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Cooperative Learning Strategies to Enhance Writing Skill

By

Rita Rani Mandal

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Rita Rani Mandal, Lecturer, Lady Willing don Institute of Advanced Study in Education, Chennai

Author

Ms.Rita Rani Mandal is a lecturer in Education, Lady willing don Institute of advanced study in Education, Chennai. She is interested in English language teaching and educational methodology.

Address : No. 33 7th Street, S.R.P. Colony, Chennai.82
E mail : mandalrita@rediffmail.com

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1. Introduction

Good Writers are those, who keep the language efficient.

That is to say, keep it accurate, keep it clear.

-Ezra Pound.

In English learning classroom, the teacher aims at developing four skills of his/her the learners' ability to understand, to speak, to read and to write. The ability to write occupies the last place in this order, but it does not mean that it is least important. "Reading maketh a full man, conference a ready man and writing an exact man," says Bacon. It is an important tool, which enables man to communicate with other people in many ways. Our abilities in language are made perfect in writing. Writing trains ears and eyes and fixes vocabulary, spelling and patterns in our mind. Speaking and reading form the basis for written work. Emphasis should be paid to written work, which is in no way less important than reading and speaking. As a matter of fact four linguistic abilities are developed simultaneously. They cannot be treated in isolation. Like speaking, writing is also an art, a creative art in which the acquired skills in language and innate interests are made manifest. While it may be argued that learners may not be required to write much, and the skill is mainly for examination purpose, writing nevertheless, helps

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to learn and practise new words and structures, and since writing is done slowly and carefully, it helps to focus students' attention on what they are learning (Doff, 1988 p148).

When we look at writing as a 'product', we are mainly interested in outcomes that is, we identify what the students have produced, e.g. grammatical accuracy, mechanics of writing, proper format, good organization, etc. Recent research on writing has provided us with an important insight: good writers go through certain process, which lead to successful pieces of written work:

“They start off with an overall plan in their heads. They think about what they want to say and whom they are writing for. Then they draft out sections of writing, and as they work on them, they are constantly reviewing, revising, and editing their work.”(Hedge, 1988)

“Writing is a creative process because it is a process of reaching out for one's thought and discovering them. Writing, as such is a process of meaning making” (Third Year Student, 1994, National University of Singapore).

2. Cooperative Learning

Life is, by nature, highly independent. To try to achieve maximum effectiveness through independence is trying to play tennis with a gold club. Being independent and working in a team, gives a person an opportunity to share himself deeply, meaningfully with others and have access to the vast resources and potential of other human beings.

Cooperative learning is an instructional strategy based on the human instinct of cooperation. It is the utilization of the psychological aspects of cooperation and competition for curricular transaction and student learning. The concept of cooperative learning refers to instructional methods and techniques in which students work in small groups and are rewarded in some way for performance as a group. The idea behind the cooperative learning method is that when group rather than individuals are rewarded,

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students will be motivated to help one another to master academic materials. Cooperative learning is a successful teaching strategy in which small teams, each with students of different levels of ability, use a variety of learning activities to improve their understanding of a subject. Each member of a team is responsible not only for learning what is taught but also for helping teammates learn, thus creating atmosphere of achievement.

A cooperative classroom increasingly emphasizes mediated learning. Mediation can be defined as facilitating, modeling and coaching. Facilitating involves creating rich environment and activities for linking new information to prior knowledge, providing opportunities for cooperative work and problem solving, and offering students a multiplicity of authentic learning tasks. Coaching involves giving hints or clues, providing feedback, redirecting students' efforts and helping their use of a strategy. That is to provide them with right amount of help when they need it.

In the field of language, cooperative learning values the interactive view of language, which is known as developed combination of structural and functional views of language. It considers knowledge of appropriate use of language and the ability to structure discourse interactions. Like any other approach, as Richards and Rodgers (2001) argued, it possesses its own theory of language and theory of learning. In its theory of language, cooperative learning sees language as a tool of social relations. Students are provided with authentic context for negotiation of meaning through using the language. Cooperative learning facilitates and deepens learning. It results in higher levels of understanding and reasoning, the development of critical thinking, and the increase in accuracy of long – term retention.

In cooperative learning method when the teacher gives a writing task, the members of the groups work together towards certain shared learning goals. They help each other during the process of drafting the writing. They plan, translate and review the work together. They monitor and evaluate their writing. They try to gain appreciation for their group. In such class activities team members try to make sure that each member has mastered the assigned task because the teacher randomly calls upon the students to

answer for the team. The teacher should reward the best team and the most challenging individual. This kind of grading will serve as an incentive to harness competition for further cooperation amongst teams' members.

