

Encouraging Second Language Use in Cooperative Learning Groups

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Abstract

This article presents, explains and organizes ideas for promoting students' use of their second language (this term includes foreign language) when they work together in cooperative learning groups. The first part of the article reviews arguments as to whether students of second languages should be encouraged to use their second language with classmates when doing group activities. These arguments are discussed with reference to Second Language Acquisition (SLA) theory. Practical issues are also explored. Next, the majority of the article presents ideas on how to promote second language use during peer interaction. Twenty-nine of these ideas are explained. The ideas are organized into five categories: a role for the L1; understanding the issue; creating a conducive climate; providing language support; and the task. It is recommended that teachers use ideas from the literature on cooperative learning when they ask students to interact.

Keywords: Second Language learning, Foreign Language Learning, Cooperative Learning, peer interaction, teacher support.

Introduction

This article begins by discussing whether students of second and foreign languages (hereafter, “second language” will be used to refer to both foreign and second languages) should be encouraged to use their second language (L2) with classmates when doing group activities. Reasons for both L2 and L1 (first language) use are discussed with reference to Second Language Acquisition (SLA) theory. Practical issues are also explored. Thereafter, the bulk of the article contains ideas about how to encourage students to use their L2 for peer interaction. Twenty-nine such ideas are explained. These are divided into five sections: a role for the L1; understanding the issue; creating a conducive climate; providing language support; and the task.

Why Encourage L2 Use

Theory and research suggest that L2 students can learn more effectively if they spend some of their class time, as well as some of their time outside of class, using the L2 with classmates. Several rationales have been offered for encouraging students to use the L2 with each other. The next paragraphs review these rationales.

A first reason for promoting student-student interaction in the L2 is that it may lead to students receiving more comprehensible input (speech or writing that is understandable to learners) (Krashen, 2011), because fellow students’ L2 speech and writing may be easier to understand. On a related point, classmates often build friendships or already are friends and, thus, feel comfortable interacting with each other and are more likely to interact with each other in the L2 than with L2 speakers whom students do not know well. Such a friendly, low-risk, low anxiety environment may promote learning (Kimura, 2011).

Furthermore, when students interact with each other in their L2, they can use the target language (the language they are trying to learn) to help each other understand what each has said

or written, thereby increasing the percentage of input that is comprehensible (Storch, 2002). For example, students can ask each other to repeat, rephrase, or explain. This negotiation for meaning promotes language acquisition (Mackey & Oliver, 1999).

Additionally, in groups, students have opportunities to produce more L2 output (speech or writing) of their own than they do in the normal teacher-fronted classroom in which the teacher calls on one student at a time (Swain, 1999). Well-conceived group learning tasks require meaningful output, can develop fluency, and encourage students to notice key features of the target language (Schmidt, 2001).

Another rationale for L2 use among students is that group mates can help each other learn the L2 by providing peer tutoring and other types of support as they work together to achieve common goals in language learning (Lantolf & Poehner, 2008). This support may be more likely when students work in groups that are heterogeneous as to L2 proficiency (Jacobs & Goh, 2007).

Cooperative Learning

One way for students to interact in their L2 involves them in sometimes studying in cooperative learning (also known as collaborative learning) groups, usually of 2-4 members. Cooperative learning provides one of many ways to move education away from a teacher centered mode and toward a student centered mode in which students are more overtly active, as they discuss, debate, plan, generate, and evaluate. Teachers still have a pivotal role in lessons that include cooperative learning, and teachers still lecture and demonstrate. However, teachers now spend more time as facilitators (Johnson & Johnson, n.d.).

Cooperative learning is an area in general education that provides teachers of all subjects, including L2, with insights into how to successfully facilitate student-student collaboration (Jacobs & Kimura, 2013; Johnson & Johnson, 1999; Slavin, 1995). These insights deal with such

matters as how to encourage all group members to participate and learn (individual accountability) and how to build a feeling of mutual concern and support within the groups (positive interdependence). Some educators, but not the authors of this paper, differentiate between cooperative learning and collaborative learning, with the latter giving students more control over how they work together and encouraging them to create group products that go beyond the sum of the parts.

A Key Difficulty with Cooperative Learning in L2 Instruction

However, just asking students to work together will not always lead to successful interaction among students. One problem that often arises when L2 students work in groups is that students spend most of the time communicating in their native language, not in the L2. This article addresses the issue of how teachers can encourage students to use their L2 with their classmates. The use of L2 in groups is relatively easy to promote in classes which consist of students with a variety of L1s. By asking students to form groups with classmates who speak different L1s, teachers create a situation in which the L2 becomes the lingua franca (common language) of the group, and students have little alternative but to use it if they wish to communicate with groupmates. Similarly, students can create such situations for themselves outside the classroom by putting themselves in situations in which they interact with people with whom students share only the target language.

