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ABSTRACT

This chapter describes a program evaluation of cooperative learning in a private language school devoted to teaching English to Japanese students. Student resistance to cooperative learning was due to a lack of training of students, a lack of understanding of basic cooperative learning principles by administrators, and a lack of cooperative learning techniques on the part of teachers. Students often interpreted the greater teacher reticence as negligence or laziness when the poorly trained teacher attempted to use cooperative learning methods. Students took this as a cue to do less than their best. Researchers have emphasized that a properly structured cooperative learning lesson resembles that of a well-prepared traditional lesson, in that it has clearly defined roles for the students and the teacher. Teachers should decide how much cooperative learning can be successfully incorporated into their classrooms after evaluating their students' learning environment and capability for taking on the responsibility for their own learning. (Contains 26 references.) (KFT)

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Chapter 5

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Implementing Cooperative Learning at a Language School

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In 1989, Lee wrote that English education was approaching a national obsession as revealed in both the public and private sectors, and this phenomenon still remains in Japanese society. In the public sector, the Ministry of Education has invited more than 4,000 Assistant Language Teachers (ALTs) to public schools (Scholefield, 1996).

In the private sector, there are more than 20,000 *eikaiwa* [English conversation] classrooms. The most important goal for these private language schools is to provide an efficient language curriculum in which the students can have ample opportunities to improve their communicative and interactive skills. The majority of students who study at such schools are university students and high school students who are not content with large-sized classrooms or the traditional teaching approach of *yakudoku* [translation tasks] at their home schools. Classroom sizes in private language schools are varied; however, small-sized classrooms (8-10 students) at private language schools are always attractive to the customers and bring business success to them.

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Even though both students and teachers at such language schools highly expect communicative and interactive activities in the classrooms, Japanese students are noted to be silent in the classrooms, and this inactive attitude deprives the students of the opportunity to develop oral language skills (Bannai, 1981; Sato, 1982; Tomizawa, 1974). What are the causes of this attitudinal problem of Japanese learners? It is often stated that lack of communication skills and inadequate learning experiences based on the traditional translation method in Japan seems to be the main causes of students' inactive attitude and lack of competence in English production (Hino, 1988; Kawasumi, 1975; Tazaki, 1978; Tajima, 1978). Researchers argue that if students were taught English as a medium of communication in a more effective manner, their communication skills might be enhanced. However, it is important to judge whether students are fully ready to be given such empowerment. It is unlikely that all success stories in the English as a Second Language (ESL) contexts can be easily copied or transferred into an English as a Foreign Language (EFL) context, particularly in the English classrooms in Japan.

Background of the School

The Importance of Needs Analyses

The school chosen for the study reported here is a medium-sized private language school with 4,000 students enrolled as part-time students. The largest population among the students at the school consists of false beginners (87.8%), who have never studied English communicatively; it was assumed that they have some foundation in basic grammar and vocabulary through the minimum of six years of English education. The majority of the students are university and high school students (75%), and male (67.5%), and their reason for learning English is that they believe the skill will be beneficial for their future careers (67%). The majority of the students (95%) desire to improve their communicative skills of English at this institute mainly because they think that their home schools don't provide an efficient curriculum to improve these skills.

The classes are arranged by reservation; students have to reserve a class each time. Under this reservation system, students have a different teacher and study with different students in each class. Compared to a fixed schedule, this reservation system attracts busy students so that many language schools use this flexible system.

A needs analysis at this institute is conducted at least every three months using such techniques as interviews, questionnaires, and direct observations of students' performance on an oral test which is used both as a placement test and as a diagnostic test. These frequent needs analyses generate a large quan-

tity and a wide variety of data. Such information provides a useful starting point for developing or evaluating a language program. It is believed that the determination of students' needs is an ongoing process.

A 10-minute long interview is given to all the new students when they enter the institute, mainly to find out how they perceive the learning of English. The questions given to them are open-ended questions and the interviewers fill in a diagnostic form for each student. The questions are asked in Japanese during the interview and asked in a random order to extract the new students' perceptions as much as possible.

Valuable information was obtained from the records and the results of interviews. The following translated response represents the perceptions of most of the beginning level students. Translation of a verbatim account have been used below in order to retain the original tone of the interview.

