

# LANGUAGE IN INDIA

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## Is Cooperative Learning Cooperative?

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### Abstract

It is important to be skilful and knowledgeable, but it is equally necessary to have the ability and approach of an effective cooperative worker, able and willing to contribute our share of knowledge and skills expected in a team-working environment. We are often thrown into situations where, in some way or the other, we tend to seek the support of those whom we believe could help us reach our target making matters easier for us. No matter what kind of profession we belong to, there is always a necessity to be cooperative in nature. Working together by distributing our knowledge and work, understanding and supporting our co-workers, organizing the steps of actions to be taken, identifying and negotiating the problems, thereby constructing an ideal cooperative environment to operate, paves way for positive outcomes. This paper examines the impact of cooperative strategy on large classes and tries to explore the common instructional problems associated with cooperative teaching.

### Introduction

The technique of working in group is not new to us. Tracing back the history of human evolution, there are innumerable archaeological evidences that provide a clear picture of how thousands of years ago, even in materially less advanced and less complex situations, humans have worked in groups to fulfil their necessities. It may be difficult at this point to make certain of what exactly would have led them to acquire this knowledge and tendency. Was it innate in nature? Or their exposure to the hunting styles of certain animals may have brought this

knowledge to them, we are not sure. Whatever may have been their source of knowledge, it is obvious that the idea of combined effort is very ancient. Since then, humans, as they formed more and more materially advanced communities, have managed to understand and master the techniques of collaborative effort. Be it in war, in trade, arts, science and technological developments and what not, humans have mingled to produce mind-blowing creations.

### **Classroom Condition**

If one devotes some time to observe certain schools and colleges in India, it would be shocking to notice students being dumped into classes. Classes have indeed become stockrooms where one could find unmanageable sum of students unbearably occupying every space the classroom could provide. I have myself been a victim to such unfortunate conditions both as a learner and teacher. A class that could barely accommodate thirty or forty seats contains candidates twice its strength. We do not know if there is any quality and facility in such institutions, but they have been very successful in managing and maintaining quantity year after year. Due to the functioning of such educational institutions, education has almost lost its flavour as a service, after all, becoming a highly competitive business. Under such circumstances, teachers are exposed to a variety of challenges and are held accountable for different responsibilities specifically related to ESL/EFL practices.

At the outset, large classes may appear to be an ordinary problem, but risks are greater than we could imagine. There is no demand for people who simply keep proclaiming and popularizing pedagogic advancements. Very few educators and scholars have comprehended the best and worst part of language teaching. We are made to believe, rather, I would say compelled to blindly accept that strategies which may have proved effective elsewhere could work for us too.

### **Classes are as Different as Cultures are!**

Classes are as different as cultures are. Unless we could comprehensively learn about a particular culture and tradition, it is difficult to get a right understanding of its people. Likewise, every class has its own kind of expression of conditions and necessities, which as teachers we ought to understand before dealing with the learners. Teaching is not the only item in our list of tasks, apart from all other roles, teachers must act as troubleshooters. As teachers, there is a necessity for us to be good analyzers investigating and rectifying matters beneath the soil. It is no use simply trying to polish our pedagogical surface.

### **Large Classes – Is it a Problem?**

The most disturbing or challenging issue faced by almost every teacher around the world is the complexity involved in dealing with large classes. Only after the impact of communicative reforms on education, variety of drawbacks has become transparent to us thereby, making us to understand our educational setting in a better way. When teacher-centered methods were dominating the classrooms, possibly, large classes would not have been troublesome; after all, those classes were more of lecturing than involving any participation. No teacher would have felt

much difficulty in managing the class since he/she had to do nothing more than to deliver their subject-matter just as any public speaker would deliver his/her item before a large gathering.

In this context, a speaker (teacher) might not be concerned about what or how well the audience (learners) would have grasped his/her lecture. Under such an environment, the roles of the teacher become very limited and there seems to be no difficulty existing for them to deal with large audience. As the speaker (teacher) is well aware of the fact that he/she is the ultimate controller of the session, he/she may not find it difficult to manage their audience (learners). In such a setting there are not much situational variables to affect or adapt their way of lecturing (teaching). An acceptable level of subject-knowledge with some good presentation skills is sufficient to entertain a gathering.

