

VARGA, LÁSZLÓ

Why Cooperative Learning

“An ounce of experience is better than a ton of theory...” (Dewey J., 1922). Cooperative learning is considered a new development in effective learning; it has its roots in the 1920s. Teaching and learning are challenging, because a teacher never knows where his influence stops and when his learners achieve their purpose. Cooperative learning is based on the idea that children can learn in groups with the help of the teacher. In a classroom using cooperative learning, children work on activities in small groups and they receive rewards or recognition based on the overall group performance. Working together, looking at things from a different perspective, being able to really listen to each other, communicating and informing, accepting changes and dealing with these changes in a flexible way, thinking and acting in a creative manner, making use of the possibilities of each individual. These are just some of the skills developed within cooperative learning.

How children learn

We believe that cooperative learning is one of the most effective ways of learning because it develops the children’s personality in many different ways (Intelligence Quotient, Emotional Quotient, Social Quotient) and makes a positive learning environment. It creates the best conditions for learning through practice (Operational Intelligence). Constructivism learning theory says that children generate knowledge from their experiences, construct knowledge for themselves, that is children build themselves up, so we can talk about ‘self –made children’.

In this chapter my main aim is to present a literature review of learning strategies and children’s individual learning styles. Furthermore, I would also like to focus on the social interactionism. This theory suggests the importance for learning by interacting with others. Finally I intend to continue with different types of workforms and I will define cooperative learning.

Every child is different. Children in the classroom where we teach may learn in many different ways. Individuals may exhibit diverse styles of learning, due to the differences in their cognitive, affective, social and physiological development. Identifying a single preferred educational style is possible; however it is not desirable since individuals differ so markedly in their learning styles.

Learning strategies are the techniques individual students use to help themselves learn. Classroom research (*Littlejohn, Hicks, 1966*) has identified three main types of strategies:

- Meta-cognitive strategies, such as planning, self-evaluating, self-monitoring, and beliefs about others.
- Cognitive strategies used in actually 'doing the learning', such as guessing words, repeating, learning things by heart and working out rules.
- Social strategies, such as working with others, asking for help and so on.

All children come to their lessons with their own learning strategies. Learning strategies are very personal – what works for one person may not work for another person. Since the strategies children use are influenced by teaching and by others, learners may not be using the best strategies for themselves. Research (*Sadker, Sadker 1991*) shows that there are at least three areas that contribute to each child's individual learning style.

- Cognitive area - Individuals have different modes of perception and organisation. Some children prefer to learn by reading and looking of material (visual), while others need to listen and hear information spoken aloud (auditory), still others learn by body movement and participation (kinesthetic). Some learners focus attention narrowly or with great intensity. Others pay attention to many things at once. While some learners are quick to respond, others rely on a more slowly paced approach.
- Affective area - Individuals bring different levels of motivation and drive to learning challenges and the intensity of this motivation is a critical determiner of learning style.
- Physiological area - A child who is hungry and tired will not learn as effectively as a rested child. Some children can sit still for long periods of time, while others need to get up and move around. Light, sounds and temperature are yet other factors to which pupils respond differently based on their physiological development.

Social interactionism

There are many alternative theories which attempt to describe the learning process. According to my topic, the most important model of the learning processes is the social constructivist theory, which strongly suggests the importance for learning of the social context and of interaction with others. The most influential theorist on this theory was L. S. Vygotsky, the remarkable Russian psychologist whose famous saying is what children can do together today, they can do alone tomorrow.

Vygotsky emphasised (*Williams, Burclen 1997*) the importance of learning in interacting with people. Children are born into a social world and learning occurs through interaction with other people. Children learn a language through using the language to interact meaningfully with other people. *"In the early stages of*

ontogenesis, the child is completely dependent on other people, usually the parents, who initiate the child's acting by instructing the child in what to do, how to do it, and what not to do." (Lantolf, Appel 1995)

Social constructivist theory provided for a new model of effective practice which lies in the nature of the social interaction between two or more people with different levels of knowledge and skill. Vygotsky made a concept which he called the 'zone of proximal development' (the ZPD). This was defined as the difference between what a child could do independently and what could be done with the support of another person who was more skilled.

Social interactionism emphasises that teachers and learners interact with each other and the learner plays a central role in this theory. Lantolf and Appel say that there is a mechanism which is relevant to the social interactionism. The scaffolding concept, created by Bruner, states that persons with different levels of knowledge can help each other. The scaffolded help theory gives six features (Lantolf, Appel 1995): recruiting, simplifying, maintaining, marking, controlling, demonstrating.

