

UDC 371.31:802.0

English teaching methods

TEACHING ENGLISH THROUGH COLLABORATIVE WORK

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Key words: *collaborative learning, participants, working independently, individual responsibility, personal relationship, stimulate, teamwork, assignment, authentic, thought-provoking.*

Ключевые слова: *совместное изучение, участники, работа самостоятельно, индивидуальная ответственность, личное отношение, стимулировать, коллективная работа, задание, подлинный, развивающее мышление.*

*И.Мирзоян**Обучение английскому языку методом совместной работы*

В статье рассматривается преподавание английского языка по технологии совместной работы. Сотрудничество налаживается для того, чтобы ученик приобрел знания и способы деятельности, опыт общения и социальной активности. Задача учителя в процессе сотрудничества создать реальную ситуацию общения, которая требует от участников проявления познавательной активности внутри коллектива. Обучение в сотрудничестве обеспечивает не только успешное освоение учебного материала, но и способствует интеллектуальному развитию учащихся, их активности и самостоятельности в достижении поставленной цели.

В результате процесс обучения становится более интересным, целенаправленным и эффективным.

*Իրզոյան**Անգլերենի դասավանդումը համագործակցային մեթոդով*

Collaboration is organized so as to make the pupil acquire knowledge, means of activities, communication experience and social activity. The aim of a teacher is to create a real situation of communication which will demand from participants to show their cognitive activity among group-members during the collaborative process of teaching. Collaborative teaching provides not only successful understanding of the academic material, but it also promotes intellectual development of pupils, their activity and achievement of their aims independently.

As a result the process of teaching becomes more interesting, purposeful and effective.

For the past three decades, educators have recognized the value of learning collaboratively. Educators widely recognize that students do not learn well when they are isolated “receivers” of knowledge. Indeed, students must overcome isolation in order to write and to speak.

Collaborative learning exercises-such as peer review workshops, collaborative research assignments, group presentations, collaborative papers, discussion groups, - are important components of our classrooms because they encourage active learning, giving students the opportunity to become more deeply engaged with each other.

The purpose of the article is to highlight the significance of cooperative and collaborative work in general and suggest practical activities that serve as stepping stones to promote collaboration and cooperation in teaching English.

Researchers such as Dillenbourg, Roschelle and Teasley agree that it is important to make a distinction between cooperation and collaboration. While cooperative learning can be defined as “working together to accomplish shared goals”, collaborative learning is a method that implies working in a group of a two or more to achieve a common goal, while respecting each individual’s contribution to the whole. Roschelle and Teasley describe cooperative work as a task that is accomplished by dividing it among participants, where

“each person is responsible for a portion of the problem solving” and they see collaborative work as “the mutual engagement of participants in a coordinated effort to solve the problem together”.¹

The key difference between these approaches to group work is that cooperation is more focused on working together to create an end product, while successful collaboration requires participants to share in the process of knowledge creation. In other words, cooperation can be achieved if all participants do their assigned parts separately and bring their results to the table; collaboration, in contrast, implies direct interaction among individuals to produce a product and involves negotiations, discussions, and accommodating others’ perspectives.

According to Nelson, cooperation is “a protocol that allows you not to get in each other’s way” as you work. He uses the example of an assembly line and reaches the conclusion that “a cooperative enterprise could in some way be done, as long as you had enough time or other resources, by a single person”.²

Numerous studies show that collaborative learning, as compared to working independently, results in deeper information processing and more meaningful psychological connections among the participants.

The goal of collaboration is to create new insight during discussions and to move students closer to an understanding of alternative perspectives. While working together, students build new understanding by challenging others’ ideas and defending their own. When successful, this creates product that is different from what any individual could produce alone.

Kaye believes that the single most important criterion for collaboration is the synthesis of information that is, creating a new product through the combination of different perspectives, talents, ideas, which is quite different from what each of the participants could have created on his or her own. An indispensable element to collaboration is that all those involved in a collaborative task contribute more or less equally.³

Important questions to assess if a classroom task is truly collaborative include:

- a. Are the students negotiating and accommodating one another’s perspectives?
- b. Is everybody contributing equally?
- c. Have different perspectives been included in the final product?

