict management skills in group interaction.

Assessment approach in school as well as state exams in Vietnam formed certain degrees of individualism and competition in learners' way of learning. Even though authentic forms of assessment, such as portfolios, journals, and self/peer-assessment have become increasingly common in ESL classrooms (Penaflores, 1998), Vietnam traditional assessment forms, rate learners by their test results, the final products, rather than the entire learning process. Consequently, learners, particularly high-ability ones, tend to retain knowledge for themselves and quietly compete with others during their study for high achievement in exams.

The impediments above had taken away practically all my intention to apply Cooperative Learning in the EFL classrooms when I happened to see an exciting Cooperative Learning lesson at the University of Health Sciences, Ho Chi Minh City. My inspiration returned at the sight of the teacher demonstrating the value of 'face-to-face interaction', one of the crucial elements of Cooperative Learning, to medical students by seating pairs of students in different positions, back-to-back, side-by-side, and face-to-face, and letting them judge the interactive effect of each position.

"I feel most motivated to talk to a partner sitting in front of me since I can see him or her listening to me, agreeing or disagreeing with me," said a male student.

"A bit shy at first in front of a male partner," a female student said, "but I felt closer to him along the conversation. He encouraged and even helped me as I was stuck for an idea. We can not have the similar encouragement in the 'talking on the phone' fashion."

Vietnamese culture characterized by such low individualism that individual self-direction can be perceived as anti-social (Tudor, 1996: 151-154) remains in Vietnamese learners and can disrupt the Cooperative Learning process if the reasons behind its learning strategies are not explained to and accepted by learners (Gibson & Chandler, 1988: 406). The teacher at the University of Health Sciences, Ho Chi Minh City managed to do this in her classroom. This action research, inspired by her Cooperative Learning practice, is intended to harmonize the diversities of my first-year EFL students at the University of Social Sciences and Humanities, as Tudor (1996: 158-159), in a discussion about Vietnamese and Moroccan learners, points out that respect for learner identity is as essential in teaching as accommodation of individual variability. The study sought to answer the subsequent questions:

- 1) What are *student diversities* in terms of learning styles and linguistic competence?
- 2) Through Cooperative Learning activities embracing their diversities, how do students *change* as regards participation, interaction and achievement?

The response to question 1 would enable us to do student grouping for Cooperative Learning activities, and the response to question 2 would tell us about the success degree of the experiment.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1 What is Cooperative Learning?

Cooperative learning is defined as a set of instructional strategies "which employ{s} small teams of pupils to promote peer interaction and cooperation for studying academic subjects" (Sharan, 1980: 242). In Slavin's (1980) view, "the term refers to classroom techniques in which students work on learning activities in small groups and receive rewards or recognition based on their group's performance" (p. 315). Cooper and Mueck (1990) regard Cooperative Learning as a structured and systematic instructional design in which small groups work together to reach a common goal. Johnson & Johnson (1999) contend that Cooperative Learning is "the instructional use of small groups so that students work together to maximize their own and each other's learning". Therefore, Cooperative Learning conspicuously is not simply putting students together in groups and giving them tasks to do, but an environment in which teachers have to guarantee that the subsequent four elements transpire.

The first element is positive interdependence which generates the sense that “we sink or swim together” (Johnson et al., 1998). It is the sense of working together for a common goal and caring about each other’s leaning (Sharan, 1980). When positive interdependence is established, each member’s endeavour in the group is always required and she or he takes different role and responsibility for a part of the given task. The group’s successfulness is the contributions from every member in the group. Without positive interdependence, learners occasionally fall into the trap of “hitchhiking” where they let one learner do all the work for them, or of being “off task” (Cohen, 1994).

The second one is individual accountability. This element emerges when each learner believes that learning her/his material is essential. Each team member has to be responsible for their own as well as their teammates’ learning and makes an active contribution to the group. Thus there was no “hitchhiking” or “freeloading” for anyone in a team (Kagan, 1989).

The third is quality of group interaction process. In this process, learners are provided with abundant verbal and face-to-face interaction, where they can explain, argue, elaborate and link current material with what they have learned previously. Thus, it is crucial to let students sit in comfortable places where they can interact face to face easily. Johnson and Johnson (1989) suggests that groups should be small when learners are just beginning to work together and develop their skills.

