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Activities for Cooperative Learning

Making groupwork and pairwork effective in the ELT classroom

Sample Units

DELTA
PUBLISHING

4a Team problem-solving

What levels?	B1-C1
What ages?	12+
How long?	20-60 minutes
What preparation?	You need a synopsis of a problem. This can be written or explained verbally
What grammar?	First and second conditionals, future forms
What vocabulary?	Depends on topic
What functions?	Agreeing and disagreeing, giving reasons, critical questioning

Summary of the activity

Team problem-solving requires learners to work together in home groups to solve a problem, based on a synopsis or case study. The problem can be presented on a handout, explained by the teacher, or come from a news story. To ensure cooperation, one group member can be designated as the chairperson, whose role it is to ensure that others all contribute equally. Students then regroup to share and peer-evaluate each other's solutions. In the example activity below, there is a brief jigsaw stage involving information about the three options. This is optional.

Key advantages

- Encourages **individual accountability** as each student is responsible for presenting their team's findings in the second part of the activity.

- Even if the students who are weaker at English contribute less during the problem-solving phase, they will be able to listen to stronger students discussing the solution and take notes, which will enable them to present their group's findings in the second stage.

Important notes and variations

- To encourage discussion, critical thinking and practice of agreement and disagreement skills, the problem should not have one easy solution.

- With older teens and adults, case studies from business English coursebooks are often suitable for this activity.

- Variation: two different problems can be used, with some groups working on each. Groups can then be paired to share solutions.

- If you prefer, two different problems can be used, with half the groups working on each. Groups can then be paired to share solutions and get peer feedback.

Team problem-solving: Example activity

Dunlin Airport

Level for this activity: B1-C1 approximate time: 35-45 minutes

Preparation

1. Copy the materials for Unit XX in the Resources section (1 per group of 3-4 students). Cut up as indicated.

Procedure

1. Put students into **home groups**. Get each group to choose a chairperson who must ensure that everybody participates and nobody dominates.

2. Introduce the task, explaining the three options and the different stages to the activity. Give the main handout to each group.

3. Explain that you have some further information about each of the three options, which you will give to one student in each group. They cannot show it, but must explain and provide details whenever required. Hand out the three options to different students.

4. Provide a time limit (10-20 minutes) and let them begin.

5. Monitor carefully, providing support as necessary. When groups agree on a solution, tell each group member to make notes on what the solution is and why, reminding them of the next stage to the activity.

6. When groups are ready to move on to stage 4, create new groups, each including one member of each home group. In large classes, you may need to split groups to ensure they don't get too large. Get each group member to explain their choice, and encourage others to ask questions about this.

7. At the end, find out which choice was most popular. You may want to have a class vote.

Extension ideas

1. Students may also be interested to know your opinion, and will benefit from listening to how you justify your choice.

2. This activity is based on a real problem in London, where the decision was made to expand the largest airport (Heathrow), rather than the estuary option. Students could research the reasons for this online for homework.

Dunlin Airport

Introduction

The city of Dunlin is getting bigger, and Dunlin Airport is not big enough to cope with the increased air travel. There are 3 options:

a)   Build a new airport at site A, at the mouth of the river Dun

b)   Expand Dunlin Airport to add a second runway at site B

c)   Build a superfast rail link to the city to encourage people to travel by train more

Activity stages

Stage 1: Read about one of the 3 options. Explain it to your team.

Stage 2: Discuss your solution, making sure everybody participates in the discussion.

Stage 3: When you agree on a solution each of you should take notes so you can present it to another group.

Stage 4: Present your solution in a new group. Listen to each other's solutions, and ask questions.

Dunlin Airport

Option A: build a new airport on the estuary to the river Dun

Estimated cost: $11 billion

Estimated timespan: 4 years

Advantages: Lots of room for expansion. Population density low, so little disturbance to people. High approval rating – 55% of Dunlin residents prefer this option.

Disadvantages: Very expensive, including two bridges over river and new motorway link. Quite far away. It will take 45 minutes to get to city centre. Two internationally important sites for wildlife will be destroyed. Very unpopular with environmentalists including the movie star Leonard diCappuccino, who has started a major campaign to stop it.

