COOPERATIVE LEARNING APPROACH

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During the last thirty years, the implementation of communicative approach has required creation of teaching methods different from those used before. Among them one can enlist peer tutoring, collaborative education, thesis circle, and cooperative learning. The latter is the topic under discussion in the present theses.

Cooperative learning is an approach based on dividing an academic group into smaller teams which are subsequently given the same goal and equivalent educational conditions to achieve it. The success of the whole teams depends on the individual impact of each student, his or her ability to communicate with the others, help one another, share knowledge, collectively process the information and come to conclusions.

The given approach has been generally promoted and studied by the scholars: Brown & Ciuffetelli Parker (2009) and Siltala (2010), David Johnson and Roger Johnson (Johnson et al., 1994), Robert Slavin (1994, 1995), and Shlomo Sharan and Yael Sharan (Sharan, 1995; Sharan & Sharan, 1994) [2], who, in their works, discussed five key elements of cooperative learning:

- Positive Interdependence. Each team member is to fully participate in the educational process leaving aside the opportunity for only the best student of the team to fulfill the task. This can be achieved via assigning sub-tasks or roles to each learner, and careful monitoring the process. As a result, the whole team must feel that "they sink or swim together" knowing that separate grades of the members influence the common success [3].

- Face-to-face Promotive Interaction. With this element students become personally devoted to each other as well as the goal. This includes oral explanations and discussions during which the learners can solve given problems and be able to compare and use each other's background and past knowledge. The element is called promotive because, in this manner, each student promotes success of another one.

- Individual vs. Team Accountability. The essence of the element is that students work together, but "perform alone" [3]. A teacher would orally ask or test each team member separately, giving personal grades, so that the learner can use the knowledge gained during the team work and not hide behind someone else's back.

- Social Skills. Apart from completing the academic task, students are also to learn social interpersonal communication skills. These may include: effective leadership, decision-making, trust-building, communication, and conflict management. It is obvious that a teacher is to give general tips on how to behave during team work, give examples and monitor the process. Later, with more practical skills acquired, the activities run more smoothly in comparison with the first attempts.

- Team Processing. The element is often forgotten or discarded due to the lack of lesson timing. After the task or project was complete and the results and grades are known, the team is to discuss the highs and lows of the performance, giving suggestions on how to improve during the next team task.

One of the advantages of cooperative learning is that practically each task or text-book can be easily adapted to such form of educational activity. On the face of it, it might seem primitive to divide the group, give the task to the teams and then give a test. In practice, the success of the team work depends on teacher's ability to correctly organize the process, get the students involved in it with the help of different techniques, and not simply leave the learners with the educational material and test them afterwards – that's what their homework is for.

Nowadays, numerous techniques have been created and are available online and from printed sources. The most popular of them include the variations of think-pair-share, reciprocal teaching, jigsaw.

Think-pair-share activity requires small teams of two members (three might be possible with uneven number of students in the group). The task is to give one's opinion on the generally known topic or describe a picture or graph. Each student is given time to individually think on the answer (think-pair-write activity type allows for students to write their points of view down before performing). Then pairs are formed and the task is done in the form of a dialogue, discussing the neighbour's answers and battling for one's own opinion in the presence of a teacher, who later chooses the best pairs and asks them to perform the dialogues for the whole group as an example.

Jigsaw technique is useful for more complex topics, mastering grammar theory, for instance. The group is divided into teams of three or four, and each team is given a separate section of the whole topic to discuss. After the discussion is complete, the group is re-organized into new teams, each one containing a member from each previous section-teams. Thus, the newly formed team gets the whole picture of the topic. Though seemingly difficult to organize, this technique is highly beneficial, because every student is involved in explaining the material to his or her group-mates, which is obviously impossible without understanding the topic. On the other hand, it makes much easier for the teacher to decide on the "weakest links" during the assessment.

The number of team members may differ according to the technique used – from two people during think-pair-share activity to simply dividing a large group into two teams during quizzes or advantage/disadvantage discussion. A teacher is to provide the best possible homogeneity between the teams, so that each one of them has equal chances to succeed. A good competition can take place only between well-matched competitors, which is virtually impossible in the groups of students with different levels of knowledge, as it may happen during the second language learning on technical specialities. Cooperative learning becomes highly beneficial when individual academic competition, at times creating a lower self-esteem, fails to provide self-motivation for students with little knowledge on the subject.

However, teachers implementing cooperative learning method can encounter "hostility" [4] from certain students, who may consider that they are held back by the weaker group-mates or vice versa, feel ineffective and ignored. Private discussions with the teacher or a confidential written feedback may help to solve the problem.

Sources:

1.   http://serc.carleton.edu/introgeo/cooperative/index.html
2.   http://college.cengage.com/education/pbl/tc/coop.html
3.   http://serc.carleton.edu/introgeo/cooperative/whatis.html#elements
4.   http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cooperative_learning