

Towards Better Group Work: Seeing the Difference between Cooperation and Collaboration

I have a confession to make. Until several months ago, the terms *cooperation* and *collaboration* were synonymous to me—I did not think about the differences between these methods and was unaware of the gap that divides them. “Is there really a big difference?” you might ask. And, more importantly, “Why should it matter for us practitioners?”

I would argue that being unaware of these differences impedes teachers from organizing group work as effectively as possible. True collaboration is simply too valuable not to take advantage of because it provides students with a significant opportunity to learn from one another, negotiate meaning, and improve their social skills.

The purpose of this article is twofold: I would like to highlight the difference between *cooperative work* and *collaborative work* in general; I will also suggest practical activities that serve as stepping stones to promote collaboration in English as a Second Language (ESL) classrooms.

Definitions of key terms

Researchers such as Dillenbourg et al. (1996) and Roschelle and Teasley (1995) agree that it is important to make a distinction between cooperation and collaboration. While *cooperative learning* can be defined as “working together to accomplish shared goals” (Smith 1995), *collaborative learning* is “a method that implies working in a group of two or more to achieve a common goal, while respecting each individual’s contribution to the whole” (McInnerney and Robert 2004, 205). Roschelle and Teasley (1995) describe cooperative work as a task that is accomplished by dividing it among participants, where “each person is responsible for a portion of the problem solving,” and they see collaborative work as “the mutual engagement of participants in a coordinated effort to solve the problem together” (70).

The key difference between these approaches to group work is that cooperation is more focused on working

together to create an end product, while successful collaboration requires participants to share in the process of knowledge creation (Dillenbourg et al. 1996; Roschelle and Teasley 1995). In other words, cooperation can be achieved if all participants do their assigned parts separately and bring their results to the table; collaboration, in contrast, implies direct interaction among individuals to produce a product and involves negotiations, discussions, and accommodating others' perspectives.

According to Nelson (2008), cooperation is "a protocol that allows you not to get in each other's way" as you work. He uses the example of an assembly line and reaches the conclusion that "a cooperative enterprise could in some way be done, as long as you had enough time or other resources, by a single person."

Strengths of collaboration

Numerous studies show that collaborative learning, as compared to working independently, results in deeper information processing and more meaningful psychological connections among the participants (Johnson, Johnson, and Smith 1998; Smith 1995). The goal of collaboration is to create new insights during discussions (Henri 1992; Kaye 1992) and to move students closer to an understanding of alternate perspectives (Cunningham 1992). While working together, students build new understanding by challenging others' ideas and defending their own. When successful, this creates a product that is different from what any individual could produce alone (Ingram and Hathorn 2004).

Kaye (1992) believes that the single most important criterion for collaboration is the synthesis of information—that is, creating a new product through the combination of different perspectives, talents, and ideas, which is quite different from what each of the participants could have created on his or her own. An indispensable element to collaboration is that all those involved in a collaborative task must contribute more or less equally (Ingram and Hathorn 2009). Important questions to assess if a classroom task is truly collaborative include:

- Were the students negotiating and accommodating one another's perspectives?

- Was everybody contributing equally?
- Have different perspectives been included in the final product?

Collaboration—a chimera or a realistic goal?

As beneficial as these strengths seem, collaboration is not always easy to achieve. Some authors point out that dividing students into groups and asking them to work collaboratively will not guarantee that they will really do so (Kreijns, Kirschner, and Jochems 2003; Johnson and Johnson 2004). This is not surprising, as collaboration places more structural, interpersonal, and cognitive demands on individuals than more passive cooperative activities do. Collaboration often does not come naturally to our students, especially in cultures that encourage individual responsibility and accountability. Think about it—we grade our students based on their individual effort and results, so when we ask learners to work in groups, it may contradict the structure they are used to and become a major challenge, both emotionally and cognitively.

A limited yet important role for teachers

The sobering news is that teachers cannot possibly have complete control over all the factors that could potentially influence collaboration; students come to our classes with their own backgrounds, personal relationships, and personality, all of which affect the way learners interact. The good news is that teachers do play an important role in shaping students' experiences. That is why I feel that we should include more collaborative tasks in our regular teaching and work towards increasing students' awareness of the numerous benefits of collaboration.

