

## Cooperative Language Learning

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### Introduction

In recent years, there has been a move away from the traditional approach to language teaching towards cooperative learning. With cooperative learning, students collaborate in pairs or small groups, working towards a common goal. Traditional teaching engages some students, but not all. Cooperative learning structures actively engage every student.

In a traditional approach, in order to engage the class, the teacher asks a question and students put their hands up. The students are called on to answer one at a time. The approach is lengthy and time consuming and students spend very little time actively engaged. Teacher talking time is high and while one student is participating actively, the rest of the class sits passively. The same pupils put their hands up time after time as students with a lower level, or shy students don't want to be singled out to speak in front of the whole class. This can lead to a widening attainment gap permitting some students to fly under the radar and fall behind. Using cooperative structures closes that gap.

With cooperative learning, all the students participate at once reducing the time needed for everyone to participate and it is not only the higher level students who participate – all students are involved. By implementing cooperative learning strategies, teachers give their class not only the opportunity to enhance their speaking and listening skills, but also their social and communication skills as teams learn to work towards a common goal together.

### Kagan cooperative structures

Doctor Spencer Kagan has been working on the development of cooperative structures since 1968, developing over 150 of them. The structures are simple, step-by-step instructional strategies designed to increase student engagement and cooperation. The structures can be used with any content, any age group and any level.

Kagan's cooperative learning structures all have one thing in common. They drastically increase the amount of engagement among students in the classroom. When students are engaged, not only are they communicating in the target language, their social skills improve and discipline problems decrease.

The way students are engaged also changes. Students no longer compete against each other. They are on the same side. A win for one is a win for all.

By adopting Kagan's approach, research has shown that it greatly improves:

- Social skills
- Team-building
- Communication skills
- Knowledge building
- Decision making
- Processing information
- Thinking skills
- Leadership skills
- Presenting information

## What are the basic principles of Cooperative Learning?

There are four main principles of cooperative learning:

### 1. Positive Interdependence

Cooperative tasks promote teamwork. Students help, encourage, and support each other's efforts. They are on the same side working together to achieve the same goal. Each one is an essential part of the team. For example, in a **Jigsaw** reading activity, pupils cannot complete the task without everybody's text.

### 2. Individual accountability

Each student is accountable for his or her individual contribution. They are required to speak in front of at least one other person without help or note down their individual response before sharing. In the structure **Numbered Heads Together**, each student must write their answer on a mini whiteboard and show it to their teammates before they get together to share their ideas.

### 3. Equal participation

Each member of the group is given an equal opportunity to participate. For example, in a **Timed Pair Share**, each student is allocated an equal amount of time to speak about the chosen topic. Participation is not voluntary. Each student must take their turn.

### 4. Simultaneous interaction

Activities are designed so that all the students are engaged at once. In the structure **Mix-n-match** all the students mingle simultaneously to find a partner and then quiz them.

## Structures

### Timed pair share

#### What is it?

In pairs, students share with a partner for a predetermined time about a specific topic while their partner listens. Then, partners switch roles.

#### How does it work?

##### Step 1

The teacher poses a question or discussion topic and states the amount of time students will have to respond. The teacher gives thinking time.

##### Step 2

Student A shares while student B listens without interrupting.

##### Step 3

Student B responds.

##### Step 4

Partners switch roles. Now student B shares and student A listens and when the time is up, responds.

## What are the benefits?

It's simple and easy to implement. Students are actively engaged, either sharing or listening. Half the class is talking at the same time. If pupils share for 30 seconds, in a little under two minutes, the entire class has had the chance to express themselves.

In addition to the linguistic benefits of improved speaking and listening skills, pupils learn to take turns and practice active and respectful listening so that they can respond to their partner.

## What can I use it for?

It can be used at any point of the lesson. For predicting, *What do you think the story will be about?* It can be used for teambuilding, *What did you do at the weekend?* It can be used for brainstorming, *What do you already know about plants?* etc.

## Tips:

- Give students at least 5 seconds think time before starting the activity.
- Remind students to listen carefully to their partner.
- Use a timer so that students can see how much time they have left to speak.
- Introduce appropriate responses and display them for the class to use e.g. *Thanks for sharing! That was really interesting! I enjoyed listening to you because....*
- Regularly change pairs.
- Use open-ended questions that pupils can spend time discussing.

## Team interview

### What is it?

In each team, one student stands up to be interviewed. Teammates interview the standing student for a set amount of time. Once the time is over, the sitting teammates respond and the next student stands to be interviewed.

### Step 1

The teacher introduces the topic and sets the time limit.

### Step 2

Student A stands up and teammates ask any question they choose.

### Step 3

When the time is up, students thank the teammate that answered the questions.

### Step 4

The next student stands and the interview continues until all students in the group have been interviewed.

## What are the benefits?

Students are given the opportunity to practise question forms and in addition to gaining communication skills, they also develop interview skills.

## Tips:

- Allow students to write their questions before the interview begins
- Make sure that the interviewers are participating equally by having them take turns to ask questions.
- Having the interviewee stand to answer the questions helps focus the team and also helps the teacher to see that students are following the structure correctly and taking turns.

## What can I use it for?

This structure is useful for teambuilding. Students can answer questions about their weekend or holiday. It is also ideal for presenting a project.

## Mix and match

### What is it?

Each student receives a card. Each card matches another. These can range from a word and a picture to matching pictures e.g. adult and baby animal, or words and definitions etc.

With their card in hand, they stand up and pair up. They quiz their partner, answer the question and change roles. They then trade cards and continue to quiz, quiz and trade each time with a new partner until the teacher calls **Freeze!** when they find the student with the card that matches theirs.

### Step 1

With their card in hand, students stand up and put a hand up to show they are free. They keep it up until they find a partner.

### Step 2

Student A quizzes student B.

### Step 3

Student B answers.

### Step 4

If the answer is correct, student A gives praise. If incorrect, they are told the answer and coached to help them remember it.

### Step 5.

Students swap roles.

### Step 6

Students trade cards, thank each other and say goodbye.

### Step 7

Students put up their hand again to look for a new partner. Repeat steps 1-6 a number of times.

### Step 8

The teacher calls, Freeze! Pupils freeze, look at their card and think of the match.

### Step 9

Students find their match and pair up.

## What are the benefits?

Mix-n-match is ideal as a class builder as students are given the opportunity to interact with many different classmates. It's an active structure allowing students to move around the room. This lets them channel their energy into learning.

## Tips:

- Model the activity the first time you try it with your class.
- Have students high five their new partner to pair up.
- If you have a mixed-level class, you could colour code the cards and have students trade with those who have the same colour card.



## What can I use it for?

Mix-n-match is idea for vocabulary practice – one student has the word and another the corresponding picture. For higher levels, definitions could be used instead of pictures. It is also useful for consolidating content in CLIL lessons as students can quiz each other on the science topic they are studying.

## Conclusion

Once mastered, structures are easy to use. Students who otherwise would not be motivated become engaged. They feel included as they are given the opportunity to interact positively with their classmates. Communication is at an all time high and learning becomes more fun. Why not give it a try?