Competitive and Cooperative Instructions In Learning English

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Abstract: This article examines the dynamics of competitive and cooperative learning environments within the framework of TESOL practices. The author reflects on personal experiences as both a learner and teacher while drawing on social interdependence theory and empirical research. Competitive learning fosters anxiety and lowers intrinsic motivation by emphasizing individual performance frequently at the expense of others and it is often characterized by negative interdependence. Cooperative learning, on the other hand, encourages students to be positively interdependent, which improves their ability to work together, their intrinsic motivation, and their language proficiency. The current article explores the implications for creating encouraging and productive learning environments in TESOL classrooms by looking at real-world applications of both strategies.

Keywords: Competitive Learning, Cooperative Learning, Classroom Dynamics, Learner Motivation, Peer Support

Introduction

One of the lectures in SLA Insights for TESOL practice was about learner-learner interactions which encouraged me to think deeper about my context. In my school years, as a student, I always tried hard to win in classroom competitions.(Schlechter et al., 2019) I could see my friends` disappointment and frustration when they lost in competitions and now looking back, I realize that creating positive and supporting atmosphere perhaps can benefit learners more than having them compete against each other. Therefore, as a teacher, I want to make changes to the nature of those interactions(Ciruela-Lorenzo et al., 2020). In this paper, I explore and discuss competitive and cooperative instructions, analyzing pros and cons of each approach, as well as reflecting on my experience as a learner and a teacher.

Methodology

Theory of Competition and Cooperation

As a founder of a theory of competition and cooperation, Deutsch (1949) distinguishes negative and positive interdependence in which the distinction between the two is in the "difference in the nature of the goal-regions in the two social situations" (p.131).

Together with the theory of individualistic efforts, these concepts jointly created foundations for social interdependence theory which has been used as a basis of research into cooperative and competitive learning for more than 70 years. It is noteworthy that many research studies on social interdependence have been carried out following this theory (Johnson & Johnson, 1975, 2008, 2015; Johnson et al., 1978; Aronson & Bridgeman, 1979; Sharan et al., 1979; Stanne et al., 1999; Tjosvold et al., 2003; McCafferty et al., 2006; Roseth et al., 2008).

Competitive Learning Environment

Competitive learning stresses the importance of accomplishing an academic goal such as a grade "A", by encouraging students to work faster and better than others (Johnson & Johnson, 2012). In such situations, there is a negative interdependence in which students might feel that they can achieve their goals at the expense of the other students` failure in the classroom (Deutsch, 1949). If I look back to my school years as a pupil myself, I cannot remember the time when we worked cooperatively inside the classroom. Learner interactions in English classrooms were mostly based on competitive and individualistic learning. We were ranked according to our scores on language tests and receiving grade 5 (an excellent grade in my context) was seen by many learners as the main goal. Everyone tried hard to defeat others and be the star. As a whole class activity, the teacher used to ask questions by calling a student`s name and having him/ her stand up (Reiner & Benner, 2022). If he/she could not find the right answer, the teacher would ask the other students to tell the correct answer to that failed student. The student who was able to provide the greatest number of correct answers would receive an excellent mark. In such cases, it is possible to imagine the excited handwaving of students and some of them might even expect other students to fail to answer correctly (Johnson & Johnson, 1987).

Furthermore, the whole class was divided into two implicit competing groups: boys and girls (Johnson et al., 2024). I do not know whether our teachers realized this, because the two opponent groups usually worked together after the lessons in separate rooms. In our "girls` pole", we used to translate texts, memorized new words, made up sentences and wrote answers to questions. What we enjoyed most in this out of class time was that we practiced speaking English together and felt comfortable doing this. In the classroom, it was difficult to do this as we were afraid of making mistakes, being laughed at, and being criticized by the opponent group which was composed of very ambitious boys. As Young (1999) points out, the fear of losing identity and competitiveness in the classroom might lead to develop anxiety. This example might indicate that competition was highlighted during the lessons, yet as learners we needed cooperation and had more fun studying together outside the classroom (Engelhardt et al., 2022).

In competitive learning environment, it is also common to arrange students according to their results, from the best to the worst. This usually happens every day during school years and there appear usual "losers" and "winners" (Johnson & Johnson, 1987). The defeated ones suffer from anxiety, lose self-confidence, and may even develop negative attitude towards the winners, the teachers, the school, and themselves (Johnson & Johnson, 2002). There are some lower-achieving students in my current teaching context who also

tend to miss lessons frequently. Teachers attempt to solve this issue through negotiations with both students and their parents. Perhaps it is also possible to link this problem with the competitive mode of education and this might help to find alternative ways of attracting these students to school(Dellestrand et al., 2020).

On the other hand, competition can be constructive, and not always harmful (Johnson & Johnson, 1987, 2015; Stanne et al., 1999; Forsyth, 1999; Tjosvold et al., 2003). Students might compete for enjoyment when reviewing the learnt materials to check and compare their progress with that of others, as a change of pace, not as the conclusion of learning. For example, my students enjoy *kahoot* quizzes, but I insist that their results not be overemphasized. As it was rightly said, "competition, when it is appropriate, is fun and adds spice to classroom life" (Johnson & Johnson, 1987, p.101).