The fourth is teaching social skills. Sufficient social skills entail an explicit instruction on appropriate communication, leadership, trust and conflict resolution skills so that the team can function effectively. Social skills refer to group-related skilled and task-related social skills. The former refers to the way students interact as teammates, such as mediating disagreements, encouraging, and praising. The latter refers to the way students interact with one another to achieve task objectives, such as asking, paraphrasing, explaining and summarizing. Cooperative Learning does not assume that students have already had the required social skills; hence, as Cooperative Learning techniques are implemented, cooperative skills are often taught.

Johnson, Johnson, Holubec and Roy (1984) and Putnam (1997) distinctly compare cooperative learning groups and traditional learning groups (see Table 1). Table 1 indicates that grouping in Cooperative Learning is not stop with just putting the learners in a group (Johnson, Johnson, and Holubec, 1991), but integrating learner attributes to enhance a group’s success. Teacher selects the groups to reflect a diversity of abilities, learning styles, viewpoints, gender, race, and even consistency of attendance, which will be particularly relevant for groups working on a project over time. Heterogeneous groups produce the greatest opportunities for peer tutoring and support as well as improving cross-race and cross-sex relations and integration. Occasionally, random or special interest teams could be formed to maximize student talents or meet a specific student need (Kagan, 1994). Letting the students choose their own groups can result in a homogeneity which reduces the acquisition of social skills and increases the possibility of a lack of focus on the learning task (Cooper, 1990).

## *2.2 Benefits of Cooperative Learning*

### *2.2.1 Enhancing learners’ cognitive growth*

Cooperative learning is constructed on the three cognitive theories: Piagetian, Vygotskian and Social Learning theories which center largely on the development of human’s cognition; thus, one of the crucial aims of Cooperative Learning is strengthening the learners’ cognitive process. Piagetian theory deems learners to be active participants in their own learning rather than recipients of information and knowledge. Hence, Cooperative Learning suggests that learning would be more meaningful if learners should experiment on their own learning instead of listening to the teacher’s lectures. Furthermore, conflicts resolution will help promote students’ cognitive growth (Murray, 1994). Vygotskian theory highlights that learners’ cognition is reinforced when they are in the action of interacting with people in their environment and in cooperation with her/his peers. Therefore, in language learning it is indispensable to create an authentic and communicative environment in which learners can make myriad interactions with different people (Vygotsky, 1978). Eventually, Bandura’s (1971) Social Learning theory stresses the importance of modeling and observing the attitudes, behaviors, and emotional reactions of others. Social learning theory explicates human behaviors in term of continuous interaction between behavioral, cognitive, and environmental impacts. Working in teams, consequently, provides learners with a variety of opportunities to learn from each other and to attain a higher cognition.

### *2.2.2 Enhancing learners’ motivation*

To motivate learners, it is vital to increase learners’s self-confidence, satisfy their needs and interests (Nunan and Lamb, 1996) and create a pleasant, relaxing atmosphere in the classroom (Dornyei and Csizer, 1998). In the Cooperative Learning classroom, a relaxing and comfortable atmosphere is formed and the self-esteem is

strengthened since Cooperative Learning creates a strong social support system in which learners feel respected and connected to one another (Cohen and Willis, 1985). Teachers function as facilitators and interact with learners while circulating through the class and observing learners' interaction (Cooper et al, 1985). Anxiety, moreover, is diminished and self-confidence is enhanced since the class attention is not focused on an individual but on a whole group and when an error is made, it becomes a teaching tool rather than a public criticism (Slavin and Kaweit, 1981). Thus, learners feel free to expose their language without hesitation.

### 2.2.3 Enhancing learners' interaction

There are numerous factors influencing interactive process such as motivation, self-esteem, empathy and anxiety (Brown, 2000). Teaching activities, moreover, impact the process. In a Cooperative Learning classroom, learners have chance to learn various social skills, several structures or activities to work together which can maximize the learners' interactions. Subsequent are certain common Cooperative Learning activities:

- **Think-Pair-Share (TPS)** – This is a cooperative learning strategy developed by Lyman in 1978 and can be defined as “a multi-mode discussion cycle in which students listen to a question or presentation, have time to think individually, talk with each other in pairs, and finally share responses with the larger group” (McTighe and Lyman, 1988: 243). Think-Pair-Share reflects the essential elements for cooperative learning portrayed by Johnson, Johnson, and Holubec (1991) and Kagan (1994).

