
STUDENTS' ATTITUDES TOWARDS COOPERATIVE LEARNING EFFECTIVENESS IN SPECIALTY ENGLISH CLASSES

Aušra Stepanovienė

*Mykolas Romeris University, Faculty of Public Security, Department of Humanities
V.Putvinskio str.70, LT-44211, Kaunas
Tel. 303664*

Abstract. Cooperative learning is now an accepted and often the preferred teaching procedure at all levels of education. The most important goal structure, and one that should be used the majority of the time in learning situations is cooperation. This paper deals with a brief questionnaire on the effectiveness of the cooperative learning in English language teaching class at Mykolas Romeris University, the faculty of Public Security. The paper reviews some theories regarding cooperative learning and analyzes students' attitudes towards the effectiveness of cooperative learning. The results of the survey show that students prefer the cooperative learning in the university and it should be promoted as it can stimulate students' motivation, develop their potentials and critical ability, which are all crucial for students' academic development in the future.

Keywords: cooperative learning, abilities, critical thinking.

INTRODUCTION

The system of education is changing in different countries of the world including Lithuania. The improvement of it is essential for the whole educational process. It is going over to advanced learning methods rather than to teaching methods. The education is turning away from the central role of the teacher towards the learner, who has the main role in the process of learning. There has been going on a significant shift from teaching to learning, from analysis of the teaching process to analysis of the learning process¹.

Most university foreign language teachers face a common problem: how to help students successfully overcome their language barrier and improve their foreign language.

Problem of the research. Traditional methods do not give enough opportunities to develop communicative skills. Learners train their skills but too little. Some students are shy and they are afraid to be laughed at, others do not like participating in the lessons and they become passive observers.

One of the best approaches to teach the language of specialty (English) is to use the cooperative learning method to fulfill the tasks in class. In this cooperative learning style the students dominate in the English learning class, rather than the teacher. However, the questions of the research are: what is the students' feedback on the cooperative learning in

¹ Stunžėnienė, G. Užsienio kalbų didaktika. Kaunas, 2008, p.14-15.

English language teaching class? What is the effectiveness of cooperative learning? Do students like the new form of learning style in their class? What are advantages and disadvantages of cooperative learning? How do students accept this teaching style in the English course and what they expect their teachers to do?

The author of the paper conducts a brief survey among the students at Mykolas Romeris University, the Faculty of Public Security.

The aims of the paper are to: (1) determine the success of application of cooperative learning techniques in English language teaching; (2) analyze the influence of cooperative learning, and (3) discuss all the problems associated with this strategy.

The object of the paper is the innovative cooperative learning method brought into practice in language teaching/learning.

The methods of the research are: a brief review of literature on cooperative learning and foreign language teaching, a questionnaire collecting the data from 102 students and interviews conducted with some students.

Other findings in cooperative research show that cooperative learning has positive effects on relations among students, self-esteem, long-term retention, or depth of understanding of course material, etc. It has been tested as one of the most effective and constructive teaching strategies.

Although many studies have been conducted on cooperative learning in many subjects, foreign language-related research on cooperative learning is a relatively new and underdeveloped area of inquiry in Lithuania. The full power of cooperative learning in foreign language classroom needs to be further exploited. This situation drives us to learn more about the theory and characteristics of cooperative learning.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Over the past few decades, cooperative learning has been proposed as a framework for the teaching of a foreign language because it maximizes authentic and purposeful interactions among students² and it provides means of integrating four language skills. Cooperative learning is one of the greatest success stories in the history of theory and actual classroom use, and there are some theoretical bases for the implementation of the cooperative learning.

² Felder, R.M., Brent, R. Active Learning: An Introduction. ASQ Higher Education Brief, 2(4) August 2009.