Moreover, competitions can be constructive when organized between cooperative groups. Forsyth (2006) points out that competition provides strong motivation, increases students` participation and contentment. Students set higher goals and attempt to work hard to achieve them(Shirk, 2020). If I refer again to my classroom as a student myself, I may find some features of the constructive competition. Although two separate groups of boys and girls competed with each other, they worked cooperatively inside their own groups. Members of each group tried hard to contribute to the success of their group, through collaboration and peer teaching after the lessons(Figueras & Garuz, 2019). However, it turns out that we overemphasized winning, and our group formation was also inappropriate, and these are important factors which need thorough consideration when applying competitions in more constructive ways(Crick & Crick, 2020).

Cooperative Learning Environment

Cooperation, as a common human nature, turns learning process into a social activity (Jacobs & Kimura, 2013). In this type of instruction students work cooperatively in groups to achieve shared goals and to improve both their own and their peers` learning (Johnson & Johnson, 2012). Cooperative instruction provides students with supportive learning atmosphere in which they produce speech more freely and become more motivated (McCafferty et al., 2006; Jacobs & Renandya, 2019). Last academic year, I taught a group of first year students whose major was English(Chiambaretto et al., 2019). What made me write about this group here is that it was very similar to the competitive one I described above. The same boys` and girls` "poles"! The same competition! In this school, students take monthly tests, and the results are attached on the school announcement board for everyone to see and discuss. Therefore, there is a strong competition among students to get excellent grades and high test scores. There were a few girls who had a good knowledge of English and had good results in interval tests. However, they used to refuse to join the class discussions, they just sat silently. Some boys were confident in speaking while a few appeared reluctant to participate in such activities. After teaching them for a few months, I felt that I had to change something. I decided to make project work with this group after the lessons, because it was not permitted by school administration to do projects during the lesson(Carlisle & Gruby, 2019).

Result

"Toothpick bridge project" was our first project. At first, the 16 students were divided into four groups of four(Moura & Tortato, 2021). Group formation was a shock for many learners because they were randomly divided into groups which composed of boys and girls. As they agreed on the ground rules for the project to be successful, they did not show explicit disagreement to this. It is important to note here that there are more effective ways of organizing groups. As stated by many (Johnson & Johnson, 2009; Jacobs & Kimura, 2013), the most preferable one is teacher-selected heterogenous group which includes high-, medium- and low-ability students. Random groups are easy to compose, and learners regard it fair, however, this sometimes result in homogeneous groups which might not be as effective as the mixed ability ones (McCafferty et al., 2006).

While working cooperatively, students feel positive interdependence (McCafferty et al., 2006; Johnson & Johnson, 2015; Ferguson-Patrick & Jolliffe, 2018). They believe that their goals can be obtained only if the other students in the group also achieve their goals (Deutsch, 1949). Positive interdependence can be created through having shared goals, distributing tasks and resources, providing collective rewards(Jabarzare & Rasti-Barzoki, 2020). In our project, the main goal for each group was to create a bridge model from toothpicks and make a digital story. Each member of the group was assigned a role: an architect, an engineer, an accountant, and a builder. The members felt responsible for their work, made notes and gave feedback to each other. Limited resources (toothpicks, glue blobs, paper, pencils) were distributed to each group to use effectively. As it was stated by many, individual accountability is an important element of cooperative learning in which each member of the group feels responsibility for their share of work (McCafferty et al., 2006; Jacobs & Renandya, 2019). Teachers` role is to assess each student`s skills, giving feedback on their progress, randomly asking the members to answer the questions, having them check each other`s work (Ferguson-Patrick & Jolliffe, 2018).

Cooperative learning, if applied precisely, boosts academic success because this type of instruction has a positive impact on intrinsic motivation and peer support. Peers attempt to achieve learning goals cooperatively, giving emotional and tutorial support to each other (Nichols & Miller, 1994; Jacobs & Renandya, 2019). Within a year, my students did another two projects together. These projects encouraged my students to collaborate, to think more critically, to support each other and develop interpersonal attraction despite differences in abilities, characteristics as well as gender(Liu et al., 2021). While working together in the project, the tension between boys and girls seemed to reduce gradually, even shy students tried to contribute to the success of the group, expressing their ideas more freely. They seemed to become more intrinsically motivated, and their language levels also increased significantly(Yu et al., 2022).

Discussion

Nevertheless, there might occur some issues while implementing cooperative learning. For instance, students tend to communicate in their native language more when

working in small groups (Jacobs & Kimura, 2013). This issue was the most common one when my students did the first project. However, they gradually learned to speak in English, as it was one of the strict requirements of the project and had direct effect to the score of their groups. Members of the group, therefore, encouraged each other to use English and also corrected one another`s mistakes. As Little et al. (2017) pointed out, teachers should motivate learners to speak in the target language by providing group activities which require using this language more(Al-Saidi, 2021).

Another problem might be the evaluation of the group outcome. As stated by Johnson & Johnson (1987), each student should be assessed according to the group performance. However, this might lead to demotivation when students assume that they cannot get higher marks because of some lower-ability peers (Jacobs & Kimura, 2013). In the "Toothpick bridge "project I gave students group grades to highlight the importance of working in cooperation. At the same time, in order to avoid the disappointment of high-achievers, I gave each member different bonus points based on their performance within their groups. It is also important that students be given regular feedback on their participation and grades because this might help them understand that learning and cooperation are important, but not grades (McCafferty et al., 2006).

Conclusion

Competition, when used constructively, is important in learning English. It should be organized in a way that encourages students to compete for fun, work together and enjoy the shared success. Cooperative instruction, the benefits of which exceed those of competitive learning, provides learners with wider opportunities to learn English in a supportive and friendly learning atmosphere. In an ideal classroom, students, sharing the common goal, are motivated to work cooperatively, to support each other, and also feel responsibility.

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