

Controversy over cooperative learning: An interview with Dr. George M. Jacobs

Keywords

cooperative learning, George Jacobs, CL techniques, CL in Japanese schools

Cooperative learning (CL) is a highly researched educational method supported by pedagogical and psychological theories. However, despite many examples of creative use of CL in Japanese schools, the practice has not expanded into the mainstream of English education in Japan. Why do some teachers shy away from CL techniques and consider it not worth learning to use? Dr. George Jacobs, an expert on CL who has conducted seminars and workshops on this topic and is familiar with the teaching situation in Japan, answers these questions.

文体(スタイル)に一貫性がないように思います。以下の日本語訳ではどうでしょう?「協同学習は教育理論・教育心理学の確固とした理論的基盤に支えられた実践である。日本でもその技法を授業に生かす取り組みが行われている一方で、協同の原理・原則が英語教育の現場に深く根付いているとは言いがたい。なぜ、積極的に取り入れられていないのか? その価値が評価されないのか? 協同学習の専門家であり、日本の教育現場の現状に詳しい Dr. George M. Jacobsにその理由・取り組みの可能性などについて尋ねた。」

協同学習をめぐる論争: Dr. George M. Jacobs氏へのインタビュー

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George Jacobs <www.georgejacobs.net> is an educator based in Singapore. Most of his teaching and writing focuses on cooperative learning, other aspects of student-centered pedagogy, and vegetarianism.



Harumi Kimura: How is CL similar to, but not the same as, pair or group work in general?

Dr. George M. Jacobs: CL is a subset of group work, with groups usually being 2-4 students.

What distinguishes CL is that both teachers and students are making a special effort to bring an *All for one, one for all* and *Two (or more) heads are better than one* spirit to the group activities. Last year, at an international conference on CL held in Nagoya, a Japanese professor named Dr. Masato Takahata showed a 20 year-old video of CL being used in Japan. He had another good slogan for this cooperative spirit: *Ask until you understand, teach until everyone understands*. In contrast to a cooperative spirit, too often group members just sit together, not cooperating and sometimes even competing against each other. CL offers many ways to promote cooperation.

HK: What are some of those ways?

GJM: Here are just a few. They aren't new; we can sometimes find them being applied in ESL textbooks. The central principle is positive interdependence, a *sink or swim together* feeling among group mates that they need each other in order to succeed. One example is resource positive interdependence. We see this in information gap tasks, where everyone must share what they know for the group to succeed. We don't see it when everyone in

a group has all the information and materials they need to do the entire task alone.

HK: Please explain more about why interdependence is positive in a cooperative group.

GJM: One point often misunderstood is that interdependence exists in people's minds. It is a perception. Cooperative learning provides teachers with tools for attempting to adjust student perceptions of their interdependence with others. Social psychologists have identified three types of interdependence: positive, negative, and none. If the outcomes of student interactions are viewed positively, students feel positively dependent with peers. In other words, what helps one helps others; what hurts one hurts others. In contrast, if the outcomes are negatively perceived, they feel negatively interdependent. Finally, if students see no correlation between efforts and outcomes, they feel no interdependence: what happens to one has no effect on others.

Let me use a sports example to illustrate the three types of interdependence. You and I are part of a swimming relay team. It's in my interest to help you improve your speed because if you swim faster, my chances of being on a winning team increase. Similarly, if you hurt your shoulder, that decreases my chances of winning. An example of negative interdependence would be if instead of being on the same relay team, you and I are competing against each other in a race. In this situation, I'm sad if you increase your speed, and if your shoulder injury flares up, my chances of winning increase. Finally, no interdependence would apply if you and I were neither teammates nor competitors, and you were swimming backstroke and I was swimming freestyle. Your outcome has no effect on mine.

Teachers can promote positive interdependence so that students are more likely to scaffold and support each other. For example, group mates can be encouraged to take the view that their task remains incomplete even if they have finished; the task remains incomplete until everyone has acquired the language and the skills necessary to accomplish it on their own. In addition, once a group has finished such an expanded task, the hope is they will feel positively interdependent with other groups and want to help them as well.

HK: What's another CL principle?

GJM: A frequently mentioned concern with group activities is freeloading, where one member allows the group mates to make all of the effort. The principle of individual accountability, where everyone

needs to show and tell what they know and don't know, helps address this situation. One simple way of promoting individual accountability is to call on group members at random to share their group's ideas. Too often a group is called on, and it's always the star of the group who shares. In such circumstances, we aren't encouraging the principle of *ask until you understand, teach until everyone understands*.

HK: How can we say that everybody is learning in this social learning context? In the end, everybody should be able to do tomorrow what they are not able to do today.

GJM: Again, the principle of individual accountability comes in handy. The group's main task is to strengthen each group member. Ways to measure this include self- and peer-feedback, individual exams, portfolios, compositions, and roles in presentations.

HK: What about when students don't get along with their group mates?

GJM: Yes, that happens frequently, especially when new groups are formed. Usually, we want to have heterogeneous groups that mix students on a range of variables such as L2 proficiency. Students may not feel comfortable with their new group mates. To address this, we can do team-building activities, strengthen and highlight the positive interdependence among group mates, and teach cooperative skills.

HK: What do you mean by teaching cooperative skills?

GJM: Cooperative skills are the skills we use to cooperate with others, such as praising, asking for help, disagreeing politely, and asking for elaboration. Since cooperation occurs through language, learning to work better together simultaneously helps students negotiate meaning. While ESL students may have not yet mastered the verbal and non-verbal aspects of using these skills in English, often the more difficult task lies in students convincing themselves of the benefits of making these skills a regular part of their language repertoires.