According to O'Neil³ motivational theory focuses on the impact of incentive structures such as group rewards and class rewards on learning. Motivational theorists criticized that the competitive grading and informal reward system of the traditional classrooms create peer norms that has a counter effect on academic efforts. The incentives offered in the competitive grading system provide students with the opportunities to demonstrate superiority over one's peers, and in informal reward system increase only one's own achievement. Therefore, motivationalists build incentive structures to incorporate both variables, i.e. one's own and peers' achievement into cooperative learning methods. The rationale for these structures is that if learners value the success of the group, they will be motivated to help one another achieve remarks that motivationalists' reward structures also allow all students and teams an equal opportunity for success since recognition is based on gains⁴. The fact that group rewards are given based on group members' behaviours is enough to induce students to engage in behaviours which help the group to be rewarded. For example, goal-directed behaviours such as peer-tutoring are likely to help students pursue better team performances. In order to maximize group learning outcomes, students are motivated not only to increase their own achievement but the achievement of peers.

In addition to motivational theory, social interdependence theory is interrelated to the motivational perspectives. Unlike motivational theorists who hold that students help their teammates because of incentive structures, social interdependence theorists emphasize that students help one another learn because they care for members within the group. Social interdependence perspectives postulate that the effects of cooperative learning are strongly mediated by the cohesiveness of the group. Group cohesiveness, an index of the level of group development, determines peer interaction which, in turn, determines outcomes⁵. Cohesive groups are more productive than non-cohesive ones. In other words, positive interdependence results in promotive interaction as group members encourage and facilitate one another's efforts. The more time group members spend together, the higher intermember acceptance and cooperation becomes⁶.

³ O'Neil, J.R. *Motivation: Theory and research*. Hillsdale, New Jersey Hove, UK, 1994.

⁴ Savile-Troike, M. *Introducing Second Language Acquisition*. New York: Cambridge UP, 2006.

⁵ Shoval, E. Who Benefits From Cooperative Learning With Movement Activity? *School Psychology International*. October 2011,32(5).

⁶ Omrod, J.E., *Educational Psychology: Developing Learners*. Upper Saddle River, N.J.:Prentice Hall, 2008.

THE BENEFITS OF COOPERATIVE LANGUAGE LEARNING

Cooperative language learning is gaining broad acceptance in language learning classrooms, because of its contributions to improving productivity and achievement and providing more opportunities for communication. There are five basic elements in cooperative learning that when structured, helps positive efforts and helps the cooperative learning group achieve their goal.

- Celebration of diversity. Students learn to work with all types of people. During small-group interactions, they find many opportunities to reflect upon and reply to the diverse responses fellow learners bring to the questions raised. Small groups also allow students to add their perspectives to an issue based on their cultural differences. This exchange inevitably helps students to better understand other cultures and points of view.
- Acknowledgment of individual differences. When questions are raised, different students have a variety of responses. Each of these can help the group create a product that reflects a wide range of perspectives and is thus more complete and comprehensive.
- Interpersonal development. Students learn to relate to their peers and other learners as they work together in group enterprises. This is especially helpful for students who have difficulty with social skills. They can benefit from structured interactions with others.
- Actively involving students in learning. Each member has opportunities to contribute in small groups. Students are apt to take more ownership of their material and to think critically about related issues when they work as a team.
- More opportunities for personal feedback. Because there are more exchanges among students in small groups, students receive more personal feedback about their ideas and responses.

For cooperative strategies to work, careful planning, inconspicuous observation and evaluation and preplanned adjustments are essential to help learners move consistently forward⁷. Effective cooperative teaching strategies are somewhat different from traditional teaching strategies because they require increasing accountability between individuals. Each

⁷ Hardwick, S.W. Humanizing the Technology Landscape Through a Collaborative Pedagogy. *Journal of Geography in Higher Education*, 24(1), 2000, p.123-129.

participant does a fair share through active participation with cooperative social skills and successful and appropriate communication skills that bring task to completion⁸.

In this research, a group of students has been chosen to explore the effectiveness of cooperative learning in English language learning.

METHODOLOGY AND DATA COLLECTION

The subjects in the study were 102 undergraduate law and police activity students enrolled in the faculty of public Security at Mykolas Romeris University. The experiment was carried out in 2009-2010 year. All the students were taught by the same syllables and some extra supplement materials were provided by the teacher in each class. In the research a questionnaire was used for testing students' attitudes towards cooperative learning in English classes. Each student had to complete the questionnaire. All the survey was conducted anonymously. The questionnaire was comprised of open-ended and multiple choice questions. Students had sufficient time to consider their responses to the questions.