These features help children solve problems with scaffolded mechanism that promotes the novice's learning through the grades.

Why cooperative learning

Littlejohn and Hick say (*Littlejohn, Hicks, 1966*) that the teaching of children poses some of the greatest and most rewarding challenges. All classes are 'mixed-ability' classes. All classes consist of individual children with different personalities and interests. Each child also, himself / herself, has mixed abilities. For example, some learners may find writing or reading easier than speaking. For this reason, teachers need to adopt a flexible methodology that allows for a variety of learning styles and abilities. Workforms are the most important aspects of class management. The better classroom managers are thinking ahead. While maintaining a pleasant classroom atmosphere, these teachers keep planning how to organise, manage and control activities to facilitate instruction. Effective teachers must be more than good classroom managers; however, they must also be good organizers of academic content and instruction. Ralph Waldo Emerson said that 'The man who can make hard things easy is the educator'.

The purpose of this section is to introduce cooperative learning. This section will highlight aspects of cooperative learning: its advantage over individual learning, the role of the teacher, and the features that teachers should consider when planning groupwork. We have mentioned earlier that there are two forms of cooperation: pairwork and groupwork.

Firstly, cooperative learning is considered a new development in effective te-

aching; it has its roots in the 1920s. In a classroom using cooperative learning, children work on activities in small groups and they receive rewards or recognition based on the overall group performance. Sometimes, classrooms are set up according to an individualistic reward structure, such as independent study or learning contracts. In these cases, learners work by themselves to reach learning goals that have no relationship to those of other children. But a cooperative learning structure differs from more traditional approaches in that children depend on one another and work together to reach shared goals. Since face-to-face interaction is important, the groups should be circular to permit easy conversation.

Next, cooperative learning programs highlight the role of the teacher as instructional leader. Children have more positive attitudes to learning and their ability to learn. Teachers have more positive attitudes toward teaching and higher expectations for their children. Williams shows (Williams, Burclen 1997) that effective teachers have strong interpersonal skills. They accept, respect and empathise with, and care about their children. They create an atmosphere of group cohesiveness and cooperation in their classroom. Cooperative learning has a positive effect on achievement as long as it reflects two essential features:

- The group must work together with positive interdependence to earn rewards.
- There must be individual accountability, since the group's success depends on the individual learning of each group member.

Cooperative learning increases not only achievement but also friendships in the classroom, and also helps mainstreamed handicapped children gain social acceptance by their classmates.

In conclusion, cooperative learning gives teachers lots of possibilities to educate the whole person according to children's personality. Williams (Williams, Burclen 1997:45) stresses the importance of developing the whole person. Education is concerned not just with theories of instruction, but with learning to learn, developing skills and strategies to continue to learn, with making learning experiences meaningful and relevant to the individual, with developing and growing as a whole person.

Characteristics of cooperative learning

This chapter will highlight three sections of groups. In this chapter I intend to continue my work with characteristics of groupwork. I would like to show what a group looks like and different ways of learning. Finally, I would like to introduce some group problems and useful ideas to avoid them.

In many of the activities, children will be working in small groups. This way of working has many advantages, in that it gives children a chance to work at their

own pace, to ask each other for help, to share ideas and to get more practice. Groups can run the danger of learners wasting their time together as they become distracted, talk about or do things other than requested, or produce work which is full of errors.

However, a cohesive group works more efficiently and productively. A positive group atmosphere can have a beneficial effect on the morale, motivation and self-image of its members and significantly affect their learning, by developing in them a positive attitude to the language being learned, to the learning process, and to themselves as learners. One has to select three sections: forming groups, maintaining groups and ending (feedback) groups.

Firstly, forming a group is relatively easy: the initial stage of group life is usually harmonious as children get to know each other and begin to work together. But getting young children to work together is not an easy task, because children at this age are usually very 'self-centered'. Scott and Ytreberg say that 'Particularly five and six year olds are often happiest working alone, and are not yet willing to cooperate and share.' (*Scott, Ytreberg 1990:15*)

Next, maintaining a cohesive group over a term is far more difficult. A frequent problem in groups is that not all members participate equally in work. Every group has dominant members and shyer children. Shyer children sit in groups, for most of their time they usually work as individuals on their own tasks.

