

Cooperative learning in interpreter training

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Abstract

Training for translators and interpreters in the modern era should go beyond adapting to professional changes: it should equip students with the ability to continuously train themselves throughout their entire professional life, to have meta-cognitive skills, to take control of their own progress, to define and achieve goals, to reflect on their performance and progress. This can be achieved by fostering self-reflection, peer cooperation, and a strong sense of autonomy. In order to fully embrace the idea of lifelong learning, students must be educated on how to become independent learners and enhance their skills for autonomous learning and self-reflection. One approach to cultivating autonomy involves implementing the principles of cooperative learning. The purpose of this article is to introduce the principles of cooperative learning and suggest several ways in which they can be put to practice in the interpreting classroom.

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1. Cooperative learning defined

Cooperative learning is a constructivist approach to teaching and learning first introduced in the 1980s by Johnson and Johnson at the University of Minnesota. The authors define it as "small-group instruction in which students work together to maximize their own and each other's learning" (Johnson and Johnson 2013, 2). Since its introduction, the approach gained worldwide attention and has become "one of the most successful and widespread applications of social and educational psychology to practice" (Johnson and Johnson 2009, 365). Other scholars define cooperative learning placing emphasis on distinct facets. Sharan (1994, 336) highlights its student-oriented nature: "a group- and student-centered approach to teaching and learning", while Slavin (2011, 344) emphasizes the importance of student interaction – "an instructional method in which teachers organize students into small groups that then work together so that members can help each other learn the content". However, it is clear that all of them use the term cooperative learning to refer to a set of methods in which students work together in small groups to help each other achieve learning goals.

Such groups can be organized in a number of ways: students can be assigned to heterogeneous or homogenous groups, or can be asked to form groups based on their preferences. Johnson and Johnson propose three types of cooperative groups: formal, informal, and base groups.

In formal cooperative groups, students work on mastering some specific educational content. These groups can last from one class period to several weeks, with students working together to complete a task in order to achieve a common goal. The teacher's role is to divide students into groups, introduce the content of the lesson, and assign tasks to the groups. The teacher also monitors the groups and intervenes when there is a need to teach collaborative skills. They also assist in mastery where needed and evaluate the results achieved. Finally, teachers guide groups in reflecting on effectiveness (Johnson and Johnson 1991, 10).

Informal groups are formed for the purpose of active cognitive processing during a teaching unit. They last from minutes to an entire class period, are randomly formed, and again are directed toward a common goal. Throughout their duration, they keep students focused on the material and help to create an appropriate atmosphere for learning and to ensure that students are cognitively processing the material. Common activities include discussion: at the beginning of the lesson, students contribute what they already know about the topic and anticipate the content of the lesson, while at the end they summarise the lesson (Johnson and Johnson 1991, 10).

The final type of group is the base group, which is long-term in duration and serves primarily to provide a sense of belonging

and support students throughout their studies so that each can bring their learning to a successful conclusion (Johnson and Johnson 1991, 10).

As Johnson and Johnson repeatedly note, it is not enough to simply sit students down next to each other and tell them they are expected to cooperate. Without clearly established boundaries, group collaboration can be ineffective and thus ultimately undesirable: some students will do all the work while others “ride along”; the more talented students, by engaging in the work, further deepen their skills while the less talented students do not develop (Johnson and Johnson 1991, 15). Cooperative learning is therefore characterized by the following five principles that ensure effective engagement of all students in the process: positive interdependence, individual accountability and personal responsibility, supportive interactions, appropriate use of social skills, and group-centered reflection (Johnson and Johnson 2009). Failure to adhere to these principles undermines the efficacy of the approach and impedes the realization of the anticipated benefits outlined in the next section.

Positive interdependence occurs when individuals believe that a goal can only be achieved if all members of the group achieve the goal, so no one succeeds at the expense of others. It causes supportive interaction as group members support each other in their efforts and help each other.

Positive interdependence results in *individual accountability and personal responsibility*, as each group member's actions are evaluated, and the result of this evaluation is provided to both the individual and the group. Each member is responsible for their part of the work, and thus for the success of the whole group. They demonstrate how the group work has contributed to their learning, and how they in turn have contributed to the group's learning. Group members are pleased both that they have accomplished their part of the task, but also that they have contributed to the accomplishment of the task for others (Johnson and Johnson 2009, 368).

Cooperative learning inevitably involves interaction, but it is important that there is *supportive interaction*. Among the elements that characterize supportive interaction, the authors include trusting behaviors, exchanging or sharing materials and information, providing help, support, and feedback, encouraging reasoning, or motivating each other to achieve a goal (Johnson and Johnson 2009, 368-369).

