

## Cooperative Listening as a Means to Promote Strategic Listening Comprehension

Cooperative learning has been part of the language learning domain for at least two decades. The approach principally aims to enhance the quality of learning by having learners cooperate in small groups or pairs (Fitzgibbon 2001). It is a mode of learning that promotes mutual helpfulness and active participation from all students in solving a problem (Jacobs and Hall 1994; Christison 1994) and is in harmony with strategic learning, whereby learners use their cognitive resources to master a particular language skill as efficiently and effectively as possible. Unfortunately, as Oxford (2002) notes, efforts in strategy training have focused on cognitive and metacognitive strategies to the exclusion of social and affective strategies, such as cooperative learning. This is unfortunate because the strategies employed in cooperative learning can be powerful tools for students as they attempt to master the demanding language skill of listening comprehension.

Teaching listening comprehension is undoubtedly a challenging task for

teachers. The fleeting nature of sound makes it hard for listeners to focus attention on a particular word or phrase for detailed analysis. So, it is understandable that many teachers slip into testing the learners' listening comprehension rather than teaching them how to listen effectively. Field (2002) points out that teachers tend to concentrate on the product of listening when they should be interested in the process. Since the 1960s, he notes, teachers have tended to begin their listening comprehension lessons by preparing learners for the vocabulary they will hear in the recorded material. After listening to the material, the students then are required to answer some comprehension questions, followed by pronunciation practice.

Recent publications in the area of listening comprehension have featured new ways of teaching this skill. As Nunan (2002a) notes, these new techniques focus more on training learners to utilize effective strategies for listening to spoken messages. These strategies are best learned in an environment

of cooperative learning, which enables students to work jointly with their classmates to comprehend spoken discourse and then benefit each other by sharing the strategies they employed during the listening. This article discusses the steps in the cooperative listening technique and the advantages of this approach. It also notes and responds to arguments against use of the technique.

### **Detailed steps of the cooperative listening technique**

The cooperative listening technique is best used for teaching a group of learners at intermediate-level proficiency in English. It should be integrated with a regular session, which may be held once a week in an 18-hour listening comprehension course so as to make the learners aware of the value of strategy exchanges for this language skill. The technique consists of the following steps:

1. The teacher divides the learners into pairs or groups of four and gives them written questions on the content of the material they are about to hear.
2. The teacher tells the learners that they are to listen to the recorded speech passage, make note of whatever they can get from it, and try their best to answer the questions. The teacher tells the students to use whatever strategies they can to accomplish the task and to remember those strategies. The speech passage is then played.
3. At the conclusion of the listening session, the teacher has the learners share with their partners or group members any information they got from the recorded passage, including the answers to the questions. The teacher also instructs the students to tell each other what strategies they used to understand the spoken passage.
4. Each pair or group reports the results of their cooperation. The report should contain (1) the ideas they successfully got from hearing the passage and (2) the strategies they used to accomplish the listening task. The teacher may write down these strategies on the board.
5. The teacher plays the recorded passage again to let the learners verify their answers, encourages discussion of

the effectiveness of their strategies, and highlights some strategies the teacher considers effective. At this point, some of the learners may be asked to give a more detailed explanation of the strategies they used so their classmates can use them as models. The discussion should be guided in such a way that less able learners can learn as much as possible from the more proficient and effective strategy users.

I have applied this technique in a listening comprehension class for mid-intermediate adult learners, and it has successfully promoted interaction among the learners as well as awareness and enhancement of their listening strategies.

### **Expanding learners' use of listening comprehension strategies**

The cooperative listening technique discussed above offers advantages over traditional pedagogy on listening. First, it allows weak learners to learn from more able learners how to listen strategically and what strategies are effective for comprehending spoken discourse. Second, it gives the learners opportunities to let other class members, including the teacher, know about the strategies they have been using. Finally, the feedback and comments provided help the students confirm or enhance the effectiveness of their strategies.

The major advantage of this cooperative listening technique is that it reveals a range of strategies that the learners have been using, which then serves as a starting point from which the teacher can classify the strategies as metacognitive, cognitive, and social/affective types, and it enables discussion of the benefits of using these types of strategies. The teacher can point out that planning, for instance, is a metacognitive act that prepares the learners for the upcoming task, that taking quick notes using a mind map is an example of a cognitive strategy, and that sharing information or exchanging strategies with other classmates is a kind of social strategy.

After the reported strategies have accumulated over several classroom sessions, the teacher will probably have identified patterns of strategy use by weak learners and more advanced learners. At this point the students can be shown how to orchestrate those strategies into a constellation of strategic acts that

are most effective for understanding spoken discourse. The teacher may draw attention to a few strategies that comprise a series of strategic acts and gradually guide the students to start using those effective strategies. This can be done by highlighting a series of acts that starts with students thinking about ideas relevant to the topic prior to listening, then listening to the entire utterance, and then immediately taking notes using a mind map.