HK: How do you think we can teach cooperative skills?

GJM: A short answer is a six-step procedure developed at the University of Minnesota Cooperative Learning Center (Jacobs & Goh, 2007). Working on one cooperative skill at a time, we can:

- discuss with students why the skill is important
- help students understand the verbal and non-verbal aspects of using the skill
- allow students to practice the skill separate from their course content (e.g., in a grammar course, doing a role play involving the cooperative skill of asking for reasons)
- encourage students to use the skill as they work together to learn course content (e.g., asking each other for reasons while doing a grammar task)
- involve students in discussing how and how well they have been using the skill, perhaps with the aid of teacher and student observation
- aid students over a long period of time in using the skill regularly

HK: Some students may feel embarrassed to put questions to other students. Some are very shy. They just go by without understanding or practicing. How can we promote a comfortable environment for learning together?

GMJ: Yes, that is a very important topic. Here are a few ideas:

- prepare students for success by pre-teaching, allowing the use of resources (such as electronic dictionaries), teaching cooperative skills, forming mixed-proficiency groups, and giving doable tasks that tap multiple learning styles
- emphasize the positive interdependence among students so that students are not participating and learning just for themselves as individuals but also in aid of their classmates
- regularly include short team-building activities that get everyone talking

HK: What are examples of team-building activities?

GMJ: One type of team-building activities highlight commonalities among group members, such as finding similar likes (such as favorite foods or movies). Another type seeks to build trust by asking students to share something about themselves, such as relating surprising personal facts. A third type has students working towards a common goal, as in seeing how many words the group can make from the letters in the word *important*. There are more than 60 words that can be formed, in case you'd like to try!

HK: What is your advice for teachers just starting with CL?

GMJ: Don't underestimate the difficulty. Among the

many sources of difficulty are students' attitudes toward working together. Many students expect, even demand, a teacher-centered environment. Our own level of skill as teachers using CL is another area of difficulty. Group activities introduce a new set of interaction variables. Previously, we dealt with teacher-student interaction and the interaction between students and classroom materials. Now, in addition to those, we need to deal with student-student interaction.

HK: You've talked about difficulties, but you haven't given any advice yet.

GMJ: You're right. My main advice is to *Start easy*. Start with easy activities so students can become comfortable working with each other and realize they really can learn via peer interaction. *Start easy* also means avoiding complex techniques (such as jigsaw-style activities) at the beginning and starting instead with short and simple ones (Gobel, 2006).

HK: Please give an example of a simple CL technique.

GMJ: There are many CL techniques, and each has multiple variations that teachers and students can create, either intentionally or accidentally. One simple one is called *Circle of Writers*. One way to do Circle of Writers in pairs is for students to take turns writing answers to questions. One student suggests an answer to the first question. Their partner gives feedback and then writes down the answer. They rotate roles for the subsequent questions, and when all the questions have been tried, the teacher asks each student to talk about their partner's answers.

HK: When learners work together, don't they mislead each other?

GMJ: Yes, learners do mislead each other, and I've been known to mislead students too. We should expect student-student interaction to reflect imperfect understandings. After all, language is complicated. I once heard Michael Halliday say that language is more complicated than nuclear physics. We are all learning and making mistakes, and learning is often a non-linear process with many ups and downs. The good thing about CL is that working cooperatively leads students to produce more output. This output reflects their current level of understanding and competence and allows peers and teachers to help.

HK: Some teachers suspect the language students produce during peer interaction is too primitive and does not show signs of development. They think that is one of the shortcomings of communi-

cative language learning. What do you think of this observation?

GMJ: The comprehensible input students take in greatly affects the output they produce for their peers. CL works very well with input-rich activities, such as extensive reading (Jacobs & Gallo, 2002) and reading aloud by teachers (Jacobs & Hannah, 2004). Also, please have a look at an ESL textbook series such as *Interchange* (Richards, Hull, & Proctor, 2004) to see how well-crafted materials can provide sufficient scaffolding so that even low proficiency students can produce appropriate output.

HK: Don't learners go off topic?

GMJ: You're right, learners do talk about topics other than those assigned. I do too. It makes life more interesting. Of course, I hope that students will return to the topic before too long. Some ways to encourage students to remain on task are:

- provide a choice of topics and ways of working on them
- support positive interdependence
- don't make tasks too hard

These three points may also be useful in encouraging students to use more L2.

HK: Don't teachers lose control?

GMJ: Isn't losing control part of what student-centered learning is all about? We're hoping that students will take more responsibility for their learning as they become life-long learners. When we use CL, we guide students to become more independent. However, teachers are still there to provide scaffolding even as students also scaffold for each other. Yes, we need to develop new skills to facilitate student-student interaction. We need to avoid jumping in the second we see groups going astray. Instead, we should let them try to solve their own problems, and when we do intervene, we should often do so less directly, using praise, paraphrasing, questions and hints, and avoid corrections and commands.

HK: Is CL meant only for groups of 2-4 students?

GMJ: I'm glad you asked. The spirit of CL, especially the principle of positive interdependence, extends far beyond a classroom group. For example, if your group finishes before mine, both groups could benefit if your group helps mine. Furthermore, if you think about it, there are so many examples in

the world where one person's, one group's, one country's, one species' outcomes are linked to those of others, where we sink or swim together. CL in the classroom can help students and teachers see the positive interdependence in their lives and act on it, first in the classroom and then elsewhere.

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