- **Numbered Heads Together** – This activity is an example of Kagan's (1989) Structural Approach which is based on using content-free ways of managing classroom interaction called structures. Kagan (1989) describes the procedure of Numbered Heads Together as follows:

Step 1: Students number off within teams.

Step 2: The teacher asks a high consensus question.

Step 3: Students put their heads together to make sure everyone on the team knows the answer.

Step 4: The teacher calls a number at random, and students with that number raise their hands to be called upon to answer the question and earn points for their teams.

- **Jigsaw** – The Jigsaw models were developed for narrative materials in the core content areas like social studies, science, literature, and other school subjects in which the goal is to learn concepts rather than skills (Aronson *et al.*, 1978; Slavin, 1986). Students leave their original group and form an “expert group”, in which all persons with the same piece of information get together, study it, and decide how best to teach it to their peers in the original groups. After this is accomplished, students return to their original groups, and each teaches his/her portion of the lesson to the others in the group. Grades are based individual examination performance; however, there is no specific reward for achievement or for the use of cooperative skills (Knight & Bohlmeier in Sharan, 1990: 3)

- **Circle the Sage** – First the teacher polls the class to see which students have a special knowledge to share. For example the teacher may ask who in the class had visited Paris. Those students (the sages) stand and spread out in the room. The teacher then has the rest of the classmates each surround a sage, with no two members of the same team going to the same sage. The sage explains what they know while the classmates listen, ask questions, and take notes. All students then return to their teams. Each in turn, explains what they learned. Because each one has gone to a different sage, they compare notes. If there is disagreement, they stand up as a team. Finally, the disagreements are aired and resolved.

### 2.2.4 Enhancing learners' achievement

Research has found out that cooperative learning strategies enhance students' academic achievement. In 67 studies of the achievement impacts of cooperative learning, 61% found greater achievement in cooperative than in traditionally taught control groups. Positive impacts were encountered in all major subjects, in all grade levels, for a range of age groups from elementary school to adult, and for high, average, and low achievers (Slavin, 1991). In a meta-analysis of 158 studies of eight methods of cooperative learning: Learning Together and Alone, Constructive Controversy, Jigsaw Procedure, Student teams Achievement Divisions (STAD), Team Accelerated Instruction (TAI), Cooperative Integrated Reading & Composition (CIRC), Teams-Games-Tournaments (TGT), and Group Investigation, Johnson and Johnson (1999) report that the current research findings present proof that the achievement levels were significantly higher when cooperative learning methods were applied as compared to individualistic or competitive methods of learning where students work individually to compete against their peers for praise or other forms of rewards and reinforcements. Cooperative learning also has some forms of competition among group members, but these forms of competition are intended to promote cohesiveness among

group members reflecting group goals and individual accountability. Group goals and individual accountability are factors contributing to achievement effects of cooperative learning. Providing students with an incentive to help each other and encourage each other to put forth maximum efforts increases the likelihood that all group members will learn. As well as individual grades and evaluations there is strong proof that group grades and team rewards are most successful for motivation (Slavin, 1995).

### 3. Research Methodology

#### 3.1 Participants

The participants in this study were 77 first-year EFL students (from among a population of 233 first-year students) from the Faculty of English Linguistics at the University of Social Sciences and Humanities in Ho Chi Minh City (USSH-HCMC), 54 females and 23 males, ranging between 18–26 years of age, who were attending a 14-week Reading 2 course.

The selection of these classes, class D and class E which were treated as the control group (CG) and the experimental group (EG) respectively, out of the six first-year EFL classes (see Table 2) was predicated on their near analogy in terms of student interaction and reading proficiency level investigated through the repeated informal observations of the six classes during Reading 1 course and the results of Reading 1 course achievement test with the permission of their teachers, two of whom, were my close colleagues, who helped connect me with the others by the snowball sampling method (Robson, 1993). The students in the experimental group were exposed to Cooperative Learning activities whereas the students in the control group were still immersed in lecture approach alternating with pair work and group work. These classes were selected since it did not contain the misleading elements for the experimentation of Cooperative Learning such as CLT, self-selected groupwork, and high classroom interaction level found in classes B, C, and F, which might lead to the confusion in determining whether students' involvement had been built up from the previous course or was enhanced by Cooperative Learning approach in this course. Classes D and E, on the contrary, carried to this course, a reticence and individualism from years of high school and again from the first course at university. Class A was not considered a good sample for the study as its students, mainly average and low achievers, could not form effective heterogenous groups of abilities, an essential element of Cooperative Learning. Moreover, the choice of a reading class to experiment Cooperative Learning was meant to demonstrate to students the social nature of reading as Meek corroborates that, "for all the reading research we have financed, we are certain only that good readers pick their own way to literacy in the company of friends who encourage and sustain them and that the enthusiasm of a trusted adult can make the difference" (1982: 60).

