

Cooperative Learning as a Facilitator to Communicative EFL Teaching

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The final phase of the 2009 Ministry of Education, Sports, Science and Technology—Japan reforms, calling for more communicative and interactive high school English classes, comes into effect in April 2013. In order to make the classes more communicative, teachers are being asked to adopt more student-centered teaching approaches. In order to conduct such interactive classes, we propose the use of cooperative learning (CL). This teaching strategy provides students with opportunities to interact with each other more efficiently. In this paper we discuss the advantages of CL over more teacher-centered approaches and offer examples of practical activities teachers can use to heighten student interaction in class.

2009年に文部科学省によって改訂された新学習指導要領は、2013年4月に全面实施となる。本改訂により、英語の授業はよりコミュニケーション的、且つインタラクティブに行われることが強調された。そのためには、学習形態を教師中心型から、生徒中心型へ移行することが有効だと考えられる。協同学習は、生徒同士による対話の機会を増やし、学びを互いに高め合う上で、重要な役割を果たす。本論文では、教師中心型と生徒中心型の授業を比較しながら、協同学習の実践的なアクティビティを紹介する

JAPAN'S MINISTRY of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology's (MEXT) Courses of Study (CoS) have undergone system-wide curricular reforms in the past few years. The final stage of implementation, to be started in April 2013, states that English shall be the language of instruction in English classes at the senior high school level. These revisions to the CoS were ratified in 2009 and have already been implemented at the elementary school level in 2011 and the junior high school level in 2012. One of the main objectives of the CoS revisions is to have



students using the target language (TL) in a communicative and meaningful way. The strong language used in the document has garnered a great deal of discussion. The new revisions reiterate previous recommendations to have language classes conducted in the TL and further call for a more committed effort on the part of teachers to have the TL reflected not only in student output, but also as the main language of instruction. This phase of the CoS, and specifically the teaching of English classes in English, targets the high school level. Junior high school teachers will also need to adjust their teaching approach as they prepare their students to enter these new types of English environments.

While questions remain as to how strictly the new directives will be applied, there is no doubt that this will prove to be a difficult task since EFL classes in Japan are predominantly taught in the L1 (Gorsuch, 1999; LoCastro, 1996). This means that students will be more dependent on the teacher's ability to create an environment conducive to English language communication. Similarly, it will require the teacher to move away from commonly used translation methods and work on more effectively using communicative teaching techniques. In Section 8, Article 3 of the Foreign Languages section, teachers of English language classes are instructed to conduct classes in English "in principle," in order to provide the best exposure to communicative English for their students (MEXT, 2010). The reforms call for teachers to carefully consider student proficiency levels in English, and have the teachers adjust their level of English accordingly, in the hopes of making classes more communicative while using the target language.

Teacher Beliefs

When it comes to education, teachers' attitudes and beliefs are the strongest guiding influences on instruction (Cuban, 1993; Reynolds & Saunders, 1987), regardless of level of instruction or nationality. This suggests many teachers resist making changes

to their teaching practices when those changes stem from administrative directives. Teachers might not necessarily follow new curricular reforms simply because they are instructed to do so, but they might discard old practices if they are shown new methods that lead to better outcomes.

There are many reasons nonnative English-speaking EFL teachers are reluctant to teach in English. Certainly, if one looks at the scores of public school teachers on English proficiency tests, one can see that they are not meeting the expectations set out by MEXT (MEXT, 2011). In the section entitled "On improving English skills and instruction abilities of English teachers, and the strategic improvement of English education at the level of schools and communities," MEXT posts the low attainment levels of its teachers in relation to its benchmark targets: "The English proficiency of 27.7% of the teachers was above STEP Grade Pre-1, TOEFL (PBT) score of over 550, iBT score of over 80, and a TOEIC score of over 730" (MEXT, 2011).

The low proficiency levels are only one part of the larger issue, that being a lack of teacher confidence. Many nonnative English-speaking teachers do not feel that they possess sufficient sociocultural and strategic competencies to introduce communicative activities in the target language (Butler, 2004; Nishino, 2008; Sakui, 2004; Samimy & Kobayashi, 2004). Even with extensive training, some teachers still lack confidence when delivering EFL lessons in English (Fennelly & Luxton, 2011). This lack of confidence is often attributed to the colonial Self-Other discourse which pits bilingual EFL teachers against the native model teacher (Kachru, 1986). This discourse renders the native status unattainable to the "outsider," no matter how high the level of proficiency (McKay & Bokhorst-Heng, 2008, p. 50).