However, in many L2 classes, it is not possible to create such mixed-L1 groups for cooperative learning. Below are 29 suggestions, divided into five sections, for facilitating L2 use when students are working in cooperative learning groups. The five sections are: (A) a role for the L1; (B) understanding the issue; (C) creating a conducive climate; (D) providing language support; and (E) the task.

Section A: A Role for the L1? Perhaps there is a valid role for the L1 when students work together in groups (Deller & Rinvoluceri, 2002). If so, instead of attempting to completely ban the L1, maybe the best course lies in students and teachers finding what they agree is the proper balance between the L1 and L2. The proper balance depends on such factors as task difficulty, student level, socio-cultural issues, and the specific goals of a particular activity.

Beneficial Use. Some use of the L1 may be beneficial for a number of reasons. For example, some words are very difficult for students to explain to each other. Thus, it may be better to use an L1 translation (Folse, 2004; Nation, 2001).

Language and identity. We teachers should remember that we are helping students add a new language, not subtract their L1. We need to appreciate that language use is involved with identity (Norton, 2000).

L1 tickets. Each student can have L1 tickets for the day, semester, or whatever. They, then, decide together if they need to use the L1 and turn in a ticket each time the L1 is used. Students can discuss how many tickets they have used and why. This, and other suggestions below, can raise student awareness of the issue. Recognition can be given to those who use fewer tickets.

Talking tokens. Similarly, each student can have, for example, four Talking Tokens. Every time they speak, they give up one token, but when they speak in L2, they give up two tokens. When they have no tokens left, they cannot speak again until all their group members have used all their tokens.

Writing in L1. One corner of the classroom can be designated as the place students can go temporarily to speak the L1. Alternatively, if students want to use the L1, they can write, rather than speak.

Percentage of L2 use. Students can set a goal as to the percentage of L2 to use and then evaluate whether they reached their goal. This can be done every class.

Mixture between L1 and L2. Students can speak a mixture of L1 and L2 in the same sentence or speaking turn. Students use L2 when they know L2 words, but they use the L1 for words that they do not know in L2. Gradually, the percentage of L2 increases.

Section B: Understanding the Issue. These suggestions concern how teachers and students view the issue of the use of the L1 and L2 when they interact with peers.

Teacher's empathy. Students and teachers need to take a long-term view. Learning a new language is difficult. Students, who can express themselves very well in the L1, suddenly have the vocabulary of small children in their L2. Teachers should empathize with how their students might feel.

Students' habit of using L1. Students have the habit of using their L1 when they speak to one another during class as well as outside of class. Everyone needs to recognize that habits take a while to change.

The advantage of using L2. The class can discuss the issue of L2 use and the advantages and disadvantages of L1 and L2 use. Then, the class can attempt to reach a consensus on the use of L1 and L2 when they work together.

Section C: Creating a Conducive Climate. Students will be more likely to experiment with L2 if they feel it is okay to use L2 even if mistakes are made.

Building relations. CL offers many ideas for building relations among students so that they feel as though the group, and perhaps even the entire class, sinks or floats together (Gillies, 2007). Thus, by using CL, the class may create a supportive, low pressure environment in which risk taking, such as using the L2, is encouraged and in which it is okay to make mistakes.

Why working in groups. Similarly, some students use the L1 because they feel uncomfortable making mistakes in speaking in front of their peers. Students need to understand that there is a time for accuracy and a time to focus on fluency and meaning. Working in groups provides an excellent vehicle for focusing on fluency, as well as accuracy, depending on the situation.

Promote an L2 climate. Teachers can promote an L2 climate by using L2 when speaking to the whole class and when walking around the room and speaking to individuals or groups of students.

The value of praising. Rather than scolding students for L1 use, peers and teachers might praise them when they use L2.

Section D: Providing Language Support. It is true that “two heads are better than one,” but groups are not magic. Teachers need to prepare carefully to help groups succeed.

Who chooses the group members. It is usually better for the teachers, rather than students or random chance, to decide which students will work together (Jacobs & Goh, 2007). In this way, we can create groups that are heterogeneous as to L2 proficiency. In such groups, the more proficient students are right there to help their less proficient groupmates if they are not sure how to say or write something in the L2.

Vocabulary for instructions. Students need the vocabulary to understand L2 instructions for group tasks and communicate with groupmates. By helping them learn this vocabulary in their L2, we build language proficiency at the same time that we help groups function well. Also, students may benefit from dictionaries and other references tools.

Demonstrations. Another means of helping students understand how to do a group task using L2 is for the teachers and/or a group of students to demonstrate for the whole class. Such

demonstrations provide students with a model to follow, and these models can be written as well as oral. Students can even imitate part of the model.

Strategies for asking. We can help students learn strategies for asking when they do not understand their instructional materials or what groupmates have said or written, e.g., asking for repetition, examples and definitions, and strategies for explaining when a groupmate does not understand, such as giving examples and paraphrasing. These strategies make it less likely that students will switch to the L1 when L2 communication breaks down in their group.

