

Useful Expressions for Implementing Cooperative Learning in English

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Abstract

With the Ministry of Education, Sports, Science and Technology calling for junior and senior high school English classes in Japan to be more communicative and taught in English, teachers need effective tools to help make their classrooms more interactive. Cooperative learning activities have the potential to increase interaction among students and to work well in creating a communicative learning environment. In this paper, we review some basic concepts of cooperative learning and present a list of useful English expressions that we have developed to aid students as they engage in cooperative learning activities. Findings are given after using the list for 22 months in a private, all-girls secondary school in Japan which suggest that the list contributed to smoother interactions amongst students, as well as increased student motivation and confidence.

Keywords: cooperative learning, collaboration, MEXT policy, interaction, communicative language learning

Introduction

The teaching of English in Japanese classrooms is in the midst of transformation. With the educational reforms instituted by the Ministry of Education, Sports, and Technology (MEXT), teachers of English are being called upon to make their classrooms more communicative (MEXT, 2011). Furthermore, at the senior high school level, teachers have been required to conduct their lessons primarily in English rather than Japanese since 2013. For many high school teachers who have spent the majority of their careers

delivering lessons in their native tongue of Japanese, this shift might seem difficult and even somewhat overwhelming. MEXT has further recently announced that, from the year 2020, junior high school English classes in Japan will also need to be conducted in English (MEXT, 2014). This means that junior high school teachers also must begin to prepare for the shift to a communicative, English-medium form of instruction.

The need for an English-medium classroom implies not only changes in how teachers conduct their lessons, but also in the expectations of students' interactions with their teachers and with one another. There is a tremendous amount of potential for language education; however, teachers will need practical ways in which to put into effect the new MEXT policies. New ways of lesson design thus need to be explored. Elsewhere (Kanamaru, Laurier, Plaza, & Shiramizu, 2013), we have suggested the usefulness of cooperative learning (CL) both as an aid for teachers designing lessons and for students interacting with one another in English-medium classrooms. However, upon observing students as they attempted to interact with one another in CL based activities, we found that students had trouble sustaining conversations. We realized that it was not enough to design activities that encouraged English-medium interactions; rather, we also needed to provide students with specific, useful phrases that they could utilize to successfully communicate with one another.

In this paper, we review the basic concepts of CL and then focus on certain tools that enable students to successfully collaborate and interact in English. We provide a list of phrases that we developed through class observation and student interviews that we propose to be a useful aid in instituting CL activities in English classrooms. Afterwards, we report on how the list was used in some English-medium, junior high classrooms and discuss its potential for further applications.

Cooperative Learning

Cooperative learning is based on the position that students learn best when collaborating towards a common learning goal. By cooperating with one another as they interact about lesson content, students can positively contribute to each other's learning. Creating a CL environment, however, is more than simply putting students together and expecting them to interact with one another. Activities need to be structured in such a way that all participants have equal opportunity to contribute to the task. Furthermore, rather than compete with one another, CL activities encourage students to work together to achieve their learning goals. Many writers (Jacobs, Power & Loh, 2002; Johnson & Johnson, 1999; Kagan & Kagan, 2009) have called attention to four principles that underlie any successful CL activity. For purposes of this paper we have chosen to use the terms *positive interdependence*, *individual accountability*, *equal opportunity to participate*, and *maximum peer interactions*.

Positive Interdependence

Positive interdependence implies that CL activities need to provide students with situations where they are dependent on one another to succeed at the learning task. An analogy can be made to a team of mountain climbers each attached to one another by a rope. The action of each member contributes to everyone successfully reaching the top of the mountain. All members must succeed if any individual member is to succeed. In

CL activities, the team succeeds together. Students are not competing against one another; rather, they are working together. CL tasks further need to be structured in such a way that students can succeed better as a team than by working individually. An example of this concept in use could be an information gap type of task where each group member is given a vital piece of information. All the various pieces of information are required to complete the task.

Individual Accountability

Individual accountability implies that each member of the group is responsible if the group is to succeed. Similar to a relay race where everyone must do their best for the whole team to succeed, each member of the group must do their part. Considering the above activity of the information gap, each member is given a vital piece of information that they are responsible to share with the group. If they do not do their part, the whole group is affected.