As beneficial as these strengths seem, collaboration is not always easy to achieve. Some authors point out that dividing students into groups and asking them to work collaboratively will not guarantee that they will really do so. This is not surprising, as collaboration places more structural interpersonal, and cognitive demands on individuals than more passive cooperative activities do.⁴ Collaboration often does not come naturally to our students especially in cultures that encourage individual responsibility and accountability. Think about it- we grade our students based on their individual effort and results, so when we ask learners to work in group, it may contradict the structure they are used to and become a major challenge, both emotionally and cognitively.

It isn’t always easy to use the method of collaboration: students come to our classes with their own backgrounds, personal relationships all of which affect the way learners interact.

The good news is that teachers do play an important role in shaping students’ experiences. That is why it is necessary to include more collaborative tasks in our regular teaching and work towards increasing students’ awareness of the numerous benefits of collaboration. However, obstacles to collaboration can be overcome by being consistent cultivating a positive environment.

The following suggestions will help establish consistency in collaborative group work:

1. during a pre-collaboration period, make sure students are motivated to participate;
2. everybody must participate and all ideas should be accommodated;
3. we needn’t get discouraged when collaborative task results in some emotional responses from students and the teacher must keep creating opportunities for learning to work collaboratively.

We should consciously raise students’ awareness of the advantages they receive while sharing resources and expertise. The result will be students who are more accepting of different opinions and increased tolerance in the classroom.

Such kinds of activities can be used in the classroom to introduce students to collaborative work. They require different degrees of collaboration, and the point to prepare students at the beginning and intermediate

¹ Dillenbourg, P., Roshelle, J., and S. Teasley. 1996 The evolution of research on collaborative learning. p. 189-211.

² Nelson, R. 2008. Learning and working in the collaborative age: A new model for the work-place. Video of presentation at Apple Education Leadership Summit, San Francisco. www.edutopia.org/randy-nelson-school-to-career-video.

³ Kaye, A.R. 1992. Learning together apart. In Collaborative learning through computer conferencing, ed. A.Kaye Berlin. Springer-Verlag, p. 1-24

⁴ Kreijns, K. P. A. Kirschner, and W. Jochems. 2003. Identifying the pitfalls for social interaction in collaborative learning environments: A review of the research. *Computers in Human Behavior* 19, p. 334-335

levels for more complex group work and tasks that they will eventually encounter in their ESL classes. The difficulty levels of these activities can be adjusted up or down, depending on the language level of the class. The group sizes can also be adjusted for the size of the class and the particular activity.

According to Smith, K.A. the following activities can be used for an effective collaborative way of teaching.

Collaborative activity 1: Preparing and structured survey

A survey activity works well in terms of collaboration because of variety of people are in involved in asking and answering questions. The language objective is to practice relevant grammar constructions and functions that can be included in the questions and responses of the survey instrument.

Materials: survey questions, paper. **Time required:** 25-30 minutes

Step 1: The teacher or the students prepare different sets of survey questions beforehand, which can be purposefully designed to practice targeted grammatical structures: “Where did you use to live? What do you prefer to drink with your meals? Where are you going after school?” When constructing the survey question, students should avoid questions that can be answered with a simple “yes” or “no”. It also helps to require students to answer the survey question in complete sentences.

Step 2: Students form groups and each group uses a set of questions to interview members of their group. To increase the variety of responses, each group can ask different survey questions. Every student in each group must ask and answer a set of questions.

Step 3: Each group assigns a scribe who record all the answers to the group’s survey questions.

Step 4: Group members choose a representative to present their group’s survey responses to another group or to the whole class.

Collaborative activity 2: The secret of the Internet

In this activity students discuss important components of the Internet, such as Wiki-pedia and social networking websites. The activity is most appropriate and interesting for teenagers and adults who are familiar with the Internet. The language objectives are the technical vocabulary and language functions associated with the Internet and social networking.

Materials: Internet access is preferable but not required. **Time required:** 25-35 minutes

Step 1: As the whole class students take turns naming their favorite Internet site for homework, communications, entertainment, or social networking.

Step 2: Students form groups and brainstorm about the features of websites and procedures to access or join social networking or other websites. This generates a large amount of useful specialized English vocabulary. One student from each group documents the vocabulary generated by that group.

Step 3: Each group takes a turn presenting the results of their discussion to the whole class, and all the class members take turns giving their reactions and opinions about the feature and procedures of the Internet.