Language support. Teachers can provide more language support before asking students to interact in their groups. Examples of support include model dialogues, vocabulary building tasks, and written versions of texts that students are listening to. This support can be in the materials students use or in the teaching that we do before and during the CL tasks.

Teacher's assistance. Teachers should circulate among groups to provide assistance and to better understand students' strengths and weaknesses.

Section E. The Task. Probably the most frequent reason why cooperative learning activities fail is that students lack the L2 and other skills necessary for doing the task that their groups are attempting. Thus, we need to pay careful attention to this area.

Start easy. When we begin using CL, the tasks should be a little bit too easy or even very easy so that students can become comfortable and confident in using CL.

Write-pair-switch. CL techniques that give students time to work alone – writing, thinking, or drawing - allow students to prepare what they will say in L2. An example of such a technique is Write-Pair-Switch (Jacobs& Kimura, 2013). In this CL technique, students work in groups of four divided into pairs. In the Write step, students work alone to write what they will say. In the Pair step, students tell their ideas to a partner. Then, in the Switch step, students

switch partners within their foursome and share with their new partner what their first partner said. The Write step allows students to prepare themselves to interact with groupmates.

Writing-in-pairs. If students write instead of speak, they may be more likely to use L2, because of the extra time that writing can afford. Also, it is easier for the teacher to help with L2 use when students write because there is a record of their writing. In contrast, students' speaking disappears into the air. To encourage more fluent writing, we may sometimes want to de-emphasize spelling, punctuation, neatness, etc. An example of a simple CL writing technique is Circle of Writers (Jacobs & Kimura, 2013). This is done in pairs. One student writes a word, sentence, etc. and then passes the paper to their partner who does the same. Partners continue passing the paper among their group of 2-4 members.

The main purpose of CL. Students need to understand that most often, the key point of the task they are doing in the CL group is not to finish the task but to improve their L2 proficiency. Thus, using the L1 as a shortcut to completing the task actually defeats the main purpose of the task.

Discussion and helping others. The use of competition between groups may encourage L1 use because students may use the L1 to finish faster and to do the short-term task better. Students need to see how each activity fits their long-term goal of L2 proficiency. Furthermore, they should understand that the group that finishes last may be the group that did the task the best, because they took time to help each other and discuss with each other. A big part of the magic of CL lies in such discussion (Gillies, 2007).

Different L1 in the group. In monolingual groups, students can imagine that their partner doesn't speak the same L1 that they do. As a result, they need to speak to them in L2. Students might even take on different names to promote this temporary identity.

Various roles. Sometimes, in group activities, each student has a designated role, such as Checker (who checks to see that all group members understand). Another role can be that of Language Monitor or L2 Captain whose role is to encourage appropriate L2 use (not to discourage L1 use).

Talking to group mates is more preferable. In many CL techniques, students first talk with groupmates, and then the teacher calls on one group member to share with the class. In their groups, students have opportunities to try out and modify the language they will use before speaking to the whole class or to another group. All group members can rehearse what they will say if the teacher calls them or they speak to another group. In this manner, students can help each other decide how to express their ideas in L2.

Students can take part in multiple abilities tasks (Cohen 1994), such as tasks that involve drawing, music, physical movements, and classification skills, in addition to language. Such tasks give lower proficiency group members who are stronger in one of these non-language areas opportunities to give help. In contrast, if our tasks focus solely on language, less proficient students are almost always in the position of receiving help. This inequality may lead to status differences, lack of helping behaviors within groups, and lack of opportunities for less proficient students to speak in the L2.

Conclusion

To promote L2 learning and to help students become comfortable communicating in L2, classroom use of the L2 should be understood, encouraged, promoted, and praised. This article has presented 29 ideas for doing that. Of course, not all of these ideas will be appropriate to every context, and many other ways exist for facilitating L2 use. Furthermore, the post-modernists advise us that when trying to understand any situation, we must take into account our

own and our students' backgrounds and perspectives, as well as the changing social forces which shape them. Postmodernist approaches shed light on the complexity of teacher-student relationships and the fluidity of our teaching/learning environment as a whole (Choi, 2006; Gee, 1996; McKay & Wong, 1996).

In conclusion, this article has situated L2 peer interaction in the context of cooperative learning. Cooperative learning is one of the most researched methods in education. This research suggests that appropriately planned group activities not only assist learning but that they also facilitate gains in affective variables, such as self-esteem and interethnic relations (Johnson, Johnson & Stanne 2001, Slavin 1995).

As mentioned earlier, an essential concept in cooperative learning is positive interdependence, the feeling among group members that what helps one helps all and that anything to the detriment of one member is detrimental to all members. Positive interdependence applies not only to the members of a group of 2-4 members in a classroom, it applies also to relations between people in any context and even to relations among species. Similarly, L2 education strives to bring people closer together and to facilitate recognition of our common interests. Therefore, in addition to the learning benefits that cooperative learning may bring to L2 education, e.g., how it can facilitate L2 use, cooperative learning also merits use for the affective benefits it offers.

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