To understand how the whole technique is done in practice, it is useful to examine the listening strategies reported by two groups of adult, mid-intermediate EFL learners in my class. They are shown below:

*Group I:*

1. Listening carefully
2. Thinking in English
3. Using previous knowledge about the topic
4. Taking quick notes

*Group II:*

1. Catching the key words
2. Thinking about the topic before listening to activate relevant background knowledge
3. Listening to the entire sentence, utterance, or unit of ideas before taking notes (If the notetaking is done in the middle of the utterance, some of the messages may be lost.)
4. Imagining the actions when asking someone for directions
5. Reading the questions first to prepare oneself for the relevant ideas in the speech
6. Taking hints from the speaker based on loudness, pitch, intonation, and speech rate (Slow speech or heavier stress indicate that some important messages are being delivered; faster speech indicates the delivery of not-very-important points.)

It is clear that Group II used more sophisticated and diverse strategies than did Group I. The teacher can exploit such a gap to help members of Group I learn the more effective strategies. This can be done by showing, for instance, that the strategy of reading comprehension questions shortly before listening can alert the listeners to the relevant information in the speech that comes later. The students can be told that they can listen carefully for key words, a strategy they can prepare for by think-

ing about the topic prior to listening and by bringing to mind ideas related to the topic. The teacher may facilitate the process by having the students brainstorm to arrive at the key words, an activity that helps learners activate relevant “slots” in their mind, which they can later fill in with details from the listening passage.

The teacher may also explain that taking hints from the speaker’s suprasegmental features (intonation, pitch, speech rate, loudness, stress) is a strategy likely to facilitate their comprehension. To raise awareness of the value of orchestrated strategies, the teacher can point out that strategies 2, 3, and 6 of Group II can be executed in a sequential fashion to form a more powerful array of strategies.

An important advantage of the cooperative listening approach is the favorable learning atmosphere that ensues. When the learners gather in groups or pairs to work out the spoken messages together, the bond between them strengthens. Cooperative learning gives them the opportunity to share their listening strategies and learn new ones from their classmates, leading to an environment conducive to learning.

The cooperative listening technique complies with the characteristics of good strategy training proposed by Oxford (2002), who states that effective strategy training should be explicit, integrated into a typical classroom activity, spread over a period of time, and lead to an orchestration of strategies.

**Issues and answers**

To get the most out of the listening technique described above, teachers should be alert to at least three possible issues associated with it. First, as is commonly acknowledged, the automatic and subconscious nature of strategies makes it difficult for learners to verbalize the strategies they have been employing (Matsumoto 1993). All learners, proficient or not, use strategies, but they may not be adept at naming them or bringing them to their consciousness. But it is precisely this difficulty that provides the rationale for using cooperative listening. The nature of the group task compels learners to bring their subconscious strategies to a level of consciousness and, by so doing, lets others learn from these strategies. In his research, Nunan (2002b) demonstrated that the very act of instructing learners to recall

their learning processes resulted in their verbal report on their strategies.

Another argument is that some strategies are specific to particular individuals; that is, not every strategy works best for all learners. For example, a student in my class used “imagining” strategy to understand a spoken message having to do with asking for and giving directions. He argued that by imagining himself to be a person asking for direction he could conjure a more vivid image of the situation, which in turn helped him grasp the meaning of the spoken message. Some students commented that this strategy would never work for them; they would rather use inferring strategy, which they claimed was also successful. This discrepancy among learners should be taken as evidence that strategies vary in effectiveness, depending on the learner.

Acknowledging that some strategies may work differently for different learners does not, however, diminish the value of those strategies known to be effective for almost all kinds of learners. Students should be made aware of this and be encouraged not only to maintain their own strategies, but also to adopt other potentially effective strategies that their classmates have been using. Consider, for example, the strategy of word-by-word translation, which is typically used by less skilled learners (Nyikos, as cited by Oxford 2002, 126). Learners using this strategy are overly concerned about individual words and take great pains to understand them in the belief that getting the meaning of every word is the key to successful listening comprehension. What usually happens, however, is that in their effort to catch the individual words, they get overwhelmed by the speed of the speech and miss the meaning of the utterance as a whole. Through cooperative listening these learners can have the opportunity to see that their more skilled peers listen to the utterance in its entirety as a way of more quickly inferring its meaning. The more able learners in my listening class who used this strategy (#3 in Group II) were able to articulate the rationale for using it. They were clearly aware that by listening to the whole utterance rather than focusing on individual details they could infer the message and still keep up with the fast-flowing spoken information. Their observation is supported by a large body of research indicating,

as Oxford (2002, 126) put it, that “effective L2 learners are aware of the strategies they use and why they employ them.” Augmented by some direct explanation by the teacher, the cooperative listening will reveal to less able learners the inefficiency of their word-by-word listening, the effectiveness of alternative strategies used by more proficient classmates, and the importance of knowing the purpose of every strategy they use.