Step 4: The teacher tells students that “the rules of the Internet” have changed. Students can continue storing and accessing information on the Internet, but only their personal information will be available. Students vote for or against this idea and explain their choice.

They also discuss how this would change the Internet.

Step 5: The whole class continues to share their ideas about the nature of the Internet. If the class has Internet access, students can demonstrate different websites and novel features that they are familiar with.

This is another type of activities that can be followed while organizing collaborative work.

Collaborative activity 3. The Sacrifice

Aim:

- To help the students be aware that scientific inventions should only serve for the improvement of people’s lives and they should not cause harm.

- To help the students be aware that the individuals should be ready to sacrifice their achievements for the sake of humanity.

Objective:

The students will be able to identify that the story suggests that scientific inventions can be applied both for good and evil and the interests of peace might require sacrifice from particular person.

Message:

A young scientist finds a cure for cancer after working on a project for some years. The day he invents it he finds out that their sponsor wants to use it for evil purpose. He makes a crucial decision and burns all his papers for the sake of humanity. The story shows that people can sacrifice their fame for the safety of humanity in order that others do not suffer.

Vocabulary: Cancer, an invention, a cure, a disease, a research, to hire, to improve, to share, damage, to cause, to suffer, evil, to trust, regret,

Pre-reading questions:

Do you think you could make sacrifice for somebody? Why?

Why not?

Post-reading questions:

Why did Sargis burn his papers?

What decision would you make if you were Sargis?

Follow-up

Ask the students to find out about a real event from the life of their relatives, friends and famous people when they have made a sacrifice for something or somebody.

Materials: survey questions, paper. **Time required:** 30-45 minutes

Collaborative and cooperative teaching method can also be used while using films in the classroom. Depending on the teaching aims and objectives, the class might watch a complete film or only parts of it, as one or two key scenes can be sufficient to illustrate a linguistic or cultural point. The following pre-, while-, and post-viewing activities prepare students to discuss films or individual scenes in the classroom. Pre-viewing activities elicit what students already know about a topic and make the actual viewing of the film more meaningful. When discussing stereotypes as a previewing activity, students can describe how they view a person from a particular ethnic group or minority. After viewing a film, students can discuss the degree to which their stereotypes coincide with the ones shown in the movie. The possible origins of stereotypical notions in the mass media and advertising also offer an opportunity to analyze the source of bias. Bearing in mind the teaching aim and the students' language skills, it may be useful to provide learners with an introduction to the film or a particular scene before they actually watch it. "Movie trailers can be used for this purpose; students first watch the trailer and speculate about the film's details, such as the protagonists, plot, and setting. Provided there is a broadband connection, trailers of most recent films can be downloaded from the Internet. A similar activity is to display a film still, which is a photograph of a movie scene that can be found in a magazine or on the Internet and used as a prompt to make students speculate about the movie".¹

To focus attention on certain characteristics of spoken language, students listen to the sound without the picture and imagine what the scene is about. However, this activity can be challenging for students who are not accustomed to the features of authentic language, such as strong accents and dialects, unclear articulation, slang, colloquialisms, and idiomatic expressions. When the visual input is missing, the task becomes even more difficult. It is often helpful to pre-teach difficult vocabulary before students actually watch a film. For example, the teacher can hand out a list of words taken from a dialogue or describe a scene and have the students guess about the situation the vocabulary refers to.

"While-viewing activities provide an opportunity to deepen understanding of the film and conduct a comprehension check. One idea from Taylor is for the teacher to play a scene with the sound off and the English subtitles on (subtitles can be in the students' first language if the level demands). The teacher then replays the scene with both the subtitles and sound, and replays it a third time with the sound alone and no subtitles. This technique is especially suitable for dramatic scenes, or when dialect or slang is spoken, because it facilitates understanding and makes students feel more confident".² If the focus is on listening or understanding individual words and phrases, the teacher can prepare a handout with expressions, some of which are taken from the film with others added that sound similar. While they watch the scene, the students have to identify the vocabulary that is actually used. Students can observe highly visual cultural details like body language, rituals, or festivals when watching a scene without the sound. To increase sociocultural awareness of food, festivities, and the appearance of people and places, students write down the differences they recognize between their own culture and the one they view in a movie sequence or scene.