Laying the groundwork for successful collaboration

Since individual achievement is the top priority in many educational settings, collaboration is often something that our students are not used to. Therefore, it might take time for students to accept collaborative tasks and learn how to perform them successfully. However, obstacles to collaboration can be overcome by being consistent and cultivating a positive environment.

Being consistent

Being consistent in the design, application, and assessment of collaborative work ensures that students have a clear understanding of the objectives and procedures of the task they will accomplish and greatly increases the potential for success. The following general suggestions can help establish consistency in collaborative group work:

1. During a pre-collaboration period, make sure students are motivated to participate.
2. Lay clear ground rules: everybody must participate, and all ideas should be accommodated.
3. Be available as a resource for students, but do not offer any judgments on the work in progress and assure them that tensions are natural.
4. Do not get discouraged when a collaborative task results in some emotional responses from students—keep creating opportunities for learning to work collaboratively.

The following questions are critical to effective planning of collaborative tasks, which also produces consistency and increases the chance for success:

- What are the specific language objectives of the task?
- How many of the four language skills will be used?
- Will the task require pairs, triads, small groups, large groups, the whole class, or a combination of these?
- Will the task be introduced with brainstorming, discussion, or some other short activity?
- What is a reasonable time period for the task to be completed?
- Will each group make a final oral or written presentation to another group or to the whole class?
- Will there be a presentation of the final project to parents, the community, or even a larger audience?

Cultivate a positive environment

When my students are successfully collaborating, I use a lot of positive reinforcement. I often ask them if they feel that their final product is better than any of them might have

done individually (a loaded question, I admit, but it serves the purpose). The answer almost invariably is yes, it is indeed better.

Another helpful strategy is to consciously raise students' awareness of the advantages they receive while sharing resources and expertise. The result will be students who are more accepting of different opinions and increased tolerance in the classroom.

Sample collaborative activities

Following are five activities that I have used in my classroom to introduce students to collaborative work. They require different degrees of collaboration, and the point is to prepare students at the beginning and intermediate levels for more complex group work and tasks that they will eventually encounter in their ESL classes. The difficulty levels of these activities can be adjusted up or down, depending on the language level of the class. The group sizes can also be adjusted for the size of the class and the particular activity.

Collaborative Activity 1:

Vocabulary brainstorm

This simple activity makes a good warm-up or review activity. The language objective is to help students learn new words about general topics such as food, weather, and clothes, or words that are examples of structures they may be studying, such as phrasal verbs, concrete nouns, adjectives, and adverbs, to name a few.

Materials: paper

Time required: 10–15 minutes

Step 1: Students form groups and generate as many words as possible that relate to a selected topic. The main rule is that everyone must participate. To ensure that the less-advanced students participate in the activity, ask them to keep track of the words that the group has generated by writing down and numbering the words.

Step 2: Each group chooses a spokesperson to read out that group's words to the whole class.

The advantage of this activity is that it is quick and fun, and exposes students to new vocabulary. It can be turned into a game if the teacher encourages students to generate

as many words as possible and keeps track of or scores the final number of words for each group. The teacher can also collect the lists of words and create a record book or make a poster wall.

Collaborative Activity 2:

Preparing a structured survey

A survey activity works well in terms of collaboration because a variety of people are involved in asking and answering questions. The language objective is to practice relevant grammar constructions and functions that can be included in the questions and responses of the survey instrument.

Materials: survey questions, paper

Time required: 25–30 minutes

- Step 1: The teacher or the students prepare different sets of survey questions beforehand, which can be purposefully designed to practice targeted grammatical structures: “Where did you use to live? What do you prefer to drink with your meals? Where are you going after school?” When constructing the survey questions, students should avoid questions that can be answered with a simple “yes” or “no.” It also helps to require students to answer the survey questions in complete sentences.
- Step 2: Students form groups and each group uses a set of questions to interview members of their group. If possible, and to increase the variety of responses, each group can ask different survey questions. Every student in each group must ask and answer a set of questions.
- Step 3: Each group assigns a scribe who records all the answers to the group’s survey questions.
- Step 4: Group members choose a representative to present their group’s survey responses to another group or to the whole class.

Collaborative Activity 3:

Drawing together

This activity, in which students create drawings using different colors, is fun and

appealing to students. The language objective includes the vocabulary of colors and adjectives, including comparatives and superlatives. Students work alone at first and then as a large group (group size is dependent on the size of the class).

