

Using Cooperative Writing Activities to Build Community, Fluency, and Accuracy

Some Theory: Cooperative Learning

Cooperative learning is a teaching methodology that offers “principles and techniques for helping students work together more effectively” (Jacobs, Power, & Loh, 2002, p. ix). In other words, cooperative learning is much more than just putting students together in groups and asking them to work together. Instead, cooperative learning principles help us understand what is involved in helping groups succeed, and cooperative learning techniques embody those principles in an attempt to provide structure for student interaction (Baloche, 1998, Johnson & Johnson, 1999).

At the heart of cooperative learning is the principle of positive interdependence. This means that the group members feel that they sink or swim together, that what helps one group member helps them all, and anything that hurts one group member hurts them all. A kind of yin- yang relationship exists between individual accountability and positive interdependence. Individual accountability puts pressure on group members to learn and to help others learn, while positive interdependence provides support to group members as they take the risks inherent in the learning process. Teachers can attempt to promote a feeling of positive interdependence in a number of ways, including:

- a) group members have a common goal(s)
- b) group members are all rewarded if the group achieves its goal(s)
- c) the group works together to overcome an obstacle
- d) each group member has unique resources
- e) each group member plays a different (perhaps rotating) role
- f) group members share a common identity as members of their group

Linguistic Objectives:

From: USING COOPERATIVE LEARNING TO TEACH VIA TEXT TYPES

George M. Jacobs and Seah-Tay Hui Yong, *The Reading Matrix* Vol. 4, No. 2, September 2004

All cooperative writing activities have one of two aims:

- Focus is on ‘messages’ and targeted communication functions: Fluency. In this case the objectives are embodied in the process of cooperative writing and the communication tasks. *examples: Brainstorming, Speed-writing, Story Sequences*
- Focus is on Form/Structure: Grammar, Punctuation. End result: Accuracy In these cooperative writing projects the focus is on the FORM of the messages, less on the message. More peer editing & correcting. *examples: Group Letters, Dictogloss, Group Timeline Projects*

Some skills that are practiced and improved with cooperative writing projects:

- Peer editing
- Peer teaching
- Appropriate critiquing
- Error correction
- Consensus building
- Agreeing/Disagreeing appropriately
- Summarizing
- Analyzing/Synthesizing
- Negotiating
- Goal setting
- Problem solving
- Persuading
- Vocabulary building
- Verbal and non-verbal communication & behaviorally:
- Confidence building
- Increased motivation
- Lowered affective filter
- Self reliance
- Increased enjoyment of writing

TYPES OF COOPERATIVE ESOL WRITING PROJECTS

While not definitive by any means, I roughly organize cooperative writing projects like so:

GROUP TASKS: Cooperative writing projects where the 'whole is larger than the sum of its parts' and where individuals negotiate specific roles and then coordinate those roles to create a larger project. All aspects, including brainstorming, organizing, writing, editing, correcting, formatting, arranging, illustrating and presenting (in a printable or postable manner) are all handled by the group.

Some examples of Group Task Projects I have facilitated:

- School newspaper
- Class newsletter
- Neighborhood Coffee Shop Guide
- Event and information Posters
- Movie, restaurant, music and book reviews
- Lyric sheets for a class created tape
- Dramatic plays
- Theme or class websites
- Theme Bulletin boards
- Reports
- Investment guides
- Letters, awards, special emails

SEQUENTIAL TASKS: Cooperative writing projects that begin with individual work and which are then later assembled/blended together to form a whole. The actual melding may be rough at first but can be polished as a further group project or by participating individuals. Usually speed/fluency is emphasized.

Some examples of Sequential Projects I have facilitated:

- Speed writing tasks (Dictate and Dash)
- 'Exquisite corpse' exercises
- Birthday & other cards – students 'add on'
- Sequential email exchanges
- Blogs & Blog Comments
- Write/draw/write/draw exercises
- Recipe booklets
- Haiku collections
- Wako poems & collections
- Raps
- Dictoglosses
- Class biographies booklet
- Surveys and statistics reports
- Travel/tourist brochures

COORDINATED TASKS: Cooperative writing projects where the actual process of creating/writing is coordinated between two or more students. One person may be speaking or dictating while the other is writing, or maybe each person writes one word at a time to create one 'real' sentence. Usually one person is writing at a time and other skills (reading, listening, speaking) are in play. In the end, all involved edit and correct the jointly scribed text.

Some examples of Coordinated Projects I have facilitated:

- Pair dictation
- Interviews
- Pair-note taking
- Intro creating/writing tasks
- Listening/summaries
- Reading/scanning/note taking
- Student created 'mad libs'
- Sentence writing roundtables
- Brainstorm extension tasks
- Collage writing projects

Denny Sargent