Post-viewing activities allow students to check their comprehension and use the new language they have learned. In the activity called "Fly on the Wall," students reconstruct a movie scene from memory, as if they are unseen witnesses. After writing down their accounts, they view the scene again to check their recall and have the opportunity to amend their rendition. To strengthen their descriptive abilities, students can analyze characters in a film and write descriptive portraits of the characters' appearance, education, profession, relationships, likes and dislikes, and other qualities.

¹ Stempleski, S and B. Tomalin. 2001 Film Oxford: Oxford University Press.

² Taylor, K 2005. Using DVD and video in your ESL class: Part two. <http://eltnotebook.blogspot.com/2007/01/>.

An effective way to stimulate students' empathy towards characters whose behavior may seem incomprehensible and even despicable is to ask the students to put themselves into the person's shoes and write a diary entry from the character's point of view. Each student then engages in a discussion with another student who is writing the diary of another character. During this role play each student defends his or her character, which gives students insight into unfamiliar points of view. The parent-child conflict in the film *Double Happiness* is thought-provoking and offers various points of view, so it fits well with this activity.

The intercultural learning assignment is task-based and combines language learning with various key skills, including using the Internet, writing a summary, developing presentation skills, and working as a team. When choosing a film for the project, the teacher has to make sure that the complexity of the topic and the film's rating are suitable for the students' ages. The required background knowledge for the analysis of the film, such as nonverbal or paraverbal communication and relevant cultural categories, should be introduced and discussed before the students watch the film.

To begin, students in groups of three are assigned to watch a film that deals with intercultural aspects and to complete an assignment. At the beginning of the project, it is recommended that team members agree on basic rules regarding their teamwork, responsibilities, communication, and deadlines. The teacher should be available as an adviser during the project. The teacher gives the students one set of questions regarding the film in general and another set to analyze the film from an intercultural point of view. Students watch the film and conduct research to answer these questions and produce a summary report that will eventually be presented in front of the whole class.

1. General questions for evaluating a film.

- What is the film about? Summarize the film.
- What genre is the film-for example, is it a drama, a historical drama, a comedy, a thriller, or a documentary?
 - What is the message of the film?
 - Whose point of view is shown in the film?
 - Who are the different characters portrayed in the film?
 - Is the film based on a book? Who is the writer?
 - Who is the director?
 - Who are the actors? Do they play their parts convincingly?
 - How was the film made? (For example, some directors do not use professional actors, and Ken Loach, a British filmmaker whose films include *Save the Last Dance* and *Bread and Roses*, aims for a particular view of realism and an authentic interplay between the actors so that some scenes in his films are not scripted).
- In your opinion, is the film structured in a way so that the audience can follow the plot easily? Does it manage to uphold suspense?
 - How would you describe the language used in the film and the actors' way of speaking?
 - How did you feel watching the film?
 - Were there any images or sounds you found particularly impressive?
 - Which scene(s) do you find most memorable?
 - What do you think of the ending of the film? If there were a sequel to the film, how would you like the story to continue?
 - How would you rate the film? For example, was it entertaining, funny, instructive, sad, trite, etc.?

2. Questions for evaluating the intercultural aspects of a film.

- What cultural aspects, values, attitudes, and behaviors of the respective cultures are shown?
- Do you think the conflict in the film could also occur in your community?
- What is the conflict about? How does the conflict evolve? Is it resolved?
- Could the conflict have been avoided or resolved differently?
- Does the film help you better understand the particular community?
- To which character(s) do you relate most? Why?
- Can you understand the motives of all the people involved, even if you don't sympathize with them?
- Are characters portrayed as stereotypes, or are they like real-life people?
- Were you aware of the problems shown in the film before you watched it?
- How has the film changed your attitude towards the problem and/or groups portrayed in the film?
- Who is the director? Is he or she part of the minority or community shown? Did he or she have any advisers? (Names are usually listed in production credits at the end of the film).

- How was the film received by the ethnic group or minority portrayed in the film?
- Could the film be set in your culture as well?
- Would you recommend the film to others to learn about the particular intercultural aspects or conflict?

Using their research and the two sets of questions, the students compose their drafts of the film summary and exchange their paper with another member of the group for peer editing.

After revising each other's summaries, the students take turns reading their work out loud to the group, and one member is put in charge of compiling a final draft that the group will present to the class. At the end of the composing process a short report on the students' experiences of organizing their teamwork can be included in the assignment; these experiences will be particularly interesting if the team members come from different cultural backgrounds.

