

## Cooperative Small Group Discussion

Keiko Hirose and Hiroe Kobayashi

Although small group discussion is a familiar activity used in ESL/EFL classrooms, it has limitations resulting from its control-free nature. This activity has been made more structured by incorporating the three basic principles of Cooperative Learning, a teaching methodology based on the belief that learning increases as cooperation among learners develops. This article first provides theoretical background for the use of group work and then describes how those three principles can be applied to the activity. Finally students' reactions to Cooperative Small Group Discussion are discussed, and suggestions as to the use of this activity are offered.

### 協同グループディスカッション

グループディスカッションは、外国語教育ではよく使われる活動であるが、本論文では、学習者のディスカッションへの参加とグループ内での協力をより確実にするために Johnson & Johnson の協同学習の基本原則を応用した方法を紹介する。

本論は、まず、外国語学習におけるグループワークの理論的な背景について論じる。次に、協同学習の三つの原則をいかに英語のクラスに適用できるかを授業のモデルをあげて示す。それから、授業を実際に受けた学習者がこの方法をどうとらえていくかをアンケート調査の結果を基に紹介し、最後に、より効果的にこの方法を用いるための提案をいくつか行う。

### 1. Introduction

As the learning of language focuses on "use," a great number of teaching materials and methods have been designed to enable learners to communicate with each other. In this communicative language teaching, activities using pair or group work have gained a prominent place in ESL/EFL classrooms; learners are encouraged to interact with each other, most often through the exchange of ideas.

Theoretical arguments for the use of group work have been corroborated by recent research in second language acquisition. Research findings indicate, for example, that group work allows for

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a greater amount of, and richer variety of, language practice than teacher-fronted classes, and also that it enhances opportunity for the negotiation of meaning (see Long & Porter, 1985, for a review of the literature). In fact, this negotiation has been observed to take place more frequently in learner-learner interaction than in learner-native speaker interaction.

In this paper, we review theoretical and empirical arguments for the use of learner-learner interaction in foreign/second language learning, and then advocate "Cooperative Small Group Discussion," which we have developed to assist low intermediate/advanced learners to improve their oral skills. We will also include students' reactions to this activity, based on experimentation in a college English course over one semester.

### **2. Theoretical Background Underlying the Use of Learner-Learner Interaction**

Recent studies on second language acquisition have been given impetus by Krashen's input hypothesis and Swain's claim regarding "comprehensible output" (1985). Krashen (1982) asserts that exposure to "comprehensible input" (i.e., the language that is directed to and understood by learners) is a necessary condition for language learning. Input slightly beyond the learner's current level can be made comprehensible through negotiations with the interlocutor, such as clarification requests, confirmation checks, or comprehension checks (see the first example in Figure 1, where the learner's clarification request triggers comprehensible input from the native speaker interlocutor). The input created through these negotiations (or conversational adjustments) is believed to assist learners in acquiring the target language.

The role of comprehensible input, however, is a controversial issue. Whereas Long (1983), among others, takes a view similar to Krashen's input hypothesis, some doubt has been cast on its significance. Ellis (1990), for example, points out that the hypothesis has not yet been empirically validated. Although he admits that such negotiations can enhance learners' understanding of input, he doubts that they actually result in new learning. Cameron and Epling

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(1989) argue, more specifically, against the significance of the role of negotiations in the input theory. According to them, the learner does not necessarily try to negotiate because "the listener frequently did not indicate lack of understanding: rather, he or she simply agreed, maintained silence, or changed the subject" (p. 403). In such cases, the learner perhaps often employs Fillmore's "feigning understanding" (Aston, 1986, p. 133): the learner pretends to understand what is said by the interlocutor without giving a signal for further negotiation. Even if the learner attempts such negotiation, however, there is no guarantee that he/she will make the input understandable to the interlocutor. Low proficiency level learners, in particular, often encounter difficulty in creating comprehensible input because of their limited language ability. Thus, Aston (1986) suggests that it is necessary to examine how much substantial understanding, not feigned understanding, is achieved through negotiations (p. 134). In short, whether comprehensible input actually promotes language learning or not still remains an issue.

