

The benefits of cooperative learning for all students



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The first thing to consider is the fact that cooperative learning is beneficial to all students, regardless of their classification or primary language. In fact, activities where the teacher uses conceptual strategies that promote ‘learning together’ or ‘group investigation’ are statistically proven to be superior to instructional design focused on working alone or working in a competitive environment. Essentially, helping each other is better than competing or working alone. Three highly effective conceptual models have been determined to be those cooperative activities which can be labeled as ‘learning together’, ‘academic controversy’, or ‘group investigation’.

Basically, if the cooperative learning technique you are using involves one of these three modes, then your lesson should be more effective than students working alone or in a competitive style (Johnson, D., Johnson R., & Stanne, 2000).

There are many examples of instructional strategies with a ‘learning together’ style. ‘Numbered Heads Together’ is one such activity; it is a strategy that promotes discussion, individual accountability, as well as group accountability. It is especially effective for reviewing and integrating subject matter (“Numbered Heads Together”, 2010). ‘Academic controversy’, another effective style of cooperative learning mentioned in the previous paragraph, is essentially informed and educated debate, with one important twist: the students argue both sides of the issue or contentious theory. One example of this type of cooperative learning strategy involves six steps: create the best case for a position on the controversy, present this best case, engage in open discussion, reverse perspectives, synthesize and come to consensus, and prepare a report (“Academic Controversy”, 2010). The last

highly-effective type of cooperative learning noted above in the research is called 'group investigation'. One school district website describes group investigation as an activity where "...students collaborate to produce a group product for presentation "... [in] an open-ended investigation...structured to promote higher-order thinking skills. (Regina Public Schools, 2003). This type of group activity is probably best known as the very popular WebQuest design where students surf the internet in a guided, but self-directed, group investigation into a topic which ultimately leads to a finalized presentation or product. (Dodge, 2007).

There are many more types of cooperative learning possibilities and conceptual categories to consider than 'learning together', 'academic controversy', and 'group investigation', however the conceptual types mentioned above are noted to be especially easy to learn, easy to implement, and easy to maintain once put into use (Johnson et al., 2000).

Not only are cooperative learning strategies effective for all learners, but they are especially effective for ELL students specifically. Language learners tend to pick up social language much faster than academic language. ELL students' basic interpersonal communication skills (BICS) are practiced in a meaningful context in a variety of social settings, but CALP is not normally practiced outside of the classroom. Rather, CALP is the language used in subject area content material; CALP is essential for success in school. While BICS will develop in as little as six months, CALP may take as long as seven years (Haynes, 1998). So we can see that the faster CALP is developed, the sooner our ELL students will succeed in content curricular areas.

One way that cooperative learning helps CALP to be developed is through comprehensible input and comprehensible output. ELL students will often fail to understand a lecture, but if they are assisted by classmates it can be made more comprehensible to them. Comprehensible output means that the student has the opportunity to practice at whatever level of English fluency they have attained. CL helps to develop comprehensible input and comprehensible output in several ways. First, small groups make it possible for the teacher or group members to adapt the message to the ELL student. Second, feedback, correction, and checking of comprehension are easier in small groups and are non-judgmental. Also, ELL students have the opportunity to practice their oral language skills, get repetition, and peer assistance related to the current task at hand (Haynes, 1998).

Another way that cooperative learning is helpful to ELL students is by lowering their anxiety level so that they feel more at ease and are able to comfortably focus on learning the language. Wang Qiang's work on cooperative learning (Qiang, 2007, as cited in Yang, 2008) shows us that speaking in small groups is natural, because in real life, this is how spontaneous communication occurs. If they speak in front of a large group of people it is usually a more formal situation where they have a prepared speech (Yang, 2009). Furthermore, according to Krashen's Affective Filter hypothesis, anxiety is a negative factor in second language acquisition whereby the ELL student will retain less language under stress than in a relaxed state (Schutz, 2007). Since cooperative learning lowers the affective filter (Willis, 2007), it is logical that cooperative learning would make second

language learning less threatening and therefore more effective. Consider this powerful quote about neuroimaging of the anxious brain:

In MRI scans of adolescents in states of affective, emotional anxiety, when the amygdala is metabolically hyperactive, the pathways that normally conduct information in and out of the amygdala show greatly reduced activity. Thus, new information is blocked from entering the memory banks (Toga & Thompson, 2003, as stated in Willis, 2007).

Two early studies done by Pica and Doughty in 1984 and 1985 (as stated in Liang, Mohan, and Early, 1998) compared the efficacy of teacher-fronted classes to small-group interactive classes. They found that in small groups students were able to practice more, receive more feedback, and produce more examples of the target language. This suggests that in small groups the ELL students have more opportunity to work on those specific curricular words, or academic language, that TESL instructors strive to develop. Pica and Doughty's study also found that in group work over 65% of students were engaged in 'negotiation for meaning' versus 45% of the students in teacher-fronted classes. This statistic seems to suggest that ELL students will talk more freely and frequently in group settings about what unfamiliar language terms and structures mean. Thus, CALP is likely developed faster in CL groups than in teacher-fronted classes (Liang et al, 1998).

Two interesting handbooks may help teachers improve their ability to foster CALP in the ELL classroom. One is the very popular Calla Handbook and the other is titled Building Academic Language, by Jeff Zweirs.

The CALLA handbook: Implementing the Cognitive Academic Language Learning Approach, was written by Anna Uhl Chamot, and was presented in workshop format, by the author, in Wyoming in February of 2007. In her presentation on her popular book, Dr. Chamot stresses several key aspects of the CALLA approach. CALLA instruction is based on educational research and focuses on those language skills needed in school for academic success. Students are encouraged to value their prior knowledge and to relate it to new academic learning, a new culture, and a new language. Students are also tasked with learning to work cooperatively and socially, as well as internalizing learning strategies and applying them to new situations. Teachers are advised to use interesting topics and content which is linked to prior experiences and knowledge as well as presenting content through hands-on, investigative, or cooperative activities (Chamot & Robbins, 2007).

A book review of Building Academic Language: Essential Practices for Content Classrooms illuminates its value for building CALP in ELL education. This handbook is described as being very practical, full of strategies for the classroom, and focused on academic literacy. Important concepts in the book include using in-depth conversation as a scaffolding technique for building academic language, using metacognition to help students analyze classroom interactions, as well as the use of visual aids to help develop academic thought processes. The book stresses the need to think about the quality of student discourse, as well as the quantity, whereby the style of academic verbal interactions is guided by teaching processes, is modeled by the teacher, and ultimately leads to a deeper academic vocabulary and a deeper comprehension. (Huerta-Macias, 2007).

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In conclusion, this paper has reviewed and discussed how certain styles of cooperative learning are particularly valuable for all learners, including ELL students. Cooperative learning research and scholarly writings have been reviewed which demonstrate further that CL facilitates second language acquisition, in particular, because it lowers anxiety, makes input and output more comprehensible, and leads to more frequent use of the target language being studied. Finally, two respected TESL handbooks were reviewed for their merits in helping ELL teachers develop CALP.