Equal Opportunity to Participate

All students need to be given an equal chance to contribute to the work of the group. A common occurrence in many group activities is that certain students tend to dominate, while others do not have the chance to offer contributions. To encourage a productive learning experience for all group members, CL activities need to be structured in such a way that all students are offered an equal amount of time to contribute to the task. Assigning time periods for each student to contribute is one way. For example, in the above information gap task, each student could be given thirty seconds to offer their information. Another way to help provide equal opportunity to participate is by creating specific, rotating roles for each member of the group, such as *discussion leader*, *timekeeper*, and *note taker*.

Maximum Peer Interactions

The CL principle of maximum peer interaction includes two aspects: quantity and quality of peer interactions. When students in a classroom organized in groups are all working on tasks simultaneously, the quantity of interactions is maximized, and the classroom becomes more communicative. This classroom contrasts with the typical situation of whole class discussion in which only one student at a time speaks while the rest of the class passively waiting for their turn. In groups of two to four members, peers are more likely to listen to one another and provide feedback as well. Teachers can then be free to circulate and offer help to each group. The quality of peer interactions improves when students do thinking tasks, such as giving each other explanations and using collaborative skills to help one another.

Class activities designed with these four concepts in mind have the potential to create a lively, interactive, and communicative classroom. CL activities are not meant to substitute for direct teacher instruction; rather, they are intended to enhance such direct instruction (Kagan & Kagan, 2009). When a teacher presents a new language structure, for example, CL-based group work, which naturally facilitates interaction, can be an effective way for students to practice the new structures. However, putting students into groups and expecting them to interact entirely in English is, as has been above mentioned, not a simple process. In addition to practicing the target language,

students need to be socially conscious of each other and exercise collaborative skills that enable them to work effectively as a group or team. Teaching students collaborative skills, then, can be an important part of helping students function in an English medium environment.

In addition to the mentioned four principles, collaborative skills form another essential component of CL. Language classes can be opportune settings for students to learn how to collaborate with one another, as the purpose of learning a language is to communicate with others. However, students sometimes fail to collaborate effectively because they either lack the necessary skills (Jacobs & Liu, 1996) or do not utilize the collaborative skills that they have acquired. Jacobs and Liu (1996) maintained that developing these skills is closely interconnected with learning language functions. They argued that “the key function of language is to communicate, and much of that communication takes one form or another of collaboration. The more skilled students become at using language, the better they become at collaboration” (p. 26).

Therefore, teachers need to teach these skills and highlight the importance of these skills. Moreover, MEXT has stated that when conducting language activities, teachers should focus on functions of language such as facilitating communication, expressing emotions, transmitting information, expressing opinions and intentions, and instigating action (MEXT, 2011, pp. 5-6). MEXT emphasizes English language teaching for practical use, and to fulfill that goal, teaching these collaborative skills along with language functions might be indispensable. Considering the importance of teaching collaborative skills for use inside and outside classes, this paper introduces a list of classroom expressions that particularly focuses on student-student interactions for activities using CL structures.

The List of Classroom Expressions for CL

This list of expressions was developed for students and for teachers when working with others to develop language skills as well as collaborative skills. It is based on students' actual interactions in class; Japanese expressions that students were using during pair/group work were noted and later translated into English. As a result, all the Japanese expressions on the list are colloquial, so students can easily find what they want to say. The expressions are categorized into four groups, based on observations of student interactions (see Appendix): Questions (Confirming, Making requests/Asking permission, Asking for opinions, Various requests); Responses; Fillers; and Sustainers (Facilitating/Action-initiating functions, Interactive functions, and Cheerleading functions).

One group of expressions, fillers, might require explanation. Filler expressions can be used when showing that the speakers are thinking or listening. These phrases are useful, but students do not really learn or have chances to practice them much in the classroom. Thus, it could be a valuable opportunity to use them for the purpose of smooth communication in the classroom. Some expressions overlap categories; for example, “I don't know” can be both fillers and responses.

Because this list was developed for use with CL activities, the main focus is on student-student interactions. Many textbooks spare one or two pages for classroom interactions

and typically offer only expressions for teacher-student interactions, such as “Open your books” or “I forgot my homework.” Therefore, in this list, the focus is on student-student interactions, such as expressing ideas and asking each other questions.

Additionally, expressions for some teacher instructions to encourage student collaboration are included in the list. These expressions are divided into two sections. One section contains practical classroom instructions, such as “Put your desks together” or “Share your ideas with your partner.” The other section contains instructions enhancing collaborative skills, such as “Make eye contact” or “Show that you are listening.” We consider these nonverbal communication methods to be very important to successful communication, and teachers need to keep emphasizing their importance until students use them naturally.