#### 3.2 Instrumentation and procedure

The study had two phases.

Phase 1: Collecting data on students' interaction level, achievement level, and learning styles

In this phase, class observations recorded through field-notes (designed by the author, see Appendix 1) and collection of the results of achievement test of Reading 1 course were conducted in six first-year EFL classes to select the student sample for this study. Then, a questionnaire survey was employed to explore the distribution of learning styles among the students of Class E (experimental group). Two questionnaires, *Index of Learning Styles (ILS)* suggested by Solomon and Felder (1999), and *Grasha-Reichmann Student Learning Style Scales (GRSLSS)* by Grasha and Reichmann (1996), were reproduced in Vietnamese and delivered to the students. These questionnaires sought to explore the students' information processing modes and social interaction modes respectively, which influenced learner-to-learner interaction patterns. The data on student academic abilities and learning styles helped the grouping process in the experimental phase.

Phase 2: Experimenting Cooperative Learning activities

The following experimental events transpired in the experimental group (Class E).

- Incorporating Cooperative Learning activities into the 10 lessons from *Effective Reading* by Simon Greenall and Michael Swan (1993).
- Observing the lessons to measure the enhancement of student interaction level.
- Discussing with the students during break time or after class to gather their feedback on Cooperative Learning activities.
- Conducting mid-term and final tests to assess student'S achievement.

**The first lesson** was designed to familiarize students with basic elements of Cooperative Learning, grouping process, and jigsaw activity in the subsequent steps:

- Video film 'We classrooms, not I classrooms' to show basic elements of Cooperative Learning
- Word game to find the group: Seven posters, each of which has a title of a song or story. Students are called and 'assigned' a card which contains a title with its words scrambled, unscramble the words to decipher the title and join the group to 'get to know each other'.
- The reading 'Doodles': Jigsaw activity.

In expert groups: analyse a doodle to discover its drawer's characteristic traits, and then read the passage connected to the doodle handed out later; after that, compare what they have discussed on the doodle with what they have read in the passage.

In original groups: tutor group members what each member has discussed and read in expert groups, and collect more ideas from them.

- Out-of-class activity: each group is given a doodle to analyse and write a report on it.

**The second lesson** was structured to remind students about basic elements of Cooperative Learning and involve them in more Cooperative Learning activities in the following steps:

- Report group's analysis of the assigned doodle: Numbered heads activity is used to exclude hitch-hiking and remind students about individual accountability
- Vocabulary section of 'Doodles': Think-pair-share
- The reading 'Shielding Brook': Jigsaw activity
- Write a report on group's favorite famous person

**The subsequent lessons:** When a few high achievers were frequently absent, 'Circle the sage' activity was incorporated to give up the stage to them, which helped increase their self-esteem and interest in being with group and class. It was time to change our role 'from sage on the stage to guide on the side' as King (1993) says.

#### 4. Findings and discussion

Phase 1: Collecting data on students' interaction level, achievement level, and learning styles

The distribution of student learning styles was surveyed and recorded in Table 3 and Table 4 using two types of instruments, social interaction instruments and instruments using multiple models.

Phase 2: Experimenting Cooperative Learning activities

In the first lesson, instantly after video show, cooperative behaviors were modeled to provide students the opportunity to identify and practice them in this 'get to know each other' step. T-charts, as illustrated in Table 5, were also handed out to help students visualize and learn the skills under discussion.

