

Cooperative Learning Approach: A Successful Way of Reducing Learning Anxiety in an EFL Class

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Abstract

This paper intends to present cooperative learning approach which can be used to reduce students' language learning anxiety in class -- an obstacle to language proficiency development. The paper describes the concept of a cooperative learning, where the groups are formed in such a way that each member of a group performs his or her task for the purpose that the group will achieve, states the reasons why cooperative learning can deduct learning anxiety, and clarifies how students study together in a small group through three main cooperative learning activities.

Introduction

Anxiety in the classroom is considered a negative factor that lessens the learner's proficiency due to the fact that under the anxious situation, it's difficult to think clearly. According to MacIntyre, (1995: 96) anxiety can create a divided attention scenario for anxious students; they are focused on both the task at hand and their reactions to it. For example, when responding to a question in a class, the anxious student is focused on answering the teacher's question and evaluating the social implications of the answer while giving it. As a result, they cannot do a good job in learning. Meanwhile, students with low proficiency of English tend to have more anxiety because studying English language might be perceived a difficult thing for them. That they feel worried and anxious in language classroom can eventually leads them to dislike and lack of enthusiasm in learning. The important role of language anxiety in foreign language learning has been demonstrated in several studies showing a negative correlation between high levels of anxiety and language achievement (Saguanpong, 2007; Yu-ching & Wu, 2004; Kondo & Yang, 2003). Therefore, many pieces of research were done to find out the way to help students have less anxiety. Take an example of one study conducted by Worde (2003) who investigated students' perspectives on Foreign language anxiety and his finding revealed that a factor students believed may help to

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reduce anxiety included a sense of community. In other words, they feel less anxious when working with partners and in small groups. So, working in cooperative learning environment is believed to reduce anxiety (Kagan, 1994).

During the past decade, “cooperative learning” seemed to attract a lot of attention and turned to be popular. This conceptual approach is based on a theoretical framework that provides general principles on how to structure cooperative learning activities in a teacher’s specific subject area, curriculum, students, and setting. It is the one that teachers can use to stimulate students to acquire the knowledge as well as interpersonal and team skills. Cooperative learning is one strategy for group instruction which is under the learner-centered approach. According to Johnson (2005), cooperation is not assigning a job to a group of students where one student does all the work and the others put their names on the paper. It is not having students sit side by side at the same table to talk with each other as they do their individual assignments as well. It is not having students do a task individually with instructions that the ones who finish first are to help the slower students. On the contrary, cooperative learning is a teaching strategy in which small teams, each with students of different levels of ability, use a variety of learning activities to improve their understanding of a subject. Each member of a team is responsible not only for learning what is taught but also for helping teammates learn, thus creating an atmosphere of achievement. Students work through the assignment until all group members successfully understand and complete it.

Cooperative learning is characterized by several common elements that include: (1) positive interdependence, where the group has a common goal and each member’s contribution is important to the group’s success; (2) face-to-face group interactions in which each member is encouraged to participate, help others succeed, and learn from each other; (3) individual and group accountability in which members divide the work and are individually responsible for specific tasks; (4) development of small group social skills involving negotiating and use of group interaction skills; and (5) group processing, which involves students reflecting on the group’s experience (Johnson and Johnson, 1994 cited in Nakahashi, 2007). Cooperative learning activities have been employed with EFL students due to the fact that they can foster active participation, a sense of community, emotional support and provide more social interaction for students.

How cooperative learning reduces students’ anxiety

1. Since cooperative learning helps to create supportive environment, students are not much stressed and have reduced anxiety in class. This is probably because students possess a sense of community. According to Worde (2003), when students feel alone with no friends, they are “more self-conscious. Working in groups or having studying partners is suggested as one way for students to interact. Traditionally, classes always consist of good students and weak students. The weak students sit in isolation as they lose confidence in their ability to learn English. Working in groups is, therefore, believed to help solve this problem. It can help shy students who don’t like to speak in a large class become comfortable speaking out in smaller groups. Group members can complement each other’s strengths and weaknesses in English. Each student has a different background and ability in English which he or she can bring to the group. For example, one student might have a strong vocabulary that can supply to students with a strong background in grammar. Furthermore,

poor students will benefit from interaction with better ones, and good students will feel proud that they play an important role in helping their weaker classmates. Students can learn other members' intention as well as create interpersonal and team skills. By working in groups, students have more opportunities to talk and to share ideas, so they can see how their peers think and create new ideas. In addition, cooperative learning decreases competitiveness and individualism but increases opportunities to actively construct or transform the knowledge among students (Johnson, & Johnson, 1995).

