

---

# Chapter 21

## Cooperative Learning in Language Classrooms: Structures to Support Activity-Based,

## Communicative Teaching in Primary Classrooms

by

Mary Lou McCloskey

### Outline

Cooperative Learning: A Classroom Snapshot	366
What is Cooperative Learning?	367
Reasons to Use Cooperative Learning	367
• Participation and practice	368
• Attitudes and Peer Relations	368
• Improved Learning	368
• Cognitive Development	368
• Improved Discipline	368
How to Begin to Use Cooperative Learning	369
• Procedures	369
Sample Cooperative Learning Activities and Structures	370
• Paired Activities	370
• Cooperative Learning Structures for Groups of 3-5	372
Conclusion	374
Key Terminology	376
Understanding Check	376
Resources	377
Summary Handout for Chapter 21	378

## Cooperative Learning: A Classroom Snapshot

Take a look at cooperative learning in action. Following is a classroom "snapshot" of a cooperative activity called "Numbered Heads Together," conducted in an Egyptian primary four classroom:

Mrs. Insaaf is checking her pupils' understanding of a reading passage in her primary four class using the "Numbered Heads Together" cooperative learning activity. She has explained the procedures for the activity in Arabic and has taught the English for the instructions she will use so all the children can understand instructions such as: "Listen to the question", and "Number Two, give your group's answer". The children are sitting at their desks in groups of three and each group member has been given a number: 1, 2, or 3. All the pupils have read and/or listened to the story, "Grandfather's Farm", in *Hello! Book 1*, page 56 (Dallas, 1994).

Mrs. Insaaf asks questions about the story: "Who are the people in "Grandfather's Farm?" asks Mrs. Insaaf. "Put your heads together and write down the names".

Each group discusses answers to the question in Arabic and makes a list of characters.

"Now", says Mrs. Insaaf, "Who is going to answer?"

Mrs. Insaaf has a cup with three cards with the numbers 1, 2 and 3 on them. She pulls a number out of a cup. "Number three! Number threes please stand up".

All the Number three pupils stand up, and several are selected to answer the questions orally or write their group's answers on the blackboard.

Mrs. Insaaf checks answers and corrects any confusion. "Everybody agrees that Grandfather, Ali, and Heba are the people in the story. Some of you think that the cows and the goats are people in the story. Do you think we should write them on our lists?"

The discussion continues...

"Now think of words that tell about Grandfather's farm and things he has on the farm".

The lesson continues with questions about the content of the selection and the vocabulary words in the selection. After each question, Mrs. Insaaf gives the group time to think about and discuss the question; then she draws a number from her cup to decide which members share the group's answers. Finally, she helps the group check their answers.

All of the children are very interested and involved in the lesson. In 15-20 minutes of this activity, every single child stands up and gives at least one answer to the full group.

---

# What is Cooperative Learning?

Cooperative learning is about learning together. As Mrs. Insaaf's activity shows, it is instruction organized so that success depends on the exchange of information among pairs or group members. Each learner is held responsible for his or her own learning but is also responsible for the group as well. Learners are also motivated to increase both their own learning and the learning of others.

The chart below summarizes the essential components of cooperative learning activities.

## Cooperative Learning Essentials

(Johnson, Johnson & Holubec, 1994)

1. **Positive Interdependence.** Pupils need one another to achieve. When one pupil achieves, others benefit.
2. **Team Formation and Teambuilding.** Groups are formed in various ways, but with attention to developing an identity for the team, and learning how to work as a team.
3. **Individual and Group Responsibility.** Pupils are evaluated through grades and assessment of group products and are responsible for learning both as individuals and as group members so marks are divided. They get part of their mark for how well they do individually and part of the mark for how well the group achieve.
4. **Social Skills.** Pupils learn both the language and the behaviors needed to work productively together.
5. **Classroom Organizational Structures.** Structures are plans or ways of organizing activities. They are not activities themselves, but they are frameworks for the activities. Teachers add the content focus to the structure. For example, Mrs. Insaaf used the Numbered Heads Together structure and added questions on the selection she was reading.