Having predicted the reticence from numerous students of this experimental class, 'question stems' (King, 1993) to 'get to know each other' had been printed on the back of each card to help students verbalize. The observations of this class during Reading 1 course showed that high achievers and low achievers tended to be loners in the groups, the cards with the icon 'red band' like that of the captain in the football team, the 'leader cards', had been allocated to high achievers, and were then pointed out by the researcher. Simultaneously, 'red bands' were distributed to these 'group leaders' to inspire them to lead loners to the group noise. At once, two problems emerged. One captain decided to return the red band, and the other was not welcomed by his group, who preferred to hand-pick another member of the group. However, it is the right time to discuss with students the advantages that they can derive from rotating roles assignment when problems take place. After the discussion on role rotation, the captain who returned the red band accepted the role. The researcher was going to allow the group who refused our selected leader to choose the leader they preferred when the latter volunteered to act as the assistant to the former. This voluntary assistant instantly got *a star* as a point in cooperative skill achievement for both himself and his group, which functions as a reminder of positive interdependence and individual accountability. According to Johnson, Johnson and Holubec (1990), this is extrinsic reward interdependence; here rewards are grades and recognition from the teacher and peers. Fredric Jones also advocates "using incentive systems to motivate responsibility, good behavior, and productive work" (qtd. in Charles, 1999).

The extent to which students interacted, while they were working in expert or original groups, varied from group to group. When high achievers were observed to be dominating group discussions, numbered heads activity was launched and it was found out that 36% of the students whose numbers were randomly called were hitchhikers.

The second lesson plan was upset by absentees, bringing the population of three groups down to four, one group down to three, and one group down to two. This absence can be construed either as students' quiet resistance due to the lack of encouragement to challenge their authorities or seniors (O'Sullivan, 1997: 51) or as students' apprehension resulting from their linguistic deficiencies or teachers' intolerance of students' slow movement toward new approach. Students were not provided with the sufficient amount of time to learn abilities to the extent expected. Cooperative Learning is likely to be quite a departure from what students are traditionally used to in the college classroom, so without students' spending sufficient time learning, the academic benefits of Cooperative Learning will be limited (Stahl, 1992). Thus, the reason above rather than hitchhiking should be the appropriate explanation for the poor demonstration of few students in numbered heads activity.

Kloss (1994) points out that the resistance from certain students is a natural part of their journey from dependence to intellectual autonomy on which they need our company. The researcher started to slow down from this moment and invited students' inner thoughts on the new approach in spoken or written form during breaktime or at the end of the lesson. As to the first lesson, several students showed their preference for quiz show in which groups analyse each other's self-designed doodles rather than our assigned ones. Group games may encourage students to look forward to other group learning activities, and success here will build confidence in the ability to work in groups. A number of students expressed a need for certain amount of teacher lecture explaining complex structures or paraphrasing inaccessible expressions or paragraphs. According to Smith and Waller (1995), Cooperative Learning Lecture (see Figure 1) should be used as a transitional phase from lecturing to Cooperative Learning.

Phone calls and e-mails together with handouts to update missing students on in-class lessons and their group assignments were delivered to them in order to make them not feel ignored. Their group members were also asked to encourage them to come back to class giving them a feeling of belonging and a motivation to come to school that they might not have had before.

**First seven weeks.** Group activities frequently varied so that students did not know what was coming from one class to the next; and thus did not feel bored. Once their inborn curiosity about the lesson was sustained, students were still motivated to come to class. Dev (1997) states that "an assigned task with zero interest value is less likely to motivate the student than is a task that arouses interest and curiosity" (p. 13).

The variety of Cooperative Learning activities came in useful for exposing students to diverse reading strategies, ranging from simple ones such as guessing the meaning of an unfamiliar word from context, to more comprehensive ones such as summarizing (Janzen, 1996). Strategy training comes from the assumption that success in learning primarily depends on appropriate strategy use and that unsuccessful learners can improve their learning by being trained to use effective strategies (Dansereau, 1985). Sequential learners, who took up 85% of the students, initially had difficulty absorbing these holistic strategies; however, group heterogeneity really worked when global learners of the groups accompanied their sequential partners through the strategies.

As shown in Table 6, at the end of first seven weeks, the extent of student interaction increased over 40% compared with the first day, and absence rate reduced to 11%. The improvement in midterm test result demonstrated student capability to use reading strategies, and above all, their cooperativeness, the 'neglected heart', returned to them. However, the presentation of group projects in which each student was randomly asked to present a particular portion of their group project revealed 22% poor performers.

At this phase, the researcher cited Holdaway as confirmation that what the students in the experimental group were doing was right.