Materials: crayons (or watercolors or colored markers), paper (small and large)

Time required: 20–25 minutes

- Step 1: Each student chooses a different color and works alone for five minutes to draw a picture of his or her choice.
- Step 2: The teacher provides a piece of paper large enough for all students to draw their pictures. Students draw together on the same piece of paper for five minutes.
- Step 3: Students analyze the final product and take turns naming the different colors.
- Step 4: The teacher asks students to use adjectives to compare and contrast the single one-color drawings with the large multi-color picture. This step will entail the use of comparatives and superlatives (e.g., bigger picture, most colorful, prettiest drawing).

Collaborative Activity 4:

All the ingredients matter!

In this activity students role-play by representing the different ingredients needed to cook a dish or prepare a meal. The language objective is to describe, compare, and explain using the large vocabulary of food and cooking, including the names of ingredients, flavors, cookware, and utensils.

Materials: food ingredients and cooking equipment (e.g., eggs, flour, salt, cooking oil, frying pan, utensils). Pictures of the items may be substituted for the actual item.

Time required: 35–40 minutes

- Step 1: Each student selects or is assigned an ingredient or utensil (either the real object or a picture).
- Step 2: The teacher asks different students questions about what their ingredient tastes like, whether it can be

eaten raw, and what their utensil is used for, etc.

- Step 3: Students take turns asking similar questions to students sitting nearby (e.g., “What is the flavor of that spice? What does an egg taste like? Why can’t you eat it raw? What kind of recipe is this ingredient used for? How do you cook with that pan?”).
- Step 4: Students form groups based on ingredients and cookware that can be used to prepare a meal; they brainstorm about the different kinds of dishes that can be made from their ingredients and discuss how to cook them. Students choose one person from their group to document the different dishes and cooking methods that were discussed.
- Step 5: Students choose a representative from their respective groups to present their menus or recipes to either a different group or to the whole class.
- Step 6: The teacher “steals” one of the ingredients or utensils and asks what is going to happen to the dish (e.g., “Is it still tasty? Can we still eat it? Is there another way to cook the dish?”).
- Step 7: The teacher returns the ingredient or utensil and reinforces the idea that all the ingredients matter.

Collaborative Activity 5: The secret of the Internet

In this activity students discuss important components of the Internet, such as Wikipedia and social networking websites. The activity is most appropriate and interesting for teenagers and adults who are familiar with the Internet. The language objectives are the technical vocabulary and language functions associated with the Internet and social networking.

Materials: Internet access is preferable but not required

Time required: 25–35 minutes

- Step 1: As a whole class students take turns naming their favorite Internet site for homework, communication, entertainment, or social networking

(e.g., Wikipedia, Facebook, Twitter, MySpace).

- Step 2: Students form groups and brainstorm about the features of websites and procedures to access or join social networking or other websites. This generates a large amount of useful specialized English vocabulary (e.g., surf, log in, register, create a profile, invite friends, upload/download photos, share music, edit content, store information). One student from each group documents the vocabulary generated by that group.
- Step 3: Each group takes a turn presenting the results of their discussion to the whole class, and all the class members take turns giving their reactions and opinions about the features and procedures of the Internet.
- Step 4: The teacher tells students that “the rules of the Internet” have changed. Students can continue storing and accessing information on the Internet, but only their personal information will be available. Students vote for or against this idea and explain their choice. They also discuss how this would change the Internet.
- Step 5: The whole class continues to share their ideas about the nature of the Internet (e.g., “Why does it take many active users to have a great website? Why is talking to others online fun? Do students learn anything from websites or people on the Internet?”). If the class has Internet access, students can demonstrate different websites and novel features that they are familiar with.

The purpose of these activities is to introduce collaboration and prepare students for higher-level tasks they will complete as they advance in their English language learning. In fact, these activities could become task-based if they had a stronger application to the world outside the classroom. This might include (1) collaborating on the development and administration of a survey for family, friends, or neighbors about an important

issue to the community and collating the data for a final report; (2) preparing an elaborate menu and cooking a meal for a large group or special event; and (3) using the Internet to complete and present a research, art, or engineering project. These types of tasks require the synergistic contributions and feedback from all students in the group to achieve success.