## Reasons to Use Cooperative Learning

Incorporating cooperative learning in your classroom is an effective way to promote language learning of all pupils. The classroom is organized, for at least part of the instructional time, so that the goals are most likely to be attained when pupils cooperate and collaborate. When the class works together toward a goal, they become a positive, supportive and successful group.

## Participation and Practice

We know that language is learned better when pupils have opportunities to use it. Cooperative learning can help you help more pupils participate actively in the class. In non-cooperative classrooms, teachers often talk most of the time and only a few of the brightest pupils have the opportunity to participate, usually by responding to the teacher. In cooperative activities, everyone talks: sometimes to peers in small groups, sometimes to the full group to report a group's findings.

## Attitudes and Peer Relations

Research, from other contexts shows that using peers as collaborators, teachers or tutors results in better peer relations, positive social development, and better attitudes toward school, learning, and self (Kagan, 1997). It also increases pupils' responsibility for their own learning.

## Improved Learning

When pairs or small groups of pupils collaborate on a common task, they must check and clarify meaning with one another. When teachers use pupils as co-teachers and use language for real purposes, they improve learning of both language and content.

## Cognitive Development

In cooperative learning settings pupils can use thinking skills as they compare different views in order to come to agreement and prepare information to present to the rest of the class. Throughout this process pupils gain practice in the use of the language necessary to carry out these tasks - practice that is varied, purposeful, and directed to the range of pupils' proficiency levels.

## Improved Discipline

Many other rewards come with the cooperative learning environment. When teachers become skillful at managing cooperative learning, and pupils are all involved in learning, classroom discipline improves. This frees the teacher from the role of maintaining social control in favor of providing support to individuals and small groups. The teacher spends more time teaching and less time managing pupils. Since what pupils like to do - actively participate - actually helps their academic achievement and language development and in well-managed cooperative learning classrooms pupils spend more time engaged in learning tasks. At the same time, pupils become more active, self-directed, and communicative learners as they work cooperatively together.

---

# How to Begin to Use Cooperative Learning

In an EFL classroom, you can try out one or two cooperative learning lessons to see how well cooperative learning works. For cooperative language learning to be effective, you must be committed to learning as much as you can about cooperative learning and to using it over time to develop your management skills. You must also plan to teach to pupils, slowly and carefully, the skills and procedures they will need to participate in the tasks.

Start with short, simple, paired cooperative task type, or structure for two pupils. Explain the tasks carefully, in Arabic if necessary, and model their use in front of the class with a few pupils. Repeat these structures with different content over a week or two, until pupils are completely familiar with them. Then teach a new structure in the same way.

When pupils become proficient at working with partners, you can move on to structures for small groups of three or four. You will always have to work within the limits of your teaching situation, but even in large classrooms with unmovable desks, with good teaching, pupils can learn to participate effectively in a small group with the peers who sit around them.

## Procedures

For all activities, use the following procedures:

1. Get pupils' full attention. (See Chapter 20: *Classroom Management in Language Classrooms*).
2. Explain the activity.
3. Teach any new language needed in the activity. (See Chapter 8: *Vocabulary Development* and Chapter 13: *Classroom Language*).
4. Model both the activity and the language pupils will use in the activity.
5. Check that pupils understand by asking them to name or show the steps in the activity or to repeat the instructions.
6. Have pupils begin the activity. Monitor them as they do the activity by walking around the room.
7. Conduct a wrap-up, summary or report-back at the end of the activity.

## Sample Cooperative Learning Activities and Structures

Cooperative learning uses a wide range of structures for organizing classroom activities. These structures are activity formats that can be used with whatever content teachers choose. By developing skill in managing a variety of structures, teachers are able to use cooperative learning to increase motivation and learning throughout the school year. Following are descriptions of structures for two groupings: structures for paired activities, for teachers just beginning cooperative learning; and structures for small groups of 3 or 4, for classrooms with some experience with cooperative learning.

