

Enhancing Reading Courses in ESL/EFL Classes Through Cooperative Learning

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Introduction

Cooperative learning is an effective learning strategy for language classrooms. It helps learners actively participate in every task at the same time and learners can compare, share, and discuss their answers. It also creates a competitive language learning environment. In cooperative learning, teachers take several roles. First, teachers make pre-instructional decisions about grouping students and assigning appropriate tasks. Teachers have to be able to explain both the tasks and the cooperative structures to students and then must monitor and intervene when necessary. Teachers must create groups. Teachers should also explain to the learners that a) they have different intellectual abilities, b) they are not expected to have all the abilities and c) that each group member has some of the abilities.

One of the most important factor that teachers should keep in mind is that in cooperative learning classes only extrovert and highly motivated students want to take part in classroom tasks. Therefore, teachers must create groups that are equitable so that all students participate fully and use different learning strategies (Cohen, 1998) if cooperative learning is to work. Finally, the teacher is also responsible for evaluating student learning and the effectiveness of each group's work (Cohen, 1998).

In this article, I present a sample lesson plan for cooperative learning which allows beginning learners to cope with language proficiency skills and which allows each student to take an important part in group activities in a reading course. For this lesson plan, I looked at internet sites to get some information about two cities in Europe, Budapest and Prague. The reason I chose these two cities was that Budapest and Prague share a similar city plan. They also have a river (in this case the Danube) dividing the city in two (Pest, the modern city, and Buda the old city,) and a castle that dominates the right bank, and some other similarities. Later, I compiled the information that I found about these two cities. I tried to simplified some parts of the texts in order to be appropriate for the intermediate level and I compiled the texts under three headlines.

- General information about the city
- Brief history of the city
- Present day information of the city. (See Appendix A)

Procedure

Step 1

Before starting the lesson, I duplicated the reading texts that I had compiled. I prepared enough copies for all my students in the class. I told the class that we would make our reading course enjoyable and that I had prepared a new reading text. Then I divided the class into two groups: Group A and Group B. I delivered the text *Budapest* to Group A and the other text, *Prague*, to Group B. I gave each group 10-15 minutes to read and try to understand their texts.

Step 2

After they had finished reading, the students worked in groups (each group has four students) and shared their ideas and discussed what they understood for 2 minutes. Later I delivered a previously prepared worksheet including inference and comprehension questions for their texts. (See Appendix B). All of these questions were the same for each group. They all

studied in their groups together and after they finished answering the questions, they chose a group leader to report the answers.

Step 3

To make it easier for all the students to see the results clearly, I divided the board into two sections. I wrote the names of the groups for each section, and wrote down the number of the questions from 1 to 10. I assigned one of the students to put a tick for each correct answer of the groups. Depending upon the number of the correct answers, we chose one group as the winner of the first part.

Step 4

I later asked each group to change their texts (this time Group A would read the text *Budapest* and Group B would read the text *Prague*) and wanted the learners to read the texts within 10-15 minutes by paying attention to the similarities. I reminded them that they could take some notes about the similarities between these two texts in terms of structures, phrases, vocabulary and names.

Step 5

After they finished their group work activity, I asked the students to put their copies face down and I gave each group another worksheet including a true-or-false activity (See Appendix B) to check how many similarities they found between the texts. This took about 7 minutes.

Step 6

Again I assigned a student from the class to put a tick for all correct answers of the groups. According to the number of the correct answers, we chose the winner.

Note: If there is a draw between the groups, I gave them one more activity (Putting a tick -- See Appendix B) for choosing the winner.

Conclusion

Cooperative learning gives a chance to share and exchange information for every student in the class. The whole class can take part in the activities and compare and contrast their ideas with their classmates. In this way all the learners in the classroom can get the chance of exploring the use of communicative language.

References

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Appendix A

Budapest

That Budapest -- one of the most beautiful cities in the world -- has developed where it is, is not some historical accident. Take a look at Gellért Hill, right next to the River Danube as it flows majestically through the centre of the modern city. It was precisely the combination of the relative ease of crossing the river here and the natural protection the hill offered against invasion that helped the earliest settlers to decide that it was the ideal place to build a town. Budapest has a population of over two million people. One in every five Hungarians lives there. The River Danube divides the city into two parts. On the west bank there are the woods and hills of Buda and the old town. On the east bank there is the bigger and more modern Pest, the business and shopping centre. From Buda there are wonderful views of Pest and the river. Six bridges join Buda and Pest.