Beginning level student (33 year old housewife):

I get so nervous when I speak English particularly with a native speaker. I wish I could talk to them more comfortably. My English ability is not so bad because English was my favorite subject and English was my major at the university. But when it comes to communication with foreigners in English, it is a different story. I sweat a lot and my heart beats faster when I speak English. I really want to change my attitude, so I chose to come to this school.

The students' perceptions and attitudes toward learning English based on this data were reported to the school authority by the staff who conducted the interviews. The report was summarized as follows:

1. Students are not self-directed learners. They are passive learners and English was learned only for passing examinations and tests.
2. They are not responsible learners. They are not aware of any efficient study skills.
3. Their motivation to learn communicative English is rather high, but they feel strong anxiety about communicating in English.
4. They believe that their basic knowledge is poor and they are not confident in their own potential ability to learn English.
5. They have been disappointed with the English education they received so far.

Nunan (1988) stated that adult learners are profoundly influenced by past learning experiences, present concerns, and future prospects. He found that they are less interested in learning for learning's sake than in learning to achieve some immediate or not too distant life goal. Combining the results of the needs

analysis with Nunan's observation, the following immediate objectives were set in the new curriculum and they were stated in the teachers' manual:

1. The students should retain responsibility for the aims and objectives of the course.
2. The students should monitor the development of the course and its continuing relevance to their own objectives.
3. The students should assess themselves. They should be aware of how well they achieve learning tasks, and have a reasonable idea of their own level of proficiency.
4. The students should take an active role in learning. In a conversational classroom setting this may be manifested in the learner seeking out every opportunity to understand, practice, and learn (Carver & Dickinson, 1982, p. 15).
5. The learners should be able to establish their own efficient learning styles.
6. The students should enjoy communication using English.
7. The students should feel a great joy in their learning process.
8. The students should utilize their potential linguistic abilities when they express themselves in English.
9. The students should feel comfortable speaking English.
10. The students should be able to make their own sentences having a strong desire to communicate; they should not be following exactly the contents given in the textbook.

Increasing the Students' Talking Time

Striving for the means to reach the above-mentioned goals and objectives, the administrators began to feel the necessity of increasing the students' talking time. A simple mathematical equation was made; to have the students feel more comfortable speaking English equates with increasing their talking time. In the traditional class with the teacher in front calling on one student at a time, students are not given sufficient time to practice because there are so many students to call on. There are only six students in one class, but still the time constraint on students' talking time was one of the problems to be solved. A simple calculation shows that each student's talking time in a 50-minute class is less than 10 minutes. It is unlikely that they would achieve their desired performance in such a classroom environment. In order to increase students' talking time, the administrators reached the conclusion that cooperative learning (CL) would be an effective way to improve the quantity of students' talk.

Studies on teacher talk have been done by Gaies (1977, 1979), Henzl (1979), Long (1983), and Long and Sato (1983). Long (1983) notes that in language classrooms, tutorial (or display) questions are more frequent than in natural

settings. The same researchers note that comprehension checks and requests for clarification are less frequent in classrooms than in natural settings, which they feel is due to the predominance of one-way communication in classrooms. The direct observation of classes revealed that teachers tend to dominate the talk in classrooms with the result that students have few opportunities to speak. In order to increase natural settings in the classroom, the administrators believed in the importance of the role of the teachers as facilitators, not as a symbol of authority dominating talking opportunities.

Training Given to the Teachers

During the teacher training, this new role of the teacher as a facilitator was positively accepted by the teachers at the institute and a consensus was reached that teachers should democratize the classrooms and give more autonomy to the students with this new communicative approach. In an affirming and encouraging small group, learners feel free to talk in provisional, exploratory ways. At the training sessions for the school, teachers were introduced to the past empirical studies on CL by Bejarano (1987), Good and Brophy (1987), Nunan (1992), and Slavin (1983). Bejarano (1987) compared the effects of two small-group CL approaches to a whole-class method on academic achievement and found that students taught with cooperative techniques showed significantly higher achievement than did students in the whole-class method. Slavin (1983, p. 128) emphasizes the benefits of CL as follows:

The research done up to the present has shown enough positive effects of CL, on a variety of outcomes, to force us to reexamine traditional instructional practices. We can no longer ignore the potential power of the peer group, perhaps the one remaining free resource for improving schools.