### Paired Activities

**Elbow buddies.** Buddy is another word for friend. In this simple cooperative learning structure, the teacher asks pupils to turn to a partner sitting near them to practice a language pattern, ask and answer a question, restate an instruction, demonstrate the meaning of a word, etc. For example, you might say "Turn to your elbow buddy and ask him/her to tell you, in Arabic, what a farmer does".

**3-2-1- Summary.** In this structure, pairs summarize something they have learned by stating 3 facts, 2 reasons, and 1 important concept.

Sample 3-2-1- Summary (Dallas, 1995:58).

3 sports we like are

2 reasons sports are good for you are

1 one thing that makes a good team is

**Flashcard Game (High, 1993).** In this structure, partners help one another practice new language. They also develop many ways to encourage and praise one another. Explain the instructions and demonstrate, using Arabic as needed to make sure pupils understand how to play the game.

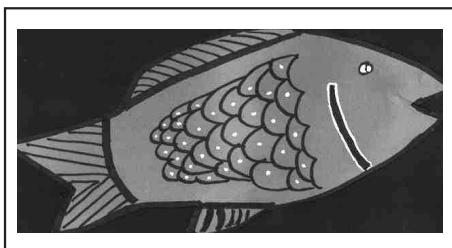
Sample Flashcard Game:

1. Place pupils in pairs.
2. Ask pupils to make a list of words they need to learn or give them a list of such words.
3. Give pieces of paper or flashcards to each pair. Tell them to write the word on one side and to draw a picture of the word on the other side. You can use bits of old paper for this activity as long as both sides are clean.
4. Teach pupils "praise phrases" -- several ways to highly praise one another

---

in English, for example, "Very good!" "You are a genius!" "Excellent!" "Super duper!" "Exactly!" "Brilliant!"

5. Pupils pair up and decide who is the "teacher" and who is the "pupil".



**fish**

### Round 1: Maximum Help:

1. The "teacher" holds a card with the word "fish" on one side and a picture of a fish on the other.
2. The teacher shows the "pupil" the picture of rain on the cue side of the card.
3. The pupil must reply "fish" and then the teacher shows the word fish on the other side of the card.
4. When the pupil gives the right answer, the teacher gives a "praise phrase" and gives the card to the pupil.
5. If the pupil gives a wrong answer, the teacher gives hints until the pupil gets the right answer. Then the teacher puts the card back in the stack.
6. When the pupil has won back all the cards, they switch roles.

### Round 2: Minimum Help:

1. This time, the "teacher" shows the question side of the card only, and the "pupil" tries to remember the answer.
2. The teacher doesn't give any hints.
3. The teachers gives the card to the pupil when the answer is right.
4. Exaggerated praise (a vocabulary builder in itself!) follows each right answer.
5. If the pupil gets the answer wrong, the teacher keeps the card and tells the pupil the right answer
6. The teacher repeats the activity with the remaining cards until the pupil has won them all. Then they switch roles.

**Homework Check (High, 1993).** This structure helps pupils work in pairs to check their homework. Two partners alternate roles as "teacher" and "pupil". They also check their answers with a second pair.

### Sample instructions:

1. Pairs meet for the first 5 minutes of class to check their homework using an answer key on the board.
2. For the first question, the coach checks the pupil's answer and praises the pupil if the answer is correct.
3. Then partners switch roles for the second question and repeat.
4. When they have checked 5 questions, they turn to a nearby pair, check their work with them, and resolve any differences.
5. They continue until they have checked all their homework.

Variation: use Pairs Check during a written exercise in class.

Note: Depending on your pupils' proficiency, you could choose to have them check their homework in either English or Arabic.

## Cooperative Learning Structures for Groups of 3-5



Think



Pair



Share

Think, Pair, Share. This three-step interview is a valuable introductory cooperative learning activity. It requires almost no movement or classroom rearrangement.

1. Introduce a topic, concept, story or problem with a question, e.g., "What do you know about cats and mice?" (Dallas, 1995, pp. 54-44).
2. Ask pupils to think about it for a little while, and perhaps note ideas or draw a picture.
3. Have pupils share their answers with a partner. "A cat has 4 feet". "A dog has a long nose".
4. Have each pair join with a second pair. Each person tells the group his or her partner's ideas.

---

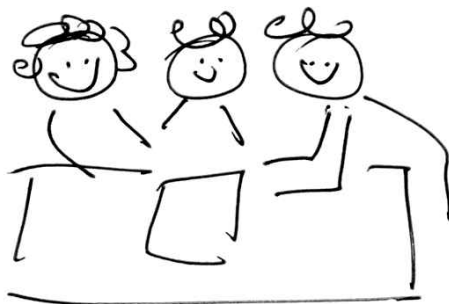
Variation: Solve, Pair, Share. This is a problem-solving variation of Think-Pair-Share. It can be used for language or content-area problems. Make sure to teach and practice the language pupils will need before the activity.

1. Teacher poses a question or problem, for example, "What is a person doing on page 25? Answer in a sentence" (*Hello Book 1*, p. 25 [Dallas, 1994]).
2. Pupils work out solutions individually.
3. Pupils check problems with a partner.
4. Partners check problems with a second group.

Numbered Heads Together. This is an excellent structure for making sure that everyone actively participates in a lesson or lesson review.

1. Have participants work in groups of about 3 or 4.
2. Give each pupil in the group a number from 1 to 3 or from 1 to 4.
3. Ask a question, for example, "How did Egyptians build the pyramids long ago?" (Dallas, 1995, p. 28.)
4. Tell pupils to "put their heads together" to figure out the answer.
5. Give pupils time to discuss the answer in their groups.
6. Pull a number out of a box or hat and have the pupils with that number stand up.
7. Call on the pupils standing to share their group's answers.
8. After the activity, have groups evaluate how well they performed their roles and make suggestions for improvement for next time.

Round Table / Roundrobin



**Roundrobin/Roundtable (Kagan, 1997).** In this structure, pupils participate in turn about a topic.

Round Robin:

1. Pupils work in groups of about 4.
2. Teacher assigns a topic, for example "describing animals (Dallas, 1995, p. 7-8).
3. Pupil 1 says something about one animal, for example, "It's gray".
4. Pupil 2 says something about the animal, for example, "It has a trunk".
5. Pupil 3 says something about the animal, for example, "It is BIG!".
6. Pupil 4 says something about the animal, for example, "It has big ears".

**Variation:** Roundtable is like Roundrobin, except that pupils take turns writing their their answers on the same paper, instead of speaking them out loud.

## Conclusion

It takes time and effort to teach pupils how to work effectively in groups. Once you have taught the procedures and have classroom management established, however, cooperative learning has many benefits for improving learning, social skills, participation and classroom climate.

### *voices* from the field

Topic: Cooperative Learning

Mr. Said Abdel Latif Ahmed

Fifth Year Primary (Hamada Tantawy Primary School)

Inspector: Mr. Sayed Abdel Hamid

When I visited his primary five class, the teacher used the structure Numbered Heads Together and it was a great success. He had prepared cards to use a cooperative learning technique in his class. He divided his class into eight groups. He changed the desks to form groups. He asked the groups to form sentences about comparison of adjectives.

Each group had a reporter to tell the class the group's answer. The pupils were very active and were able to help each other to form good sentences. I noticed that most of the class cooperated to form sentences about figures drawn on the board by the teacher, especially weak pupils. Most of the passive pupils were encouraged to share in the class.