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Dunlin Airport

Option B: expand Dunlin Airport to add a second runway at site B

Estimated cost: $8 billion

Estimated timespan: 2 years

Advantages: Not too expensive. Very good road links are already available. It would make Dunlin Airport the world's largest, and a good centre for international connections. It will only take 2 years to complete.

Disadvantages: Very noisy for residents of west Dunlin, so approval rating is very low. Only 15% of Dunlin residents prefer this option. Mass protests have already started, with some residents threatening legal action if it goes ahead.

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Dunlin Airport

Option C: Build a high speed rail link to the city to encourage people to travel by train more

Estimated cost: $6 billion

Estimated timespan: 6 years

Advantages: The cheapest option. Superfast trains (up to 450 km/h). Travel times to nearby cities in the country and in Europe will be just as fast as flying. Likely to reduce the need to fly, thereby improving the environment. Only disturbs a small number of residents. Approval rating quite high – 30% of Dunlin residents prefer this option.

Disadvantages: It doesn't really solve the main problem of increased air traffic. Planes from other continents will still need to land somewhere, so international tourism and trade will suffer. Travelling by the high speed train will be more expensive than flying on most airlines. It will take 6 years to complete.

5b Grammar jigsaw

What levels?	A2-C1
What ages?	13+
How long?	40-60 minutes
What preparation?	Select your area of grammar in advance, and decide how you will jigsaw the rules. Choose both controlled and freer practice activities.
What grammar?	Almost any. Particularly good for contrasting two tenses, contrasting conditionals, contrasting verb forms, contrasting determiners.
What vocabulary?	Good for 'usage-bound vocabulary' (different uses of get, normal vs. extreme adjectives, make and do, phrasal verb types, etc.)
What functions?	Retelling key information, applying rules to situations, providing reasons for an opinion.

Summary of the activity

Typically involves a **test-learn-test** structure (rather than test-teach-test), in which learners first work in their home groups to assess their current knowledge of an area of grammar (e.g. use of articles). They then split up into expert groups, with each expert group finding out more about one part of this grammar area (e.g. in the example below, some students learn about the definite article 'the', others learn about the indefinite article 'a' and the third group learn about the zero article). Depending on the area of grammar, there may be two, three or four topics for expert groups. Students then take this knowledge back to their home groups, where they work together to do the same, or a similar activity to the one used at the start of the lesson. Depending on the area of grammar and how it has been tested, students may also do a language practice activity after this (see example below, in which they retell the story).

Key advantages

- Likely to be much more student led than a typical test-teach-test lesson.

- Encourages **positive interdependence** and **individual accountability**.

Important notes and variations

- Can be used for a wide variety of grammar areas, especially when two aspects of language are being contrasted. Coursebook material can be adapted simply by copying and cutting up the grammar explanations, and the corresponding exercises.

- Can also be used for areas of lexis, where rules govern usage (e.g. different uses of get, normal vs. extreme adjectives, make and do, phrasal verb types, etc.)

Blind violinist

Level for this activity: A2-B1   **Approximate time: 45-50 minutes**

Preparation

1. Copy the materials for Unit XX in the Resources section (1 copy of the activity sheet and one information sheet per group of 3-5 students). Cut up and/or fold as indicated.

Procedure

1. Put students into groups of 3-5 (**home groups** if you use them). Introduce the activity and hand out a copy of the activity sheet to each group. Get them to read the story and discuss what is missing.

2. Get each group to add articles where necessary, using pen and pencil as recommended. Monitor to notice difficulties - this will help in the next stage. Don't check the answers yet!

3. Put students into 3 **expert groups** (A, B, C). If you have over 17 students break each expert group into two smaller ones so that you never have more than six students in a group (3-4 is usually best).

4. Explain briefly that each group will learn about one of the three areas of article grammar (a/an, the, zero article). Remind them that they should work hard as a team because when they finish they will take this knowledge back to their home groups who will rely on them for the next activity. Give each expert group their corresponding information sheet (or the cut up strips – see Preparation).

5. Explain what they have to do, and let them begin. Monitor carefully, providing support esp. with difficult rules. As each group finishes, hand out the Information Sheet Answer Key and remind them that they need to remember the 6 rules, as they won't have these materials during the next lesson stage.