2.1 Advantages of cooperative Learning

1. Cooperative learning develops higher level thinking skills.
2. Skill building and practice can be enhanced and made less tedious through cooperative learning activities in and out the classroom.
3. It creates an environment for active, involved and exploratory learning.
4. It improves the performance of the weaker students when grouped with higher achieving students.
5. It addresses learning style differences among students.

2.2 Cooperative Learning Strategies

Cooperative learning strategies could be used during the process of writing that is planning, translating and reviewing, so that the product produced by the group is good. During the process of drafting a composition lot of discussions takes place. It encourages the students to think in the language. But the teachers should motivate the students to participate in good discussions.

- **Jigsaw:** Groups with five students are set up. Each member is assigned some material to learn and to teach to his group members. The representative of the students working on the same topic gets together and discusses the important concepts and the ways to teach it to the whole class. After the practice in these “expert” groups the original groups get together and teach each other. Tests and assessments follow.
- **Think-Pair-Share:** This is a simple and quick technique; the instructor develops and poses questions, gives the students a few minutes to think about a response, and then asks students to share their ideas with a partner. This task gives them

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- opportunity to collect and organize their thoughts. “Pair” and “share” components encourage learners to compare and contrast their understanding with those of another, and to rehearse their response first in a low-risk situation before going public with the whole class.
- **Three-Step Interview:** Each member of a team chooses another member to be a partner. During the first step individuals interview their partner by asking clarifying questions. During the second step partners reverse roles. For the final step, members share their partner’s response with the team.
 - **Round Robin:** It is primarily a brainstorming technique in which students generate ideas but do not elaborate, explain, evaluate, or question the ideas. Group members take turns responding to a question with words, phrases, or short answers. The order of responses is organized by proceeding from one student to another until all students have had an opportunity to speak. This technique helps in generating many ideas because all students participate, because it discourages comments that interrupt or inhibit the flow of ideas. The ideas could be used to develop a piece of good paragraph on a given topic.
 - **Three-minute review:** Teacher stops any time during a lecture or discussion on the various formats of letter writing, report writing, etc and give team members three minutes to review what has been said, ask clarifying questions or answer questions.
 - **Numbered Heads:** A team of four is established. Each member is given number 1,2,3 and four. Questions are asked of the group. Groups work together to answer the questions so that all can verbally answer the questions. Teacher calls out a number (three) and the number three in each group is asked to give the answer. This could be used for comprehension exercises.

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- **Buzz Groups:** Buzz groups are teams of four to six students that are formed quickly and extemporaneously. They discuss on a particular topic or different topics allotted to them. The discussion is informal and they exchange the ideas. Buzz Groups serve as a warm-up to whole-class discussion. They are effective for generating information and ideas in a short period of time. This technique could be used to write essays on current issues.
- **Talking Chips:** In talking chips, students participate in a group discussion, surrendering a token each time they speak. This technique ensures equitable participation by regulating how often each group member is allowed to participate. This technique encourages reticent students to participate and solve communication or process problems, such as dominating or clashing group members.
- **Critical Debate:** This activity could be used while drafting argumentative essays. In this individual students select their side of an issue in contrary to their own views. They form teams and discuss, present, and argue the issue against the opposing team. It exposes the class to a focused, in-depth, multiple-perspective analysis of issues. It can move students beyond simple dualistic thinking, deepen their understanding of an issue, and help them to recognize the range of perspectives inherent in complex topics. This technique is suitable for tertiary level students.
- **Write Around:** For creative writing or summarizing, teachers could give a sentence starter (for e.g. If there were no plants on the earth-----/ A man met an alien on the sea shore-----) then all students in each team have to finish the sentence. Then, they pass the paper to the right, read the one they receive, and add sentence to than one. After a few round, four great summaries or stories emerge. Students should be given time to add a conclusion and/or edit their favourite one to share with the class.
- **Praise-Question-Polish:** In this technique the group members take turns to read aloud their papers as their other group members follow along with copies. First,

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the respondents are asked to react to the piece of writing by asking them to identify what they liked about the work (Praise), then identify what portion of the writing they did not understand (Question), finally offering specific suggestions for improvement of the writing (Polish). The students would be able to improve their own writing by critically evaluating the writing of their peers.

3. Conclusion

In cooperative learning the student are given opportunity to write and to revise and rewrite what they have written. Peer criticism aids students sharpen their knowledge about essays structure and grammatical rules. In order to evaluate effectively someone else's papers students must know what to look for and be able to justify their comments. It also provides the student with the opportunity of evaluating his or her own work. They demonstrate more confidence in writing and decrease their apprehensions towards writing. Though cooperative learning strategies are difficult to practice as novel strategies of instruction. Teaching through this would be equally interesting both for the teacher and the students. The students working with partners ask each other for help and improve their attitude towards writing. They will show high level of enthusiasm, curiosity and involvement in being taught through cooperative learning tasks. Thus, an incorporation of these activities will be of great benefit to the student community and help them enhance their writing skill.

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