Effective cooperation and interaction is conditioned by the *social skills* that make it possible. Students should consciously learn social skills, as they do not “magically appear just when we need them” (Johnson and Johnson 1991, 21), and need to be encouraged to use them. Students need to trust each other, communicate appropriately and clearly, accept, respect and support each other, and be able to resolve conflicts constructively (Johnson and Johnson 1991, 21).

The last principle is *group-oriented reflection*, which should take place in an atmosphere of mutual respect. In order to improve the effectiveness

of the collaboration, group members evaluate which specific activities have or have not contributed to the achievement of the goal, which can be retained, and which would be better not repeated or modified (Johnson and Johnson 2009, 369).

2. Benefits of cooperative learning

Based on the abovementioned principles such as positive interdependence and personal accountability, it can be assumed that cooperative learning indirectly influences the development of student autonomy. Johnson and Johnson (1994) argued that cooperative learning promotes student autonomy by providing opportunities for active involvement in decision-making, fostering ownership of learning, and encouraging opportunity for individual and group progress. Research specifically examining the direct link between cooperative learning and student autonomy would provide more conclusive evidence in this area. However, it can be argued that through positive interdependence, personal accountability, and peer feedback, cooperative learning fosters self-regulatory behaviors such as goal-setting, self-monitoring, and self-evaluation, which are all at the heart of interpreter training.

While research on the relationship of cooperative learning and autonomy is lacking, there is a substantial body of evidence that demonstrates its other benefits. As shown by more than 1,200 studies that compared competitive, individual and cooperative forms of learning around the world and across all levels of the education system, cooperative learning compares favorably to the former in three broad areas in particular: effort to achieve, positive interpersonal relationships, and psychological adjustment (Johnson and Johnson 2019).

In terms of effort to achieve, it increases performance and productivity, promotes higher-level cognitive reasoning, knowledge transfer, and also creativity as it leads to more frequent generation of new ideas and solutions. It also positively influences students' behaviour and the quality and depth of their relationships (despite barriers that may arise due to different cultural or socio-economic backgrounds, language barriers, gender or different levels of skills and knowledge). Better relationships tend to reduce absenteeism, increase students' engagement and sense of personal responsibility towards the group and the educational institution, among other things. The application of principles of cooperative learning improves persistence, morale, willingness to endure frustration for the benefit of the group, and willingness to listen to and be influenced by classmates. In addition, it increases achievement motivation and academic productivity, at all levels of the educational system.

In terms of psychological adjustment, cooperative learning teaches students to accept others and encourage them to succeed, which improves

the self-esteem and self-worth of the whole group. In addition, students find it easier to become autonomous and independent through cooperation.

The authors came to the same conclusions after conducting a meta-analysis in 2014 of 305 peer-reviewed studies that addressed the application of cooperative learning in university instruction (Johnson and Johnson 2014).

3. Application in Interpreter Training

The constraints of limited time, the need for extensive practice to attain mastery, and large class sizes pose challenges in effectively engaging every student in a traditional classroom setting. Additionally, providing individual feedback becomes impractical due to the sheer number of students. In such circumstances, working in groups provides more interpreting opportunities. Cooperative learning can be adapted for all modes of interpreting, be it consecutive, simultaneous, chuchotage, dialogic, or court interpreting. The following exercises are intended for simultaneous, consecutive, or dialogic interpreting. Applying the principles of cooperative learning can enhance students' learning experience, foster collaborative skills, and ultimately cultivate learner autonomy. However, successful implementation requires the design of well-structured tasks that adhere to the aforementioned principles.

To that end, the following activities are based on the principle of positive interdependence, where students are individually accountable for their part of the work. At the end of each activity, students create a supportive environment by pooling their knowledge and insight to analyze their classmates' and their own performance and to devise strategies to address the challenges at hand. It is important to bear in mind that each activity is closed with group-oriented reflection of the group processes, which requires the use of social skills. Students should have the opportunity to evaluate their own input, express (dis)satisfaction with their classmate's work, suggest improvements to the way their team works, give and accept feedback, and in general communicate constructively about the task at hand. Simple group work is thus transformed into cooperative learning.

Two cooperative activities suitable for consecutive interpreting are proposed by Cao (2017a): Speaking and Retelling Activity, and Speaking and Interpreting Activity. In both activities, students form a group of three, where each member is assigned a specific task. The Speaker prepares and presents a speech on a designated topic, while the Reteller/Interpreter retells the speech in the source language, or interprets it into the target language. In both activities, members are asked to complete a peer-assessment form.

