The Benefits of Cooperative Learning to ELLs

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Abstract

Almost all recent researches in educational methodology conclude that Cooperative Learning is a particularly effective instructional method to promote students’ social, academic, linguistic, and affective domains. Whereas the implementation of cooperative learning is highly beneficial to a diversity of students with varying cognitive and learning abilities, it is even more so for English Language Learners (ELLs) with different cultural, racial, and linguistic backgrounds.
**Introduction**

Cooperative learning occurs when two or more students work together for the intellectual and academic benefit of each other. However, as pointed out by Johnson, Johnson, and Smith (1998), “Not all that glitters is gold, of course, and not all group efforts are cooperative. Simply assigning students to groups and telling them to work together does not, in and of itself, result in cooperative efforts.”

Evidence from research demonstrates the multiple benefits of cooperative learning, which has been widely identified as one of the most efficient instructional method to promote students’ social, academic, linguistic, and affective domains.

According to Johnson, Johnson, and Smith (1998), cooperative learning optimally consists of five key elements: (1) positive interdependence, (2) individual accountability, (3) promotive interaction, (4) social skills, and (5) group processing.

As far back as the late seventies, findings from 25 different studies show that cooperative learning techniques are more effective than traditional ones for student achievement. (Slavin, 1980)

This paper highlights some of the various points of views on the effectiveness of cooperative learning as it pertains to these domains. Although this instructional method has been proved beneficial across the educational spectrum, this paper focuses mainly on the benefits reaped by ELLs.

**Social Benefits**

Cooperative learning groups tend to have characteristics of positive interdependence, shared leadership, and shared responsibility for each other, while task and maintenance are emphasized, and social skills are directly taught. Traditional learning groups don’t possess such features.

Research shows that cooperative learning methods increase student motivation and effort by allowing students to work together on common projects to attain a shared goal (Slavin &
Oickle, 1981). Competition, on the other hand, has been shown to dampen motivation for all but the most facile learners.

As opposed to traditional teaching techniques, cooperative learning results in students feeling greater mutual concern for each other and an overall greater liking of school; it also improves race relations (Slavin, 1986).

**Academic Benefits**

Students of English as a second language find the demands of academic English especially formidable when they enter high school. Research indicates that the academic English proficiency of these students lags five to seven years behind their social communication language.

Cohen (1994) notes that cooperative learning is now an accepted instructional strategy that promotes learning and achievement across the curriculum. It has been used successfully to promote learning achievement in collaborative writing (Dale, 1995; Zammuner, 1995), problem solving in mathematics (Webb & Farivar, 1994), comprehension in reading (Stevens & Slavin, 1995a), and conceptual understanding in science (Lazarowitz & Karsenty, 1990).

**Linguistic Benefits**

Separate from the challenge of having several languages in one classroom is the challenge of providing instruction in one language in which students have varying proficiency levels. Cooperative learning techniques, such as grouping, peer tutoring, jigsaw, and language modification can create predictability in the classroom and can be used by mainstream teachers as they engage native English speakers and ELLs in activities conducted in English, by ESL teachers as they engage differing levels of ELLs in activities conducted in English, or by bilingual education teachers as they engage students in activities conducted in students' native language (Thomas, 1993).

Krashen (1985) pointed out that one’s second language development is dependant on the amount of comprehensible input that the learner can have. Interactions, especially cooperative
conversational interactions, can increase the opportunities to intake comprehensible inputs, and therefore allow learners to advance. (Pica, 1994)

Linguistic benefits include those gained from small group work in which task structures ensure the positive involvement of all group members (Doughty & Pica, 1986) and in which genuine rather than pseudo-communication of the target language is established in the classroom (Long & Porter, 1985). Research comparing cooperative learning instruction of foreign language (FL) with traditional instruction of FL has indicated favorable results for cooperative learning instruction (Bejarano, 1987).

Furthermore, studies have shown that cooperative learning will (1) increase language practice opportunities for participants, (2) improve the quality of student talk, (3) help individualize instruction, (4) promote positive affective climate, and (5) motivate learners. (Winget, 1988)

**Affective Benefits**

Studies of cooperative learning experiences consistently indicate numerous positive cognitive and affective outcomes. These include enhanced academic learning, improved self-esteem, more frequent social interactions among majority/minority members outside of the learning group, enhanced feelings of trust and acceptance by peers and teachers, expression of more altruistic feelings, and increased acts of cooperative behavior in other settings.

Furthermore, in the affective domain, cooperative learning promotes socialization and positive student interactions (Jordan & Le Metais, 1997; Shachar & Sharan, 1994) and improves attitudes toward learning (Sharan & Shaulov, 1990). Leming (1985) concludes that empirical data reporting cognitive and affective gains for CL methods are among the strongest in the professional literature.

Psychological benefits of cooperative learning pertinent for minority students learning English as a second language include the lowering of anxiety and the strengthening of motivation, self-esteem, and empowerment (Cummins, 1989; Krashen, 1989).

Since language learning is a stressful situation that augments learner’s anxiety level, providing non-threatening environment is important to lessen the stress or anxiety level. This
will allow to lower the ‘affective filters’ (Krashen, 1985), or to provide ‘face-saving’ opportunity (Levinson, 1983); to facilitate learning in psychologically safe environment.

**Conclusion**

Most psychological theories portray learning as a process of construction (Fosnot, 1996). Students can make sense of a concept only if they build it into the structure of their own prior experience. It is very difficult to create such a structure by oneself, especially in an unfamiliar and/or linguistically challenging subject area. However, discussion in small groups of peers makes this undertaking much easier.

In this contest, cooperative learning is fundamental to successfully educating a diversity of learners—students with varying cognitive abilities, developmental and learning disabilities, sensory impairments, and different cultural, racial, linguistic, gender, and socioeconomic backgrounds.

It is widely accepted that cooperative learning is one of the most powerful methods for enabling children to celebrate and benefit from the diversity that characterizes our schools, communities, and society. When properly implemented, cooperative learning benefits students in a number of ways by promoting higher academic achievement levels, imparting social skills to students, and teaching students to value and respect one another in spite of their differences. (Putnam, 1998)
References


