

Cooperative Learning in the Classroom-A Report on the Visiting Trip in Cerritos, California

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Overview

First of all, I would like to express my gratitude towards the Education Bureau for organizing this wonderful trip. In two weeks, we have not only learned the strategies of conducting lessons in different ways, but also got the opportunities to have the first-hand experience of how elementary schools run in the United States. Also, the intensive training program during the first week has been extremely helpful. One of the topics covered was “Cooperative learning”, and I would like to further explore the idea and share the lessons we have had during the training program. The report will also include the procedure of how cooperative learning is conducted in different classrooms, as well as my own experience of implementing some of the activities in my classroom.

The Idea of Cooperative learning

Research demonstrates that cooperative learning activities are beneficial across all grade levels and subject areas. (Dettmer, Thursti, & Dyck, 2009). The reason we use cooperative learning activities in the classrooms is because they are especially beneficial to learners with different levels of abilities. When students work together, the ones with better language skills can help with those who are weaker, and at the same time, students with weaker language abilities can still be involved in the activities, thus create a sense of achievement. Also, these activities can increase student retention, develop students’ social skills and promote their self-esteem. When students work together, they also learn about how to share their efforts with fellow classmates. However, in order to make cooperative learning successful, teacher must bear in mind the five essential elements of cooperative learning, which are the following:

- Positive Interdependence
- Face-to face Interaction
- Individual & Group Accountability
- Interpersonal Small-Group Skills

- **Group Processing**

Only under these circumstances can students truly work with each other when learning. Teachers should always be aware of the suitable learning environment for students to work in. Students also need to follow the above rules so that the cooperative learning can truly happen.

I would like to briefly review some of the activities we have done in the following paragraphs.

In the classroom of the training program

The first step to conduct cooperative learning activities is to form adequate learning groups. The typical way is to distribute card with different numbers, colors, or different words from the topics according to the teaching objects. The following activities are demonstrated by instructors and all of the participants in the classroom, and since everyone has similar level of English, a random grouping would be very suitable for the activities.

Conversation Bag

1. Students pick up different conversation question from the bag.
2. Students are given number cards; each student can not ask the question to the person who has the same number.
3. Each student need to ask three people the question, and write down the answer.
4. After finishing asking the questions, people with the same number card should sit together.
5. Each student reports the answers to the group members, and in the end, ask each other the question.

By doing this activity, students can get multiple practices with the question, as well as develop the skill of reporting their record to other people. The final report to the group can also prompt students to speak more about the topic and is also a very good ice breaking activity.

For the young students, this activity can be combined with vocabulary and make sure students understand the meaning of new vocabularies in the questions. The conversation time is then a great opportunity for the students to utilize the new vocabularies they have learned.

Round Robin

It's a more traditional cooperative learning activity for brainstorming. Here, the instructor used it as a vocabulary review activities.

1. The teacher asks one question that has many correct answers; e.g. name of the food, fruit, vegetables, animals, etc.
2. Students take turn to write down their answer to the question in a small group.
3. Students stop writing when the time is up. Then students can share their list with the class.

This activity is useful for vocabulary review so that students don't just forget the new words they learned previously. Also, group members can help with each other's spelling and writing. With younger students, the activities can also be adapted to oral to review letter names and letter sounds. And after students are all familiar with the vocabularies, the activity can be adapted to making sentences.

Picture Story

Use a picture of scene to provide the rich context for vocabulary connections.

1. Assign a group of student to write about one or two people in a picture.
2. Make sure everyone writes the same sentences.
3. Re-distribute students to another groups composed of a member from each group, so the whole group can tell a story of the picture.
4. Ask one of the groups to share the story with the whole class.

This activity is another form of information gap. Each group of students has information of one certain characters, and as a re-formed group, people can exchange their information about different characters.

This activity is quite useful for practicing students' basic writing skills as well as the abilities to discuss.

Writing activity

Another activity we have done was the interactive writing. The activity was fun to do and can be also viewed as a cooperative learning activity.

1. Students are grouped with even number of members. Every student in the group gets a picture of a person, a paper clip and writing paper.
2. Students then answer one question about the picture and pass the picture as well as the writing paper to the next person.
3. In the end, there will be a story about each picture.
4. Students can read the full stories together and pick the best stories.
5. Then students can share with the whole class their stories.

For lower proficiency students, the teachers can provide structured sentences for them, so that they are not intimidated by the idea of writing in English. The activity also helps with students reading skills, since they have to comprehend of what other people write about the story and make sense of the whole story as a group.

Head Shoulders Knees and Toes

1. Students are assigned different roles in a group. They are model and spellchecker, tracer and spell checker, labeler for the head and labeler to the body.
2. The tracer will then trace the model's body on a large piece of paper, and then the labelers can label the body parts and facial features.

This activity can also be adapted to drawing animals, fruits, and classroom objects. Students have fun when drawing a big picture, and the labeling part can be beneficial to their vocabulary retention.

The ABC adult school English class

In the English class taught by Christine in ABC adult school, the strategy was used quite often. Pair work activities were used repeatedly whether teaching new vocabulary, conversation practice or listening practice. Because of the large number of the English class, students usually sit in a table of four, and were given a lot of times doing pair checking before reviewing worksheet together. Pair checking can ensure that each student work on their own problem as well as help with the partner's questions. Also, through discussion, students can clarify the meaning of the problem or learn new words from each other.

