Cooperative Learning and Second Language Acquisition in First-Year Composition: Opportunities for Authentic Communication among English Language Learners

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In an ESL first-year composition classroom, cooperative learning assists English language learners in developing their ideas, voice, organization, and sense of writing conventions, while simultaneously enhancing their production and comprehension of English.

In Sandra Cisneros's *House on Mango Street,* Esperanza reveals a fear common to speakers of English as a second or other language when she describes Mamacita's reluctance to leave her home:

> I believe she doesn't come out because she is afraid to speak English, and maybe this is so since she only knows eight words. She knows to say: *He not here* for when the landlord comes, *No speak English* if anybody else comes, and *Holy smokes.* I don't know where she learned this but I heard her say it one time and it surprised me. (77)

Esperanza's poignant observation serves as a valuable reminder for me, that it is my responsibility to alleviate fear and anxiety among my culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) students as they develop their English language communication skills and cognitive abilities.

Within my English as a second language (ESL) first-year composition classroom, my students have expressed the same fears that Esperanza describes. During a recent online discussion, Hiroki, an undergraduate student from Japan, wrote, "I do not feel comfortable in group work because everyone states very difficult ideas, so I cannot sometimes keep up with them." And Hyungsoo, a graduate student from South Korea, responded: "I agree with your opinion about the group work. In fact, I was surprised after I read my teammates' essay first. All of them [. . .] used better expressions in their essay than mine and they have just a few grammar errors." Even in this environment, in which English is a second or other language for *every* student, fear and anxiety affect my students' learning and engagement. Yet, in spite of their concerns, they welcomed the chance to practice their spoken English in cooperative structures while learning about and engaging in their composing processes. In the same online discussion, Hyungsoo declared that he has "learned many good expressions through group work," while Hiroki wrote, "I can improve my English communication skill because we have enough time to talk with teammates."

English language learners (ELLs) often have two main goals in my writing class: to improve their writing and to enhance their English language proficiency. It is my responsibility to help them meet those goals, and cooperative learning helps me to respond effectively, professionally, and compassionately to their linguistic needs. It creates authentic contexts for meaningful production and comprehension of language, as my students take linguistic risks and receive modeling and feedback from me and their peers. In fact, Hyungsoo wrote, "[W]henever I get the feedback from my teammates, I think all of my teammates could be my other instructors for my essay."

Cooperative Learning Defined

Cooperative learning is a somewhat ambiguous term when it comes to actual classroom application. Within my own practice and for the purpose of clarity in this paper, I define it as structured student interaction—face-to-face or online—that promotes a sense of community among students and involves Spencer Kagan's four principles of cooperative learning: positive interdependence, individual accountability, equal participation, and simultaneous interaction (par. 29).

In my ESL first-year composition classroom, cooperative learning takes many forms, including in-class cooperative structures that provide students with opportunities to share ideas and opinions in pairs or in teams of four to five. In addition, at the beginning of their composing processes, my students and I participate in writing online proposals and in responding to one another's ideas. These practices are followed by team conferences during the final stages of the students' composing processes. These structures—which occur both online and face to face and incorporate listening, speaking, reading, and writing—complement my other instructional strategies. Although cooperative learning is not a one-size-fits-all answer to the increasing linguistic diversity among today's students, it provides opportunities for language acquisition not available in traditional teacher-centered classrooms, and it can be used in combination with other teaching methods such as lecture, whole-class discussion, and individual student work. Moreover, it allows me the opportunity to learn from my students as I listen to their ideas regarding their own and their classmates' writing.

Language Proficiency in Cooperative Learning

Culturally and linguistically diverse students flourish when they can communicate and experiment with language in natural situations. Cooperative learning provides increased opportunities for second language learners to develop simultaneously their ideas, organization, voice, and sense of writing conventions, along with their language proficiency, in an informal, safe setting.

On a daily basis, my students engage in cooperative structures in which they share their experiences and ideas throughout their composing processes and listen to those of their peers. For example, I might ask them to take a few moments to write their stance in relation to a particular issue (usually one of their choice), as

well as three to four counterarguments. Then they will take round robin turns of one to two minutes each sharing their ideas in teams of four to five, while their teammates listen and suggest other possible counterarguments. This gives all of the students an opportunity to develop their ideas for writing (by considering possible counterarguments) and practice their spoken English within that context. Sawako, an undergraduate student from Japan, reflected on this experience, saying "Teammates have different opinion or suggestions about my topic so I can think [about] my topic from various points of view."