Frequently Asked Questions about collaborative tasks

1. How can I be sure that all the students will participate?

As mentioned previously, a key criterion for collaboration is equal participation. However, as we all know, strong students often take the initiative in group work and drive the whole task, while weaker students contribute less. It is important to create a chance for students with less-developed language skills to express themselves and contribute to the overall success of the group. It is true that some students are not good at vocabulary or grammar; however, they might be great at drawing or be good athletes. Such students often make excellent “designers” or “messengers” for the team. Here is what I have been doing in my classes to encourage weaker learners to participate:

- I make it explicit that if somebody does not participate, the entire team or group will lose points.
- In order to provide students with enough opportunities to take part, I include a physical and a creative part in the task. I tell students they will earn more points if they add illustrations or design a logo for their reports or presentations. And, when possible, I add a physical component in the task—students need to run, or hop, or throw a dart when they finish their task.

From my observations, it is usually the less-advanced students who do the physical and the creative parts of the task. They seem to enjoy it, but what is more, being involved tends to increase their general motivation level, which in turn has a beneficial effect on language learning.

2. Should teachers assign roles—or not?

I believe that ideally the teacher should refrain from assigning students absolute roles for group work. It is important for students to learn to negotiate and work together. Students themselves should be the ones to decide who will be the scribe or the presenter, or who will do the physical and the creative parts of a task. However, if students are very young or new to collaboration, I initially support them by arranging an activity that will demonstrate different roles. For instance, during a brainstorming activity I might assign one student to keep track of the vocabulary as other students go around the classroom gathering words from their classmates.

3. How should teachers handle emotional reactions?

Be prepared for emotional reactions. If you get them, remember that the cause is not you—these reactions are a part and a parcel of the collaboration. Bruffee (1999, 326) points out that in collaborative tasks, “instructors willingly relinquish most of their classroom authority in order to entrust and empower the learners to take control of their own learning.”

Emotions, both positive and negative, seem to be inevitable in collaborative learning (Jones and Issroff 2005). This is especially true with heterogeneous groups that have not had the prior experience of working together. With collaboration, students have to deal with power issues (who controls the task?) as they accommodate different ideas and question their own point of view.

Therefore, instructors need to prepare for emotional reactions from students and consider ways to handle the situation. Here are a few suggestions:

- Stay calm and positive, and be careful about getting involved.
- Remind students that they are learning a new skill—negotiating the work—and that it is important to offer their expertise and respect the expertise of others.
- Use metaphors like learning to ride a bike, falling when trying to roller-skate, or typing slowly when first using a computer.
- Assure students that some tensions are natural and will soon go away. Students

take a lot of social referencing from their teachers, and they will most likely adopt such an attitude and continue collaborating with the group.

- Introduce micro-collaboration by having students work on smaller projects that are easier to manage. Incorporating this type of smaller task frequently enough builds up familiarity and contributes to students' positive experience.

Conclusion: Give it a chance

The reason I felt it was important to write this article is to share a lesson that I learned while trying to organize collaborative activities. And the lesson is this: even if it fails the first time, give it a second chance. I was initially frustrated trying to set up some collaborative tasks. The activities seemed messy, noisy, and chaotic; sometimes students ran to me complaining about their group mates. It was not an ideal, blissful teaching situation. What kept me from giving up on collaboration is the idea that, like a lot of other skills in life, the ability to collaborate is a learned skill and can and hopefully will be developed if students are given enough opportunities.

So I continued. I often divided students into groups, told them that everyone should participate, and rewarded students lavishly with praise and grades when they truly collaborated. I also made it clear that dividing the task and completing it separately was not acceptable. And eventually it worked—after several awkward attempts, my students started talking and sharing ideas; they now decorate the walls with great word lists and posters that they create together, and they take pride in them. What is more, they relax in group work. It is no longer a competition against one another, but a fun process of working together to build something new.

Finally, let me finish with a metaphor of a potluck dinner, where people cook and bring different dishes to the table. The dinner is more exciting than what each individual would have eaten individually—but the guests return back to their homes being able to cook only the same dish they brought to the potluck. Even though they may have gotten recipes, they still need to learn to make the new dishes themselves. On the other hand, had

they cooked together in the first place they would have observed and learned a lot more from one another; they would have taken away some practical, hands-on skills even if cooking together had meant a messier and a more chaotic process. So give collaboration a chance! It is worth the effort.

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