The Changing Roles of Teachers

While there is general agreement that low confidence is not easily overcome, two Dörnyei studies dealing with teacher prac-

tices are instrumental in helping find a solution. In what they called the “Ten Commandments,” Dörnyei and Cziser (1998) identified 10 strategies to motivating students. Key among them are the following two: setting a personal example and creating a pleasant learning atmosphere. Guilloteaux and Dörnyei (2008) found a positive correlation between instructor motivational practices and the level of student motivation. These findings reveal a need for EFL teachers to be stronger models of language in use.

In order to become models of language in use, teachers must look at improving the dynamics of the classroom to foster an environment of communication. For some teachers this will require a change in teaching practice and for others it will be a simple refocusing of the weight they place on classroom communication priorities. The MEXT-commissioned survey of the state of education in Japan, Proposal 4, states:

Reinforcement of English skills and instruction abilities of English teachers is extremely important for the improvement of students’ proficiency in English. Besides, English teachers themselves must realize the importance of English communication abilities in the global society. Everyday efforts of each English teacher are of greatest importance. (Commission on the Development of Foreign Language Proficiency, 2011)

These everyday efforts will likely involve a reformulation of teachers’ beliefs in the role they play in the achievement of student L2 output. Within a communicative framework the function of the teacher in the classroom changes dramatically. The teacher is not there to merely transmit knowledge and information to passive and wisdom-thirsty recipients, but rather to create the conditions conducive to learning and see to it that learning occurs. The teacher as instructor, as sole repository of truth and knowledge, has lost its universally accepted status,

and in its place has come the teacher as facilitator (Karavas, 1993, p. 231). The role of facilitator is one of the roles MEXT is calling upon public school teachers to adopt.

Cooperative Learning

Cooperative learning is a proven teaching strategy that enables teachers to conduct more interactive classes and provide students with opportunities to interact with each other more efficiently. To realize the objective of creating a more communicative and cooperative class, the role of facilitator must be more obvious in EFL classes. The following section introduces CL as a useful tool for making the role of facilitator most effective, not only for teachers with low confidence in L2 teaching, but also for those who strive to make students more communicative in English.

Cooperative learning activities are based around structured group work. Students are put into groups and individually assigned tasks that facilitate all members’ participation. Rather than leaving students in groups to compete with each other, cooperative learning activities provide enough structure so that all members participate without the stronger students dominating or the weaker students remaining silent. Kagan and Kagan (2009) measure the effectiveness of an activity by using the following four principles, which form the acronym, PIEs.

P (Positive interdependence): In order to create positive interdependence, tasks need to be organized so that students are on the same team and are working toward the same goal. Tasks should be structured to make it easier for students to work together, rather than to individually complete the task.

I (Individual accountability): The success of the individual student is very important. All students need to be responsible for their own performance while simultaneously contributing toward the goal of the team.

E (Equal participation): It is important for participation to be equal if all students are going to achieve gains in learning. Teachers can ensure equality in effort and opportunity by using turn-taking, time allocation, and distribution of roles.

S (Simultaneous interaction): Multiple students performing the task at the same time are more productive than one student at a time. Simultaneous interaction ensures that a higher percentage of students are actively engaged in learning.

As teachers in Japanese junior and senior high schools work towards making their lessons conform to the MEXT guidelines, they will find that traditional, teacher-centered lessons do not easily meet the goals. CL activities have the potential to help make English classrooms more communicative, as they offer more structured activities than teacher-centered lessons. This promotes student TL use in multiple ways, including interaction, efficiency, and socialization.

Interaction

With CL activities, since students work together in groups, there is more interaction. Students talk with each other, as well as with the teacher, increasing both language input and output. Input is increased because students are given the opportunity to help one another, along with the teacher, in the learning process. Similarly, since there are more opportunities to talk, student output is also increased. In contrast, a more teacher-centered approach tends to be one-sided, with students receiving input from the teacher and repeating as a class or answering questions individually when called upon.

Efficiency

Simultaneous interaction is a key part of a CL activity. This makes for more efficient use of class time, with more students talking simultaneously. In a teacher-centered lesson, students often find themselves waiting in silence as the teacher calls on students one by one to speak. CL activities significantly reduce this wait time. Also, during CL activities teachers are available to monitor student interaction, making it easier to identify someone who might need help with the material.

Another way that CL activities can help with the efficient use of class time is by allowing students to give feedback to each other. Activities can be designed where, as part of their group responsibilities, students comment upon and correct one another's work. In this way, rather than being limited to submitting an assignment and having to wait until the next class to receive feedback from the teacher, students get instant feedback from their peers.

Socialization

By participating in structured group work, students have the opportunity to improve vital social skills, such as listening to others and asking questions. By working together, students can build trust amongst themselves, making for an environment where they feel more comfortable if they make a mistake or need to seek clarification. Similarly, by arriving together at answers or conclusions, students are often more confident in their results.

Additionally, by learning in groups, students are exposed to more ideas than they would be if they were working alone. They have the opportunity to see a problem from as many different perspectives as there are members in the group, making each member an integral part of the whole group's learning experience.

Example Activities

Some example activities can better show how CL can be implemented in Japanese junior and senior high school English classes.

Round Robin

Round Robin (Kagan & Kagan, 2009) is a CL activity in which groups of students take turns working on a particular task. By delegating a time limit for each student, the teacher ensures each student has an equal opportunity to contribute to the task. Compared to a teacher-centered exercise, this activity can lead students to interact more actively by checking each other's comprehension and giving and receiving feedback from each other. Moreover, the teacher can then monitor and observe the language being used in the small groups and have more time to better assess and correct student output.

In one case in a junior high school English class, Round Robin was used to conduct written drills with a newly learned grammar point. Once students had learned the new grammar rule, and were used to its form and application, they were put into groups and given a piece of paper on which to create and complete fill-in-the-blank sentences using the target grammar point as a group.

Jigsaw

Another well-known CL activity that can be used in junior and senior high school is called Jigsaw (Kagan & Kagan, 2009). In this activity, each member of the group is responsible for a piece of information that is vital to the overall completion of the task or problem, creating an atmosphere of positive interdependence. Similar to how the image of a jigsaw puzzle needs all its pieces to be seen clearly, the CL Jigsaw needs all the group members' contribution to achieve full understanding.

Jigsaws work very well as textbook reading activities. Longer reading passages can be cut into smaller segments that are assigned to individual group members who then must rely on their team members to fill in the gaps. In one example, the activity is divided into two parts. In the first part, students prepare themselves to be well versed in the reading segment assigned to them. In the other part, they share their information with their team members. By having each member share their knowledge about their segment, an understanding of the whole reading can arise within the group.

In a teacher-centered class, students might read the whole passage alone and work on the reading task individually. The teacher would control the whole class in terms of checking for comprehension and explanation of content. This kind of lesson could result in a limited or receptive form of learning. On the other hand, in this CL activity, the tasks are shared among the students and they have the opportunity to learn from each other, as well as from the teacher. The act of explaining their segment forces students to restructure language in their minds and develops higher order thinking skills. Also, because students are aware they are individually accountable for explaining their section to their group, there is usually a higher sense of motivation to fully understand the assigned segment. Finally, they can be seen as being an expert on their section, which can boost confidence.

Conclusion

In order for teachers in Japanese high schools and junior high schools to meet the new MEXT guidelines, they will need to create more communicative, interactive classes. Making the transition from a teacher-centered, lecture style of teaching to a communicative approach will be challenging for many. CL activities can facilitate this process by providing a base for learning that is both interactive and effective. By creating more

opportunities for students to interact, there are naturally more opportunities to use English. Additionally, by creating situations where students respond to and give feedback on each other's English use in a structured way, the possibility exists for more efficient error correction. Furthermore, this process, by showing students how to take responsibility for their own learning, can be both inspiring and empowering for them.

CL can be a useful tool for teachers as well, providing an effective form of classroom management and structure that is conducive to all-English environments. Making sure all students participate in a lecture style class can be difficult, but monitoring students as they participate in CL group work is easier since all students have a role to play and, by the nature of the structured activities, participate equally and simultaneously. Also, instructions for CL activities are simple and easily adaptable to many teaching contexts. Regardless of the curriculum, they can be readily reused. Familiarity with the activities will enable teachers to use them in other contexts.

We hope CL will lower teachers' anxiety about conducting their classes in English. Instead of needing to explain everything themselves, they can have students work on their own and then explain the content to each other, so the teacher will have more time to help students when they make mistakes or have questions. In this way, teachers become class facilitators or guides for the students. CL presents itself as a tool for making the role of facilitator most effective, not only for teachers with low confidence in L2 teaching, but also for those who strive to make students more communicative in English. CL has the capability to create a pleasant learning atmosphere for students and a comfortable teaching environment for teachers. Therefore, it can be a powerful tool in helping teachers become facilitators as they implement the new MEXT revisions.

Bio Data

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