It is important to note that in acquiring a language, learners often go through a silent period, in which they listen without attempting to speak, understanding language (input) before they are able to produce it (output). This is a normal stage of acquisition and does not hinder language development, although it can affect students' participation in cooperative structures. Moreover, students who are in the silent period may be peripheral participants in cooperative learning as they engage *intra*personally, rather than *inter*personally. Kumiko Fushino notes that in Kagan Cooperative Learning structures, "[S]tudents who do not speak up are viewed as not fulfilling their responsibility" (3). Yet as teachers we can subvert this notion that engagement must be overt and instead acknowledge the value of peripheral participation in which students "may be engaging in private speech, reacting to others and trying to internalize ideas presented by others" (Fushino 7). Jie, a graduate student from China, wrote, "I am not used to talk lots in front of my teammates and instructor. I like to listen to, think about what my teammates talk about, and accept them to improve my essay [. . .]." Naturally, my students and I try to take each person's comfort level into consideration as we engage in various cooperative activities.

Yet cooperative learning builds confidence for ELLs to move from the silent period to speaking in small groups to participating in whole-class discussions. As a former middle school English teacher who taught the same students for their sixth, seventh, and eighth grade years, I was able to watch my own students make this transition. And, although I do not get to spend as much time with my college students (several weeks, rather than years), I can see their comfort with spoken English increasing. In the same online discussion, Jie also wrote, "[C]ommunicating face-to-face is not easy for me either [. . .]. By expressing my opinions and listening to others' feedback, I improved both my spoken English and listening comprehension." And in her course reflection, Sawako wrote, "I was uncomfortable to share my idea with classmates in the beginning of class because I was afraid of giving wrong advises to them. But as I shared my idea many times, I got used to it. It was good practice to think critically and tell my opinion in front of my classmates."

Cooperative Learning and the Four Modes of Literacy

In addition to providing authentic contexts for meaningful spoken communication, cooperative learning naturally integrates all four modes of literacy—listening, speaking, reading, and writing—which support one another and promote understanding of academic content. Although language learners often develop their use

of the modes sequentially—first listening, then speaking, reading, and writing—research indicates that teachers should not simply teach one mode at a time, waiting until students have mastered each one (Freeman and Freeman 134). In fact, some English language learners learn to read and write *before* they speak:

> In some ways, written language is easier to process than oral language, because oral language passes by quickly, but written language is available for reexamination. The speaker sets the pace for the oral language, but the reader sets the pace for written language. (Freeman and Freeman 134–35)

Traditionally, speaking and listening are the most strongly supported modes within cooperative learning, but reading and writing also play roles. For many cooperative structures, I incorporate "write time" in which students take time to think and write their responses to a prompt before responding orally within cooperative teams. Some Kagan Cooperative Structures, such as "RallyTable" and "RoundTable," specifically support reading and writing, as students refrain from talking, and instead write responses and read those of their teammates on a common piece of paper in teams of two or four, respectively. Teachers can also incorporate reading and writing by asking students to take turns sharing ideas orally in small groups to facilitate peer review of written work.

Computer-assisted learning also provides opportunities for reading and writing. My students and I participate in an online cooperative structure I call "Paper Proposals and Critiques" that involves reading and writing exclusively. Toward the beginning of their composing processes, students post their individual paper proposals, consisting of claims, supporting reasons, and counterarguments, online on our course Blackboard site. Then students provide critiques (constructive feedback) for each of their three to four assigned teammates' paper proposals. The critiques generally consist of personal reactions and clarifying questions and suggestions, and are intended to provide other perspectives before students commit themselves to one particular stance in relation to their selected topics. As Ninnar, an undergraduate student from Kuwait, put it in her course reflection, "the online proposals were like the appetizer to the meal (paper). The proposals helped us gather our thoughts and set us in the right track before we go any further."

In addition to receiving feedback from peers, each student also receives feedback from me *after* all of the teammates have posted their critiques. This allows me to see the type and amount of feedback students have already received for their work and respond accordingly. Many times my students provide one another with ideas and suggestions that I would not have thought of myself. And, in fact, some students noticed benefits not just from receiving but also from *providing* constructive feedback for their teammates. Areej, an undergraduate student from Saudi Arabia, wrote:

> I don't know why, but I enjoyed criticizing my team proposals. I think this feeling come[s] from the idea of wanting to help my teammates in their paper as they are helping me. I enjoyed online critiques and the peer review [so much] that I asked my husband if there is a job that I can criticize essays in.

And Chi-Chien, an undergraduate student from Taiwan, wrote, "As to critiques, I find them still hard to do. But by doing the critiques, I found when I wrote my proposal I would think about the possible critiques and then I would revise my proposal to make it better."

