

*Original Article*

# Cooperative Learning in the EFL Reading Classroom in Tertiary Education: A Way to Improve the Classroom Climate through the Communicative Use of a Questionnaire

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This study examined the effectiveness of cooperative learning while participating in a communicative Reading class. Twenty-five students majoring in English Communication at a junior college participated in this study. The participants completed a short questionnaire at the end of each lesson which sought insight into their satisfaction with cooperative learning and their reflective comments about the lesson. While it is unclear whether cooperative learning has improved their proficiency and comprehension of English, the findings from the questionnaire suggest that cooperative learning heightened the participants' motivation and led to a more enjoyable and profitable learning experience.

**Key Words:** Cooperative Learning, Reading, Pair/group work, Motivation, Questionnaire

## Introduction

It was ten years ago that I started my career as an English teacher in tertiary education and utilized a teaching method similar to cooperative learning in my classes. I was assigned to teach comprehensive English to a small number of classes consisting of 50 to 60 students per class. In such large-scale classes, it was almost impossible for the teacher to have face-to-face interaction with each student. I wished to involve all the students in participatory learning in the classroom as DelliCarpini (2009)<sup>1</sup> suggests that cooperative learning is an alternative to traditional, competitive classrooms (p. 43). The new approach turned out to be favorably received by the students in the classroom, supported by written comments in SETs (Students' Evaluation of Teaching surveys, SETs, hereafter) at the end of the semester. This gave me further support to continue in this

new teaching method. Since then I have utilized cooperative learning in every communicative class.

## Cooperative Learning in language learning

Cooperative learning is defined by Johnson and Johnson (1999)<sup>2</sup> as 'the instructional use of small groups in which students work together to maximize their own and each other's learning' (p. 73). In the foreign language learning field, cooperative learning is accounted as one of the three communicative strands (Oxford, 1997)<sup>3</sup>, alongside collaborative learning and interaction, which can help us to better comprehend language learning and teaching. She states that many language classrooms have been intentionally communicative and adapting group works in any style (p. 445).

Numerous studies empirically show positive effects of cooperative learning on foreign and second language acquisition: Storch (1999)<sup>4</sup>; 2007<sup>5</sup>) on grammar-focused tasks; Baleghizadeh (2010)<sup>6</sup> on word-building tasks; Agawa (2012)<sup>7</sup> on story-telling tasks; and Cullen, Kullman, and Wild (2013)<sup>8</sup> on online-writing projects.

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Brufee (1995)<sup>9)</sup> suggests that two or more students working together may learn more than individual students working alone in tertiary education (p. 12).

Ning (2011)<sup>10)</sup> argues that many university graduates in China still lack ability in communicating in English despite over ten years' studying English. She suggests that cooperative learning is likely to facilitate the developments of students' communicative competence. She also suggests that cooperative learning can be adapted in language learning contexts similar to Chinese tertiary learners (p. 68).

### Rationale

In 2013, I was assigned to teach Reading in the Department of English Communication at Chugoku Junior College (CJC, hereafter) and conducted an informal survey inquiring whether or not the students like reading in Japanese on the first day of the class. Expectedly, as the trend away from reading is becoming widespread, nearly the half of the respondents answered that they were not fond of reading. What was surprising, however, was that one respondent claimed to have never read a book for pleasure and another hated reading itself. It became apparent that they do not even read in their native language, much less in a foreign language.

Teaching Reading reminded me of unsatisfactory memories during my university days where students spend class time only translating difficult English sentences into appropriate Japanese (see Matsuura, Chiba, & Hildebrandt, 2001)<sup>11)</sup>. The material used in the class, in addition, was English literature, in which I had little interest. During class, the precise translation was the sole requirement and was carried out alone without any cooperation with peers. The students often faced humiliation through this negative experience, which led me to adopt a new approach to Reading, using cooperative learning while teaching.

After the SETs evaluation, I concluded that the material selection was one of the attributions to better evaluation. In the class, a scientific, non-fiction text was used which aroused the students' interest and was written in learner-friendly, appropriate language. This new style of Reading was favorably recognized particularly by the students in the lower level of proficiency in English. In contrast, SETs results in the higher proficiency class showed learners were not

always comfortable with the approach.

By introducing cooperative learning into Reading classes in the Department of English Communication at CJC, I hoped the students would, after enjoying reading, select a book themselves to read written in English. This study also sought to explore how students' perception of reading changed through cooperative learning of reading and how their cooperation has changed while undertaking problem-solving tasks cooperatively.