While Cao initially proposed these activities for after-class practice (in formal cooperative groups that are rather stable and may last

up to several weeks), they could also be utilized in informal cooperative groups as an introductory exercise in an interpreting class.

A similar activity can be used in simultaneous interpreting. Students work in groups of four. Students A and B are responsible for the preparation, presentation and recording of a speech (preferably in .mp4 format or similar) on a previously defined topic, which is then interpreted simultaneously by Student C via a Zoom session with interpreting enabled or a specialized software for interpreting practice. Student D plays the role of the listener and provides feedback to the interpreter based solely on their classmate's interpreting performance.

Alternatively, students can work in groups of four, where Student A is responsible for recording a speech on a given topic. Student B listens to the speech and identifies the main idea of each section of the speech. These can be written down in a simple Word document and uploaded to a cloud storage that is accessible to the students (such as OneDrive, Google Disc, Moodle, etc.) Student C then interprets the speech. Finally, student D then listens to the interpreted version of the speech and identifies its main ideas, writes them down in a document and uploads it. Students then work together to see whether Student C has managed to successfully render the main ideas of the speech.

To further promote a dynamic learning experience where students actively engage, students should be encouraged to form groups with varying compositions in each lesson. This way, students have ample opportunities to develop a range of skills, observe their peers, learn from each other, and pool their knowledge and previous experience to devise creative solutions.

Another intrinsically cooperative activity is the role play. Role plays have been widely used in interpreter training in dialogic interpreting in business contexts (Cirillo and Radicioni 2017) or court interpreting (Hunt-Gómez and Gómez Moreno 2015). The education goals range from practicing topic vocabulary or interpreting techniques to rehearsing challenging situations (Wadensjö 2014). It follows that there are various forms of role play for various purposes and learning stages. Students can be asked to prepare and record a role play dialogue for their peer, or act out an impromptu dialogue on the spot with a third student taking on the role of the interpreter. In the case of impromptu dialogues, students should have some instructions to follow, and the roles of each participant should be explained beforehand, as well as the goal of their interaction. The trainer should ensure that the role play is followed by group-oriented reflection to improve the effectiveness of students' collaboration.

A crucial aspect of cooperation and of interpreter training is peer feedback (Holewik 2020). Trainees should be encouraged to form informal cooperative groups during practice sessions to provide constructive self-evaluation and peer-feedback. The implementation of structured feedback

for both the speaker and reteller or interpreter helps trainees identify strengths and areas for improvement. When done cooperatively, this creates a supportive learning environment and enhances self-reflection skills (Kagan 1992). To be able to provide constructive and targeted feedback, students can work with pre-designed evaluation charts (an overview is presented in Machová 2016). In later stages, each student can design an evaluation chart for himself or herself based on the mistakes they commonly make, and thus track their own progress.

Another task suitable for working in formal cooperative groups is the preparation of mock conferences, interpreting workshops and other situated learning contexts in which students can cooperate, share experiences, and learn from each other's successes and failures (González-Davies and Enríquez-Raído 2016).

An alternative approach to working in base cooperative groups, which are long-term and serve primarily to support students throughout their studies, would entail base groups combined with peer mentoring and coaching. Within these base groups, the more experienced students are grouped with those in the early stages of their training, enabling mentors to offer guidance, support, inspiration, and a model of performance. These groups can open holistically across the study program, incorporating students from various academic years.

4. The role of the teacher

The trainer plays an indispensable role in establishing cooperative learning experiences in their classroom. Trainers not only structure the groups and plan activities, they should also teach students the necessary cooperative social skills, promote student interaction and help them accept responsibility and constructive feedback (Gillies 2016). This requires strong presence throughout the lesson. Cao (2017b) summarizes their multifaceted task into five roles as follows: the designer, the role model, the facilitator, the advisor, and the monitor. It becomes evident that the success of the application of cooperative learning largely depends on the role of the trainer.

5. Conclusion

Cooperative learning holds great potential for enhancing interpreter training by promoting student autonomy, fostering collaborative skills, and creating a supportive learning environment. By implementing the principles of cooperative learning, students can actively engage in the learning process and achieve better outcomes. In the context of interpreter training, where time constraints and large classes pose challenges, cooperative learning offers a practical solution. Incorporating cooperative learning principles into interpreter training not only equips

students with the necessary skills but also instills a lifelong learning mindset by fostering autonomy, collaboration, and self-reflection. Embracing cooperative learning in interpreter training can contribute to the development of competent and resilient professionals.

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