The research comparing CL to competitive learning has generally been positive (Nunan, 1992). Good and Brophy (1987) suggest additional benefits of CL; although the positive effects of CL on achievement appear to be basically motivational, the key is not motivation to win competitions against other teams, but motivation to assist one's teammates to meet their individual goals and thus insure that the team as a whole will do well. With the evidence suggesting the benefits of CL and theoretical support, the school launched the new innovative classroom organization plan.

The teachers were asked to read three academic papers which showed the effects of CL. Nunan's (1992) book, *Collaborative Language Learning and Teaching* was recommended as an additional reference. Since there were 34 Japanese teachers and 43 native-speaking instructors (40% full-time, 60% part-time) working for the institute at the time, four two-hour training sessions were

offered and the teachers were obliged to participate in one of these sessions. During the training, teachers viewed a demonstration tape which aimed to show how CL actually works. The training video was designed under an artificial situation using the staff as students. The basic principles and philosophy of CL were well accepted by the teachers and the video tape was useful in visualizing the tasks and activities. The teachers' positive expectations about outcomes and their excitement seemed to be promising for the use of CL at the school.

CL Activities

Existing textbooks and materials continued to be used, adding CL tasks and activities. In the previous lesson plans, teachers dealt with each student on a one-to-one basis for most of the activities even though there were six students in the classroom. There was little time given to each student to interact with the teacher and there were no interactive activities among the students. Each lesson consisted of five steps:

1. Introducing new vocabulary and expressions in the lesson.
2. Homework review by asking comprehension questions on the text in the unit.
3. Grammar explanation of the sample dialog.
4. Conversation practice of the sample dialog.
5. Role play practice.

CL activities were incorporated into the tasks in steps 2 (homework review), 4 (conversation practice), and 5 (role play practice).

The teacher doesn't directly interact with the students; instead he or she acts as a facilitator by setting a task for each activity. The teacher moves around to see how each group or pair are doing and helps only when the students get stuck in doing the given task.

A Sign of "Tissue Rejection" From Students

Approximately two months after this new method was implemented, we began to hear complaints from the students. A middle-aged female student sent a long letter to the institute explaining why she was not happy with the new teaching method. The following is a translated summary of her letter:

I was looking forward to having plenty of opportunities to practice English with native speaking instructors at this institute. That's why I chose this school to improve my English. But your teaching approach has changed a great deal since two months ago. I used to enjoy listening to the teachers' responses even though they were talking to the other students. But now all we have to do is to talk to the other students in the classroom. I

don't think it is fun and it is very boring. I can't continue smooth conversations with other students whose English is as poor as my English. How can we keep our conversation going when we are just looking at each other remaining silent? Some teachers are looking out the windows and I think they are neglecting their duties. Teachers should pay more attention to students all the time and we have the right to talk to our teachers. I am not at this school to practice with other students. I am here to practice with teachers.

Several similar complaints were subsequently heard. Hoyle (1970, p. 2) uses the term "tissue rejection" to describe what happens when curriculum innovation does not become an effectively functioning part of the system. The students' complaints were a sign of this tissue rejection; therefore, the administrators were forced to immediately conduct a survey to evaluate the curriculum.

The Purpose of the Evaluation

Nunan (1986) argues that no curriculum can claim to be truly learner-centered unless the learners' subjective needs and perceptions relating to the processes of learning are taken into account. He also states that there is anecdotal evidence to suggest that learners are more immediately concerned with the appropriacy of learning processes than with learning content, and it would seem that it is in relation to processes that most teacher/learner conflict occurs. The data derived from the curriculum evaluation revealed much about classroom realities of which the administrators and teachers had been unaware.

The purpose of the evaluation was to collect and analyze precise information on how the students were perceiving CL activities. The administrators needed accurate information to decide whether they should continue using CL or terminate it and go back to the previous teacher-centered method. They felt a strong responsibility to take prompt action to alleviate the students' frustration. The following questions were focused on in the formative evaluation:

1. Have CL activities been effectively implemented by the teachers?
2. If not, what are the causes?
3. What are the students' and teachers' perceptions of CL?