### The Study

#### 1. Participants

The participants of this study were 25 female first year students in the English Department of CJC, taking 'Reading A' as one of the graduation requirements. The class met twice a week for a single semester of 15 weeks. Initially there were 26 students, but one dropped out so the data used in this study is only from the 25 remaining students, so the total number of the lessons in this study is 22.

The text books utilized in the class were Oxford Bookworms Library *Factfiles: Seasons and Celebrations Stage 2* (Maguire, 2008)<sup>12)</sup> and Oxford Bookworms Library *Factfiles: The USA Stage 3* (Baxter, 2008)<sup>13)</sup>, which are non-fiction graded reading texts.

#### 2. Procedure

The 25 students were asked to fill in a questionnaire at the end of each class of the 22 lessons. The same questionnaire was utilized every lesson, consisting of six, 5-point Likert scaled questions and also free space for additional comments on each lesson (Appendix 1). The students were asked to complete the questionnaire anonymously. It was clearly stated on the questionnaire that the results would only be used for research purposes and would not impact in any way on the participants' final grades.

Three options are available for grouping: by the teachers, students themselves, or on a random basis (Ning, 2011)<sup>9)</sup> (p. 64). The random grouping was selected because the author expected that they would indulge in off-task "chatting" if close friends sat next to each other. The pairs/groups were frequently monitored not to engage in disruptive off-task behavior as recommended by Baleghizadeh (2010)<sup>6)</sup> as one of the tips to make pair work effective (pp. 406-407).

This pairing/grouping of the students was conducted once every seven or eight lessons, on a monthly basis. There were 12 pairs and one group of three students.

The class proceeded according to the following procedure:

- 1) The students read the text silently.
- 2) They listened to the audio reading on CD (read by a native speaker) for the phonetic check such as pronunciation.
- 3) They read aloud the text with their partners or group mates. The method of reading aloud was decided by each pair or group; per sentence, per paragraph, or in other way.
- 4) They read the text intensively. Single pair or group was assigned to present their intensive reading for one paragraph of the text. The roles in the presentation were also decided on their agreement. "Designated roles can vary from group to group depending on the nature of the task assigned", is one of the guidelines presented by Willis (2007)<sup>14)</sup> (pp. 7-8).
- 5) They used the comprehension check provided

at the back of the textbook together with their partner or group members.

- 6) In the last five minutes of each lesson, the students filled in the short questionnaire.

## Findings

The questionnaire data were analyzed using SPSS. For the purpose of analysis, the responses to "5" (Most Positive) and "4" (Positive) were added together to create an overall score of agreement with the item, and the sum of responses to "2" (negative) and "1" (Most Negative) were similarly calculated to gain a measure of disagreement.

Table 1 shows the findings of the total 22 lessons' data.

Overall, the mean score was constantly high and the deviation is small due to the small number of the participants. Although it is difficult to say whether the findings were significant, it is possible to suggest that the learners' attitude towards reading and cooperative learning has positively changed