# voices from the field

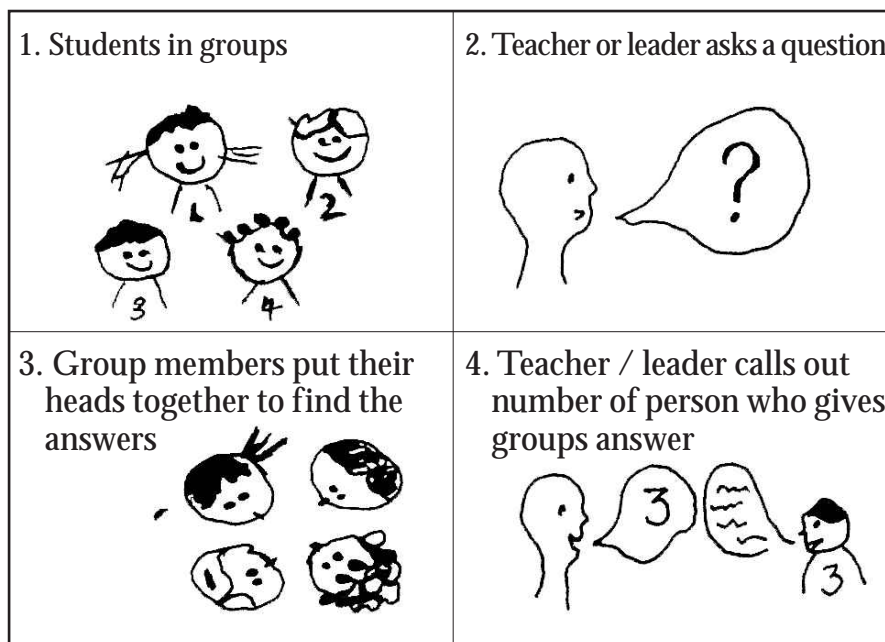
Topic: Cooperative Learning

Voice: Hussein Ali Abdallah Shaaban, Wellaida School, Fayoum Governorate, Sinnors Directorate 4th and 5th Year Primary, 40 pupils

After we had gone back from IELP-II SPEER, Mr. Sayed my Supervisor visited me at school. He modeled some Cooperative Learning Techniques, especially "Numbered head together" in primary five, class 5-2. The lesson was "Comparison". In fact it was a nice period and the students were very active and positive.

I implemented the same technique in all my classes. The technique was very easy and more than 80% of the students participated in the lesson activity. Then I used other techniques such as "Elbow Buddies" and "Homework Check". These techniques helped the students to exchange information, and increased the participation especially of the weak students. Moreover, every pupil was involved in the task. My instructions were very clear, but I sometimes had to use Arabic, especially at the beginning of the activities.

In my opinion, cooperative learning techniques can be used successfully in the Egyptian context.



## Key Terminology

### Cognitive Development

Development of thinking skills

### Cooperative learning

A type of learning in which pupils work and exchange information with one another to achieve learning goals.

### High-level thinking skills

Abilities in complex thinking, for example: analyzing, planning, or evaluating.

### Classroom management

Setting and organizing learning activities and pupil behavior efficiently and effectively

### Interaction

Exchange of conversation and information, oral or written, among class and teachers

### Cooperative learning structure

Specific ways to organize work in groups that can be used with a variety of materials in the classroom. Teachers combine structures with specific content materials to create activities.

### Leadership roles

The different parts that leaders play when people work in groups.

### Structure

The plan or procedures for a cooperative learning activity. Once you know the structures, you can substitute whatever content you are teaching that day into the cooperative learning activity.

### Information gap activities

Activities in which one pupil needs the information that another pupil knows - so they have real reasons to communicate.

## Understanding Check

1. What are the main components of cooperative learning tasks?
2. What are the advantages and disadvantages of cooperative learning for classrooms like yours?
3. How might you use "Numbered Heads Together" for a grammar lesson? (Or another lesson you're planning next week).
4. What are the challenges of cooperative learning? What steps can you take to overcome them?

---

## Resources

Aronson, E. & Patnoe, S. (1996). *The Jigsaw Classroom: Building Cooperation in the Classroom*. 2nd Ed. White Plains, NJ, USA: Addison-Wesley Pub Co.