6. When all groups have checked their answers, send students back to their Home Groups. Tell them to look again at their story, and check carefully whether the rules that they read about in their expert groups apply to any of the article uses (including zero article) here. If you like, you can encourage them by saying that there is at least one example of each of the rules in the story. Once more, monitor and provide support as necessary.

7. Check the answers. The **team challenge** method will work well here. One group starts reading and other groups challenge if they think they hear a mistake. The group reading at the end are the winners!

8. Within each home group, one student should now take the story, and the remaining members should try to retell it as accurately as possible. The student with the story can prompt them if they make any mistakes, using the **peer prompt** method.

Extension ideas

1. For further practice, students may be able to translate anecdotes from their first language into English. Because anecdotes introduce and then repeat the same characters, they provide a good context for helping students to practise the most common uses of articles.

Activity sheet

1. There is a problem with the grammar in this story. Read it, then discuss: What is missing?

Blind violinist

My friend Esra told me funniest story about when she was travelling to Cairngorm mountains in Scotland in July last year. She sat down opposite old man who had white stick, violin and wore dark glasses. There was dog sitting next to him, so she thought he was blind. They got chatting and she found out he played violin in Scottish Symphony Orchestra. He was on his way home from work.

Anyway, train had just left Edinburgh when old man went to restaurant car to get lunch and came back with some sandwiches and newspaper. He sat down and opened newspaper. His dog was now sitting next to him, and every time dog barked, man turned pages. Just then, train conductor came to check our tickets. He saw man reading and explained: 'Sorry, sir. Dogs are not allowed on trains unless their owners are blind.'

'Oh, but I am blind,' said man, 'but my dog isn't and he likes to read Times on long journeys.'

2. You probably noticed that there were no articles (a, the) in the article. In your groups, insert articles wherever you think they are necessary. Use a pen if you are certain, and a pencil if not.

3. Now get into expert groups. Each group will learn about one of the three article situations:

    A.   Situations where we use a or an

    B.   Situations where we use the

    C.   Situations where we don't use a/an or the (called 'zero article')

4. Once you have worked in your expert groups, come back to your home group. Using the information you learnt in your expert groups, check your story again, and make changes where necessary.

5. Your teacher will check the answers with you.

6. Working together try to retell the story. One group member can look at the correct story and prompt the others if they forget anything.

Group A information sheet: The article a / an

Match the rules with the example sentences:

1.	Use 'a/an' the first time you mention something or someone.	a.	My brother Mark is a secondary teacher.
2.	Use 'a/an' with singular countable nouns when it isn't important which one you're talking about.	b.	The plane was delayed for an hour.
3.	Use 'a/an' when you state someone's job.	c.	I bought some new books yesterday.
4.	Use 'a' (not 'an') before words that don't start with a vowel sound.	d.	I saw a really good film last night.
5.	Use 'an' (not 'a') before words that start with a vowel sound.	e.	Could you pass me a pen, please?
6.	Use 'some' instead of 'a/an' with plural nouns.	f.	I have just had a coffee.

Now cover the rules, read out the example sentences and try to remember the rule.

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Information sheet key: Expert group A: 1d, 2e, 3a, 4f, 5b, 6c.

Group B information sheet: The article 'the'

Match the rules with the example sentences:

1.	Use 'the' to talk about something you have mentioned before.	a.	This is the best holiday I've ever been on.
2.	Use 'the' when something is unique or there's only one of them in the situation.	b.	She plays the guitar very well.
3.	Use 'the' with superlative adjectives.	c.	My uncle lives in the Caribbean.
4.	Use 'the' with certain geographical features, especially seas and oceans, rivers, mountain ranges and island groups.	d.	Could you pass the salt, please?
5.	Use 'the' to talk about musical instruments someone plays.	e.	We have a dog and a cat. The dog is called Cindy and the cat is called Jess.
6.	Pronounce 'the' /ðiː/ before a word that starts with a vowel.	f.	I sometimes go running in the afternoon at the old stadium.

Now cover the rules, read out the example sentences and try to remember the rule.

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Information sheet key: Expert group B: 1e, 2d, 3a, 4c, 5b, 6f.