FINDINGS

When talking about their attitudes towards the cooperative learning, most students have shown great enthusiasm toward the new learning style. 89% of the subjects thought that the cooperative learning is a good way to improve their professional English proficiency. Only two students thought that the cooperative learning is not a good way. The students did not give further explanation, and perhaps they did not adopt themselves to the innovative learning style.

According to the questionnaire, 84% of the subjects preferred the cooperative learning in the university. Only one student preferred the traditional way of English teaching. The statistics suggest that most students liked the cooperative learning. Probably most of the informants had not tried to learn a foreign language utilizing the cooperative learning style, and they were curious about the new way. Another possible reason is that they had chances to communicate with other classmates and they could interact with each other in the class.

In the questionnaire, students were asked to describe the main advantages and disadvantages of the cooperative learning in their English course. The main points could be summarized as follows:

⁸ Zeller, J. When Teachers and Students Connect. Available at http://www.gse.harvard.edu/news_events/ed/2008/summer/appian/zeller.html

Table 1. Advantages and Disadvantages of Cooperative Learning

Advantages of cooperative learning	Disadvantages of cooperative learning
Develops higher level thinking skills Increases student retention Develops oral communication skills Uses a team approach to problem solving while maintaining individual accountability Encourages diversity understanding Stimulates critical thinking and helps students clarify ideas through discussion and debate Fosters and develops interpersonal relationships Creates a stronger social support system	Usually there is not sufficient time for true cooperation to occur Learners work at different speed Group members might work inefficiently

Obviously, the cooperative learning has both advantages and drawbacks in the English language teaching practice. A good teacher should try to exert all the advantages to help students while avoiding the disadvantages of the cooperative learning.

In addition to these, the majority of students (90%) have noticed that the cooperative learning is a good way to improve the relationship between students.

Regarding the relationship between the teacher and students, Duxbury⁹ suggested that it is essential to establish a cooperative relationship between teachers and students. Both of them are equal in cooperation. Teachers are responsible for macro design and students are real participants of the operation; meanwhile students are motivated by enthusiasm or passion for learning. They are expected to do what they are supposed to. According to the outcomes of the question, almost all the students described teacher's role in their class as "guide", "assistant", "friend, and/or "facilitator". The basic functions of teacher during the cooperative learning lessons are to help students work together in groups and help groups do their job.

Another effect of cooperative learning highlighted by the survey is the skill that the students have improved most in the cooperative learning. 83% of the respondents think that their speaking and communicating ability has been improved in the course. Only 6% of the students do not know which specific skill has been strengthened, and 15% of the students comment that their listening skill has been improved most in the cooperative learning class because they have to listen to their group members in the cooperative learning.

When talking about the long-term effectiveness of cooperative learning, 87% of the informants think that the way of learning helpful to other courses, because in professional English course they found many tasks are done by groups, and the cooperative learning in the

⁹ Duxbury, J.G. The Effects of Cooperative Learning on Foreign language Anxiety. Informational Journal of Instruction. 2010 Vol.3, No1.

English language course has laid a good foundation for their further academic learning. However, there are still obstacles in the process of cooperative learning. The main difficulties could be categorized into two types: the language and the method. By the language, some students think that their language is still not good enough to carry out the English discussion in class, so sometimes they have to resort to their native language to finish the discussion in the class. Furthermore, the subjects think that the method of cooperative learning can have many different varieties in the class. They hope that the teacher in class can provide many varieties of activities in the cooperative learning setting.

CONCLUSION

Many researches and statistics have proved that cooperative learning is an effective way to help students improve English language ability, but cooperative learning still need a long way to promote. Undoubtedly, cooperative learning can help students to fully interact with each other and students learn English in the cooperative style will achieve better results in English language class. Meanwhile, in the cooperative activities students can discuss and give creative responses, which will help them think critically in the future. Therefore, teachers should combine many learning styles and vary them in the class according to the specific tasks; otherwise, students might feel bored with the cooperative learning if too much time is spent on the monotonous style in the English teaching class.