Important Dates in the History of Budapest

For nearly a thousand years, Buda and Pest were two towns. Then in 1873 they joined and became one city, Budapest. Until 1939, Budapest was one of the most important cultural capitals of Europe. Then World War II started. In 1945 the city was in ruins and the Communists took control. In 1956, the people tried to free themselves. They pulled down a statue of Stalin and fought the soldiers, but they were not successful. Communist rule did not end until 1989.

The City Today

Budapest is very unusual because it has two completely different parts. You can choose the peace and quiet of Buda's woods or the excitement of Pest, where there are good theatres, restaurants, bars, and shops. The public transport system in Budapest is one of the best and cheapest in the world. Budapest's network of public transport services includes buses, trolleybuses, trams, underground trains (Metró) and over ground suburban trains (HÉV). Buses, trams and trolleybuses run daily from 4:30 a.m. until 11:00 p.m. All three Underground lines connect at Deák tér Station, and service frequencies range from 15 minutes late in the evening to every two minutes at peak times. The HÉV runs to and from Csepel Island and Ráckeve in the south, Szentendre in the north, and Gödöllő in the east.

You can travel easily by underground, bus, tram, and taxi, but driving a car in Budapest is not a good idea. There are not many car parks. Most cars are old, so pollution is very bad. The healthiest thing to do in the city is to visit one of the 30 spa baths and swimming pools. The mineral waters of Budapest are famous, and a very popular way to relax.

Prague

Prague has a population of over one million people. It is not the biggest city in Europe, but it is certainly one of the most beautiful. It is built on seven hills on the banks of River Vltava. Fifteen bridges cross the river. The most famous is Charles Bridge, which joins Prague Castle and the old town. The view of the castle from the river is very famous. Prague is a city of unusual beauty. It is a natural amphitheatre through which the Vltava River flows, filled with a thousand years' worth of manmade structures with aspirations greater than simply satisfying basic human needs. Its prime, yet sensitive, location in the heart of Europe is at the confluence of trade routes, political interests, and cultural influences. While this has never assured the city of a peaceful history, it has certainly guaranteed it an eventful one.

Important Dates in the History of Prague

Prague did not become the capital until October 1918, after World War I, when Czechoslovakia became an independent country. Twenty years later, in 1938, it lost its independence again before World War II. After the war, in 1948, the Communists took control. In 1968 the people tried to free themselves. They fought the soldiers in Wenceslas Square, but they were not successful. Communists rule did not end until 1989.

The City Today

Some people say Prague is the most beautiful city in the world. They call it 'The Golden City' and the 'The Mother of Cities' because it still has many beautiful medieval buildings and statues. Perhaps the most popular building is the Old Town Hall with its amazing 15th century astronomical clock. People also call Prague 'Europe's School of Music'. There are many concert halls, and every May there is a famous music festival: 'Prague Spring'. There are also 20 theatres and many old pubs, wine

bars, and restaurants. Prague has an excellent public transport system covering all parts. It is clean, safe and prompt. The places in Prague you can't get to by taking a bus, subway or tram are easy to reach by using a taxi that stands at every subway or main bus stations. Public transport runs round the clock and easy-to-follow timetables can be found at each tram and bus stop. There is now a modern underground, but traffic is still a problem. It is often better to walk and feel the atmosphere of the pretty little streets.

Appendix B

A - Questions

1. How many bridges are there in the city?
2. Why is this city unusual?
3. Why weren't the people successful at ending the Communists rule?
4. What is the most economic transportation system in the city?
5. What happened in 1989?
6. How do people generally spend their times in this city?
7. What happened before World War II started?
8. What do you think about the general aim of the bridges in this city?

B - True-False Activity

1. T F - Each city has seven bridges that cross the river.
2. T F - The Communists took control in 1948.
3. T F - The people in both cities tried to govern themselves but they couldn't succeed.
4. T F - The Communist rule ended in 1989.
5. T F - Each city has a castle.
6. T F - In Budapest there are lots of car parks.
7. T F - The most popular buildings in these two cities are museums.
8. T F - Prague has few concert halls.
9. T F - Each city was established on seven hills.
10. T F - In Prague, traffic is still a problem.

C – Put a tick for the words, number and phrases which are found in both texts.

1. __ World War II
2. __ cross the river
3. __ population over one million people
4. __ 1989
5. __ public transport system
6. __ one of the most beautiful
7. __ famous music festivals
8. __ subway
9. __ not enough car parks
10. __ easy travel