There is no greater source of inefficiency in school methods of teaching language than the dependence on competition as a motivator. The real business of learning is concerned with performing better than yesterday or last week: it has absolutely nothing to do with performing better than someone else. (1980: 18)

The researcher confirmed that the students were performing better than the day before. The groups, after learning the lesson 'Burgled seven times', even wrote and acted out the plays on searching the burglars or trying them in court. It was interesting to see the captain bands circulating among group members smoothly through Cooperative Learning activities.

**End of the course.** In the midterm test result, the grade distribution in the experimental group was reasonably bell-shaped, with more students earning 'Pass' than any other grades; however, the final grade distribution was

markedly skewed toward higher grades as displayed in Table 7. In the final group project, designing a *travel guide to Vietnam* predicated on the reading *Getting China cracked*, students made a remarkable progress with the number of poor project presenters reduced to 5%.

The course evaluations were positive and most students (89.19%) in the experimental group made strong statements about how much Cooperative Learning improved their understanding of the course material. The course was closed by a *Farewell activity* in each group in which groupmates thank each other for their help, sum up what has been learned about working in groups, write “letters of reference” to be given to members of the person’s new group in the next course, and take group pictures. One student commented, “This class is different from any I’ve been in before. Usually you just end up knowing a couple of classmates – here I know everyone in the class. Working in Cooperative Learning groups does this.”

### Concluding remarks

Dewey (1938) contends that one of the philosophies of education is not to merely acquire information but rather to bring that learning to bear on our everyday actions and behaviors. Consistent with this goal, Cooperative Learning prepares learners to be effective participants not only in their classrooms today but also in their workplaces tomorrow. Nonetheless, it is quite a great change from teacher dependence to learner interdependence, from teacher tutoring to peer tutoring, and from learning by collecting to learning by sharing; thus, learners and teachers need to be patient and persistent as they explore ways to use the power of cooperation (Baloche, 1998). Learner resistance in the first few weeks of the study displays teachers’ rush in incorporating Cooperative Learning activities, which, according to Johnson *et al.* in *Circles of Learning* (1993), should be structured layer after layer, much like peeling an onion, until the heart is reached. However, learner gains in the rest of the study demonstrate that Vietnamese learners are open to change and Vietnamese EFL teachers should create effective activities for learners to immerse themselves in talking cooperatively instead of talking individualistically in the classrooms.

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Table 1. Cooperative vs. Traditional Groups

Cooperative	Traditional
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Positive interdependence</li> <li>• Individual accountability</li> <li>• Heterogeneous</li> <li>• Teacher selected groups</li> <li>• Cooperative skill instruction</li> <li>• Concern for peer learning</li> <li>• Shared leadership</li> <li>• Task and maintenance emphasized</li> <li>• Student reflection and goal setting</li> <li>• Teacher observation and feedback</li> <li>• Group problem-solving interactor</li> <li>• Group processes their effectiveness</li> <li>• Equal opportunity for success</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• No positive interdependence</li> <li>• No individual accountability</li> <li>• Homogeneous</li> <li>• Student selected groups</li> <li>• No cooperative skill instruction</li> <li>• Little concern for peer learning</li> <li>• One appointed leader</li> <li>• Only task emphasized</li> <li>• No student reflection and goal setting</li> <li>• No teacher observation and feedback</li> <li>• Group problem-solving intervener</li> <li>• No group processing</li> <li>• Uniform standard for success</li> </ul>

Table 2. Class description

Class	Class size	Teachers's teaching approach	Student interaction level	Results of Reading 1 achievement test
Class A	42 students	Lecture approach	Low interaction level (about 20%)	Excellent: 0.00% Good: 9.52% Pass: 59.52% Fail: 30.95% Average score: 4.7
Class B	39 students	Lecture approach alternating with self-selected group work	Average interaction level (about 60%)	Excellent: 5.13% Good: 7.69% Pass: 82.05% Fail: 5.13% Average score: 6.13
Class C	37 students	Communicative language teaching (CLT) with alternative self-selected pair and group work	High interaction level (about 70%)	Excellent: 8.11% Good: 16.22% Pass: 67.57% Fail: 8.11% Average score: 6.99
Class D	37 students	Lecture approach alternating with pairwork and group work	Low interaction level (about 35%)	Excellent: 2.70% Good: 10.81% Pass: 70.27% Fail: 16.22% Average score: 5.37
Class E	40 students	Lecture approach alternating with pairwork and (rarely) group work	Low interaction level (about 30%)	Excellent: 2.50% Good: 10.00% Pass: 67.50% Fail: 20.00% Average score: 5.23
Class F	38 students	Lecture approach with alternative self-selected pair and group work	Average interaction level (about 55%)	Excellent: 5.26% Good: 7.89% Pass: 78.95% Fail: 7.89% Average score: 6.34