Table 1 The results of the questionnaires

n = 22~25

	1. Lesson preparation		2. Lesson material		3. Grammar explanation		4. Co-operation		5. Clarity		6. Overall satisfaction	
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
1st lesson	3.62	1.203	3.81	0.680	4.14	0.793	4.67	0.966	3.86	0.793	4.33	0.658
2nd lesson	3.70	1.146	3.83	0.717	4.26	0.619	4.57	0.945	4.13	0.815	4.35	0.775
3rd lesson	3.71	1.197	4.29	0.751	4.29	0.751	4.42	1.060	4.25	0.794	4.42	0.717
4th lesson	4.00	0.885	3.87	0.900	4.21	0.932	4.42	0.776	4.13	0.850	4.21	0.884
5th lesson	4.13	0.992	4.00	0.885	4.21	0.884	4.71	0.624	4.42	0.717	4.25	0.676
6th lesson	4.24	0.831	4.32	0.802	4.52	0.714	4.72	0.542	4.60	0.577	4.44	0.651
7th lesson	4.00	1.382	4.30	0.822	4.65	0.647	4.70	0.559	4.57	0.590	4.57	0.590
8th lesson	4.46	0.721	4.54	0.588	4.67	0.565	4.71	0.550	4.50	0.590	4.62	0.576
9th lesson	3.68	1.211	3.95	1.133	4.36	0.953	4.68	0.568	4.18	1.006	4.27	1.077
10th lesson	3.92	1.038	4.04	0.978	4.44	0.712	4.72	0.542	4.32	0.627	4.48	0.653
11th lesson	4.38	0.711	4.29	0.908	4.54	0.658	4.71	0.550	4.71	0.550	4.63	0.576
12th lesson	4.25	0.847	4.29	0.955	4.58	0.654	4.75	0.532	4.50	0.590	4.50	0.590
13th lesson	4.00	1.285	4.08	0.974	4.33	0.963	4.62	0.576	4.42	0.776	4.13	1.076
14th lesson	4.48	0.770	4.40	0.707	4.72	0.542	4.80	0.500	4.60	0.577	4.56	0.651
15th lesson	4.61	0.656	4.52	0.730	4.61	0.583	4.70	0.635	4.65	0.573	4.61	0.583
16th lesson	4.33	0.868	4.50	0.659	4.67	0.565	4.67	0.565	4.63	0.576	4.67	0.565
17th lesson	4.21	1.103	4.17	1.129	4.50	0.722	4.71	0.550	4.58	0.654	4.63	0.647
18th lesson	4.79	0.509	4.79	0.509	4.79	0.509	4.75	0.532	4.67	0.565	4.75	0.532
19th lesson	4.64	0.569	4.60	0.577	4.68	0.557	4.64	0.569	4.64	0.569	4.56	0.768
20th lesson	4.68	0.557	4.68	0.557	4.64	0.638	4.68	0.557	4.64	0.638	4.64	0.638
21st lesson	4.75	0.532	4.67	0.637	4.71	0.624	4.67	0.565	4.71	0.624	4.67	0.637
22nd lesson	4.54	0.932	4.71	0.624	4.71	0.624	4.63	0.647	4.67	0.637	4.63	0.647

Note: 5=Most positive, 4=Positive, 3=Neutral, 2=Negative, 1=Most negative

throughout the semester.

In Question 1, which asked whether the students prepared for the lesson, and Question 2 which asked about the lesson material, the mean score was comparatively lower in the first few lessons. One reason is suggested by student comments in the free space provided. Students suggested that:

- It is much appreciated if a fill-in-the-blank handout of translation is provided instead of the complete translation.
- I can't keep up the class because the complete translation is required and I am not able to write all the correct translation in time.

Before receiving the above remarks, the author had employed a traditional approach in the classroom, word-for-word translation. Realizing it was too much hard work for the students, a fill-in-the-blank translation was presented. It became apparent that the students had been struggling with the translation task in the classroom during the eight lessons prior to the survey. It was discovered that the questionnaire functioned as a communication tool between the teacher and the students.

The blanks to be filled were grammar structures targeted in each unit of the textbook as well as key words and phrases in the text. The students were provided with a handout in advance to fill blanks and they were able to prepare for the next lesson.

Soon after the fill-in-the-blank exercise was introduced to the class, twelve students, nearly half of those left comments, including:

- This approach is much more student- friendly and preferable.

It was also revealed that the handout had facilitated the learners' preparation for the class and had encouraged their reading motivation. One of the students stated:

- I can easily prepare for the next lesson with the handout, so I have become eager to do so.

The statistical findings seem to support this new approach. Subsequently, after the fill-in-blank handout was prepared, the mean scores of Question 1 and 2 were higher. It may be that the students were more motivated to prepare for the lesson as a perceived hindrance which may have discouraged their incentive to study had been removed and they found the lesson and the material interesting. As Silva (2008)<sup>15</sup> suggests, interest is a source of intrinsic

motivation for learning; students task persistence is longer, they spend more time, read more deeply, remember better, and receive better grades (p. 58).

The mean score of Question 5 which inquired whether unclear matters became clearer was also higher after the new approach was introduced.

The mean score of Question 4, which asked about cooperation with the partner, is high from the first lesson and throughout with very little variation. The participants in the survey are all majoring in English Communication, so they have been taking other subjects which involved pair/group work (such as Oral English) besides Reading.

Among the free comments received, those related to the class content include the following:

- In the next lesson the seating will be changed. I'm going to miss my current partner because she was always so helpful. [4th lesson]
- My partner this time is an earnest student, so her attitude stimulates my learning. [5th lesson]
- I made the lesson well today. [All lessons through 6th-18th]
- I didn't prepare the class enough today, but I'll definitely prepare for the next lesson. [7th lesson]
- I was fully prepared for the lesson today, so I could enjoy the class. [8th lesson]
- My partner never prepares for the lesson. That really bothers me. I'm always to be responsible for it. I do hope the seating is changed soon. [12th lesson]
- I'll make some efforts to catch up the class with my new partner. [13th lesson]
- I always looked forward to who my next partner would be because my partner was always helpful. [22nd lesson]

Other comments noted that (one) other student(s) were noisy, they wanted more time for taking notes, and remarked that time passed quickly.

