

# Using Cooperative Learning Strategies to Teach English Language Skills to Middle School Students: A Practical Approach

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**Abstract:** Cooperative learning is a scientific method of teaching methodology where teachers engage the students to learn in groups. The subject matter is broken into small components and then structured into hands on activities which children engage in to master. The mastery of content is achieved in a collaborative team spirit where the focus is not on a particular individual but on the team effort. All the members of the team are involved in the process of learning with each one having a specific role to facilitate the team. This paper explores the use of cooperative learning strategies to enhance English language teaching for middle school students. A large volume of research on Cooperative Learning endorses the effectiveness of how techniques such as Think-Pair-Share, Jigsaw, Round Robin, Numbered Heads Together, and Team-Pair-Solo can positively support the development of language skills and student motivation. Each strategy is linked to a particular English skill and accompanied by practical classroom activities and lesson plans. The paper concludes by discussing classroom observations and the pedagogical implications of adopting cooperative learning strategies in language instruction.

**Keywords:** Cooperative Learning, Language Skills, English Language Teaching, Middle School Students, Student Motivation.

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## I. INTRODUCTION

Teaching English language in the middle schools in India can be very challenging for teachers especially in multilingual and multicultural set up. Some of the challenges that teachers typically have to face are, low student engagement, limited exposure to English beyond the classroom, lack of motivation to learn and speak, and a strong dependence on rote learning methods. To address these concerns, educators are turning towards more interactive and student-centered teaching models. Cooperative learning, which emphasizes structured group interaction and shared learning goals, offers a promising solution. This paper presents practical cooperative learning strategies tailored for English language instruction, aiming to promote both skill development and student motivation.

## II. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

In his book, Cooperative Learning (Kagan, 2001), has detailed the various ways Cooperative Learning could be adopted in schools. He firmly believes that apart from the significant enhancement in the academic achievement, cooperative learning also builds ethnic relation among students creating mutual understanding between them. It also increases one's self-esteem, social skills and study skills. It teaches student empathy and builds social relationships. It not only makes a student like the school, class, lesson plans, the teacher but also teaches them to be more responsible, creating a sense in them that they do make a difference. Moreover, in working in groups students learn to work with and understand others who differ from themselves. Students also learn to value one another's contribution which is a skill needed in the 21<sup>st</sup> century where global networking and sharing of information to create a global learning community is the key to a sustainable future.

Definition of cooperative learning varies as different scholars have different versions (Cohen, 1994; Y. Sharan & S. Sharan, 1987; D. W. Johnson, R. T. Johnson, & Holubec, 1993). But in general, it involves having students work in small groups or teams to help one another learn academic material (Slavin, 1989). It's a teaching strategy which aims at learning through group activities so that members at different levels can maximize their learning. According to (D. W. Johnson 2009; R. T. Johnson, 2014), cooperative learning has its theoretical roots in social interdependence theory, which can be traced from Kurt Koffka, through Kurt Lewin, to Morton Deutsch and then modified and extended by David Johnson and Roger Johnson, with the basic premise being "the type of interdependence structured in a situation determines how individual interact with each other, and this in turn largely determines outcomes". Other scholars have also made their contributions to cooperative learning (Sharan & Sharan, 1989; Kagan, 1989, 2014; Slavin, 2010). Superiority of cooperative learning compared to traditional instruction is revealed in meta-analyses presented by many researchers (D. W. Johnson, R. T. Johnson, & Stanne, 2000; Kagan, 2014). Cooperative learning is a methodology that employs a variety of learning activities to improve students' understanding of a subject by using a structured approach which involves a series of steps, requiring students to create, analyse and apply concepts (Kagan, 1990). Cooperative learning utilizes Vygotsky's **Sociocultural Theory** which emphasizes the role of social interaction in cognitive development. Learning is mediated through dialogue and collaboration. It also uses Piaget's **Constructivist Theory** that highlights active participation in learning and the construction of knowledge through experience. **Social Interdependence Theory** (Morton Deutsch, 1949) posits that the way in which goals are structured determines how individuals interact, which in turn affects outcomes. In cooperative learning, **positive interdependence** (when individuals perceive that they can reach their goals if and only if the others in the group also reach theirs) promotes collaboration and mutual support. Students work until each group member successfully understands and completes the assignment, thus creating an "atmosphere of achievement" (Panitz, 1996). As a result, they frame new concepts by basing their conclusions on prior knowledge. This process results in a deeper understanding of the material and more potential to retain the material. When applied to language learning, cooperative strategies encourage communication, reduce anxiety, and increase learner autonomy. They provide rich opportunities for language input and output through peer interaction.

### III. SELECTED COOPERATIVE LEARNING STRATEGIES AND THEIR APPLICATION

#### A. Think-Pair-Share Skill

- *Focus:*  
Speaking and comprehension
- *Description:*  
Students first think about a question individually, then pair up to discuss their responses, and finally share their thoughts with the class.
- *Sample Activity:*  
After reading a short story, ask: "What lesson did the main character learn?" Students think individually, discuss in pairs, and share with the class.
- *Lesson Plan Snapshot:*
  - *Topic:* Character Analysis
  - *Grade:* 6
  - *Objective:* Students will analyse the main character's traits and actions.
  - *Materials:* Short story handout, discussion prompt
  - *Time:* 30 minutes

#### B. Jigsaw Skill

- *Focus:*  
Reading comprehension and summarizing
- *Description:*  
A text is divided into sections. Each group becomes an "expert" on one section and teaches it to other groups.
- *Sample Activity:*  
Use a newspaper article. Divide it into four parts. Each group summarizes and presents their section.
- *Lesson Plan Snapshot:*
  - *Topic:* Understanding News Articles
  - *Grade:* 7
  - *Objective:* Students will summarize key points from assigned sections.
  - *Materials:* Printed article, worksheet
  - *Time:* 40 minutes

#### C. Numbered Heads Together Skill

- *Focus:*  
Listening and grammar
- *Description:*  
Groups discuss answers to a teacher's question. A random member is called to respond.

➤ *Sample Activity:*

Grammar quiz on verb tenses. Students discuss answers before responding.

➤ *Lesson Plan Snapshot:*

- *Topic:* Verb Tenses
- *Grade:* 8
- *Objective:* Students will identify correct verb tense usage.
- *Materials:* Quiz sheet, answer key
- *Time:* 25 minutes

*D. Round Robin / Rally Robin Skill*➤ *Focus:*

Vocabulary and fluency

➤ *Description:*

Students take turns quickly sharing items related to a prompt.

➤ *Sample Activity:*

“List as many adjectives as you can to describe a rainy day.”

➤ *Lesson Plan Snapshot:*

- *Topic:* Descriptive Vocabulary
- *Grade:* 6
- *Objective:* Students will build vocabulary related to weather.
- *Materials:* Word chart, timer
- *Time:* 20 minutes

*E. Team-Pair-Solo Skill*➤ *Focus:*

Writing

➤ *Description:*

Students solve problems first in teams, then pairs, then individually.

➤ *Sample Activity:*

Write a descriptive paragraph about a school event.

➤ *Lesson Plan Snapshot:*

- *Topic:* Paragraph Writing
- *Grade:* 7
- *Objective:* Students will write descriptive paragraphs collaboratively and independently.
- *Materials:* Writing prompt, worksheet
- *Time:* 45 minutes

#### IV. REFLECTIONS AND CLASSROOM OBSERVATIONS

Implementation of these strategies in middle school classrooms yielded positive results. Teachers observed improved student participation, better peer support, and enhanced confidence in using English. Students reported enjoying the collaborative nature of activities and found

learning more meaningful. Challenges included managing group dynamics and ensuring equal participation, especially among shy students. Time management also required adjustment to accommodate collaborative tasks.

#### V. CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Cooperative learning strategies offer a practical and effective approach to English language teaching in middle schools. They encourage active participation, improve language skills, and enhance motivation among learners. For educators in multilingual and diverse classrooms like those in Shillong, these strategies provide meaningful engagement and support differentiated learning. Future research may explore long-term impacts and adaptation across different curriculum levels.

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