Galton and Patrick observed a great deal of groupwork at junior classrooms. Seating and working were recorded and compared. Researchers have shown that in the junior study children sat in groups but worked individually. Galton and Williamson give an account of their research. "For example, although for 56 per cent of the time children were seated in groups they were expected to work as a group for only 5 per cent of the time during which they were observed. (...) In contrast, although children were seated at individual desks or tables for only 7.5 per cent of the time they worked individually during 81 per cent of all observations." (*Galton, Williamson 1994:12*)

Research shows that young children work IN groups, but not AS groups. As we have mentioned, maintaining a group is very difficult.

Finally, evaluation is an important part of groupwork. In learning, one of the most important factors is a feeling that you are getting somewhere. Learning at school can seem like an endless activity, in which they move from one task to the next. It is important, therefore, that children receive feedback on what they have done. Allowing time for groups to show their work to each other can allow them an opportunity to have pride in their work, ask questions about things they are share ideas.

Galton and Williamson classified the different grouping arrangements in the primary classroom. They list four different types of groupforms: seating groups,

working groups, cooperative groups and collaborative groups.

- Seating group means that children work on a similar theme, they have a separate task. Learners sit in groups, but do not work as a group.
- Second, there is the kind of group where children have the same task and they work with a little cooperation. Pupils complete the same assignment independently and may check each other's answers.
- The third kind of grouping is the cooperative group where pupils work on the same task but each have individual assignments which are put together to form a joint result.
- Finally, collaborative groupwork means that each pupil has same task and this involves problem-solving activities where children debate a problem and produce an agreed solution.

Why cooperation is good for children

Groupwork seems to be an extremely attractive idea for a number of reasons. Vygotsky stresses (*Lantolf, Appel 1995*) the importance of the social situation in learning and argues that what a child can do today in cooperation, tomorrow he will be able to do on his own.

Cooperative groupwork is not a single form of classroom organisation, but encompasses different approaches with children working in different ways. The main objective is always, however, that children should work cooperatively together. Activities will have to be coordinated and it is possible that a group leader will emerge, or could be selected in order to create the necessary organisation. The teacher wants the children to work together, to help each other, to be aware of what others are doing and how they are working. Vale and Feunteun stress the importance of group-formation activities. *“They are activities that require, for example, the individuals within the group to work co-operatively, to act together, to support each other, to make physical contact with each other, to lend and receive trust – in highly enjoyable, non-competitive situations.”* (Vale, Feunteun 1995:22)

REFERENCES

- Batelaan P., Van Hoof C. (1996): Cooperative learning in intercultural education. *European journal of intercultural studies*.
- Cohen E. (1994): *Designing group work – Strategies for the heterogeneous classrooms. Sociological theory in practice*. Teachers College Press, New York
- Dewey J. (1902): *The Child and the Curriculum*. The University of Chicago Press, Chicago
- Dewey J. (1922): *Democracy and Education: an introduction to the philosophy*

- of education*. The Macmillan Company, New York
- Dunne E., Bennett N. (1996): *Talking and Learning in Groups*. Routledge, London
- Galton M., Williamson J. (1994): *Groupwork in the Primary Classroom*. Routledge, London
- Galton M. (1990): *Primary Teacher Training: Practice in Search of Pedagogy*. Hodder and Stoughton, London
- Harmer J. (1991): *The Practice of English Language Teaching*. Longman, London
- Kagan, Spencer (1994): *Cooperative Learning*. Kagan Publishing, San Clemente
- Lantolf J. P., Appel G. (1995): Theoretical Framework: An Introduction to Vygotskian Approaches to Second Language Research In J.P. Lantolf and G. Appel (eds.): *Vygotskian Approaches To Second Language Research*. Norwood: Ablex Publishing Corporation 1-32.
- Sadker M. P., Sadker D. M. (1991): *Teachers, Schools, and Society*. Mc Graw-Hill, New York
- Scott W. A., Ytreberg L. H. (1990): *Teaching English to Children*. Longman, London
- Slavin, R. (1995): *Cooperative learning*. Allyn and Bacon, Boston
- Vale D., Feunteun A. (1995): *Teaching Children English*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge
- Vygotsky L. S. (1978): *Mind in society. The development of higher psychological processes*. Harvard University Press, Cambridge
- Williams M., Burclen, R.L. (1997): *Psychology for Language Teachers*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge