
Cooperative Education; Rationale and Course Design for At-risk Student Support

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INTRODUCTION

This paper outlines the basic tenets and history of cooperative or collaborative education, its application to the practice of second language acquisition, and the impetus, design, and justification of a support skills course following these principles. This work was generated by the research that precipitated the development of the English Support Skills course at a middle size suburban private university in Japan.

In response to an achievement gap we were tasked with creating a support skills class for at-risk students. The goals of the course were two-fold, to provide instruction in the basics of the English language and to help raise overall academic performance through study skills instruction. The intention of the course design was to provide students with a support group to practice English in a comfortable atmosphere conducive to learning and processing new material. The combination of these elements should have the ultimate impact of increasing retention.

Using a survey information was gathered from nearly all members of the department of English communication (182 participants) to determine how they qualified their learning styles and therefore what the most effective pedagogical approach for the course would be. The results of the survey showed a natural propensity for the students to work together and support each other in and outside of the classroom; therefore the tenets of cooperative education were employed to make the most use of pre-existing classroom manners and behaviors.

COOPERATIVE EDUCATION

Cooperative Education: History and Background

Cooperative education can be simply defined as a mode of education that creates a community for more effective teaching and learning, following the belief that collaboration benefits both receivers of peer support and givers. Though the term 'cooperative education' is relatively new, the tenets have existed in various forms in organized education for hundreds of years and the field has been the center of many focused and in-depth research efforts. As far back as the 17th century, Slavin (1995) notes, cooperative practices in formalized education can be seen in the writings of Comenius, followed by Rousseau in the 18th century and Pestalozzi in the 19th century. Some of the greatest contributors to the field in the modern era have been Dewey, bolstered by the work of Piaget and Vygotsky in developmental psychology (Slavin, 1995), and currently Johnson, Johnson and Holubec (1994) who focus on the collaborative nature of social interdependence. Given the longevity of the field, it is no surprise that contributors come from different areas in education and academia, or that there has been such a variety of documented research conducted.

Johnson, Johnson & Holubec (1994 b) also state that nearly 600 experimental and over 100 correlational studies have been conducted on cooperative, competitive, and individualistic efforts to learn since 1898. (Chafe, 1998, ¶4)

Cooperative education, by its very nature, extends into several educational areas and fields; collaborative learning, legitimate peripheral participation, and content-based instruction (CBI) to name a few. In addition, the justification and reasoning for cooperative education design models often reference aspects of cognitive psychology. The developmental perspective model presumes that the interaction between students promotes a deeper level of inquiry and understanding regarding a body of knowledge and encourages mastery of a task (Chafe, 1998). This view is a combination of the work of Vygotsky (1978), who believes that learning takes place through interaction before it gets internalized, and Piaget (1926), who said that certain knowledge can only be learned through peer processing. Chafe (1998) points out that, when considered together, these ideas promote the concept that effective learning depends on the use of cooperative tasks. In an atmosphere constructed around collaborative learning the opportunity is created for students to discuss topics, argue points in an academic manner, and hear different perspectives, all of which increase their own comprehension and command of the subject matter.

Regarding the process of collaborative task-based learning, Slavin offers the cognitive elaboration perspective (1995) that states that the act of processing and restructuring material by the individual student is the first step to basic familiarization and understanding. In doing so the student elaborates on the initial construct and re-assembles the material in a way that makes sense. Individualization and personalization of material eventually leads to retention. Regarding cooperative education, collaborative learning predicates familiarization and elaboration by encouraging students to take on different roles (such as recorder, recaller, listener, and peer-educator). In addition, working together in an unstructured way (without designated roles) prompts students to help each other, which requires a working command of the material on one hand, and an inquisitive approach on the other, both of which contribute to cognitive elaboration.

There are many working models of cooperative education, and differing definitions. Sometimes cooperative education is considered separate from collaborative learning processes. At other times, they are seen as different terms for the same approach. There are varied methods regarding formal and informal structures, manners of team formation, evaluation, assessment, outcome analysis, and appropriate or applicable settings and subjects (Johnson, Johnson, & Holubec, 1994). What unites these pedagogies is the basic practice of team, group, or pair work, following the assumption that cognition, comprehension, and therefore retention are increased through interaction.

Cooperative Education: Definition and Practice

Cooperative education, as defined through practice, is student-centered learning. Student-centered learning is essential for today's diverse student body operating in the modern classroom. Student-centered learning encourages ownership over course content and introduces the concept of learner autonomy, helping students develop into life-long learners. In the information age, learner autonomy is necessary to help students disseminate the multitude of information they gain access to through technology and create personal opinions, viewpoints, and methodologies for analysis and reflection. In a classroom based on cooperative learning, students not only have to develop individual statements, they get to hone them through discussion with peers, reinforcing the variety of possible responses and the importance of diverse contributions. Some research has linked cooperative learning practices with student autonomy.

...on a continuum from teacher lecture to self-study, cooperative learning represents a major step away from dependence on teachers and toward greater reliance on self and peers. Further, the purpose of cooperative learning is not to get everyone to think alike, but to get everyone to think and to share and to develop their own thinking through engagement with others. (McCafferty, et al, 2006, p.16)

Cooperative education is student-centered learning in that student-generated content is central to discussions, making the language and use more immediate, pertinent and appropriate. Furthermore, cooperative learning promotes diversity in the classroom of opinions, thoughts, and the different learning styles that individuals bring. As the traditional role of the student changes, so do the nature of teaching and the role of the teacher. In many ways, the modern teacher is more of a facilitator, instructing in the art of questioning, analysis, evaluation, and reflection. This encourages students to develop individual learning styles within a formal academic structure, acknowledging both the need for universal outcomes and assessment and the diverse background, ideas, and experiences that students approach learning with.

In addition learner autonomy is encouraged by prompting ownership over the process and the material. This makes the content generated more personal and appropriate, and therefore more likely to resonate with individual group members than a foreign text or outside source. Once ownership is achieved within a course, chances are greater that students will make productive use of their time to explore their own interests within the academic environment, again, leading to greater opportunities for comprehension and retention.

Another implication of the focus on learners in second language instruction is the concept of *learner autonomy*, the idea that students should develop into life-long learners by enhancing their abilities and their inclinations to plan, control, and evaluate their own learning (Wenden 1991)... The collaboration that occurs in cooperative learning groups fits well with notions of learner autonomy as students are given a large role in controlling their own learning process (Macaro, 1997). (McCafferty, et al, 2006, p.26)

Cooperative learning is considered effective for a wide range of topics and fields because its student-centered nature capitalizes on existing classroom conditions and recognizes the influence of social and cultural factors. It is extremely pertinent today given the multicultural atmosphere of the modern classroom and the subsequent need to recognize and promote diversity.

Cooperative pedagogy, drawing from the basic concepts of collaborative learning practices encourages the classroom construct to reflect the diverse nature of its student body, support the multitude of learning styles and opinions, and prepare students to become life-long learners, capable of processing information beyond textual analysis, but in ways that will be relevant to real-world situations that require peer-production and group work.

For these reasons, it is well suited to second language acquisition and the international teaching of English as a second language. Language is often best learned in context, therefore cooperative practices that encourage a high rate of student-to-student communication using the target language in the comfort of a peer group is desirable.

COOPERATIVE EDUCATION AND SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION

Cooperative education practices are especially germane for second language teaching for a variety of

reasons. Some of the primary principles of second language acquisition posit that proficiency is reached through use and meaning created from context. Proficiency is best acquired when small groups communicate for a purpose because peer support is provided and meaning negotiated. This creates an understanding of vocabulary, grammar, and practical applications of the target language. Furthermore, coursework that relies on student-generated content, provided by peer-to-peer communication is more pertinent and viable for individual students in that it is closer to their understanding, background, and experiences. Cooperative education is not the only approach that can achieve these pedagogical aims, or necessarily the best, given different contexts and desired outcomes. However, when combined with traditional classroom practices and manners of instruction, it can help provide support for struggling students, a chance for capable students to cement their knowledge through peer instruction, and greatly increase the amount of time spent using the target language.

Second Language Acquisition: Meaning is Created Through Context and Use

One of the most important pedagogical principles for second language acquisition is that meaning is created through context. In the classroom, situations have to be contrived to give students the opportunity to interact with each other through the target language in ways that provoke original expression. When the desire exists to express something, language becomes a powerful tool. Collaborative learning is effective in the language classroom because a student-centered atmosphere is created where students manipulate language to contribute and respond to topics of personal interest. This approach is well suited for the second language classroom because time spent manipulating the target language is increased, and the impetus for individual expression and the setting that models authentic use is created. This is a move away from pre-recorded conversations that may or may not be applicable, viable, or understandable.

Kagan (1995) points to three areas of second language acquisition that cooperative learning makes the most effective use of: input, output, and context. The optimum setting for language acquisition is one where the input is understandable and appropriate, output is communicative, viable, and authentic given the identity of the speakers, and the context, to the extent possible is natural, localized, and transparent (Kagan, 1995).

Cooperative education pedagogy and collaborative learning practices are effective for second language learning because they inherently provide an environment where input is student-centered and content-based, output encouraged, and context immediate (Chafe, 1998). A study by Joritz-Nakagawa (2006) showed that when input is student-centered and participant-generated, language proficiency is increased. Content-based learning has long been considered an effective pedagogy for language instruction. When the participants provide the content of the course, the material becomes valid and localized, and therefore more susceptible for comprehension and retention. Input in a language classroom can refer to the mechanics of the language, as provided by the teacher and textbook. It can also refer to the topics or subjects used to promote language ability. When students provide the topics their opinions and insights gain relevance and individual contributions become appropriate. This input provides the motivation to create meaningful output in the target language. Students in small group settings can be encouraged by watching their peers who present an attainable model of target language proficiency (Joritz-Nakagawa, 2006).

When considering the reasoning for promoting student output in the target language as a necessary component to second language acquisition, Swain (1985, 1993) identified four main benefits.

- Promoting fluency via meaningful language use
- Pushing learners to engage in syntactic processing of language.

- Allowing hypothesis testing as to what works in the L2 in terms of appropriacy, correctness, and understandability.
- Providing opportunities for feedback from others, in such forms as negotiating meaning or supplying missing words. (McCafferty, et al, 2006, p.20)

His primary assertion is that students need to manipulate the target language and produce work, written or verbal, which encourages the acquisition of grammatical functions. The process of production begins a cycle of feedback, negotiation and meaning creation that combine to enhance understanding.

When conducted in the relative safety of a supportive small group atmosphere, students are more likely to take risks with language to express what they are thinking and feeling. Feedback is often as helpful or more so when proffered by peers rather than the native speaking instructor since the students are closer to the material and to each other. Collaboration is necessary in this setting when the drive to communicate in the target language is generated by the content, not by the external pressure to use L 2 vocabulary and grammatical structures. Content-based learning and instruction, when viewed in this light is provided by the language lesson on one hand, and the student-generated context on the other.

Language which occurs in a context that is “supportive and motivating, communicative and referential, developmentally appropriate and feedback rich” will be much more likely to be acquired (Kagan, 1995). Kagan lists a number of reasons why students are more motivated and feel more support in a cooperative classroom.

- (1) They are more frequently asked questions;
 - (2) They need to communicate to accomplish the cooperative learning projects;
 - (3) Peers are far more supportive than in the traditional classroom because they are all on the same side;
 - (4) Cooperative learning structures demand speech;
 - (5) Students are taught to praise and encourage each other; and
 - (6) Students are made interdependent so they need to know what the others know.
- (Chafe, 1998, ¶44)

Cooperative Learning Practices: Groups Work Best

If the goal of a language program is linguistic ability, and language seems to develop best in contextual situations, an effective pedagogy for second language acquisition instruction might be for teachers to create as many situations as possible in which students use the target language with different people. In the traditional foreign language classroom, the instructor lectures, then walks students through various activities and exercises in textbooks. Student participation is limited to answering questions based off of textbook work, while interaction usually only occurs between students and teachers when called upon to provide a response.

Porter (1985) found that...under typical teacher-fronted, or lockstep, procedures the average time that a student spoke was only 30 seconds per 50-minute lesson. However, when students worked in groups of three for just one quarter of a 50-minute period, the quantity of student talk increased more than 500 percent. (McCafferty, et al, 2006, p.21)

This evidence is supported by several different researchers, and termed the *simultaneity principle* by

Kagan (1992) because of the increase in participant language use. There are two operating principles at work that make this effective and appropriate for second language acquisition, the first being that the goal of language learning is communicative ability which is improved through use and practice. The second is the idea that students can learn as much from each other as they do from teachers (Reid, 1993). When they work in collaborative groups, students are using the language to make themselves understood in original ways that textbook exercises rarely promote. When given a grammatical construct or vocabulary word set to use, combined with a relevant topic, students in a group can regulate each other's use of the language and support efforts to construct meaning. Encouragement, help, and feedback are given at a higher rate in small groups than occurs in a traditional interaction between student and teacher (Chafe, 1998). Furthermore, students are often more comfortable checking with each other about correct word, phrase, or grammar use than with a native language instructor.

The intimate setting created in a small group encourages students to negotiate meaning and take risks with the language that might be prevented when performing in front of the class in response to the teacher. Furthermore, a study by Varonis and Gass (1985) found that negotiation of meaning occurs in greater frequency in groups of nonnative speakers than in interactions between nonnative speakers and native speakers.

Through the *negotiation for meaning* (Oliver 1998; Pica 1996; Schinke-Llano & Vicars 1993), the amount of comprehensible input is thought to increase. Ways of negotiating meaning include the listener asking for repetition or clarification, as well as the speaker checking to see that others have understood...Rulon and McCreary (1986: 182) held that groups promote negotiation of meaning because "the more intimate setting provides students with the opportunity to negotiate the language they hear, free from the stress and rapid pace of the teacher-fronted classroom." (McCafferty, et al, 2006, p.19)

Webb and Farivar (1994) hypothesize that students are closer to the material than their older, more expert, and often native speaking, teacher, which translates into greater capacity for peers to explain material in understandable ways. Furthermore, teachers, through repetition and practice often lose sight of what it is like to approach something at a fundamental level. Therefore they may have trouble identifying what some students who are incapable of fluent expression are specifically struggling with. This is especially relevant to an ESL or EFL classroom where the instructor is a native speaker and the students are not. That setting can be especially intimidating for less capable students because instruction, input, and content are given in the target language, and the pace of the language is often much quicker when used by a native speaker. Compounding the stress of attempting to communicate in a foreign language is the atmosphere created, albeit unintentionally, by the traditional teacher-fronted classroom.

Particularly germane to ESL and EFL instructors is the need to explain directions as well as concepts, definitions, and other pertinent vocabulary and terms needed to accomplish cooperative goals. It is difficult for instructors to divorce themselves from their own assumptions about the nature of teaching and learning, especially if these constructs are culturally accepted and promoted in their experience, but foreign to their students. When doing anything in the classroom it is important to define terms and expectations, however, when introducing collaborative exercises in nonnative classrooms, it is best to first discuss the method being used, and the roles for all involved parties.

The teacher needs to establish and reinforce cooperative norms so that students know that it is all right to help each other. They need to know when they are supposed to work alone or be in their groups. They also need to know what they are expected to produce and how they will be evalu-

ated. (Holt, et al, 1991, ¶68)

Group work is an effective way to increase speaking time, language use, and opportunities for peer feedback and instruction, however it may be a teaching method that students in different environments have little experience with. Therefore, terms such as 'work with a partner' or 'work together' need to be clearly defined within the context of the classroom to make sure students and teacher share an understanding of what is appropriate regarding operating principles and procedures. Additionally, with new methods of behavior and practice come new methods of assessment. It is important when beginning any activity in the classroom that participants are aware of the expectations for production and manner of evaluation.

Cooperative Education: Criticisms and Conclusions

The motivation to use the target language is inherent in the structure of the cooperative classroom, however, in many academic institutions this may not fit with existing methods of outcome based assessment and performance rationales. Regarding the outcome of a collaborative project or classroom experience, it is often up to the instructor to decide what area to focus on when assessing achievement. There are many different theories of evaluation and rewards for student performance ranging from individual assessment to group designations with all participants receiving the same grade. There is even a question of rewarding participants as a motivating factor for participation. It is unclear which is the best method for motivating learners, however there is agreement that cooperative education as a supplement to classroom practices strengthens the student's experiences and provides additional knowledge not included in traditional instructive methods (Slavin, 1995; Matingly & Van Sickle, 1992; Sharan & Shachar, 1988).

Too much peer-to-peer communication, without new concepts being introduced and modeled by the instructor can lead to stagnation. In SLA this can also lead to problems with words being used incorrectly regarding form and meaning, and on a base level, pronunciation (Chafe, 1998). Questions also arise about group construction, being heterogeneous or homogeneous regarding higher performing students and who the experience really benefits? In practice perhaps the most effective use of cooperative learning is to process classroom exercises and provide a peer group for discussion and support, augmented by individual assessment to put the onus on each student to take a measure of responsibility.

There is a proliferation of well-documented evidence that cooperative education is an effective pedagogy to employ for second language acquisition and EFL/ESL teaching (Chafe, 1998). However, within the field of cooperative or collaborative learning practices there is a wide array of different approaches, suggesting that while the pedagogy is effective, instructors need to consider which facet of the different approaches will be most useful in meeting their target goals and working with their specific population of learners. Cooperative learning is not the only method for achieving success in the second language classroom.

However, cooperative learning in its many methods and forms is not the solution to all second language acquisition. As Szostek (1994) states: "...cooperative learning is not a panacea. It cannot and should not be used to replace all other types of teaching and learning." (p.259) (Chafe, 1998, ¶51)

Recent studies on L2 learning show that no one method, activity, or experience grants learners proficiency in the target language or can encompass the entire process of second language learning (Pica, 1994). Cooperative learning practices, when used in conjunction with more traditional methods of instruction can

help teachers accomplish traditional goals and achieve success on standardized methods of assessment. Furthermore, when formed into groups, students cement their knowledge by assisting each other, receive peer feedback in an appropriate and understandable manner, and have a supportive environment to work in that is receptive to individual attempts to negotiate meaning.

COOPERATIVE EDUCATION AND THE JAPANESE CLASSROOM

In any research study it is important to qualify the environment under scrutiny, especially so in a study with cross-cultural concerns involving native language instructors and non-native student speakers. Equally important is the need to define instruction and practice when the background and pedagogy of the instructor are different from many of the students' previous experiences. Describing the environment and atmosphere encourages relevance of the study for readers, especially other teachers, furthermore, localizing the setting helps retard the tendency to ascribe rationalizations to cultural, social, and individual differences.

The research for this work was conducted by survey and observation in the English Communication department of a medium sized, private, suburban Japanese university. The total student population is around 5,000, however the English department only has about 200 members. Students are graded on a curve and quickly realize they are competing for passing grades. This creates an atmosphere where students quickly realize they are competing for passing grades. At-risk students tend to fail more than one course, and often become disheartened with the system and the impersonal nature of the grading policy and process. As the university increasingly fails to draw significant numbers of applicants, retention is rapidly becoming a concern. To encourage retention of at-risk first and second year students we were asked to create a remedial course to bolster their understanding of the fundamentals of English grammar, verbal and written communication, and reading, as well as providing a smaller, more accessible peer group of students in similar circumstances. Students were identified and chosen for the course based on their performance on entrance exams and first year mid-semester and final exams.

The English Support Skills course was designed following the principles of cooperative education, with the belief that these would best suit pre-existing preferences and classroom conditions, and help meet the needs of the course as outlined by the university administration. Drawing on experience and the results of a survey that asked students to qualify their preferred learning styles, the curriculum was created and implemented with the goal of providing students with a supportive atmosphere to gain comfort with the rudiments of the English language and confidence in their ability to create meaning and communicate clearly.

Collaborative Learning in Our Japanese Classroom

It is common for Japanese students entering the university to have achieved some proficiency in writing and reading English, yet be unable to communicate verbally (Nakagawa, 2006). This is due in part to the emphasis by non-native instructors in many primary and secondary schools on reading and writing to help students score well on central exams, TOEIC, and other standardized tests. Joritz-Nakagawa (2006) writing about her experience teaching in a Japanese university attributes this to the focus on accuracy required to pass university entrance exams instead of fluency as a desired outcome of second language learning.

There are many possible reasons for the conduct and character of the Japanese classroom, but we have no desire to act on conjecture or propagate assumptions and generalizations. What is of more interest and concern, and germane to this study, is what is actually occurring in the classroom and what pedagogy will

be most effective with the mechanisms that are already in place to help students develop communicative ability in English.

In addition to making the material student-centered, therefore personal, immediate and viable, cooperative teaching practices can free instructors to observe students more carefully, offer suggestions on a personal level when appropriate, and provides a platform from which to view the lesson and curriculum as a whole, leading to evaluation and improvement of existing methods and practices (Joritz-Nakagawa, 2006). The opportunity to work with students on a more personal level in a large classroom setting is essential, especially so in Japan, where many students are taught not to ask questions during lessons from an early age. An instructor who is free to circulate and address issues with students is more approachable than one who stands in front of the room, and by virtue of that position, requires students to distinguish themselves from the group in order to ask a question. In some cases students' private queries to a circulating instructor raise issues pertinent to the group as a whole, in which case the instructor can always make the remainder of the class aware of the new insight or information. This disseminates necessary information as it becomes usable, and with praise from the teacher (using statements like "a good question was just asked...") can encourage other students to follow suit.

Our Research: Methods, Impetus and Results

Prior to designing the course a survey was given to 182 participants to identify specifics of learning practices and classroom behaviors. Given the nature of the problem cooperative education pedagogies were initially selected, but the specific design of the course and curriculum had yet to be determined until the results of the survey were analyzed. Written initially in English then translated to Japanese to ensure participant understanding and veracity of results the survey presented students with 15 questions in a variety of formats about the ways they preferred to give and receive help.

In light of research ethics, precautions were taken to ensure the privacy of the students surveyed. Only the questionnaires for which the students had granted written permission were analyzed and published. Students were also informed of the purpose of the survey and promised anonymity before the survey was administered. A few students did not grant permission or complete all items on the questionnaire, and therefore, were eliminated from the study. Of the 182 participants in this study almost half were in their third year (N=81) and about a quarter were in the first (N=43) and second year (N=48). Since fourth year students usually finish taking classes in the second semester, which was when the survey was administered, they composed less than two percent (N=10) of the overall group. To gather some background information, the students were asked to provide the number of years they have studied English and their university grade. Regarding the amount of English education students were exposed to, roughly 90% had six to ten years which is consistent to the amount of time most university students in Japan study English.

Several questions in the survey targeted views that students have about working alone or working with partners. Question 3, as shown in Table 1, asked students to indicate their preference to work alone or with a partner on exercises in class. A majority of the students (76.37%) indicated that they preferred working in pairs, however, the percentage decreased after each year of study. A difference of over 18 percentage points was observed between the first year (88.37%) and fourth year students (70.00%) with the largest change occurring between their first and second year of study (15 percentage points).

Table 1

Q 3: If a teacher gives you an exercise to work on in class, do you prefer to work with a partner or alone?				
	1 st year	2 nd year	3 rd year	4 th year
A: Partner	88.37%	72.91%	72.83%	70.00%
B: Alone	11.62%	27.08%	27.16%	30.00%

One explanation for this decrease is that students are becoming assimilated into a new more competitive system, one that has policies in place that increase competition among students or encourage working independently. Even with these policies in place, there remain a remarkably high percentage of students across all grade levels that prefer to work together to those who wish to work alone. This is of particular importance to the English Support class because students already have an inclination toward working in pairs. Therefore, less time is needed to motivate students to work in groups.

Question 4 assessed whether students think they perform better in pairs or alone. This item is closely connected with question 3; however, perceived competence was measured as opposed to preference. The data (see Table 2 below) revealed that most students think they work better in pairs(79.12%)than in groups (20.88%). A slight but progressive change after each subsequent year of study was found in students who think they work better independently.

Table 2

Q 4: Do you work better with a partner or alone?				
	1 st year	2 nd year	3 rd year	4 th year
A: Partner	83.72%	81.25%	75.31%	80.00%
B: Alone	16.27%	18.75%	24.69%	20.00%

This may be one of the goals of the current competitive system, that is, to move students away from peer dependence and toward autonomy. Nevertheless, the slight increase in only the first three years (8 percentage points) does not offer a strong case that students are changing their perceptions concerning the value of peer support in this environment. These results favor a more cooperative approach for the English Support Skills course because if students perceive themselves to be more competent in pair work then this method should help them gain confidence and a higher level of comfort.

Table 3 indicates the overall data gathered from questions 5 and 6, which suggest that students would rather ask their classmates for help than their teacher when confronted with a difficult question or incomprehensible instructions. About 70% of all the students indicated that they would ask their classmates and nearly 26% would ask their teacher for help in these situations. Less than 4% said that they would do nothing.

Table 3

Q 5: If the teacher asks you a question that you don't understand, what would you do?	
A: Do nothing	3.85%
B: Ask the teacher to repeat what they have said	26.92%
C: Ask the person next to you	69.23%
Q 6: If the teacher gives instructions that you don't understand, what would you do?	
A: Do nothing	3.30%
B: Ask the teacher to repeat what they have said	25.27%
C: Ask the person next to you	71.43%

This implies that there is a strong level of interdependence between students in the classroom and that attitudes and beliefs promote support and cooperation. In many classrooms students are exposed to a traditional model of education where teachers are authoritative figures and perceived as knowledge givers rather than facilitators. This can be alienating and create a divide between teachers and students. Further complicating the issue is the language barrier in the classroom between native language instructors and non-native speakers. It is important that students have a support network they can utilize if communication problems occur, however, it is disheartening that teachers are not more involved in the process. This justifies use of a cooperative approach for the support skills course since it may help students to understand instructions and develop a greater level of trust in their teachers. This is possible because teachers have more time to circulate and interact with students on a more personal and individual level.

Data gathered in questions 7 and 8 (illustrated below) suggest that students strongly desire assistance from their classmates when a teacher asks them a question they do not know (89.01%) and that they expect the same in return (87.91%). This is consistent with the preference and belief that working in pairs leads to more effective learning since students have a support system they can refer to when obstacles are encountered.

Table 4

Q 7: If the teacher asks the student next to you a question and they don't know the answer, what would you do?	
A: Do nothing	10.99%
B: Help them / Give them the answer	89.01%
Q 8: If the teacher calls on you to answer a question that you do not know, what would you like the person sitting next to you to do?	
A: Do nothing	12.09%
B: Help you / Give you the answer	87.91%

Three 5-point Likert-scale questions (questions 12-14) measured how students felt about working together in different situations: completing in-class activities, reviewing for tests, and doing homework. The students were more favorable toward working together to complete in-class activities (Mean=3.36) than on homework (Mean=2.95) and test reviews (Mean=3.18).

Table 5

Q 12: I like working with classmates on projects, exercises, or activities in class.					
Strongly disagree (1)	Disagree (2)	No opinion (3)	Agree (4)	Strongly Agree (5)	Mean
4.40%	13.19%	24.10%	46.70%	11.50%	3.36
Q 13: I like reviewing for tests with other classmates.					
Strongly disagree (1)	Disagree (2)	No opinion (3)	Agree (4)	Strongly Agree (5)	Mean
7.69%	15.93%	34.00%	34.60%	7.69%	3.18
Q 14: I like doing homework with other classmates.					
Strongly disagree (1)	Disagree (2)	No opinion (3)	Agree (4)	Strongly Agree (5)	Mean
9.89%	26.92%	28.02%	28.02%	7.14%	2.95

For the most part, the existing English department emphasizes grades given on tests and homework assignments rather than project work, in-class exercises, and participation. It is no surprise then that students are less inclined to help a classmate do homework or review for a test. Another possible explanation is that students cannot find a suitable time to meet outside of class to review for tests and do homework, or they have a dislike for tests and homework on any occasion. The data indicates that working with peers is not solely the preferred method. Cooperative learning must be supplemented with individual production. Combining multiple pedagogical approaches encourages an array of student competencies.

Despite the propensity for a group of students to compete with each other, especially in an atmosphere with a predetermined failure rate, these students have shown a remarkable tendency to help, assist, and guide each other. What is occurring is a process of cooperative education. Whether this is fueled by years of elementary training, or draws from the work place model of cooperative production, students are working together in a variety of different ways, regardless of personal feelings of friendship or animosity. The result is a stronger classroom where the students function as a unit.

English Support Skills Course Design

Given the existing tendency to practice collaborative learning and the overall sense of unity among the student body, the support skills course was designed in a way that would make best use of existing prac-

tices, and reach target goals and develop essential skill sets.

The support skills course seeks to capitulate on the tangible, yet invisible network, that students create in the classroom. When asked questions students will often check answers in whispered conference with neighbors before reporting to the class. In the same vein it is not uncommon to see a struggling student being fed answers quietly by their peers. In contrast to teacher-fronted lockstep instruction, small group work capitalizes on this practice by providing a more intimate and supportive atmosphere where existing practices of peer instruction are actively encouraged. This has been shown to have a positive effect on developing second language skills (Long & Porter, 1985). In this atmosphere language use and communicative ability improves as does confidence in individual ability, development of roles and skills for group work, and general approaches to academic production that can be applied to other courses.

As students work together to master reading and writing skills in two languages, they also learn cooperation and “people skills” that are invaluable. They become higher-order thinkers and become less afraid of failure. When teachers are able to use this cooperative learning approach to education, students grow--and so do the teachers. (Porter, 1999, ¶13)

To encourage students to focus on the learning process and develop a better work ethic that they can apply to other classes, collaborative learning is balanced with individual presentations, which are the basis for performance and evaluation. Students work together but are graded individually. However, the focus for assessment is on effort, so grades are assigned on a pass/fail basis. Furthermore, because it is a support course, considered to be remedial, therefore outside the regular core curriculum, the supports skills course is exempt from routine policy and grades are assigned on a Pass/Fail basis.

The course design includes; repetition of daily routine so as the content changes the practice is predictable, full knowledge of procedures and material so the students are involved in the management of the course, and a significant component of member-checking and partner work so students can generate vocabulary, discuss, form, and practice phrases and develop personal answers within their comfort zone before being asked to present individually.

The cycle of activities is an important concept, like the peer group, it offers something familiar and functions like a support network creating an expandable zone of proximal familiarity. As the subject grows increasingly more complex, students begin to interact with more depth in the target language, getting further and further from their natural thought and speech patterns. The cycle of activities is the constant in a classroom that pushes students to take ownership. Asking a student to generate their own motivation requires an environment where the student feels comfortable and life-long personal and professional skills are engendered.