The main purpose of the formative evaluation was to revise and improve the curriculum according to the students' needs. Systematic procedures of direct observation of students' and teachers' classroom behavior were necessary to minimize the administrators' bias. Six higher beginning level classes and six lower beginning level classes totaling 12 classes and 72 students were observed by the administrative staff members. The students who participated in the observed classes were given follow-up interviews by the two observers

after the classes, and the questions concerning CL activities were asked individually and in groups. The eight teachers who taught the 12 classes were also interviewed individually.

The Results of the Evaluation

Teachers' Behavior

Most of the classes were well conducted in terms of general class management and time management. Teacher talk was mostly limited in all the classes and the teachers were making efforts to increase students' talking time through CL activities. Compared to the traditional teacher-centered class, it seemed that these CL oriented classes gave more opportunities to the students to talk, but even though such opportunities were amply given, it appeared that the class atmosphere was inactive and different from the one expected from the instructional guidance in the teacher's manual. Even though the tasks were explained to the students, many of them seemed to be confused about the tasks and they remained quiet or just kept looking down at the textbooks. Classroom realities were very different from the ones created on the demonstration video tape which was used during the CL training.

One of the questions asked during the interviews of the teachers was "Do you think you are successfully implementing CL?" Most of the teachers had been feeling that it was more difficult to apply CL to Japanese low language proficiency students than they had expected. Many of the teachers said that they didn't know what the reason for the problems were and were surprised when the realities were totally different from the training video, which presented a false image of CL to the teachers.

One teacher stated as follows in the interview:

One of the reasons for failure of CL implementation is the students' language proficiency. The students' language proficiency was too low to understand the tasks, much less carry them out. Also the training video projects a false image of CL and the realities are quite different from the artificially created atmosphere on the video. Besides the problem of the students' low language proficiency, the students don't know each other so well and some of them meet in the class for the first time. The reservation system inhibits them from having active voluntary participation and creating a friendly atmosphere.

However, a few successful cases were observed. Successful classes mean here that there was more interactive and communicative behavior identified in the students' performance in these classes compared to the other inactive classes.

Those two successful teachers (out of eight teachers) were conducting CL activities creatively and effectively. They clearly explained each task in much more detail to the students than did other teachers and also they were creative in implementing CL using various techniques. For example, these teachers tried to emphasize team spirit by having the students compete with each other in the role play practices and gave scores based on students' performance.

The class atmosphere was greatly affected by the teachers' creative techniques of implementing CL activities, and the classes in which the teachers tried to foster and strengthen team spirit had a more cheerful and brighter atmosphere compared to the classes in which no such efforts were made. After the cross-validation of the data from direct observation and interviews, the administrators felt strongly that the teachers should be retrained about CL and informed of the various techniques of CL activities of those teachers who were demonstrating successful use of CL.

Students' Behavior

The direct observation focusing on the students' behavior showed substantial evidence that the students were not participating with a positive attitude in the CL-oriented classrooms. When CL tasks were given to the students and the students were told to work in pairs or groups, teachers told the students to change the directions of the chairs to face their partners. Some of the students hesitantly moved their chairs, and even though they sat facing their partners, they didn't look at their partners' faces. This behavioral pattern was more frequently observed in the lower beginning level classes than the high beginning level classes. The cause of this passive behavioral pattern was revealed through the data obtained in the interviews given to the students. A number of students claimed great difficulties with CL activities because they have to work with other students who they don't know so well. They emphatically claimed that they tended to feel nervous, particularly in the beginning of the lesson until they got used to the unfamiliar atmosphere, but the teachers didn't seem to realize the psychological pressures the students were feeling.

A student suggested that if there were a few students who were extremely cheerful and bright, they could take the initiative in group work to change the atmosphere, but unfortunately such cases would occur very rarely. Even though students had increased their talking time, the time was not necessarily used effectively because of the class situations. A couple of students complained that "most of the teachers didn't know how to help these reserved students, and then the class atmosphere became horrible and all students felt the terrible atmosphere except the teacher." They

confessed that some of the teachers seemed to be neglecting their duties because CL activities lightened their workload.