Another issue associated with cooperative listening has to do with differing learning styles and whether students with different styles can work cooperatively with each other. Oxford (2003, 2) defines learning styles as “[T]he general approaches that students use in acquiring a new language.” The approaches encompass learners’ predispositions toward extroversion or introversion, field dependence or field-independence, analytic or global processing, cooperation or competition, and tolerance for ambiguity (Oxford 1989). An increasing body of research suggests that “learning style has a significant influence on students’ choice of learning strategies, and ...both styles and strategies affect learning outcomes” (Oxford 1989, 1). This implies that the learning styles of students determine their preferences for interacting with their classmates and the types of learning strategies they will employ to accomplish the tasks at hand.

With respect to differing learning styles, the groupings may accidentally put members with contrasting learning styles in one group, resulting in the potential for low cooperation among them. For instance, field-independent learners, who are typically skillful at picking up details from a complicated background (Oxford 1989), may be inclined to deploy analytical strategies that are not in harmony with the more global approach of field-dependent learners. Oxford (1989, 1) apparently agrees, noting that “field independent learners show significant advantages over field-dependent learners in analytical tasks.” Extroverted learners, characterized by the enthusiasm to interact with other people, may not get along well with their introverted classmates, who are more inward-looking and tend to do things on their own. Cooperative listening may not suit learners with this latter style.

To avert such problems, teachers can quickly identify students’ learning preferences

through a brief questionnaire administered at the beginning of the course. They can then work with the learners to arrange the most suitable groupings within the class. Alternatively, teachers may let the learners arrange themselves in groups or pairs. Students with relatively similar styles will usually get themselves together in one group.

Rather than view different learning styles as a problem, the teacher can turn the conflicting learning styles into an advantage by assuring the students that the purpose of cooperative listening is to bring up their different strategies so that they can complement each other. Thus, analytic learners can learn how global learners approach the listening task using their global strategies (guessing, inferring, predicting), and start using these strategies to complement their existing style. Likewise, a usually solitary learner may see the worth of group-oriented strategies by more sociable classmates. If this viewpoint is adopted, the learners' different learning preferences will no longer be an obstacle. In the class that I taught, there was one student who shunned group work in the beginning sessions. However, as the sessions continued and the learners engaged in more intense cooperative listening techniques, the student began to show a willingness to share his work and ideas with other students. I noticed a healthy exchange of strategies between those who preferred listening to the whole speech before tackling the questions and those who preferred skimming through the questions before listening. The latter group gradually learned from the former how the "listening first" strategy helped them concentrate better on the flow of spoken ideas. In short, cooperative listening apparently gave them the opportunity not only to refine their strategies through mutually beneficial exchanges of strategies, but also to adopt a new attitude toward learning as a social activity. This conforms with what Oxford (1989, 2) states: "In studies where students were taught specifically to be cooperative, results revealed vast improvement in language skills as well as increased self-esteem, motivation, altruism, and positive attitude toward others."

### Conclusion

This article presents a technique for teaching listening comprehension that combines cooperative learning with strategic learning. It

assigns learners to pairs or small groups, and then gets them to cooperate in comprehending the messages of a recorded speech. While listening, the learners employ some strategies and keep them in mind so they can later share them with their classmates after listening. The results of this activity are a range of strategies used by students with a variety of learning styles. These strategies are then shown to the class. At this stage, the learners have the opportunity to assess the effectiveness of their own strategies, adopt other strategies to complement theirs, and explain why they use a particular strategy. Under the guidance of the teacher, weaker learners can see the limitations of their listening strategies and adopt those that more proficient classmates have been using with some success. The teacher can encourage the use of different types of strategies, increase the learners' awareness of having purposeful strategies, and show the students how to orchestrate the strategies to achieve a good result. An added advantage of this listening comprehension technique is the creation of a learning atmosphere conducive to feelings of togetherness among the students.

Possible obstacles to this technique include the difficulty learners have verbalizing their automatic mental processes, the difference among some strategies in terms of effectiveness for different learners, and the potential incompatibility among learners with different learning preferences. These potential obstacles should not dissuade teachers from implementing the listening technique since, arguably, the very cooperative nature of the technique is likely to overcome such difficulties.

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