Notes: Excellent: 8-10 points on the 10-point grading scale  
 Good: 7-<8 points on the 10-point grading scale  
 Pass: 5-<7 points on the 10-point grading scale  
 Fail: under 5 points on the 10-point grading scale

Table 3. Social Interaction Instruments

*Grasha-Reichmann Student Learning Style Scales (GRSLSS)*

Learning style dimensions			N	%
Avoidant/ Participative	Avoidant	take little responsibility for learning	23	57.50
	Participative	accept responsibility for self-learning and relate well to peers	17	42.50
Competitive/ Collaborative	Competitive	suspicious of peers	26	65.00
	Collaborative	enjoys working harmoniously with peers	14	35.00
Dependent/ Independent	Dependent	become frustrated when facing new challenges not directly addressed in the classroom	31	77.50
	Independent	prefers to work alone and requires little direction	9	22.50

Table 4. Instruments using multiple models

*Index of Learning Styles (ILS)*

Learning style dimensions			n	%
Perception	Sensing	prefer to learn facts and follow established processes	17	42.50
	Intuitive	prefer abstractions and learning by discovery	23	57.50
Input	Visual	prefer to learn through pictures, diagrams, demonstrations, etc.	31	77.50
	Verbal	prefer to learn through written and spoken words	9	22.50
Processing	Active	prefer to do something active with information, such as discuss, apply, or explain	21	52.50
	Reflective	prefer to think about it	19	47.50
Understanding	Sequential	prefer to learn in linear steps	34	85.00
	Global	absorb material almost randomly, put things together in novel ways	6	15.00

Table 5. T-Chart Encouraging Others

What does it look like?	What does it sound like?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• looking into someone’s eye</li> <li>• leaning toward someone</li> <li>• paying attention</li> <li>• smiling</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “What do you think of this idea?”</li> <li>• “Tuan, I’m confused, can you help?”</li> <li>• “How would you explain this?”</li> <li>• “Would you like a shot at this?”</li> </ul>

Table 6. Student change after 7 weeks

Class	Participation level	Interaction level	Achievement test	Group project
Class D (CG)	82%	> 40%	Excellent: 5.41% Good: 16.22% Pass: 70.27% Fail: 8.11% Average score: 6.02	34% poor presenters
Class E (EG)	89%	> 45%	Excellent: 5.00% Good: 22.50% Pass: 62.50% Fail: 10.00% Average score: 6.16	22% poor presenters

Table 7. Student change in the remaining half of the course

Class	Participation level	Interaction level	Achievement test	Group project
Class D (CG)	78%	> 50%	Excellent: 8.11% Good: 24.32% Pass: 59.46% Fail: 8.11% Average score: 6.45	28% poor presenters
Class E (EG)	96%	> 70%	Excellent: 17.50% Good: 47.50% Pass: 32.50% Fail: 2.50% Average score: 7.19	5% poor presenters

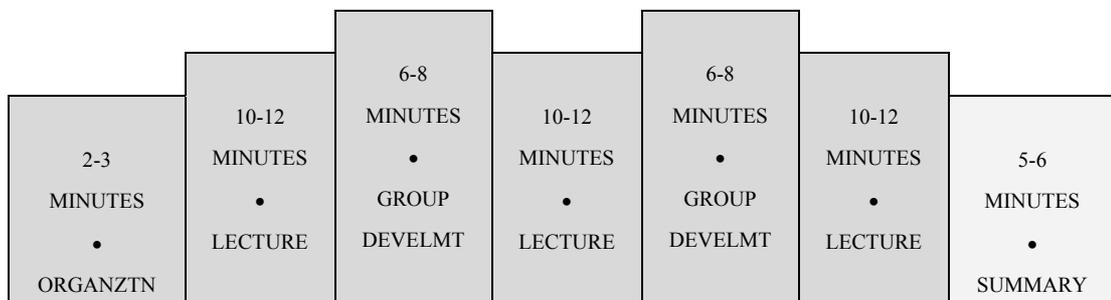


Figure 1. Segmentation of the cooperative learning lecture to promote active involvement on the part of the students in a one-hour class period