The list can provide linguistic support for students because it is a tool that they can refer to as they interact with one another. It can further give a sense of relief and confidence to students and create a positive atmosphere in the classroom where students feel more comfortable making mistakes and receiving feedback. Some tick boxes are provided for each expression for the students to tick right after they use an expression. This ticking system enables students to reflect on which expressions they did and did not use. Such reflection could become a useful method of language reinforcement. Moreover, the list is not only a tool for students but also for teachers. It is highly recommended that teachers use these expressions as much as possible in their teacher talk, as it is beneficial for students to see how the expressions are used.

With regard to the level of the vocabulary on the list, we referred to General Service List K1 and K2, which consists of 2000 basic words that are frequently used in daily life (Cobb, 2002; Heatley, Nation, & Coxhead, 2002). This was done to make sure all the expressions were simple enough for the students to use. The list of expressions is meant as a scaffolding aid to students; they gradually learn to utilize the expressions without looking at the list, thereby becoming more autonomous in their language use.

Before each activity, the teacher took some time to go through the list so that students could look for the expressions to use and prepare themselves to use the expressions. Types of CL structures that were used successfully were Round Robin, Rally Robin, Four Corners and Jigsaw, among others (Kagan & Kagan, 2009). In a previous paper, we detailed several activities using CL structures tailored specifically for secondary school environments (Kanamaru et al., 2013).

Method

Participants

The participants were a group of ninth graders, aged fifteen, at a well-known, private, all girls secondary school located in the city of Kawasaki in Kanagawa prefecture, Japan. They had been learning English using CL structures since fall 2011 when they were seventh graders. The list was implemented when they were ninth graders in May 2013. At the time this study was conducted in March 2015, they had already become accustomed to CL-based learning since they had been learning in such a way for four years. During the first few years of implementing CL in English lessons, student-student discussions and interactions were mostly done in the students’ first language, Japanese.

After a solid CL-based lesson pattern was established and the list was implemented, the students were encouraged to interact with each other in English.

Procedure

After 22 months of implementing the list in four English classes, a printed questionnaire written in Japanese was given to all of 97 students in the four classes at the end of the semester in March 2015; the questionnaire was designed to see if they regarded the list as a useful tool for CL-based interactions and as a motivating tool for English learning.

The questionnaire included four statements, and students were encouraged to rate each statement on a five-point Likert scale by selecting an answer that most closely matched their feelings (i.e., strongly agree – agree – neutral – disagree – strongly disagree) in relation to each statement and to add comments about why the particular answer was chosen. The statements (S1 – S4), translated into English, were as follows.

- S1. The list has helped you to speak out during a discussion.
- S2. The list has helped you to articulate your ideas beyond the phrases on the list.
- S3. With the list, you have felt more confident in your English speaking skills.
- S4. With the list, you have felt more motivated in learning English.

Results and Discussion

The results of the questionnaire survey are given in Table 1. Each cell shows how many students chose the item and its percentage of the whole. For the positive responses to each question, scores of “Strongly agree” and “Agree” were put together. Similarly, the negative responses were calculated by adding the number of “Disagree” and “Strongly Disagree” responses.

Table 1. Questionnaire Results

	S1.	S2.	S3.	S4.
Strongly agree	29 (29.9%)	19 (19.6%)	22 (22.7%)	32 (33%)
Agree	60 (61.9%)	55 (56.7%)	63 (64.9%)	50 (51.5%)
Neutral	6 (6.2%)	17 (17.5%)	8 (8.2%)	15 (15.5%)
Disagree	2 (2.1%)	5 (5.2%)	3 (3.1%)	0 (0.0%)
Strongly disagree	0 (0.0%)	1 (1.0%)	1 (1.0%)	0 (0.0%)
Positive response (strongly agree + agree)	89 (91.8%)	74 (76.3%)	85 (87.6%)	82 (84.5%)
Negative response (strongly disagree + disagree)	2 (2.1%)	6 (6.2%)	4 (4.1%)	0 (0.0%)

Note. N = 97

The results of the questionnaire suggested students generally considered the list to be helpful in establishing smoother English language communication with their classmates. The results also suggested that the list helped build confidence and contributed to increased motivation among the students. The individual comments in the questionnaire further indicated that students felt the list played a significant role in helping them during discussions, especially because it encouraged them to jump into conversations or at least say something (e.g., a quick response).

