Keynote Address:

ENHANCING ENGLISH LEARNING WITH YOUNG CHILDREN: GUIDING THEIR FIRST STEPS IN COOPERATIVE LEARNING

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Abstract

Cooperative Learning has been promoted by the Indonesian Ministry of Education and Culture (Process Standard number 22 in 2016) because its principles and techniques are considered best practices in many learning contexts around the world for teaching a wide variety of subjects in elementary and secondary schools. However, Cooperative Learning activities are not often adopted in early childhood education. This paper examines several Cooperative Learning techniques that can be modified or simplified so that they are appropriate for teaching young learners. In introducing these activities to children at a young age, teachers can foster their students’ social skills as well as prepare their students for more advanced Cooperative Learning activities as they progress in school.

Keywords: Social skill, learning context, English learning, cooperative learning

INTRODUCTION

In 2015, the Indonesian Ministry of Education and Culture revised Indonesian curriculum (effective as of 2016) with new standards for not only what would be taught (content) but also for how (process). The Process Standard (Ministry of Education and Culture decree number 22 (2016) prescribes 14 learning principles. Most relevant to this paper are Principles #1 and #12. Principle #1 states, “Dari peserta didik diberi tahu menuju peserta didik mencari tahu (from learners being told to learners looking for/discovering information or finding meanings)” while Principle #12 declares, “Pembelajaran yang menerapkan prinsip bahwa siapa saja adalah guru, siapa saja adalah peserta didik, dan di mana saja adalah kelas (learning that enacts the principle of: anyone can be teachers, anyone can be students, and everywhere is classroom).” (Astuti 2016a).

The Indonesian Process Standard also states “partisipasi aktif peserta didik (students' active learning) and berpusat pada peserta didik (student-centered).” (Astuti 2016a). Cooperative Learning (CL) aligns very well with the Process Standard because it involves students’ active learning in a student-centered classroom. The government made an appropriate decision in promoting CL, which was also the case in the 2013 Curriculum (see Astuti 2016b) because scholars consider Cooperative Learning a best practice within the communicative approach in varied contexts around the world.

Cooperative Learning (CL)

CL comes from the educational theory of social constructivism most often tied to Vygotsky (1978). Various scholars have established different principles for CL, with the five proposed by Johnson and Johnson (2009) being quite often cited. For young children, however, the 5th principle, Group Processing, might be considered too advanced in that it consists of individual and group reflection and modification. Hence, this article will include only four here (adapted from Kagan (2017) and will demonstrate that at least these are suitable for young children:
1. **Interdependence.** Students know that they need their partners and that their partners need them in order to complete the pair or group task.

2. **Individual Accountability.** Students are responsible for their own learning and must show that they have learned it. At later ages, group accountability (being responsible for their partners’ learning) is also included.

3. **Equal Participation** – All students should speak for about the same amount of time in each activity.

4. **Simultaneous Interaction** – A high percentage of children should be participating actively at any given moment in the activity.

The CL principles of **interdependence, accountability, participation, and interaction** foster the Indonesian Principles of active learning and student-centered learning. With the very youngest children, perhaps the only CL principles addressed are 3 and 4, **participation and interaction**, but by learning how to work together in CL activities, young children will develop the social skills needed to become **interdependent and accountable**. These two principles can be fostered in some CL activities even at a young age.

A major reason CL leads to effective learning stems from the fact that people learn well in social settings. From the time they start speaking, young children learn from asking questions and talking with others (Vygotsky 1978). In a traditional teacher-centered classroom, however, students work individually and are often called to the front of the class to perform in front of all of their classmates. As research on the common phobia of public speaking demonstrates, having to perform in front of a large group is stressful and works against learning. As estimates of the population who have a fear of public speaking range as high as 75% (Hamilton 2010), teachers can assume that many of their students will be afraid of speaking up in class. In contrast, CL involves students working in pairs or small groups, which are less intimidating than large groups because they are more like out-of-class conversations, so students can feel more relaxed and learn more easily.

CL helps students learn, but it also helps teachers. Instead of preparing long lectures to give in front of passive students, CL activities require teachers to make lesson plans about what the students will do. That is, while traditional lesson plans are content and teacher centered, CL lesson plans are more naturally learner centered. For teachers of English who are afraid to speak English themselves, the focus will be on making their instructions clear rather than on worrying too much about their accent or whether they are following every grammar rule. Teachers can focus on which CL activities could work for the lesson, how to form the groups, how much time to give, and how to adapt during the lesson when the plan is not successful. If an activity doesn’t work, teachers can modify it, and this modification does not signal a failure. On the contrary, making changes in front of students models a growth mindset (Dweck 2006) With a growth mindset, teachers model that people can try something and then modify it to grow or improve. They can model that making mistakes is a natural part of learning rather than a sign of weakness.