However, there were some students who experienced successful CL activities, and they stated that they liked the CL activities because the teachers who taught them used games to foster a competitive atmosphere. For example, one student said that even though the students didn't know each other, they immediately felt close to each other and worked together to win against the other teams. Another example of a successful CL activity was that each group shared a piece of paper and a pen to write up their own scripts for the role play practice, and they were allowed to speak Japanese while they were working on the task.

The Necessities of Modifications

This study reveals that there are certain requisites for successful implementation of CL. Kluge (1993) suggested that CL seems to hold much promise for improving foreign language education in Japan so that it should not be abandoned on account of problems. The problems at this institute, that is, failure of CL implementation, was due to 1) the lack of awareness of independent and interdependent learning on the students' side; 2) the lack of understanding of basic principles of CL on the administrator's side; and 3) the lack of the essential techniques to actualize the efficacy of CL on the teachers' side.

The administrators were convinced that the shared values of CL among the teachers, students, and administrators should immediately be built upon. Following the successful teachers' suggestions, all teachers were instructed to check each student's language proficiency level and attitudinal level during the first 10 to 15 minutes of instruction. If all of the students' levels were too low to implement CL and they were quiet and reserved students, instructions should be given in Japanese, or modifications of the time and the amount of CL activities could be balanced with using the teacher-centered method.

If there were some students with relatively higher language proficiency or who were "risk takers," choosing these students as group leaders to change the classroom atmosphere was the first appropriate step to make CL successful. The gender of the students was also an important factor according to the data collected. Since a larger portion of male students were enrolled at this institute (and the observations indicated that male students are usually more shy and quieter than female students), modifications regarding time and amount of CL activities would be necessary in such predominantly male classrooms.

The successful teachers gave distinct roles and responsibilities to the students through CL activities and tried to emphasize their team spirit. This showed that giving specific roles and responsibilities stimulated the students' participation.

Another teacher found that fostering group competitiveness and team spirit and building group autonomy by giving groups names could contribute to

brighten the classroom atmosphere. He added that writing the results of the game on the board after the competition was an effective way to foster competitiveness among the teams.

Implementing these techniques requires a great deal of imagination and involvement on the part of teacher and it implies that CL is difficult work and, at least initially, it is harder than conventional teaching. Keeping the role of facilitators and encouraging the students' participation is not as easy as it seems to be. Many students claimed that the teachers were having an easy time in the CL classroom, but the fact is the opposite for the successful CL classrooms.

The teachers felt that a variety of CL activities should be introduced into the CL curriculum. A number of suggestions were made by the teachers, for example, introducing new ideas and exchanging information on CL activities using the school bulletin board would be helpful for other teachers and the administrators could then follow what is happening in the classrooms. The students should also be aware of the basic principles of CL; therefore, distributing a newsletter to the students will be helpful for asking their cooperation and explaining why we are using CL and how we would like to proceed to bring about successful outcomes. As Brindley (1989) stated, teachers and students are likely to have differing expectations about what should be learnt and how, and misunderstandings may arise unless information is shared by both parties about each other's expectations.

Conclusion

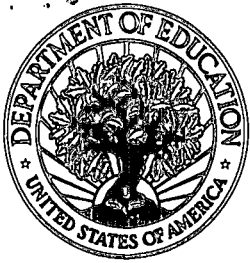
A list of common misconceptions about CL were explained by McGuire, Kluge, and Thornton (1996). They claimed that people often mistakenly equate CL with a more general idea of group work. One of the misconceptions is that CL is just an excuse for the teacher to be negligent. That is a common pitfall that many teachers tend to fall into when implementing CL. The negligence will be immediately noticed by the students even though the teachers didn't intend to be lazy, as this study has proven. McGuire et al. (1996) emphasized that a properly structured cooperative lesson looks much like a well-prepared traditional lesson: It has clearly defined roles for the students and clearly defined goals so students know what and how they are supposed to learn (p. 60). That is the most crucial aspect of CL and the students will not be independent and responsible learners without proper guidance. CL brings an attractive and innovative image to English teachers in Japan; However, it is not a fad, rather it requires careful and cautious preparation before trial. Teachers should decide how much of CL can be incorporated after evaluating the students' learning environment and capability for taking on responsibility for their own learning. Confirming that trust between teachers and students can be built before implementation is a key factor to success.

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