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STUDENTŲ POŽIŪRIS Į MOKYMOSI BENDRADARBIAUJANT METODO EFEKTYVUMĄ MOKANTIS SPECIALYBĖS ANGLŲ KALBOS

Aušra Stepanovienė*
Mykolas Romeris University

Santrauka

Pastaruosius dešimtmečius atlikti moksliniai tyrimai rodo, kad pasaulio šalių ir Lietuvos švietimo sistemose vyksta ryškus poslinkis nuo tam tikrų dalykų mokymo link mokymosi; nuo mokymo proceso analizės pereinama prie mokymosi proceso analizės; nuo centrinio mokytojo vaidmens mokymo procese prie pagrindinio besimokančiojo vaidmens mokymosi procese.

Daugumos universitetų užsienio kalbų dėstytojai susiduria su bendra problema – kaip padėti studentams sėkmingai įveikti kalbos kliūtis ir patobulinti užsienio kalbų žinias.

Vienas iš inovatyvių svetimų kalbos mokymosi metodų – mokymasis bendradarbiaujant – suteikia dėstytojams galimybę lengviau organizuoti darbą mišrioje grupėje, skatina besimokančiųjų kūrybiškumą, savarankiškumą, problemų sprendimo būdų ieškojimą. Studentai imasi aktyvaus vaidmens ir atsakomybės už savo mokymąsi. Bendradarbiavimo esmę sudaro ne vien paviršutiniškas pritarimas, o, būtent, nesutarimas, ginčai, kritinės pastabos, leidžiančios tinkamai numatyti viziją ir misiją. Mokymasis bendradarbiaujant – tai aktyvus ugdymas, kuris šiandien yra dinamiškos, greitai kintančios tikrovės būtinybė.

Straipsnyje analizuojamas Mykolo Romerio universiteto Teisės ir policijos veiklos studijų programos studentų požiūris į mokymosi bendradarbiaujant metodų efektyvumą specialybės anglų kalbos pratybose. Tyrime dalyvavo 102 antrakursiai. Siekiant išsiaiškinti studentų nuomonę apie šių metodų taikymo privalumus, buvo parengta ir studentams pateikta anketa.

Išanalizavus gautus rezultatus nustatyta, kad studentai (89%) teigiamai vertina mokymosi bendradarbiaujant metodų taikymą specialybės anglų kalbos pamokose.

Anketoje studentai nurodė taikomų metodų privalumus ir trūkumus. 90% studentų nuomone mokymasis bendradarbiaujant stiprina gerus mokymosi santykius tarp studentų, ugdo besimokančiųjų aktyvumą, savitarpio pagalbą, iniciatyvą, susidomėjimą veikla, socialinius įgūdžius. 87% respondentų mano, kad grupinių užduočių atlikimas anglų kalbos pamokose padeda tvirtą pagrindą tolimesnėms akademinėms studijoms.

Nagrinėjant anketos duomenis išvelgta, kad mokydamiesi bendradarbiaujant studentai dažniausiai susiduria su šiais sunkumais: laiko, skirto grupinių užduočių atlikimui, stoka, nevienodu grupių darbo tempu, neefektyviu kai kurių grupės narių darbu. Kai kurie studentai mano, kad jų kalbiniai gebėjimai nėra pakankamai geri, kad galėtų diskutuoti, prieštarauti, reikšti savo nuomonę.

Mokymosi bendradarbiaujant metodų taikymas specialybės anglų kalbos pamokose gerina pedagoginio proceso kokybę. Tai reiškia, kad studentai, dirbdami su savo draugais, geriau suvokia ir įsisavina būsimai specialybei reikalingas žinias.

Pagrindinės sąvokos: mokymasis bendradarbiaujant, gebėjimai, kritinis mąstymas.

Aušra Stepanovienė*, Mykolas Romeris universiteto Visuomenės saugumo fakulteto Humanitarinių mokslų katedros lektorė. Mokslinių tyrimų kryptys: profesinės užsienio kalbos mokymo(-si) problemos, teisės kalbos vertimo teorija ir praktika.

Aušra Stepanovienė*, Mykolas Romeris University, Faculty of Public Security, Department of Humanities, lecturer. Research interests: professional foreign language teaching/learning problems, theory and practice of legal language translation.