Film is also a rich resource for the language learning classroom, especially at the advanced level, when students can appreciate and benefit from the complex themes and resulting discussions. Instructors who use films in the classroom will find that the use of authentic language combined with thought-provoking drama broadens cultural competence and improves the collaborative and cooperative methods while teaching English, too.

As mentioned previously, a key criterion for collaboration is equal participation. However, as we all know, strong students often take the initiative in group work and drive the whole task, while weaker students contribute less. It is important to create a chance for students with less-developed language skills to express themselves and contribute to the over-all success of the group. It is true that some students are not good at vocabulary, or grammar; however they must be great at drawing or be good athletes. Such students often make excellent "designers" or "messengers" for the team. Here is what I have been doing in my classes to encourage weaker learners to participate:

- I make it explicit that if anybody does not participate, the entire team or group will lose points.
- In order to provide students with enough opportunities to take part, I include a physical and a creative part in the task. I tell students they will earn more points if they add illustrations or design a logo for their reports or presentation. And, when possible, I add physical component in the task, students need to run, or hop, or throw a dart when they finish their task.

Observations show us it is usually the less-advanced students who do the physical and the creative parts of the task. They seem to enjoy it, but what is more, being involved tends to increase their general motivation level, which in turn has a beneficial effect on language learning.

So, the teacher should refrain from assigning students absolute roles for group work. It is important for student to learn to negotiate and work together. Students themselves should be the ones to decide who will be the scribe or the presenter, or who will do the physical and creative parts of a task. However, if students are very young or new to collaboration, it is better initially to support them by arranging an activity that will demonstrate different roles. For instance, during a brain-storming activity teachers should assign one student to keep track of the vocabulary as other students go around the classroom gathering words from their classmates.

Teachers should be prepared for emotional reactions. If you get them, remember that the cause is not you—these reactions are a part and a parcel of the collaboration. Bruffee points out that in collaborative tasks, "instructors willingly relinquish most of their classroom authority' in order to entrust and empower the learners to take control of their own learning."¹

"Emotions, both positive and negative, seem to be inevitable in collaborative learning. This is especially true with heterogeneous groups that have not had the prior experience of working together. With collaboration, students have to deal with power issues (who control the task?) as they accommodate different ideas and question their own point of view".²

Therefore, instructors need to prepare for emotional reactions from students and consider ways to handle the situation. Here are few suggestions:

- Stay calm and positive, and be careful about getting involved.
- Remind students that they are learning a new skill—negotiating the work—and that it is important to offer their expertise and respect the expertise of others.

¹ Bruffee, K.A. 1999, Collaborative learning: higher education, interdependence, and the authority of knowledge.^{2nd} ed. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.

² Jones, A. , K. Issroff. 2005. Learning technologies: Affective and social issues in computer-supported collaborative learning. Computers and education, p. 395-408

- Use metaphors like *learning to ride a bike, falling when trying to roller-skate, or typing slowly when first using a computer.*

- Assure students that some tensions are natural and will soon go away. Students take a lot of social referencing from their teachers, and they will most likely adopt such an attitude and continue collaborating with the group.

- Introduce micro-collaboration behaving students' work on smaller projects that are easier to manage. Incorporating this type of smaller task frequently enough builds up familiarity and contributes to students' positive experience.

The aim of this article is to share a lesson that we learn while trying to organize collaborative and cooperative activities. And the lesson is this: even if it fails the first time, give it a second chance. Sometimes we are initially frustrated trying to set up such collaborative tasks. The activities seem messy, noisy, and chaotic: sometimes students run to us complaining about their group mates. It seems not an ideal, blissful teaching situation that makes us give up doing collaborative activity. But the main idea is that, like a lot of other skills in life, the ability to collaborate is a learned skill and it can hopefully be developed if students are given enough opportunities.

Thus, it is necessary to divide students into groups, tell them that everyone should participate, and reward students lavishly with praise and grades when they truly collaborate.

So we may also make it clear that dividing the task and completing it separately is not acceptable. And eventually it works after several awkward attempts, our students start talking and sharing ideas; they decorate the walls with great word lists and posters that they have created together, and they take pride in them.

What is more, they relax in group work. It is no longer a competition against one another, but a fun process of working together to build something new.

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The article is recommended for publication by the member of editorial board,
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