## Discussion

Both the quantitative and qualitative data in this study suggest that cooperative learning in reading was effective, yet the shortcomings are recognizable. Uncooperative or/and unmotivated students might cause their peers to feel disadvantaged as shown in

the 12th lesson's comment, leading to a downward spiral of increasingly demotivated students. However, the reverse effect might also occur if students felt like the students in the fifth class who commented earlier, similar to findings in Johnson and Johnson (1999)<sup>2)</sup> who stated that:

"Cooperative learning ensures that all students are meaningfully and actively involved in learning. ... Cooperative learning also ensures that students are achieving up to their potential and are experiencing psychological success, so they are motivated to continue to invest energy and effort in learning (p. 72)."

Educators and researchers alike have to remember that cooperative learning might not suit all students' learning styles and so may counterproductive. Also one member of a pair or group might be overloaded due to the other's neglectful behavior. However, students possibly disguise their dissatisfaction with their partner because they do not want to be seen as a disobedient student to the teacher. Frustration might lead those students to lose their motivation to productively participate in the class. The teacher, therefore, needs to periodically supervise pair/group work in the classroom. If necessary, the teacher should pedagogically intervene in the malfunctioning pairs/groups as a facilitator in a similar fashion as in Agawa's (2012)<sup>6)</sup> and Kayi-Aydar's (2013)<sup>16)</sup> studies, where the teachers encouraged participation in each pair/group and gave each learner opportunities to participate. It seems that occasional pairing/grouping is one option of the solutions to such a situation as shown in the 12th lesson's comment.

It is significant that the questionnaire utilized in this study functions as a communication tool between the teacher and the students. The students seem to appreciate the opportunity to raise their voices and to get their opinions reflected on by the teacher to improve classroom learning opportunities. On one occasion when I forgot to bring the questionnaire to the classroom once, some students wished me to go back and get it. In casual conversation with me outside from the class, some students said that responding to the questionnaire encouraged them to reflect on what they had done and learned in the lesson.

## Conclusion

While the qualitative data suggest the efficacy of a questionnaire filled out each lesson, the quantitative results in this study are not generalizable to a wider population due to the small number of participants. However, results demonstrate the importance of Action Research in a single classroom learning situation as an aid to lesson improvement and reflection. Further research similar to this study may be useful with a larger sample. Hopefully, such studies would lead to quantitative data with higher validity.

The proficiency of English and reading comprehension of the participants were not measured before and after cooperative learning was implemented in this study. While findings revealed that cooperative learning facilitates student learning and heightens their motivation to learn to the certain degree in the reading classroom, it is still unknown whether their proficiency of English and reading comprehension improves or not. In a subsequent study, therefore, I would like to explore the change in the proficiency and comprehension of the participants through a semester with pre-and post-tests.

In addition, an exploration into the learners' individual accountability and interdependence among themselves would encourage further qualitative analysis.

To conclude, the author wishes that the participants in this study will continue to read English books even after the Reading class is over. Reading is a powerful language learning tool as noted by Krashen (1993)<sup>17)</sup>:

"Reading is a powerful means of developing literacy, of developing reading comprehension ability, writing style, vocabulary, grammar, and spelling (p. 22)."

I hope that the findings of this study will shed light on the usefulness of cooperative learning in tertiary education, to encourage and increase learners' active participation in the communicative classroom.

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**Appendix 1**

Date: \_\_\_/\_\_\_/\_\_\_

**Student Survey about English Reading Class**

This survey is to find out how you honestly tackle with and feel about this Reading class. Your answers are confidential and will only be used as research findings for academic purposes and will not impact in any way on your final grades.

Directions: Please state your degree of agreement or disagreement with the following questions.

1. How much did you prepare for the lesson?  

Very much	5	4	3	2	1	Not at all
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2. Did you find the material you learned today interesting?  

Very interesting	5	4	3	2	1	very boring
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3. Was the grammar explanation comprehensible?  

Very comprehensible	5	4	3	2	1	very incomprehensible
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4. Did you cooperate with your partner well?  

Very well	5	4	3	2	1	Not at all
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5. Did the incomprehensible items in your preparation become clear?  

Very clear	5	4	3	2	1	Still unclear
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6. Overall, are you satisfied with today's lesson content?  

Very satisfied	5	4	3	2	1	very unsatisfied
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Any additional comments about the Reading class:

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