Figure 1.  
Examples of "Comprehensible Input" and  
"Comprehensible Output"

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### 1. Comprehensible Input

Learner (NNS English)

Interlocutor (NS English)

so you came here by yourself or  
did you come here with friends?

no no I—what? what you say?  
(clarification request)

did you come to the States with  
friends or did you come alone?

no, alone—from Toronto.

### 2. Comprehensible Output

and they have the chwach there

the what? (clarification request)

the chwach—I know someone that—

what does it mean? (clarification  
request)

like um like American people  
they always go there every Sunday

yes?

you know—every morning that there  
pr—that—the American people get  
dressed up to go to um chwach

oh to church—I see

(From Pica, 1987, pp. 5-6)

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From a different perspective, Swain (1985) argues that “comprehensible input” is not sufficient, but “comprehensible output” (the language that learners themselves make comprehensible to the interlocutor in communicating their intended meaning) is also crucial in language acquisition (see the second example in Figure 1, where the learner is given the chance to clarify his/her meaning so as to make the language comprehensible to the native speaker interlocutor). Swain’s claim results from evidence that French immersion students, in spite of seven years’ exposure to comprehensible input, did not achieve native-like linguistic performance. She attributes this failure to their limited use of the target language.

Swain’s position seems more relevant than Krashen’s, especially for improving oral skills. Krashen puts comprehension over production, whereas Swain reverses that order. She emphasizes the importance of output by articulating its functions as follows. First, output provides learners with opportunities for meaningful use of the target language as well as for hypothesis-testing. Second, the learners, making use of such opportunities, may be pushed more to produce their desired meaning, especially when a communication breakdown occurs. Finally, by using the target language, they are likely forced to move from semantic processing to syntactic processing. All these functions are considered important for the development of oral skills (Swain, 1985, pp. 248-9).

The two claims made by Krashen and Swain, respectively, have generated much research on second language acquisition, particularly on learner-native and learner-learner interaction. Research findings indicate that native speakers of English make their input comprehensible to learners by linguistic and conversational adjustments (i.e., simplifying their speech, requesting clarification, and numerous other means). Further, it has been shown that, given similar interaction times, learners talk more and negotiate more with other learners than they do with native speakers of English (Porter, 1986; Varonis & Gass, 1985).

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Perhaps because of pedagogical concerns, learner-learner interaction has received much attention in recent investigations. Assuming that increased speech and interaction will facilitate learning a language, factors that influence learner talk have been sought. The factors verified include learner-external factors such as task type (e.g., one-way vs. two-way information exchange task: Doughty & Pica, 1986; Gass & Varonis, 1985; Long, 1983), group size (Doughty & Pica, 1986); also learner-internal factors such as sex difference (Gass & Varonis, 1986), first language background (Duff, 1986; Gass & Varonis, 1985), proficiency level (Hirose & Kobayashi, 1990; Porter, 1986; Ross, 1988), and interaction style (Cameron & Epling, 1989).

If we accept the premise that increased amounts of speech and interaction are a prerequisite for language learning, especially for improving oral skills, then learner-learner interaction through group work should play a significant role in foreign language classrooms. This role is even more important in an EFL situation such as Japan, where conversation with native speakers of English may not often occur outside the classroom. Given this, one major task for the teacher to perform is to set up group work that ensures learners' active participation in making their output comprehensible to the interlocutors.

### **3. Cooperative Group Discussion: Why?**

Language teachers have devised many activities to get learners to talk freely for communication practice, including information gap and problem solving, to name just two. Of these activities, group discussion, by which we mean "topic-centered" discussion, is not particularly new. In fact, this activity seems to win much favor from teachers for several reasons. First, although complex preparation in terms of reading materials and the use of elaborate aids may make discussion more successful, it can be "simple to prepare" (Ur, 1987, p. 14), as compared, for example, with the amount of preparation required for information-gap tasks. Second, because it is a control-free activity, it can promote learners' individual initiative. Learners can exchange

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ideas freely. In short, group discussion is a practical communicative activity.

In addition to pedagogical advantages, recent research on learner interaction (Hirose & Kobayashi, 1990) shows that group members, when participating in discussion, offered each other challenging opportunities for "comprehensible output" on both cognitive and linguistic levels. Some learners, stimulated by others' utterances, made serious efforts to convey their intended meanings. In these attempts, they utilized linguistic input offered by other members, which facilitated their syntactic processing of ideas in the target language. This finding supports the use of group discussion for fostering learners' speaking abilities.