Regarding the effectiveness of the list in helping students move beyond the list phrases to articulate their ideas (Statement 2), responses suggested that students felt the list contributed to learning beyond the specific phrases presented. While the phrases on the list mainly facilitate learners linking one utterance to another, thereby smoothing interactions, the list also may have contributed to students' belief in their ability to convey their messages in English during conversation. Even so, the percentage of positive responses to the second statement was the lowest of the four with 76.3% positive responses. While the majority of students felt they articulated themselves more effectively, 23.7% did not, suggesting that some students may, in fact, have had difficulties making themselves understood in English on their own despite the presence of the list. Perhaps attention needs to be given to how to better help students use the list as a springboard into other types of communication.

Additionally, the results of the questionnaire suggest that students found that they could use their knowledge of English, which they had accumulated over time, in order to convey certain messages they did not think they could express in a language other than Japanese. These students had been learning English for about three years and already knew some English grammar rules and vocabulary, but they had unfortunately lacked opportunities to use this knowledge in a communicative way. Gaining communicative competence through actual practice of the language could be an important factor in making students more motivated.

Future Directions

The expressions in the list are categorized by their function as questions, responses, fillers, and sustainers. Oral Communication Strategies (OCSs) could offer another way to categorize the expressions (Nakatani, 2005). These strategies are related to interlocutors' negotiation behaviors and how learners conduct oral interaction. There are two major categories of OCSs: achievement strategies and reduction strategies. Achievement strategies pertain to actively repairing and maintaining interactions and can offer positive learner outcomes, whereas reduction strategies pertain to the avoidance of confronting communication difficulties and can potentially result in negative learner outcomes. Many of the expressions from the list can be classified as achievement strategies. Several subcategories have been created under achievement strategies: *help-seeking, modified interaction, modified output, time-gaining, maintenance, and self-solving strategies* (Nakatani, 2005). Organizing the list according to subcategories such as these could offer new insight into implementing the list in class practice.

Conclusion

Cooperative learning has been shown to be an effective tool in increasing student interaction and has the potential to make English classrooms in Japan more communicative. When students of English work together in groups, it is beneficial for them to be given guidance and support in how to successfully collaborate with one another. We have developed a list of classroom expressions for CL activities as a way to help students work with one another in English and, hopefully, attain a deeper and more meaningful communicative experience. We invite others to implement the list in their classrooms as well and hope that it proves to be a useful resource.

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Appendix

Student-Student Interactions

1 QUESTIONS

Confirming

1-1	それって ~ってこと？	You mean~?
1-2	大丈夫？	Is it alright / ok?
1-3	ひとりでできる？	Can you do it by yourself?
1-4	私、あってるかな？	I wonder if I'm right.
1-5	この意味何だっけ？	What does this mean again?
1-6	これ合ってる？	Is this right/correct?
1-7	本当？	Really? Are you sure?
1-8	そうなの？	Is that so?
1-9	できた？終わった？	Are you finished/done?

Making requests / Asking for permission

1-10	あなたのノートを見せてくれる？	Could you show me your notebook (, please)?
1-11	大きな声で話してくれる？	Could you speak louder (, please)?
1-12	教えてくれる？	Could you help me (, please)?
1-13	もう一回言ってくれる？	Could you repeat that (, please)?
1-14	もう少しゆっくり話して。	Could you speak more slowly (, please)?

1-15	～を取って。	Could you pass me～(, please)?
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1-16	一緒に使ってもいい？	Can I share it with you?
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Asking for opinions

1-17	あなたは？	How about you?
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1-18	そう思わない？	Don't you think so?
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1-19	あなたはどう思う？	What do you think?
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1-20	どうして？	Why? Why not?
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Various requests

1-21	次は何だっけ？	What's next?
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1-22	聞いているの？	Are you listening?
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1-23	これどうやるの？	How do you do this?
------	----------	---------------------

1-24	これは何て発音するの？	How do you pronounce this?
------	-------------	----------------------------

1-25	今どこやってるの？	What are you working on now?
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1-26	～は英語で何と言いますか？	How do you say～in English?
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1-27	～のスペルは何？	How do you spell～?
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1-28	～はどういう意味？	What does～mean?
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1-29	それをどうやって訳した？	What did you translate it into?
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2 RESPONSES

2-1	私はあなたの意見に賛成だわ。	I agree.
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2-2	私はそう思わないわ。	I don't think so.
2-3	それいいね。	That sounds good.
2-4	しっくりこないね。	I don't know.
2-5	言ってる意味がよくわからないな。	I don't understand what you mean.
2-6	わかった！	I understand. / I got it.
2-7	つまり～ってこと。	I mean～.
2-8	私の答え、あなたと同じ。	My answer is the same as yours.
2-9	私の答え、あなたと違うな。	My answer is different from yours.
2-10	私も。（肯定、否定）	Me, too. / Me, neither.
2-11	私も。私もそう思う。	So do I. / I think so, too.
2-12	いいよ。	Sure. / Of course. / No problem.