Partner interview was also used in Christine's class. The questions are prepared by the teacher, and the discussion of the content helps students to understand more about each others'

culture, since a lot of the students come from different countries. For advanced students, it is a good chance for them to express their thoughts under pressure-free circumstances. For lower level students, simpler questions can be used for the pair to interview each other, and achieve the teaching goals.

The 2nd grade classroom in Elliott elementary school

Math class

Students in the 2nd grade classroom in Elliott elementary school are assigned into different groups. Each group has a table leader, so that it is easy for the teacher to monitor the whole class as well as to conduct cooperative learning activities. These activities are used not only in language arts, but also other subjects as well. For example, students are asked to report how they do the subtraction problems. For some the students, it is not an easy task. In order to have them practice a lot of times, teacher asked students to work in pairs with their math problems, and have to “say” the procedure to each other when doing the math problem. In doing so, students get multiple times of practice, as well as listen to the procedure many times and familiarize themselves with the new method of solving math problems.



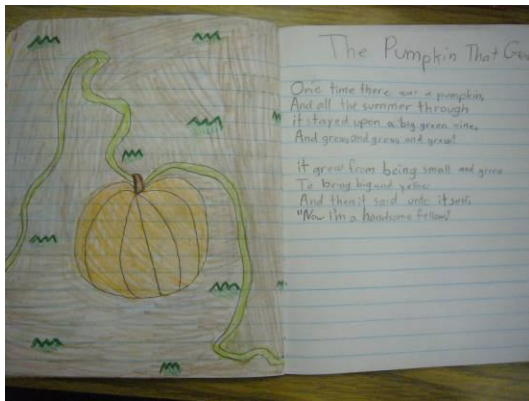
“Students’ working tables are arranged in group”

Poem/Writing groups

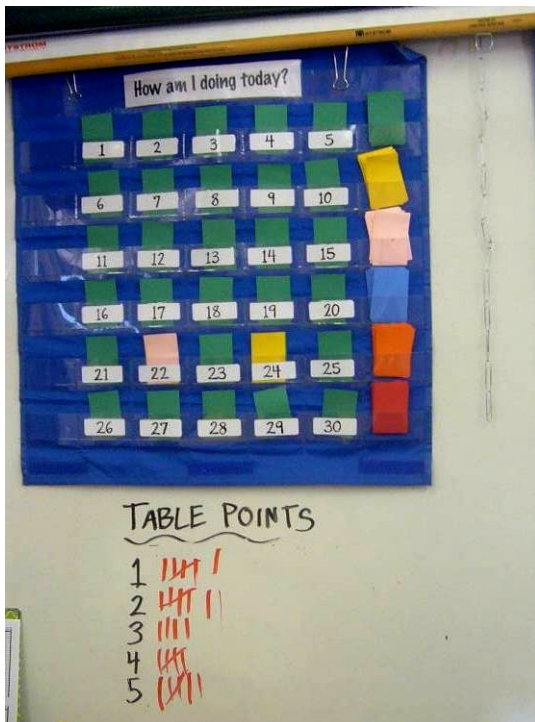
During the language art hours, students are divided into different groups to do poem copying and writing practice. In the beginning, students worked individually; however, when they finished their draft, they were asked to do pair checking and discussion before making the final writing. In this way, students learn to give constructive criticism about each other’s work. The sharing process also helps students to make their work better and better.



“Students’ works collected according to different groups”



“The final work of poem writing”



“Teacher uses paper clips and table points to evaluate group performances.”

Bring it home: In Zhongtai elementary school

After coming back from the trip, I have rearranged my classroom to be more group oriented rather than placing students in rows of individual tables. By doing so, it is easier to conduct conversation pair practices as well as group activities. One of the activities I had students do was to complete a vocabulary chart of the relations between occupation, places, and job description. At first, students were struggling a bit with the task, but most of them engaged in the group work enthusiastically. Having students actually involve in the activity is really the key for students to actively learn things instead of reciting the vocabulary and sentences passively. The information gap activities are very useful in the classroom too. And from oral practice, the activities can always be expanded to writing activities, which help students to develop in different aspects of language learning.

Reflection

As a successful citizen in the society, one of the most important abilities is to be able to work in a team with other people rather than being competitive about everything. The education system and the parents in Taiwan sometimes put more emphasis on getting perfect marks of test papers than being a well rounded person. In conducting cooperative learning activities, I can see the transformation of students from caring only about the achievement of oneself to caring and sharing with other group members. However, I do think that they need to practice more to learn not to point at each other's nose during the discussion. It is the ability to share and collaborate with other people that we should focus on developing. Also, students learn to take responsibilities of their work performance, which make learning part of their responsibilities rather than the teacher "feeding" them the knowledge. The method also solves the problems of having students of mix levels in one classroom, as we often encounter in today's classes. In this way, students learn more actively and efficiently, and most importantly, enjoy the process of learning.

References

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Cerritos, U.S.A.: ABC Adult School, English Language Intitute