"Team Conferences," a cooperative structure that I've adapted from a suggestion by Arizona State University Writing Programs Director Greg Glau, employs all four modes of literacy, as students read and provide constructive feedback—both in writing and verbally—for their teammates' paper drafts toward the end of their composing processes. For this activity, students provide drafts of their papers for each of their teammates and for me during the class period before our team conferences begin. This allows everyone plenty of time to read and provide detailed feedback for each writer. My students appreciated this feature of team conferences, as many of them had experienced in-class peer reviews in which they were expected to read *and* respond to several of their classmates' drafts within one class period. Even for students whose first language *is* English, it is difficult to adequately read and provide feedback for essays within a single class period. Of his previous experience, Hiroki said, "We did not have enough time to state our opinions, for we had to read our essays, the time prevented us from presenting our opinions for classmates." And Kyung, an undergraduate student from Korea, responded, "In my previous class, I had only fifteen minutes to read and respond to the peers' writings. It did not help me at all." Chi-Chien, who had a similar experience in her previous writing classes, wrote:

> In [my previous composition class], we read the essay and did the peer review in class. We just wrote down our comments in the student's essay and finished the peer review sheet and the students get the feedbacks by reading them. I prefer the team conferences because we can straightly talk and what we think about the student's essay and give them feedback directly and also communicate with her by asking questions.

Because of the flexibility a college classroom provides, I am able to meet with each team individually and participate as a member of the team, listening to each student's ideas and sharing my own. Kyung noted the importance of the teacher's role in this situation: "I think it was more helpful when a teacher [is] involved in the activity as we did [during team conferences] because discussion can get to nowhere or can be out of topic."

Throughout the semester and in their course evaluations, my students reported that the in-class cooperative structures, as well as "Paper Proposals and Critiques" and "Team Conferences" helped them develop their ideas for writing and get to know their classmates. Karina, an undergraduate student from Indonesia, wrote that providing feedback is "a good thing because as it trains me to analyze others' papers, I find that I'll be more careful when reviewing my paper too." In addition, almost every student in my ESL first-year composition class reported that participating in these structures, especially those that involve speaking and listening, helped them to develop their English language production and comprehension.

Improved Ethnic Relations with Cooperative Structures

Among the thirteen students in my recent ESL composition class, nine countries were represented. In culturally diverse settings such as this, cooperative learning can be especially beneficial since its "interconnectedness can help students transcend the gender, racial, cultural, linguistic, and other differences they may sense among themselves" ("Cooperative Learning" par. 6). The very act of genuinely communicating with peers from diverse backgrounds through cooperative teambuilding structures alleviates fear, breaks down stereotypes, and promotes relationship building among students. This, in turn, helps lower what Stephen Krashen calls the affective filter, which suggests that factors such as self-assurance, motivation, and anxiety correlate with acquisition of language. Low self-esteem, fear of ridicule, and lack of motivation can disrupt a learner's ability to comprehend and respond to meaningful input (Schütz par. 12). In other words, students who do not feel comfortable in a classroom environment will have more difficulty acquiring language than those who sense they are part of a community of learners. Based on my experience, cooperative learning facilitates a sense of positive interdependence among classmates, thus reducing the affective filter that hinders language acquisition. Karina noted the impact of interacting with international students in one of her reflections:

> [W]hen we did brainstorming on an assignment, the ideas are all great because
> they came from people of different backgrounds, and different ways of thinking. I
> get to see things from different points of view. I find that sharing my ideas and
> also reviewing other people's essays help me in improving my writing skills. It's
> because [our class] is made up of international students that are from various
> ethnic backgrounds. So it is very interesting to see how they communicate and
> present their work from their point of view.

And Jie also appreciated the sense of community we were able to establish in our classroom during just five weeks of summer school. In fact, she felt so strongly about her experience, that, after earning her undergraduate degree in electrical engineering in China, she has decided to pursue something different in the United States: "If we don't like a class or a teacher, we can't concentrate to study, sometimes we don't come to class. I love [this class]. And I am applying for College of Education."

Final Thoughts

With the increasing cultural and linguistic diversity among students in the United States, teachers must seek out and employ strategies that effectively address and meet the needs of English language learners. Implementation of cooperative learning structures in first-year composition classrooms provides several benefits, including improved ethnic relations, increased student-student interaction, and a natural integration of speaking, listening, reading, and writing—important factors in anyone's composing process. This is not to suggest that cooperative learning should replace

all other forms of instruction; rather, this approach can be used as a complement to current classroom teaching techniques. Many cooperative learning structures that involve face-to-face communication can be incorporated into any content and, once students are familiar with the procedure, take only a few minutes of class time. More important, in those few minutes, *all* students have the opportunity to interact with peers through authentic communication, thus acquiring language naturally. As students develop proficiency in both conversational and academic language, cooperative learning helps teachers ensure that English language learners will not be "afraid to speak English," like Cisneros's Mamacita. Instead, through frequent and authentic student-student interaction, these learners can take linguistic risks, interpret input, adjust output, request clarification, and negotiate meaning, while simultaneously engaging in their composing processes. ◀

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