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Group C information sheet: The zero article

Match the rules with the example sentences:

1.	Use no article before the names of people, cities, continents and most countries.	a.	The meeting is at 4 o'clock on Friday.
2.	Use no articles before plural nouns to talk about a group of things in general.	b.	My sister, Emily, has lived her whole life in Leeds, in England.
3.	Use no article when referring to an uncountable or plural noun for the first time.	c.	I sometimes skip breakfast and have a bigger lunch.
4.	Use no article before times, days of the week, months or years.	d.	Doctors are paid much more than nurses.
5.	Use no article when you are talking about being at or going to certain places, especially home, work, school, hospital, university, prison, church.	e.	I'm not a fan of hot drinks. I don't like tea or coffee, but I love juice and lemonade.
6.	Use no article before meals.	f.	He wasn't at school last week because he went into hospital for an operation.

Now cover the rules, read out the example sentences and try to remember the rule.

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Information sheet key: Expert group C: 1b, 2d, 3e, 4a, 5f, 6c.

Introduction

Key principles in cooperative learning

Most teachers who are familiar with communicative language teaching and/or task-based language teaching will know something about collaborative learning, but this isn't the same as cooperative learning. In this book, will use the term 'collaborative learning' to refer to the general use of pairwork and groupwork – any activities in which learners collaborate. But we will reserve the term 'cooperative learning' for a more specific type of collaboration, in which two key principles are emphasised and visible in the activities that learners do; positive interdependence and individual accountability. While different writers on cooperative learning mention other factors,

> "The crux of the difference between cooperation and competition lies in the nature of the way that the goals of the participants in each of the situations are linked. In cooperative situation the goals are so linked that everybody sinks or swims together, while in the competitive situation if one swims, the others must sink." Deutsch 1949

these two are almost always emphasised, and agreed upon by some of its most influential figures (e.g. Slavin 1995, Johnson & Johnson 1994, Kagan & Kagan 2009). They also seem to be important to making groupwork effective in ELT classrooms in a range of contexts worldwide (Ghaith & Kawtharani 2006; Ning 2010; Panhwar 2016):

Positive interdependence: For an activity to be truly cooperative, learners need to depend on each other to complete a given task. They must work as a team, not in competition with each other, so that "they sink or swim together" (Johnson et al. 1993, 3:6).

Individual accountability: To ensure that the group succeeds, each student must be accountable, both for their own learning, and for contributing to the group as required. Success may be interpreted as completion of a task, solution of a problem, answering of a review question, or success in a class quiz, taken individually after the team has prepared together.

Usually it is the design of the task that simultaneously ensures both positive interdependence and individual accountability. A good example of this is a jigsaw reading activity, something that most communicative teachers are familiar with. But not all jigsaw tasks are truly cooperative – some just get learners to read and regurgitate what they have read. While this may be useful and may work in some classes, it isn't as cooperative as a jigsaw reading activity in which learners have to understand, compare, synthesise, or even evaluate the content of the different texts in order to complete a specific task.

The example activities in this book provide examples of this latter, more cooperative task type, such as in Unit 5a. After reading one of three texts about the jobs of three different people, group members then work together to answer questions that force them to compare and evaluate all three texts (without showing them to each other), such as "Who works hardest?", "Who makes the most money?" and "Who do you think has the most difficult job? Why?" If any group member fails to contribute, the whole group may get the answer wrong, so it becomes the shared responsibility of the whole group to ensure that they do. Thus, two of the most commonly cited problems with groupwork – that one or two students dominate, or that some don't pull their weight – are less likely to happen when positive interdependence and individual accountability are required.

Other principles emphasised in the literature on cooperative learning include 'personal responsibility', 'promotive interaction' and 'group processing' (e.g. Johnson & Johnson 2009), all of which tend to develop naturally providing the conditions for positive interdependence and individual accountability are met. The development of key social skills is also emphasised, and discussed below.