**Cooperative Learning Activities for Young Learners**

Of the many CL activities, some that can be used with children even in pre-school include the following:

1. Think-Pair-Share
2. Rally Robin
3. Round Robin
4. Match Mine
5. Gallery Walk
6. Mix & Match  
7. A-B Each Teach  
8. Quiz-Quiz – Trade  
9. Jigsaw Groups  

This paper provides examples of these for teaching English, but these same CL activities can be used in any class in any language. As students advance from pre-school to elementary school through post-graduate work, they can use these and other CL activities for math, science, social studies, art, music, and any other subject.

Think-Pair-Share (TPS) is the most well-known CL activity, although not everyone knows it is part of CL. TPS is popular even in many teacher-centered classrooms because it provides time for students to respond. Students first think for themselves, then share with a partner (i.e. in pairs), and finally share with a larger group or with the entire class. Even very young learners can use TPS. For example, when the teacher begins reading a story to preschool children, the teacher can stop and ask the children to guess what they think someone in the story will do next, how the story will end, or how they want it to end. The children can then share their ideas in pairs and later with a group. Any story can work, and any question a teacher might normally ask can be appropriate as a TPS activity.

TPS adheres to Indonesian Process Standard Principle 1, active learning, because students have to think for themselves first and then share their thinking with a partner. If teachers ask how students want the story to end, children’s interests can be addressed, which is in line with the student-centered approach of Process Standard 22. Finally, since any story can be used and any kind of question can be asked, TPS can be used outside of the classroom and with people other than the teacher.

While TPS starts with learners working individually to think first by themselves, in Rally Robin, the partners take turns. For example, young learners could take turns saying the names of animals, coloring in a picture or map, adding or grouping numbers, etc. Young children can benefit from this kind of practice in turn taking in a pair effort to complete the task because it not only causes them to participate actively, but taking turns also helps them develop their social skills.

Round Robin can be used in somewhat the same way as Rally Robin, but in Round Robin students take turns in their groups. Often the teacher makes a rule that nobody in the group may repeat what a previous person already said. That is, each student’s answer must be something new. Round Robin extends the social skills of taking turns as it requires each child to demonstrate their individual accountability as they contribute to the activity.

TPS, Rally Robin and Round Robin CL structures are simple and appropriate for teaching young learners because they have only one level of individual accountability; that is, the individual is responsible for their own performance in their pair or group. At the same time, they involve students participating equally and interacting to develop their interdependence as they function in a group.

A CL activity that works with any age is called Match Mine (MM). Working in pairs, each student must compare what they have to what their partner has. With young learners, pictures are ideal materials to match. Teachers can use ready-made, so-called spot-the-difference pictures with some differences (like two elephants), with many differences (such as a sheep and an elephant) or pictures the students draw themselves, for example about their lives such as their houses or their families. In doing MM, students are learning to cooperate and to communicate. For an English class, the goal would be to have the students speaking in English as much as possible, so MM works best if each student can see only one of the pictures and not that of their partner. If partners are back-to-back or have a barrier hiding the
other person’s picture, students will have to use as much English as they can and not gesture or point to communicate. In any case, during MM, the students are actively interacting during their comparisons. In addition, MM promotes two levels of accountability as the two students are accountable for the differences they and their partners can find. That is, they are beginning to be responsible not just for their individual knowledge or opinion but for that of their pair.

Gallery Walk (GW) is also most often associated with pictures, but it can be conducted with words or other content. The traditional CL GW occurs with pairs or groups and gets students moving about the classroom. Young children often like to draw, and neuroscience research has shown that the act of drawing helps us connect ideas to learn concepts, even complex ones in science, for example (Ainsworth, Prain, and Tytler 2011). In learning English, students can draw a picture and label the parts – Each pair or group could collaboratively draw and label different animals or the groups might draw different types of objects. For example, one group might draw and label the parts of the face; another items of clothing; a third items in the classroom, while a fourth parts of a house. Once the drawings are complete, the students walk around with their partner or group to all of the other pictures. If they know how to write, they can leave questions or make corrections on another piece of paper or a sticky note. When the walk is completed, each group can see the feedback from the comments of the other groups. With young learners, the groups could give feedback orally about each poster.

