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Cooperative Learning in foreign language teaching

'It is impossible to single out just one explanation for why cooperative learning works so well on so many dimensions. Cooperative learning is a teacher's dream but a researcher's nightmare.' So writes one of the leading figures within cooperative learning in USA, Spencer Kagan¹, in an article from 2001, and this is perhaps the shortest way of saying that cooperative learning is a complex entity: a form of teaching that challenges students at the intellectual as well as the social level and that combines various levels of simultaneous learning processes in an ingenious way.

Cooperative learning is learning in small groups where interaction is structured according to carefully worked-out principles. The method, which was developed in USA, arose among other things out of concern that the traditional school was creating far too many losers, destroying the spontaneous joy of learning in many young people and failing to develop one of the most important things one will need in later life, i.e. the ability to cooperate with others. Cooperative learning can be used at all age levels, from kindergarten to university. It is much more than just a bag of tricks to make teaching run more smoothly. It is a different way of conceiving teaching.

Research within cooperative learning shows impressive results in terms of subject knowledge. But apart from this, there is also positive spin-off from cooperative learning in the form of an increase in the individual's self-esteem and a noticeable reduction of bullying². The last-mentioned is due to the fact that the students eventually come to work together with everyone across the classroom, which breaks down prejudices and insecurity. The high level of activity also prevents boredom and off-task behaviour.

Cooperative learning has not been specially developed for foreign language teaching, but can be used with advantage in all subjects. The reason why the method is relevant for us as foreign language teachers is that - apart from everything else it can do - it is an excellent way of conducting communicative language teaching. More of this later. First, based on the work of Spencer Kagan, a brief account of the method's most important building blocks.

Learning through interaction

Cooperative learning is based on a social-constructivist view of learning: One builds up one's own understanding of the world through communication. Via the formulation and re-formulation that often occurs in interaction the material becomes one's own in a way that it can never do if one simply 'receives' the material in the form the teacher or the text supplies it. One formulates, explains and negotiates one's way to an understanding of the material.

To ensure optimum opportunities for interaction, cooperative learning takes place in small teams, often of four students. This makes pair work possible within the team, and this face-to-face interaction is a very important element. It is recommended that the teams work together for a while and team-building exercises are used to induce a team spirit that contributes to motivating students to help each other.

The importance of structure

The foundation of cooperative learning is structures. It is here one will find the absolutely crucial difference between cooperative learning and traditional group work. Kagan calls his approach to cooperative learning the structural approach, and his book from 1994 includes almost 100 structures³.

The individual structures can last a short or a long while, depending on which teaching material one 'puts into them'. If one wants to plan longish, project-like sequences, these can be built up out of a series of structures which together create the desired progression, fulfilling the proposed subgoals on the way. All the structures can, in principle, be used in all subjects. It is only when they are combined with a content that they become subject-specific activities. It is the task of the cooperative learning teacher to choose (or personally construct) suitable structures in relation to aim and content.

But what is meant by a structure? A structure is a content-free way in which one can organise interaction between individuals. An example could be the Round Robin structure, which is when team members do a round in which they in turn suggest, for example, an answer to a task or ideas for a brainstorming session. A Round Robin is often one step in a multi-step structure. An example is Think-Pair-Square, where the pupils first think individually, then share their thoughts with a partner and finally do a Round Robin in the team.

Why are structures so important? Structures control our behaviour to a great extent, and different structures elicit different forms of behaviour such as active/passive and social/asocial behaviour. Far too much of what goes on in schools, according to

Kagan and others⁴, is training in asocial behaviour via competitive situations. One person wins if the other loses. The class conversation, for example, is a competitive structure: it encourages students to compete against each other for the teacher's attention and permission to answer. Only the strongest have a chance here, which is why many opt out. Somewhat simplistically, one could say that the structure encourages asocial behaviour and passivity. Interaction in pairs, on the other hand, will normally be a cooperative structure. It is hard to be passive in a situation where the task is, for example, to interview each other in pairs. Cooperation and social behaviour arise naturally here.

But why so many structures? Because the aims of one's teaching can vary. If the aim is to acquire concrete knowledge one needs different structures than if the aim is to train communication skills or thinking skills. For this reason, Kagan categorises structures according to the overall purpose(s) they serve best, thereby making it easier to choose the structure that is relevant, both in relation to the nature and amount of the material that is to be worked on and the teaching goal that has been set. The following domains of usefulness for the structures are used:

- team building
- class building
- mastery
- thinking skills
- information sharing
- communication skills

The overall categories refer to the overall learning goals which the individual structures are best able to promote, without excluding the possibility that one has positive spin-off at the same time. Kagan's categorisation actually shows that many of the structures are equally good at promoting various different overall aims: Round Robin, for example, is grouped as a team-building, mastery and information-sharing structure.