Butler, J. A. (1988). Cooperative Learning: Central Elementary School. [Online]. Northwest Regional Education Laboratory School Improvement Research Series (SIRS) Snapshot #7. [January 26, 2000] Available: <http://www.nwrel.org/scpd/sirs/2/snap7.html>

Coelho, E., Winer, L. & Olsen, J. (1998). *All Sides of the Issue: Activities for Cooperative Jigsaw Groups*. Burlingame, CA, US: Alta Books.

Cowen, J. E. (1996). *English Teacher's Portfolio of Multicultural Activities: Ready-To-Use Lessons & Cooperative Activities for Grades 7-12*. Center for Applied Research in Education.

Dallas, D. (1994). *Hello 1*. Cairo: Egyptian International Publishing Company -Longman.

Dallas, D. (1995). *Hello! 2*. Cairo: Egyptian International Publishing Company -Longman.

Enright, D.S. & McCloskey, M.L. (1988). *Integrating English: Developing English Language and Literacy in the Multilingual Classroom*. Reading, MA, USA: Addison-Wesley. High, J. (1993). *Second Language Learning through Cooperative Learning*. San Juan Capistrano, CA, USA: Kagan Cooperative Learning.

Johnson D., Johnson, R. T. & Holubec, E. J. (1993). *The New Circles of Learning: Cooperation in the Classroom*. Alexandria, Virginia, USA: ASCD

Kagan, S. (1997). *Cooperative Learning: Resources for Teachers*. Rev. ed. Laguna Niguel, CA, USA: Kagan Cooperative.

Levine, L. & McCloskey, M. L. (2001). *Activity-Based, Communicative Language Teaching and Learning: Teaching English in the Primary Classroom*. Unpublished manuscript.

Ministry of Education, Arab Republic of Egypt. (2001). *Games*. Ministry of Education: Cairo.

Selected ERIC Abstracts on Cooperative Learning. [1995]. [Online]. Available <http://www.ascd.org/services/eric/ericcoo.html> [January 26, 2000].

Slavin R. E. (1995.) *Cooperative Learning: Theory, Research, and Practice*, 2nd Ed. Englewood Cliffs, NJ, USA: Prentice Hall.

Slavin, R.E. (1995). Research on Cooperative Learning and Achievement: What We Know, What We Need to Know [Online]. Available <http://www.successforall.net/cooplearn.html> [January 26, 2000].

(Also see the cooperative learning resource list at <http://www.mindspring.com/~mlmcc/MDI/Cooperative.htm>

## Summary Handout for Chapter 21:

### Cooperative Learning

#### Cooperative Language Learning for EFL Summary

##### Cooperative learning essentials

- Positive Interdependence
- Team Formation and Teambuilding
- Individual and Group Responsibility
- Social Skills
- Structures and Structuring

##### Reasons to use cooperative learning

- Participation and Practice
- Attitudes and Peer Relations
- Improved Learning
- Cognitive Development
- Improved Discipline

##### How to begin cooperative learning

- Management skills
- Pre-activities, preparations and instructions
- Step-by-step approach, starting with pair activities

##### Procedures for cooperative learning activities

1. Get pupils' full attention. (See Chapter 20: *Classroom Management in Language Classrooms*).
2. Explain the activity.
3. Teach any new language needed in the activity. (See Chapter 8: *Vocabulary Development*).
4. Model both the activity and the language pupils will use in the activity.
5. Check that pupils understand by asking them to name or show the steps in the activity or to repeat the instructions.

- 
6. Have pupils begin the activity. Monitor them as they do the activity by walking around the room.
  7. Conduct a wrap-up, summary or report-back at the end of the activity.

Sample Structures	
<p>Activities for groups of 2</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Elbow Buddies</li><li>• Paired Verbal Fluency</li><li>• 3-2-1- Summary</li><li>• Flashcard Game</li><li>• Homework Check</li></ul>	<p>Activities for groups of 3-5</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Think, Pair, Share</li><li>• Numbered Heads Together</li><li>• Playing Card Roles</li><li>• Round Robin/Roundtable</li><li>• Inside/Outside Circles</li></ul>