Learning cooperatively in teams where “all work for one” and “one works for all” gives students the emotional and academic support that helps them to persevere against the many obstacles they face in school. Not only do cooperative teams give students additional motivation to stay in school and improve academically, they also help them learn the skills that they will need for the increasingly interactive workplaces of the future. (Holt, et al, 1991, ¶6)

Students are actively encouraged to form small groups that will work as support units both inside and outside the course. Providing students with a peer group can increase individual sense of responsibility, and alleviate some of the pressures that a new environment holds. Pedagogically, teambuilding is an effective classroom practice especially for second language acquisition. Additionally, it begins to prepare the students for their eventual entry into the working world where collaboration is the norm.

Through cooperative learning, students serve as teachers of other students or as experts on certain topics. Cooperative teams may offer some students the academic support that will help them find success. The lack of stimulating classes, the lack of interested, caring adults, and peer pressures are reasons given by many students for dropping out of school. Cooperative learning may lead to peer friendships and support, thereby preventing students from dropping out and instead motivating them to succeed academically and socially. (Holt, et al, 1991, ¶22)

In a classroom designed around collaborative learning, the onus shifts from the teacher to students to make the material familiar and personal. The benefits for students are clear. They are given a peer support group that creates a sense of familiarity inside and outside the classroom. This can help improve academic performance, and of equal importance alleviate some of the pressures that contribute to retention problems. The skills they learn are immediately relevant, and also helpful in preparing students for their future endeavors. Additionally, a collaborative classroom has benefits for instructors. The teacher's role changes from the 'sage on the stage' to a position resembling a facilitator. This frees the teacher to circulate, giving her a chance to work individually with students who need extra attention and prompt those who are capable to take on additional roles. It also provides an opportunity to observe the lesson and material with an eye towards effectiveness, innovation, and course evolution. Though not the only way to achieve these goals nor always suitable for everyone and all situations, cooperative education and collaborative learning practices can be effective in a variety of environments for a myriad of different purposes.

CONCLUSION

Cooperative education can provide an effective foundation to achieve the goals of the support skills course. The data from the study strongly suggests students both prefer and value working with peers. Expectations also exist among students regarding how and when peer support is appropriate. Students are likely to provide and receive support when their teacher asks them a question or gives instructions they cannot understand. The results also suggest that even if situated in classrooms that encourage students to compete for grades, collaborative learning is still a favored practice. Some variation existed, however, according to the type of task performed, that is, students favored working alone in tasks that have a direct impact on grades such as homework and test reviews.

The research in this study and many others illustrate the importance of cooperative learning and collaborative learning models in second language learning. Over the past 10 years there has been a number of significant developments in curriculum design, however, questions about the specific ways to implement collaborative learning practices into classrooms and courses still exist (Chafe, 1998). Successful implementation requires teacher training, in-service support, and well-researched models.

If cooperative learning is to be successful, teachers need to be aware of what research has shown to work. They also need practical knowledge with examples. It is not enough to simply give teachers a book. Teachers would like to know that it works in similar situations to their own. Otherwise, they will continue to use what they see as reasonably successful in their own classrooms, without really understanding what cooperative learning can do for their students. Most people are resistant to change. They need to be convinced that it is worth the effort. (Chafe, 1998, ¶64)

In most academic venues, change is most effective when preceded by a process of review of pertinent

and current research and literature, and analysis of curricular methods, goals, and materials. Although the survey administered in this study provided rationale for implementing a cooperative approach for the support skills course, more research is needed to investigate how and if students are meeting the course objectives. The goal of this study was to determine an initial approach. Now that it is in place, evaluation and assessment are needed to determine effectiveness and alignment of curricular components.

This is not an effective method for all teachers to implement in all courses, nor should cooperative learning be viewed as the alternative to traditional classroom practices. However, in large classrooms where conversation and communication is the goal of second language acquisition, these can be effective methods when used to increase the percentage of time students spend using the target language. Even in classrooms where group work is utilized, training in cooperative learning methods can provide teachers with a stronger foundation for implementing successful group and peer activities. Teachers, for example, can learn the most effective way to assign roles to group members to ensure participation and responsibility and use means of assessment that reward individual and group participation. While the research involved in this paper concluded in the rationale, justification, and design of a cooperative model for the support skills course, the overall effects on student performance and retention remain to be determined. Through the process of implementation, however, a viable framework has been provided that supports learners' preferences and perceptions and hopefully will lead to an environment that increases confidence, learner autonomy, and communicative competence in the target language.

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