

Jacobs, G. M., Holt, D. D., Olsen, J. W-B., & Goldstein, S. (1998). Four questions and 53 answers about using cooperative learning. *Teaching & Learning*, 18(2), 18-28. [corresponding author: george.jacobs@gmail.com]

Four Questions and 53 Answers about Using Cooperative Learning

Group activities are becoming more and more popular in the teaching of second/foreign languages and other subjects all over the world. Since about 1970, a great deal of work has gone into research and methodology in order to develop ways that teachers can help their students learn more effectively and happily in groups. Many people working in this area use the term "Cooperative Learning", (also known as "Collaborative Learning") to describe these ways of enhancing group learning.

Since the late 1980s, ES/FL teachers interested in Cooperative Learning have come together to share ideas at the annual convention of the International TESOL organization. The 1995 convention was no exception. The four of us hosted a Breakfast Seminar at which fifty other teachers joined us to begin our day with good food and good discussion about important questions in using Cooperative Learning (CL) with our students.

Below is a list of the questions we discussed and the responses we received. After the convention, we showed our list to others and added their responses. These included a class group of secondary school teachers from Singapore attending a course on Cooperative Learning at RELC. We have included everyone's responses, even when one response seemed to contradict a previous one. Each teacher must make their own decision based on their own particular teaching situation and their own beliefs about education. No doubt, you, our talented readers, will have some ideas we have not thought of. Please be so kind to write as to us and share them, so that we can share them with others. Thank you.

- A. *How can we make Cooperative Learning (CL) work when different nationalities just don't get along, or one tends to dominate the other? And, what if some of our students just won't work with each other, no matter what we do?*
1. We can establish guidelines and rules for how to work together. Students can have a voice in establishing these.
 2. We can emphasize the use of skills necessary to collaborate with others. For example, we can focus on turntaking by putting a pencil in the middle of the group, and only the person holding the pencil can talk. Then, everyone else must take a turn before that person can talk again.
 3. We can set aside time for groups to discuss how well they are functioning and to think of ways to function more effectively in the future.
 4. Groups can be composed on the basis of personality type, e.g., the domineers (of whatever nationality) together, and the more docile ones together. They usually find a way to work together.
 5. When students each have a role to play in the group, they work together better. Possible roles include facilitator, recorder, timekeeper, checker, noise monitor, and spokesperson.
 6. Another role could be "fairness monitor", which can either be the most dominant student or the quietest one. This person is charged with helping equalize participation.
 7. We can start with random grouping at first (so they all get to know one another) -- at mid-term we can group them according to past achievement and background (to vary countries within a group).
 8. Inviting students to group themselves according to such criteria as birthday months, clothes colors may help them overcome whatever makes them hesitant to work with one another.

9. At first, students can form groups with whomever they wish. So, initially maybe in one group there are only Japanese students and in another one only Arab students. Later, after students are comfortable with the idea of learning in groups, we can form more heterogeneous groups.
10. We can provide activities that help students learn about each other, e.g., food exhibits, artifacts, art, and music.
11. Students will follow the teacher's lead, if s/he shows a high level of respect for all, in time most students will respond.
12. Roleplay of one another perhaps could encourage greater sensitivity toward the feelings of others.
13. CL works best when self-motivated, not enforced. Often, after studying alone while watching classmates work in groups, reluctant students will give it a try.
14. Introducing CL gradually might help. We can discuss the idea before doing any groupwork, and students can talk about advantages and disadvantages.
15. We can acknowledge the difficulty and ask students to try again if their first attempt at CL was not too successful.
16. We can stress that in life we seldom get to choose whether to work alone or with others, or with whom we must collaborate. For example, we teachers don't get to choose our colleagues.
17. Many high status jobs involve working with others, e.g., doctors in operating rooms need to collaborate with a whole team of medical personnel and also to communicate with patients and their families. CL provides students a chance to practice this collaboration.

B. How can CL work when students are used to teacher-centred classrooms and only want to hear teacher talk, because they don't believe they can learn from their peers?