Despite these merits, group discussion has several inherent problems. One such is its control-free nature, which leaves members' participation to their own discretion. Their participation is likely to be affected by individual traits and oral proficiency levels. For example, some learners who are more outspoken or linguistically more competent than others may dominate the discussion, leaving the rest in the position of passive listeners. While this problem can be corrected to some degree through proper preparation and feedback (for example, by the teacher providing topic-related vocabulary or various interactional functions in advance, and then monitoring learners' participation), a lack of control over learner participation is likely to cause unbalanced turn-taking among group members.

Another problem is that group discussion lacks "the purpose of genuine discourse" (Ur, 1987, p. 6) because learners often speak simply for the sake of practice. Nevertheless, if topics are stimulating enough, they can facilitate real exchange of ideas among learners. However, such topic effects seem to vary among individuals. Because of having different interests, some learners find a given topic more stimulating than others, which in turn is likely to influence members' exchange of ideas (see the later discussion on topics). Consequently, what is needed is a group goal

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(i.e., the creation of a consensus or position) towards which members work in discussing a topic. Although such a goal still remains artificial, it can be effective in terms of getting members involved in intra-group negotiation.

At this point, in order to overcome the problems mentioned above, we would like to introduce Cooperative Learning techniques. These techniques do not provide all the answers, but our experience tells that they work well.

### 4. Basic Principles of Cooperative Group Discussion

Our group discussion activity incorporates the basic principles of Cooperative Learning developed by Johnson and Johnson (1975). Cooperative Learning is a teaching methodology which aims at maximizing learning by fostering cooperation among learners. It makes use of small group work, but unlike typical group work, it is characterized by having three basic principles: (a) positive interdependence, (b) individual accountability, and (c) collaborative skills related to small group interaction. These principles can be easily adapted to ESL/EFL classes at various levels, not to mention many other subject areas (see Jacobs, 1988, for use in EFL writing, and Ringdahl et al., 1986, for use with lower level ESL classes).

#### 4.1 Positive interdependence

For positive interdependence to occur in a group, learners must perceive that they "sink or swim together" (Johnson, Johnson, & Holubec, 1986, p. 8). This can be achieved by having members share tasks through setting up a mutual goal, assigning roles, dividing materials or resources among members, and giving joint rewards. These techniques make group work structured enough to ensure group collaboration.

In our group discussion, each team of four has the goal of producing a summary sheet of the given discussion, together with the group's chosen position and supporting reasons. Then roles are assigned to members: a *facilitator* who presides over

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discussion, ensuring an equal chance for members' participation; a *writer* (or *recorder*) who fills out the summary sheet; a *reporter* who presents the group's position to the whole class; and an *observer* who observes how discussion goes or how each group member participates in the discussion. Regarding evaluation, each member receives the same score as the group does.

### 4.2 *Individual accountability*

The basic tenet of Cooperative Learning is that learners are responsible for their own learning. Cooperative Learning provides a situation in which learners can maximize their achievements. This requires the teacher's frequent monitoring of the learners' participation and progress on a given task so as to ensure their involvement and achievement. To show one's responsibility, every member of a group signs the summary sheet (see Appendix A for an example). The signature indicates that individuals agree with what is written and are able to explain the group's position. The teacher then picks any member and asks him/her to verify the position or to supply more detailed ideas. When a member is unable to do this, the teacher may ask other members to explain it to him/her. This encourages group members to assist each other.

### 4.3 *Collaborative skills*

Cooperative Learning also requires that learners develop social skills, and use them effectively for successful collaboration. These skills, which need to be taught, include encouraging reticent group members, requesting clarification, expressing disagreement, and persuading others to change their ideas. Thus, "Cooperative Learning provides an excellent context for social language" (Ringdahl et al., 1986, p. 26).

In our group discussion, the teacher introduces language functions which are socially appropriate (i.e., greeting, thanking, disagreeing, and encouraging) and also those more directly relevant to the negotiation of meaning (i.e., requesting clarification, checking for confirmation). In each lesson, time is allowed for the practice of the collaborative skills, and learners are encouraged to utilize them in the actual discussion. Initially they may find them artificial, but will soon adapt



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various collaborative skills into their own speech.