But, the case of the communicative environment is not so. Class management has always been the most intricate environment to minister. Unless teachers possess all the essential qualities of sound teaching, we cannot say that we have been productive.

### **Anonymity**

In overcrowding classes learners merely “become faces instead of people.” The teacher is almost left to a condition in which he/she may not successfully know who their learners are and what their problems are. The strength of the classroom makes it immensely impossible for the teacher to create a positively close association with his learners, thereby establishing an anonymity and distance between the teacher and his students. Additionally, there is very less chance for the teacher to put individual attention for every learner. Sometimes, it becomes a high requirement to understand an individuals’ language related difficulties to suggest or help to improve their performance. Unless we could ourselves create possible ways to associate with our learners, large classes would always remain a barrier for comfortable, interaction-rich environment.

### **Disinterested Participation**

When it comes to manage large classes, teachers, especially those who are inexperienced find it very difficult and demotivating. In such a condition, the performance of the teacher is much affected. They could hardly work with satisfaction. If we observe the various schools and colleges in India, it is obvious that most of the institutions have or appoint preferably young hands to teach. This is mainly because by appointing young and dynamic people, the management could extract more work by paying less and at the same time assign different tasks which an experienced person might not be willing to accept. There is also a generally accepted opinion that young employees are more suitable, more active when compared to older people specifically in terms of using technology. Those who are new to the profession without much classroom management skills find large classes immensely difficult to deal with. Though there is no better way than to learn it through experience, it would be good if the management could prefer somebody with an experience for large classes and encourage young teachers to take over smaller classes till they learn the nuances of effective teaching. The management must not fail to make sure that young staff members are comfortable and enthusiastic about what they are doing.

## **Teacher Incompetency**

A teacher is a person who is supposed to be a 'leading-learner' working among his/her learners. He/she stands just ahead of his/her learners in his/her knowledge and experience steering the entire group as per needed in the right direction. At times when learners make less or no progression, it is teacher who accelerates everybody with his motivating words. At the same time it is his/her responsibility to attend to the difficulties of the learners and gear them appropriately making their academic ride smooth and successful. In order to achieve all this, the teacher must possess variety of capabilities. But, unfortunately most teachers are incompetent in a variety of ways.

## **Messing Up with Methods**

Unless a teacher knows exactly what instructional strategy could suit a particular condition, it is quite difficult to provide effective education. Prior determination of the learners' level, their academic strengths and weaknesses and other fundamental qualities as such are vital to be analysed before choosing any method. A wrong method could not only bring a negative consequence but could also make a great mess of the entire programme. Instead of messing up with instructional methods, the teacher could select something appropriate considering all the factors.

All the above discussed challenges in some way add difficulty in implementing the cooperative strategy. Though we could not affirm this completely in some exceptional cases, it would be agreeable to mention that under such situations a cooperative method of teaching may not be fully helpful. The following list summarises the difficulties clearly:

## **The Difficulties of the Teacher in Cooperative Learning**

1. The researcher observed some of the groups did not work cooperatively very well; especially some distracted students did their individual work and made class noisy, the classroom management was sometimes not easy to deal with.
2. The researcher had to monitor the big class and pay attention to seven heterogeneous groups. It is difficult to control students' chaos and maintain classroom management. Additionally the researcher had heavy workload to satisfactorily complete the preparation of teaching materials and to design activities.
3. It is not easy for the researcher to train the students to adapt to cooperative learning situations and to encourage students to take part in their group activities.
4. It is difficult to have effective methods to measure students' performances. Moreover, some students were absent, which deeply affected the group discussions, cooperative atmosphere and group performances. Students usually communicated with teammates in Chinese far more times than in English in class. (Wang, 2007)

## Conclusion

Thorough understanding of the students is essential for any teacher. Most of the instructional problems could be solved if the teacher takes effort to concentrate on the nature of the classroom. On the other hand, teachers should also understand the limitations of a particular approach and adapt appropriate methods for the appropriate audience. Indian classroom conditions are, of course, very challenging and just as any other second language learning atmosphere; here too it requires a large amount of exposure and experience for the teachers to cope with all these unpredictable variables. Cooperative learning could, without doubt, be cooperative only if teachers have the potential to overcome the instructional disabilities through repeated practice and exposure.

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