So far, the CL activities presented of TPS, Rally Robin, Round Robin, MM, and Gallery Walk require minimal preparation time and few materials beyond what a traditional lesson requires: that is, the CL activity uses existing stories, pictures, and vocabulary lists.

The last few activities may require more time for teachers in their lesson planning because they need to obtain or create appropriate materials. In Mix and Match (M&M), students walk around the room to find a partner with the related word. For example, one student might have the word hot while another has cold. The students walk around the class to find the student with the opposite card. All of the students participate and interact simultaneously; each pair is jointly accountable for matching the antonyms. In order to create a M&M activity, the teacher needs to decide on the vocabulary from the content being taught and the number of pairs and then prepare the cards. M&M can also be made into a group activity in which case the teacher needs to put groups of words into categories, such as fruits, vegetables, meats, etc. M&M is good for helping students connect different ideas because, while the students are not drawing the pictures themselves, they are still engaging the brain’s processing of visual images and the connections of those images to language. For example, in an English class, students can connect vocabulary to pictures, to other words (such as synonyms or antonyms), or to categories (such as fruits or vegetables). Older students might connect countries to continents, animals to their species, or chemical symbols to chemical names. Finally, M&M is useful because it can be used to form the pairs or groups for a later activity, to review content already learned, or to connect vocabulary being learned to previously learned material.

A-B Each Teach is a CL activity in which each child is responsible for learning something and then teaching it to another student. The classic version of A-B Each Teach has each student reading a section of a text and then teaching it to a partner. With children who cannot yet read, A-B Each Teach can be used in other ways. For vocabulary, for example, each student could listen to a different English word and learn how to pronounce it using pictures and a talking dictionary. Then they could take the picture and teach its pronunciation to their partner. For those beginning to write, the word could be written down, and they could also teach its spelling to their partner. A-B Each Teach fosters accountability beyond
students’ individual learning since students are responsible for teaching to their partner. Interdependence is also involved as students must rely on their partner to teach well.

Quiz-Quiz-Trade is similar to A-B Each Teach, but it does not end with pair work. After B teaches, students trade cards then repeat the A-B Each Teach and trade around the class to continue learning and teaching Quiz-Quiz Trade is an excellent activity to do in classes with a lot of repetitive practice, such as math, because in Quiz-Quiz Trade each student has a single math problem to solve in each round rather than a full page of math problems. In an English class, it can be used with each student having a different new word to learn and teach. Like A-B Each Teach, the teaching element of Quiz-Quiz-Trade gives young children their first experiences with interdependence and accountability for the learning of others.

Jigsaw or Expert Groups is a classic Cooperative Learning technique, but most people think of it only for older learners. Nevertheless, Jigsaws can be used with young children if they have uncomplicated tasks that do not require reading. In a simple Jigsaw, students begin in groups called Home Groups. Each Home Group is given a different task or subject to learn in Step 1. For primary school learners, the subject might be animals, for example, with each Home Group given a different animal to learn about. In addition to the animal name, students can be asked to describe it (Elephants have trunks, tails, tusks, eyes, 4 legs, big ears). They might also discuss where the animals live and what they eat. For pre-school children, an English lesson might use Jigsaw for fruits, with each group learning if it has an English name, what its color is, and saying if they like it or not. After the Home Groups have learned their material, Step 2 requires each student to move from the Home Group to a second group, where they are the Expert and must teach about their subject to all of their Expert Group members and to learn from all of their Expert Group members. Hence, when they move to these Expert Groups, which are mixed with people from the other Home Groups, each child is accountable for teaching the other students about their animal or fruit. As students get older, a three-step jigsaw moves students back to their original groups to report.

Every teacher has some techniques they rely on more than others, but CL activities promote active, student-centered learning. All of those in this paper are intended to help young children as they develop the interdependence, accountability, participation, and interaction they will need in their future studies and in their lives. Many teachers discover that, as they become familiar with using CL procedures and gain confidence in implementing CL techniques into their teaching, lessons become easier and easier to plan. There are many other Cooperative Learning strategies, and while some of them require students to interact at a high level and take great responsibility for the group’s collective learning, the pre-school years can and should be used as the starting point to help children begin to work in groups, take turns, listen to others, and share their own ideas in an active, student-centered context.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