### **5. Sample Discussion Lesson: "Should Women Stay Home?"**

In this section we shall describe the way the lesson is conducted in a 90-minute college freshman class. The lesson consists of several parts. Although time allocation is flexible, the discussion (including summary writing as a group) constitutes the central part, requiring nearly half of the class time. The pre- and post-discussion activities (see below) each require approximately a quarter of the class time.

#### *5.1 Collaborative skills*

The language functions to be presented are clarifying and encouraging. These functions are used to encourage linguistically weak students, who often remain reticent, to talk or to ask for clarification. The teacher first elicits students' expressions by presenting situations where they might use the functions. Then the teacher introduces phrases such as "Try it," "Don't worry about mistakes," and "Go on," and also shows strategies for *clarifying*, through expressions such as "What do you mean?" "Pardon?" and the partial repetition of the previous speaker's utterance with rising intonation. Students repeat these expressions after the teacher.

#### *5.2 Topic presentation*

Although this is a warm-up for the activity, it can greatly affect the way the subsequent discussion will proceed. In the previous class, students are given reading assignments (i.e., newspaper articles about the conditions of working mothers) to gain some relevant knowledge about the topic. On the day of discussion, the teacher tries to raise the level of student interest in the topic, first by doing a class survey on whether their mothers work or not, then by comparing the results with the available statistics on Japanese working mothers, and finally by directing their attention to a specific question, "Why has the number of working mothers increased in Japan recently?"

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### *5.3 Grouping*

Although there are several ways of grouping (e.g., learner's proficiency level, familiarity, lottery), this lesson adopts a mechanical one, which usually results in heterogeneous grouping. In the case of a class of twenty, all students are given a number from one to five randomly and those with the same number constitute a group of four. New groups are formed once every three or four weeks.

### *5.4 Discussion*

The goal of the discussion is to achieve a group consensus; in other words, each group decides to take either a "Yes" or "No" position and comes up with supporting reasons for it. Some Japanese students may find this difficult; others may find it challenging. During this activity, the teacher monitors each group, provides language support if requested, and encourages students to speak in English. (This type of teacher monitoring is possible with a class of up to 40 highly-motivated students, but it is difficult to manage larger classes, particularly at a low intermediate level.) After the given topic has been discussed for twenty-five minutes, the teacher distributes a summary sheet to each group. While a designated writer takes charge of the actual writing, all four members collaborate on the content and language. Upon completion of the writing, they read the sheet and sign it to indicate that they agree with what is written. Thus, the summary sheet should reflect all the members' opinions.

### *5.5 Processing*

The teacher spends some time collecting students' feedback on their group collaboration. Designated observers in each group are asked to report orally to the class on how students worked together in their groups or how they treated the day's topic.

### *5.6 Sharing.*

In sharing, designated reporters are called on to present their group's position to the whole class. The teacher

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clarifies their position or confirms some of the given reasons by asking other group members (individual accountability). Because the same position and reasons are often restated by many other groups, for the most efficient use of time the teacher may focus only on differences among groups. In the end, the teacher summarizes the whole discussion and gives comments on it. If time permits, class discussion can be extended to related issues, to promote further exchange of opinions among groups.

### **6. Students' Reactions to Cooperative Group Discussion**

Students' reactions were collected through questionnaires and a group discussion conducted on the topic, "What do you think of group discussion? Do you like it or not?" We have been using this activity since 1987. Every year we elicit feedback from students on the activity. Students' reactions indicate almost the same tendency, and here we report those of 1988.

A majority of the 42 students (79%) reported that they liked the activity, with strong preference for its discussion part (74%). Apparently they enjoyed the exchange of ideas with other group members, and also listening to other students' opinions on various topics (14%).

The benefits students received from participating in the ten consecutive group discussions were seen in their increased confidence in speaking English: nearly 40% of the students felt that their confidence had increased considerably or a great deal, compared with the first time they discussed in a group, and almost 50% of them felt it had increased at least some. Naturally, many students (53%) felt more comfortable speaking English by the end of the semester. In spite of these positive feelings, however, only one fifth of the students (22%) perceived their speaking abilities to have improved to a great degree; in fact, many students still reported that it was a great struggle for them to express themselves in English. Perhaps because of this difficulty, they became more aware of inadequacies in their speaking ability, which resulted in increased motivation for improvement in this area (54%).