Other theories and principles underpinning cooperative learning

Sociocultural theory

Although cooperative learning evolved mainly in America at a time when Vygotskian sociocultural theory was largely unknown, more recent writings have drawn upon sociocultural theory to provide explanations as to why cooperative learning may be effective (e.g. Jacobs et al. 2006, King 2008, Kagan & Kagan 2009). Because of the need for learners to interact with classmates during cooperative learning, learning becomes dialogic (i.e. it involves dialogue). Students are required to express what they have learnt linguistically. This forces them to express their ideas using their own words and concepts, which are likely to be accessible to classmates. As such, they 'scaffold' each other's understanding of the content. Not only is this likely to make that content understandable for others, this need to conceptualise it in their own terms, helps learners to assimilate it themselves, to 'own' the content. It is an often repeated mantra in learner-centred education that explaining something to someone else helps you to remember it. What is more, not only is this likely to be true for all education, it may be especially important in language learning, as the dialogic interaction involves repetition of vocabulary and grammatical structures that may be new or emergent in learners' developing language systems (sometimes called their 'interlanguage'), and it also includes negotiation of meaning, something long suspected to accelerate language learning (e.g. Long 1991).

Heterogenous grouping

Most writers on cooperative learning emphasise the importance of heterogenous 'base groups' or 'home groups' including both male and female learners, a variety of ability levels, and – where differences in ethnicity, age and first languages occur – also mixing these among the groups (e.g. Johnson & Johnson 2002, Kagan & Kagan 2009). These groups should remain stable for an extended period of time to allow learners to build bonds and peer understanding. This creates a group environment that is conducive to peer tutoring, another practice known to have a powerful positive effect on learning (Hattie 2009), especially through peer-explanation (see previous paragraph), but also through peer-feedback and peer-correction. Guidelines for grouping learners according to the principles of cooperative learning are provided below.

Learner autonomy

Because cooperative learning encourages learners to take responsibility for their own learning and to work independently of the teacher, it promotes and provides the conditions for increased learner autonomy (Jacobs & McCafferty 2006), something that is known to have a positive effect on learning (Hattie 2009; see 'self-regulated learning').

"Peer needs analysis can be defined as the act of raising the students' awareness of the needs of their co-learners in a class. It aims to turn needs analysis into a social event." Anderson 2017

Learners develop the organisational, analytical and study skills necessary to work independently of the teacher. What is more, they develop these skills communally, sharing ideas and strategies for autonomous learning. Peer-needs analysis (see Unit XX) helps learners to share these skills and become aware of each other's needs, thereby fostering greater rapport, understanding and empathy within both groups and classes (Anderson 2017).

Task-mediated differentiation

Differentiation, also called 'differentiated learning/instruction', is an important principle in classrooms where learners have varying abilities, strengths and preferences (i.e. most, if not all classrooms!). Differentiation involves "ensuring that what a student learns, how she/he learns it, and how the student demonstrates what she/he has learnt is a match for that student's readiness level, interests, and preferred mode of learning" (Tomlinson 2004).

"Differentiated instruction is a way of living in the classroom so that the broader objectives of education are achieved. … All learning is an individual matter, but teaching is essentially individual guidance in group situations. Properly planned instruction provides recognition of individual capacities, achievements, interests motives, and needs, as well as equal learning opportunities in the classroom." (Betts 1946)

Traditionally, recommendations for differentiation have focused on providing different tasks to different individuals or groups, something not usually recommended in cooperative learning, where the emphasis is on bringing learners together, rather than segregating them. Instead, opportunities for differentiated learning occur naturally in the cooperative classroom, especially through 'task-mediated differentiation', where differentiation occurs simply in how learners complete a task. Task-mediated differentiation is facilitated in the language classroom whenever we provide enough freedom and flexibility for learners to use the skills and language they have in different ways to complete the same task. For example, Unit 5e requires learners to think up their own questions, thus learners with stronger grammar awareness may choose to use more complex question forms, challenging themselves and providing useful exposure to new structures for their classmates. Unit 4e requires learners to take as many notes as possible while listening to a story – thus learners with stronger listening skills can take more notes than classmates who are weaker at listening. And Unit 2d provides freedom to learners to provide spoken summaries of a section of the text, once more allowing longer or shorter summaries according to ability level.

Differentiation also occurs naturally in the cooperative classroom through interaction between students of mixed ability. For example, peer-tuition and peer-correction both allow students with more knowledge about the language and its usage to provide useful input or feedback to classmates with less knowledge, both helping their classmates, and challenging themselves to use the language effectively and sensitively as they do.