2. Cooperative learning provides a less anxiety-producing context in terms of discussing, creating, and thinking in a group, rather than in a whole class. In such an atmosphere, students may feel more comfortable to study and try out new ideas. This concept is in accordance with Worde's (2003) who found that the participants in his study identified having a relaxing classroom environment as paramount in reducing anxiety and in gaining motivation to learn. Therefore, a cooperative learning environment is believed to reduce anxiety and provide more opportunities for students to produce language (Kagan, 1994). In addition, a relaxing environment or atmosphere is likely related to how the teacher conducted the class. Many studies have been done to investigate an impact of cooperative learning approach on students' learning anxiety in an EFL class. Take an example of Nakahashi's study (2007), which used structured cooperative learning activities to reduce language anxiety of freshmen students in Akita University by providing a non-threatening, supportive environment that led to language skills development. The results revealed that while the students' learning anxiety reduced, their language proficiency scores improved significantly. Therefore, this work can be used to support its effectiveness in terms of language anxiety reduction.

Implementing cooperative learning activities in classrooms

Although there are many types of cooperative learning activities implemented in class, the author would like to suggest the three main activities suitable for Thai EFL context. They are not at all anxiety-provoking situations, but increase supportiveness among students.

The first activity "Think-Pair-Share" developed by Frank Lyman and his colleagues in Maryland can be used to encourage student classroom participation without stress. This activity helps the students to formulate individual ideas and share these ideas with another student. It involves a three-step cooperative structure. In the "think" step, the teacher provokes students' thinking with a question or a prompt. It should take a few moments for them to think about the question individually. In the "pair" step, students work in pairs talking about the answer each comes up with. They compare their written notes and identify the answers they think are best, most convincing, or most unique. In the last step called "share", the teacher calls for pairs to share their thinking with other pairs and the rest of the class. Often, the teacher or a designated helper will record these responses on the board. Students are allowed to choose their own partners in doing pair work (Lyman, 2002). This kind of activity covers different tasks and can be created to improve different skills as follows:

- **Think-Write-Pair-Share** - To increase individual accountability, have students jot down their ideas before turning to a partner to discuss them. The teacher can walk around the room and look at what they are writing to see who understands the

concept. It also prevents students from adopting their partner's attitude easily or just sitting back and letting their partner to all the thinking.

- **Spelling** – The teacher calls out a word, has them think of the spelling, then designates one person to turn and whisper the spelling to their partner. The partner gives a thumbs-up to show agreement, or corrects the spelling. The teacher can reveal the correct spelling by showing on screen with PowerPoint. (Instructional Strategies Online, 2009).

In short, think-Pair-Share provides an opportunity for all students to share their thinking with at least one other student; this, in turn, increases their sense of involvement in classroom learning.

The second group work activity the teacher can employ is “Numbered Heads Together.” Its structure is derived from the work of Spencer Kagan (2003). A team of four is established. Each member is given numbers of 1, 2, 3, 4. Questions are asked of the group. Group members work together so that all can verbally answer the questions. The teacher calls out a number and that number in each team is asked to give the answer. By doing this, everyone in the team must participate and be able to answer the question. This activity is usually conducted to enhance students' reading comprehension skill. One great benefit includes students being able to learn from each other. They must work together to ensure that everyone can understand and answer the question. This activity is one way to reduce anxiety in class.

The last activity, which fits the learner-centered approach, is called “Peer Review,” an activity requiring students to read each other's draft and give comments on it. “Peer Review” provides students with the opportunity to learn how to give and receive constructive feedback. The main goal of using peer review is to help both writers and commentators to improve their writing. The benefits from doing peer feedback are that students who give feedback to peer will be developing their critical thinking and that students will become active learners (Villamil & Guerrero, 1998). The peer review is usually conducted in pairs. The students are trained on the principles of peer correction and how to give feedback so that they would not encounter any difficulties when giving comments. Peer review training should be available before the lesson started officially. This means they will be taught how to follow the review procedure step by step, how to consult dictionary when in doubt, how to write up a comment, etc. Through peer review activity, students will experience supportive peer feedback which helps to increase their motivation and attitude towards studying English. The feedback from peers is less threatening than teacher's, so they gain less anxiety in class.

Conclusion

Nowadays cooperative learning approach is employed in different parts of the world in order to enable active learning. The reason lying behind the frequent use of it is that this kind of learning gives a lot of opportunities for students to improve themselves in different aspects such as knowledge, skill, attitude, and achievement. Most importantly, this approach does not create threatening situations in class. As we know, a relaxed classroom atmosphere or environment is significant in reducing learning anxiety. When students' anxiety decreases, they tend to perform better tasks. Knowing this, language teachers should increase

their awareness of language anxiety in class. To make students have a good perception of learning English as well as to make them feel like participating in class, teachers need to provide a variety of activities in groups, creating a pleasant environment. Furthermore, the issue of language anxiety should be taken more seriously by people concerned such as the chairperson and course coordinator. Now it's time to create a low stress, friendly and supportive learning environment for our students in order that English will not be seen as a threatening subject anymore.

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