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Among the given factors that presumably helped students' participation, "friendly atmosphere within a group" was reported the most facilitating (69%), "topics" (43%) was next, and the rest was reported as follows: "peer assistance" (38%), "assigned roles" (19%), and "speaking ability" (12%). The students' perceptions support what the literature says about successful group work (Long & Porter, 1985): creating a warm friendly atmosphere contributes a great deal to active learner interaction; students feel comfortable asking for peer assistance in their word-searches or, in return, offering help when others are in trouble, such as being unable to complete their utterances.

What is interesting about the facilitating factor of "topics," however, is that students found the same factor to be a hindrance to their participation as well. Compared with the 43% who had a positive view of "topics," 57% reported the opposite. This same tendency was also found with many of the topics used (see Appendix B). For example, regarding the topic "Should Children Take Care of Aging Parents?" 12 students liked it, but 13 viewed it as boring. This points out how difficult it is for teachers to choose a topic appropriate for all students.

### 7. Conclusion

In Japan learners often find it difficult to improve their oral skills due to limited opportunity for language practice outside the classroom. It is therefore urgent for teachers to provide classroom opportunities for the production of comprehensible output. In response to this need, many communicative activities using pair or group work have been devised and implemented so far. We have taken up one activity, group discussion, and attempted to improve it by incorporating Cooperative Learning principles.

Unlike typical small group work, our Cooperative Group Discussion facilitates group collaboration through the following factors: (a) every group has a goal; (b) every member has a role; (c) every member is encouraged to use social/functional language.

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In short, the activity is structured so that cooperation is ensured among group members. As described in this paper, the incorporation of the three basic principles of Cooperative Learning can help ESL/EFL teachers to improve the effectiveness of group work.

The students generally showed a positive attitude toward Cooperative Group Discussion; they liked to exchange ideas with other students in the target language. Regarding the effects of its use, the activity appears to increase students' confidence in speaking and also their motivation for further improvement of oral skills; however, its use does not seem to lead immediately to great improvement of oral skills.

Several suggestions can be made which will make the activity more effective. As holds true with any group work, it is important for teachers to create a warm, friendly atmosphere in the class. Greetings and small talk should be incorporated into the beginning of discussion, and games should sometimes be played for fun and relaxation. Further, teachers should allow students to choose what topics they want to discuss and to present their choices to the class. However, if students are not ready to take the initiative, giving too much responsibility is not recommended. Finally, intra-group organization also requires the teachers' attention. Learners' interactional style and language proficiency level are found to influence interaction among group members, as is familiarity with the other learners. Considering these factors, teachers should strive to find ways of grouping which allow for greater learner participation.

In conclusion, Cooperative Small Group Discussion can provide learners with significant intellectual and linguistic challenges. If planned well, it can create a great deal of opportunity for producing comprehensible output, not to mention understanding comprehensible input.

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### Appendix A A sample summary sheet

Date: 7/6/1988

Group No.: 3

#### GROUP DISCUSSION

Topic: "What do you think of group discussion?"

Do you like it or not?"

#### PRESENTATION

Position: YES

Reasons: We can feel relaxed, for we don't have to speak in front of many people.

It is useful to develop our ability to think logically.

We can have many opportunity to speak English.  
It's fun to speak with friends, even in English.

#### SIGNATURE:

Facilitator: Rie Nakemishi

Reporter: Keiko Aoki

Writer: Mio Arita

Observer: Mari Sano

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### Appendix B

#### A List of the Topics Used in the Small Group Discussion

1. What do you think of your university? Do you like it or not?
2. What do you think of English classes in the university compared with those in senior high school? Which do you like better?
3. Should we study hard at college?
4. Are you “for” or “against” school uniforms?
5. Do we have to go abroad to improve English?
6. Should children take care of aging parents?
7. Do students need money from their parents?
8. Should women stay home?
9. What do you think of international marriage? Are you “for” or “against” it?
10. What do you think of group discussion? Do you like it or not?