3 FILLERS

3-1	～かなあとってたんだけど。	I was wondering～.
3-2	間違ってるかも。	It may not be correct.
3-3	そうだなあ、	Let me see/think～.
3-4	～でしょ。	～, you know. / You know, ～. / ～, right?
3-5	あのね、	You know what?
3-6	良く分からないけど、	I'm not sure but ～.

4 SUSTAINERS

Facilitating/Action-initiating functions

4-1	順番に言おう。	Let's take turns.
4-2	時計回りに順番に（輪番制で）言おう。	Let's go around clockwise.
4-3	メモを取るね。	I'll take notes.
4-4	次の問題に行こう。	Let's move on to the next question.
4-5	～の意見も聞こう。	Let's listen to ～.
4-6	お先にどうぞ。	You can start first. / Go ahead.
4-7	次が私ね。	I'm next.
4-8	こうしよう。	Let's do it this way.
4-9	これは後回しにしよう。	Let's work on it later.
4-10	みんなの意見を聞かせて。 。	Let's share our opinions / ideas.
4-11	お互いの文章を比べよう。 。	Let's compare our sentences.
4-12	辞書で単語を調べよう。	Let's look up the word in the dictionary.
4-13	終わったよ。	We're finished.
4-14	まだ終わってないよ。	We haven't finished yet.
4-15	ちょっと待って。	Just a moment (, please).

Interactive functions

4-16	～してくれてありがとう。 。	Thank you for -ing ~.
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4-17	わからなくなってきた。	I am (getting) confused (about) ~ .
4-18	全然わかんない！	I have no idea /clue!
4-19	～が抜けているよ。	～ is missing.
4-20	ここに～を入れるんだよ。	You should put ~ here.
4-21	そう思わない？	Don't you think so?
4-22	そうかもー。	That might be true.
4-23	でしょ？	See?
4-24	同じだよ。	Same here.
4-25	私の答え、あなたのと違うな。	My answer is different from yours.
4-26	私の答え、あなたと同じ。	My answer is the same as yours.
4-27	間違っていたらごめんね。	I'm sorry if I'm wrong.

Cheerleading Functions

4-28	なるほど。	I see.
4-29	たぶん。	Probably.
4-30	大丈夫！がんばって！	You can do it!
4-31	いいじゃん！	Good job. / Nice work.
4-32	良さそう。	Looks good.
4-33	良い答え(考え)だと思うよ。	I think it's a good answer / idea.
4-34	良いアイデアだね。	I like your idea.
4-35	いいね！	I like that!

4-36	そのとおり。	That's right.
4-37	惜しい。	Close. / Almost.
4-38	言ってる意味わかるよ。	I know what you mean.
4-39	いいね！	(That) Sounds good!
4-40	この部分がわかんないな。	I don't understand this part.
4-41	ちょっと違う。	Not quite.
4-42	その訳し方、いいね。	I like your translation.

Teacher Instructions

5 PRACTICAL CLASSROOM INSTRUCTIONS

5-1	机を並べなさい。	Put your desks together.
5-2	隣同士で答え合わせを しなさい。	Check your answers with your partner.
5-3	～を右側の人に渡しな さい。	Pass ~ to the person on your right.
5-4	役割を交代しなさい。	Switch roles.
5-5	ペアで話し合いなさい。	Share your ideas with your partner.
5-6	グループで話し合いな さい。	Share your ideas in your group.
5-7	クラスで話し合いましょ う。	Let's share our ideas with the class.

6 INSTRUCTION ENHANCING COLLABORATIVE SKILLS

6-1	注意深く話を聞こう。	Listen carefully to your friends.
6-2	はっきり、ゆっくり話そ	Speak clearly and slowly.

	う。	
6-3	アイコンタクトをしよう。 。	Make eye-contact.
6-4	パートナーには笑顔で！	Smile at your partner.
6-5	話を聞くときは頷こう。	Nod while you're listening.
6-6	ジェスチャーを使って！	Use gestures.
6-7	相手の話の後には何か一言 ！	Give a comment after listening to your partner.

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