1. Students need time to know each other and an opportunity to respect the instructor's approach.
2. We can choose familiar/favourite topics initially so students will be motivated to learn the materials and (perhaps) be more open to a new method.
3. CL requires much teacher preparation to introduce questions and materials so students are presented with sufficient language support and doable tasks at which they can feel successful.
4. We can discuss CL openly and encourage students to consider the pros and cons of CL, and then decide for themselves what's good for them.
5. The class can calculate how many minutes a month the typical student gets to talk when the traditional teacher-fronted approach is used. This will be very little. Then, they can calculate how much more student talk there is when CL is used. Isn't all that extra opportunity for language output worth the possible problems?
6. Mention the large amount of research that supports the use of CL.
7. By letting students know how we have learned from them, we encourage them to believe they can learn from one another.
8. Perhaps students don't know that they can learn from one another. We can give our own examples of learning from peers and ask to students for their examples.

9. Showing videos of CL lessons or having students observe a CL lesson let's them see how it works.
10. We can explain CL that will not be the only way we teach - sometime students will hear lots of teacher talk. However, CL will be used a significant amount of time, not just an hour a week for variety.
11. Gradual exposure and involvement eases the transition from familiar teacher-centred techniques to the more student-centred CL.
12. Use of activities, such as jigsaw, in which information sharing is required helps emphasize the benefits of sharing with others.
13. While students are in their cooperative groups, the teacher is circulating among them - not back at the desk marking papers - available to help groups that get stuck. Thus, teachers are not abandoning their students.
14. We need to make sure that directions are clear, e.g., rather than explaining an entire CL technique before students begin, the first time the technique is used, it can be explained one step at a time. Further, providing drawings and diagrams, as well as demonstrating the technique with one or more students, helps students feel more certain of what to do.
15. Students tried "something different" when they decided to learn a new language--they should be willing to try something different again in the way they learn it!
16. When CL is a part of classroom guidelines--- "This is the way we do it!" students will often accept differences in teaching from this perspective.
17. We can explain that students will get the best of two worlds: our "teacher talk" AND when working with peers, they will learn to become better listeners by listening to English in all of its different varieties.
18. When introducing CL we can talk about how different people have different ideas and that it is important to develop the ability to decide for ourselves.
19. Students need to value ideas, not just the correctness of the language in which those ideas are expressed.
20. A communicative focus which gives priority (but not sole place) to language use, not language usage helps students feel more relaxed about their peers' temporary weaknesses.

C. *Many experts in CL suggest spending class time to teach collaborative skills. Is this really necessary?*

1. Yes, because practising collaboration models the overwhelmingly social nature of what learners encounter outside of the classroom and gives more relevance to instruction--in work situations, community, family, we need collaborative skills too.
2. Absolutely, because some students are ill-equipped with those skills when they come to our classes. Thus, many cannot keep a group functioning on their own unless they have training in these skills.
3. Collaboration involves key language functions, such as disagreeing politely and asking for and making suggestions. By using CL, we are teaching language at the same time we teach collaborative skills.

4. Yes. If we do nothing else, collaborative skills will help our classes function as a unit--not just "pods" of similarly-placed individuals!
 5. School can be a lonely place. CL, especially when long-term groups are used and students know how to work together, helps students feel like they belong.
 6. Yes, especially if our students are not accustomed to collaborative classroom behaviour due to cultural influences or personality differences.
- D. Students take tests alone. Will CL make them overly dependent on others?*
1. Only if the students want to be dependent on others.
 2. CL will help them learn more; so, they'll be stronger for the tests.
 3. If students comprehend a concept well enough to explain it to a peer, they really comprehend. Also, helping others builds self-confidence.
 4. Not if they know ahead of time that they're expected to be able to perform alone. (In some cases, groups get extra points, etc. if all members perform well alone--so they work harder to make sure everyone is prepared.)
 5. The learning time is often more important than the test in terms of long-term results!
 6. Many students come to school to improve their employability. More and more workplaces are now team-oriented, so students need to know how to interact others to increase productivity and enjoyment in learning and working. Thus, CL prepares students for the "tests" they will face outside of school.
 7. Students can learn from one another that each has their own strengths and that they can use and share those strengths. This will build their confidence and help them function better independently.
 8. Cooperative groups provide a means for students to learn how to learn, i.e., to observe and to teach others effective learning strategies. These strategies can boost test scores.
 9. CL can provide great practice for exams, as in the following activity. Pair students with one worksheet of 10-20 items. Student pairs work through the items, agree (or not) on the answers, recording both answers if they differ, then check with an answer sheet that is provided after they have finished. Pairs ask other pairs for explanations on items they have missed. Any items still not understood (or also missed by the other pair) are checked with a third pair. The teacher is consulted only as a last resort. Extra worksheets can be provided for home practice.
 10. Do students always have to take tests alone?