The aim of these overall categories is to ensure that the teacher chooses a structure that is in line with his overall objective; just as suitable as the structures are to serve the aims for which they were created can they be unsuitable in relation to other objectives. If, for example, one wishes the students to acquire some concrete material, one should not choose a communication-skills structure such as Talking Chips (the aim of which is to practise dialogue) or a thinking-skill structure such as 4s Brainstorming (the aim of which is to generate new ideas) but a mastery structure such as Expert-Jigsaw, the aim of which is to become an 'expert' in certain material in order to explain it subsequently to others.

The four basic principles in the structures

But what precisely are the mechanisms that make a structure cooperative? There are four principles that ought to be observed in every structure, no matter its aim. These are:

- 1) **Simultaneous interaction:** Most students possible ought to be 'on' at the same time. The optimal form is pair work, which is very frequently included as a stage in the various structures. The classic example of the opposite is the teacher-controlled class conversation, where the individual student, to slightly oversimplify, 'waits in line' for 44 minutes so as to be 'on' for one minute. Simultaneous interaction can easily increase the student's speaking time tenfold or twentyfold.
- 2) **Equal participation:** As a rule, the structures are constructed so that everyone can contribute equally, with no one being forgotten or opting out. Once again, class teaching can illustrate the opposite: here the students volunteer and those who most need to practise speaking are usually those who say least - often nothing at all. In ordinary group work, ensuring equal participation is a well-known problem.
- 3) **Positive interdependence:** The structures are built up in such a way that the students in a team need each other's output if they are to solve the task they have been given. The contribution of each student is a piece of the total work. This means that everyone has an interest not only in explaining their knowledge to the others but in extracting knowledge from the others until they have understood each other. This push-pull mechanism is an effective 'engine' in the interaction that is lacking in class conversation.
- 4) **Individual accountability:** The structures give each student an important role in the interactional pattern. No one can opt out without this having consequences for the others. Individual accountability is one of the most important motivating factors in cooperative learning. Everyone likes to feel that they know something others can use, and everyone gets the chance of showing this precisely via the structures. Individual accountability is also implemented when students are being individually assessed in various assignments or tests.

As is apparent, the structures constantly clarify the task of each student in the interaction with the team. And they make each student indispensable. This completely changes the patterns of activity in a class. Situations no longer arise where a student can feel his or her contribution is irrelevant. Everyone is listened to and taken seriously. This enhances self-esteem - and self-esteem enhances motivation.

It is good to remind oneself that no student turns up in class with the aim of being bored or getting stupider. It is the structures through which we organise the work that to a very great extent determine whether the students experience success or the opposite.

Cooperative learning in foreign language teaching

In our context, it is particularly interesting how cooperative learning can contribute to attaining better learning results in foreign language teaching. If the aim - which everyone seems to agree on - is for the students ultimately to gain communicative competence, I believe that the teaching itself ought to be communicative, i.e. it ought to the greatest possible extent to give the students the opportunity to communicate - not just do exercises aimed at future communication. In this context, an important criterion is how much output the individual student is given the chance of producing, since it is here that a very central part of language acquisition and acquisition of communicative competences in general takes place.

Let us look at some concrete examples of cooperative-learning structures used in foreign language teaching.

3-Step Interview

Step 1: Pair-work: student A interviews student B.

Step 2: Partners switch roles

Step 3: Team work: Round Robin: the students explain in turn what their partner said.

‘3-step interview’ is categorised as an information-sharing structure. It can be used to process material in numerous ways. One example could be that the students interview each other about which of the two tales they have read they like the better and why, which person in a short story they find most appealing/realistic/interesting and why, etc. In the process, the person being interviewed will not only have to express himself or herself in the target language - (s)he will also become involved in an interpretation process. One could also imagine the students interviewing each other about what they would consider working on if they themselves were to plan the next sequence, etc.

Travelling Heads Together

Step 1: The team is given a task. They discuss until they arrive at an answer and make sure they all agree about it and can defend it.

Step 2: A student from each team (e.g. with the aid of a student selector⁵) goes to the next group, where (s)he explains the team’s answer.

Travelling heads together is a variation of the structure Numbered Heads Together, which is categorised as a Mastery structure. In the original structure, where the se-

lected student gives the answer to the whole class, the emphasis is on the work done in the first team to master the material. But when the student is instead sent on to the next team, the structure becomes just as much an information-sharing structure, as the presentation to the new team is not only proof of the material having been mastered but also a sharing of this new knowledge. One can thus choose to let various teams work on various questions and share the answers in this way.

Inside-Outside Circle:

Step 1: The students work in teams on certain material.

Step 2: The students form two big circles on the floor, one inside the other. If, for example, there are 6 teams of 4 students, 3 teams form the inner circle and the other 3 the outer circle. The inner circle looks outwards, the outer circle inwards. Each person in the inner circle has a partner in the outer circle. The students now exchange material or discuss with their partner.

Step 3: The students in the outer circle (or inner circle) move 4 persons to the right (or left), so that everyone is now facing a new partner. Material is exchanged with the new partner.

Inside-outside circle is one of the most versatile structures. It appears under the categories Class building, Mastery and Information sharing. It is very good for getting the pupils/students to feel relaxed with each other in a new class, where one can, for example, use it to get them to talk about themselves in English. If so, Stage 1, of course, is removed and the rotation is one person at a time - as long as one wishes.

The activity can well become quite noisy as many people are standing close together and speaking, but it is perfectly possible to quieten things down by, for example, asking them to whisper for a while. It is important that the whole group stays together and does not, for example, spread out into corridors and corners while the presentations are taking place. Some of the energy comes precisely from the unconventional arrangement and from the buzz of activity around one.

One of the things Inside-Outside-Circle is specially suitable for is to train students to present material in a clear, well-structured way. Most teachers are all too familiar with long-winded group or individual presentations that really should be the culmination of a lengthy work process but which often end up as an anti-climax. Everyone's time is wasted on processes that contain far too little learning.

One of the reasons why students rarely become very good at presentations is naturally that they get too little training in it, because it takes time. With Inside-Outside Circle

one can train performance skills without wasting each other's time. This is done in the following way: All the students in the one circle make a five-minute presentation for their partner in the other circle. The partner must listen carefully as afterwards (s)he is to give feedback in the form of praise and advice concerning improvements, especially as regards how clear and well-structured the presentation was. After this, they exchange roles. When both have presented and been given feedback (Stage 2), an extra stage is added before Stage 3 where everyone returns to their teams to discuss how the feedback they have received may help them improve their presentations. Perhaps the composition ought to be altered, perhaps the introduction ought to be clearer, etc. When the agreed time has passed, everyone returns to the circles once more (Stage 3). Everyone moves one team to the right and tries out the presentation once more. When everyone has received feedback, they listen to a new presentation with a different content than the first one. All students get a new chance in this way to practise presenting.

Let us look at the amount of time consumed: in the presentation training described, 24 students each did two presentations of five minutes, i.e. 48 five-minute presentations all told. This took 20 minutes. If the presentations had been done in the traditional way, this would have taken 240 minutes, 12 times as long - or more than five lessons. The feedback process was also far more economical: here it was once more a question of pair work. If each feedback session lasted 2 minutes, this meant a total of 8 minutes for feedback, whereas 2 minutes of feedback per time for 48 presentations would add up to 96 minutes - or more than 2 lessons. So in terms of speaking-time we have achieved in approx. 30 minutes what would have taken over 7 lessons using old-fashioned presentations. If we are interested in our students speaking English in their English lessons, there is something useful to be had here.

Cooperative learning and communicative competence

In the course of the processes described, which, it should be noted, only comprise a few examples, the students manage to train many different components of communicative competence: strategic competence is used in the negotiation of meaning that takes place in the attempt to make oneself understood by the other person; pragmatic competence is trained, i.a. via the use of speech-acts that otherwise do not occur all that frequently in teaching situations such as praising, giving advice, asking clarifying questions. Discourse competence is at the very centre of Inside-Outside-Circle, both when they are listening to the structure of the presentation and when giving feedback to it, and when discussing the structure in teams.

It would be possible to go into much more depth in analysing this dimension of cooperative learning, but one could sum up the matter in the following way: All

aspects of at least the oral side of communicative competence are involved when one works via cooperative learning, for the simple reason that they were included in the concept of the method from the outset. Communicative competence (or at any rate its oral aspects) is in many ways another word for the social competence that is repeatedly referred to in Kagan's book as one of the prime aims of cooperative learning in general.

But it is not only the oral side of communicative competence that is taken account of in cooperative learning. The written side is, too. As far as reading is concerned, this is achieved by the structures often being used in connection with the reading of texts, which either takes place beforehand or, for example, in a cooperative reading structure. Written skills are developed i.a. by written processes being built into the structures, so Round Robin, for example, becomes a Round Table where every pupil writes instead of speaking, or Think-pair-square becomes Write-pair-square, where the first stage is to write something down that then forms the basis of further discussion in pairs and in teams.

In literature on cooperative learning in language and foreign language teaching one can find descriptions of a number of concrete writing activities⁶. In addition, I would again refer to the flexibility of the structures: Since the teacher decides the content, (s)he can choose to use them to work on written skills just as /well as anything else. There is, though, a small thing that should be noted here: While the oral side of communicative competence is, so to speak, integrated into the structures and therefore is trained the whole time, no matter what one is working on, the written dimension will sometimes occur as a structural element, at other times as the actual content that is put into the structures.

Linguistic awareness

Another point that can be important in this connection is that cooperative learning does not - as one might perhaps be misled to believe - only offer language acquisition as something that, so to speak, 'happens on its own while the students are talking about something else'. Even though language acquisition occurs to a great extent in this way, most people agree that from time to time there is a need for working in a more focused way on linguistic phenomena. This is also taken account of in cooperative learning, as the structures - which are without content - can also, in principle, have for instance a grammatical problem as their content.

There are plenty of structures that are excellently suited to this work. One example of a relevant structure could be Pairs Check, where the students alternately solve a task while thinking aloud, and the partner listens in and approves the task when it

has been satisfactorily solved, after which they exchange roles for the next task. A structure like Flash Card Game could also be relevant: Here the students have written down the things they need to learn on personal cards, and are then 'trained' by their partner, who uses 'exaggerated praise' as motivation in the form of a range of enthusiastic exclamations such as: 'Excellent!', 'You did a terrific job!', 'You keep amazing me!' etc. (the challenge being to use a new eulogising expression each time) until the student has won all his cards back by replying correctly. A somewhat behaviouristic touch, perhaps, but one that the students love. There are also such structures as Turn-4-Thought, a kind of game where the students are handed out a sheet of paper with questions, but where cards taken from various piles decide which of the four team members is to ask a question, answer it, give feedback and give more detailed explanations. This game can apparently motivate the students no matter what it is that has to be learned - even the use of relative pronouns (!) Finally, a number of communicative language exercises are very close to cooperative learning in their construction and with slight adaptations would be bona fide cooperative learning activities if so desired.

Social competence

That communicative competence is so central to cooperative learning is, as mentioned, due to the fact that social skills are at the heart of the method. In order to further strengthen this competence a number of roles have been developed - especially for team work in project-like activities - several of which, such as Encourager, Gatekeeper or Question Commander⁷, have to try and ensure that the dialogue works, and that everyone's opinion is heard. Examples of dialogue gambits used in such roles could be 'Let's listen to Peter' or 'Louise, do you agree with the point that Maria has just made?' The students are thus directly trained to involve everyone in the conversation in a positive way. There are also certain structures, such as Paraphrase Passport, that have exactly this function.

Social competence is developed in other ways as well, however. As mentioned, team building is regularly included, especially when new teams have been formed. Additionally, one can set up a social skills centre in a corner of the classroom, choose the social skill of the week together with the students and write it on a poster along with various expressions one needs when practising that particular skill. If, for example, the skill of the week is to get everyone in the group to feel appreciated, the poster will feature such expressions as: 'You did a wonderful job', 'Thanks for helping me out on this', 'That was a terrific idea', etc. In the course of the week, if other good praisers are heard, these are written on the poster so everyone can see them. In this way, communicative and social competence are further trained, and the students achieve meta-cognition regarding cooperation and interaction.

Much more than language

One might almost think that cooperative learning had been invented with foreign language teaching in mind, and many people have also written specially about the many advantages of using it here⁸. But just as many of the advantages cut across subject boundaries. Here are just some that I have not previously mentioned: Cooperative learning is an exceedingly democratic form of teaching; it strengthens both the individual and the community. Every single student is required in many different contexts to adopt an attitude and explain his or her own point of view, they learn to listen to and respect each other and everyone can therefore feel that they are at the centre at the same time. The method is powerful when it comes to the development of character and values. It is also stressed as being more versatile in its appeal to the various intelligences and well in line with what brain research tells us about how we learn. And, something not without relevance for the actual teaching situation: It is fun to be a student in a cooperative classroom.

Notes

¹ Kagan Structures: Research and Rationale. In: Kagan Online Magazine, 2001 [www.kaganonline.com/Articles/index.html]

² See, for example Robert S. Slavin: Cooperative Learning. Allyn and Bacon, 1990.

³ Spencer Kagan: Cooperative Learning. San Clemente, Calif.: Kagan Cooperative Learning, 1994.

⁴ See, for example Johnson, Johnson and Holubec: Cooperative Learning in the Classroom, ASCD, 1994.

⁵ A transparent 'wheel of fortune' for OHP use, where the arrow chooses which of the team's students gets the task.

⁶ See, for example, Julie High: Second Language Learning through Cooperative Learning. San Clemente, Calif.: Kagan Cooperative Learning, 1993.

⁷ See Kagan, 1994, p. 14:10 and 14:11, where 12 'social roles' for use in team work are presented.

⁸ See, for example, Holt, Chips and Wallace: Cooperative Learning in the Secondary School: Maximizing Language Acquisition, Academic Achievement, and Social Development, NCBE Program Information Guide Series, Number 12, 1991.