Cooperative Learning in the EFL Classroom
Sylvia Fehling, Universität Kassel (Germany)

The following article focuses on cooperative learning in the EFL (English as a Foreign Language) classroom. First, cooperative learning is defined and its relevance and aims especially for EFL teaching and learning are described. Furthermore, it is discussed which role research plays in the context of cooperation in the EFL classroom. Finally, the results of a survey on cooperative learning in the EFL classroom in Germany are shown and conclusions are drawn.¹

1 Cooperative Learning: A Definition

Cooperative learning can be characterized as a social process in which knowledge is acquired through the successful interaction between the group members (Cohen, 1994; Weidner, 2003, p. 33), as Slavin (1995, p. 2) shows:

Cooperative learning refers to a variety of teaching methods in which students work in small groups to help one another learn academic content. In cooperative classrooms, students are expected to help each other, to discuss and argue with each other, to assess each other’s current knowledge and fill in gaps in each other’s understanding.

In addition, the following five elements are important aspects of cooperative learning (Gillies, 2007, p. 4; Weidner, 2003, p. 34):

- Individual Accountability
- Social Skills
- Face-to-Face Interaction
- Positive Interdependence
- Group Processing

*Individual Accountability* “involves students’ understanding that they will be held accountable for their individual contributions to the group, that free-loading will not be tolerated, and that everyone must contribute” (Gillies, 2007, p. 5).

*Social Skills* refer to interpersonal and small group skills such as effective communication which are needed to cooperate successfully (ibid.).

**Face-to-Face Interaction** involves working in small groups where students can see each other and are engaged in face-to-face interaction (ibid., p. 4). Particularly with respect to cooperative EFL teaching and learning, for example in intercultural projects, face-to-face interaction has lately been complemented by online learning: thus, cooperative learning has successfully been implemented into blended learning scenarios (Wilden, 2006).

**Positive Interdependence** among students is established when everybody understands that each member’s contribution is important in helping the group to achieve its goal (Gillies, 2007, p. 4).

**Group Processing** refers to the assessment of cooperative learning. It can be described as a formative assessment that focuses on students’ feedback on the learning process, including the students’ reflection on what they still need to do to accomplish their objectives (ibid., p. 5).

## 2 Relevance of cooperative learning

According to Weidner (2003, pp. 18-25) cooperative learning can be regarded as an answer to cultural, social and economic changes in western societies. These changes can be found within modern family structures. Thus, families with only one child or single-parent families are not unusual nowadays. In addition, the birth rate in quite a few western countries such as Germany is decreasing. According to the German Federal Statistical Office there were only 673 000 children born in 2006 which is the lowest birth rate in Germany since the end of the Second World War (Statistisches Bundesamt, 2007). Consequently, many children have little experience in dealing with siblings or other members of their peer group. Moreover, media and especially computers have a high impact on the development of children’s social and learning interaction. As a consequence, children have to learn and act differently and schools need to offer cooperatively rich learning environments.

Changes can also be found in economics: The ability to work in a team has become a key qualification in the business world, as Weidner (2003, p. 20) points out:

In addition, cooperative learning can be seen in close connection with constructivist learning theories. Constructivism is based on the assumption that a child’s cognition develops through interaction between the individual and its environment. The construction of knowledge is thereby led by assimilation and accommodation and is a highly individual process (Wolff, 2003, p. 324). According to the constructivist concept, there are the following two main principles that are crucial for efficient learning: self-organisation or autonomy and cooperation (ibid.). On the one hand learning can only be successful if the learners feel responsible for their own learning process. On the other hand cooperation with others is needed to compare and if necessary adapt the individual concepts (Wolff, 1994, p. 421). Therefore, cooperative learning is an essential methodological paradigm in the constructivist classroom.

3 Aims of cooperative learning

The aims of cooperative learning can be summarized as follows:

- Academic learning
- Social-affective learning
- Personality development

In the following part these three aspects will be considered in more detail.

3.1 Academic learning

Cohen (1994, p. 6) states that cooperative learning can help students learn academically. On the one hand they acquire the content of the subject and on the other hand they develop meta-disciplinary competence, as for example “higher order thinking skills” (ibid., p. 14). These include forming hypotheses, making decisions and finding categories. In addition, cooperative learning encourages students to find solutions for special problems. Therefore, they have to discuss, form ideas and opinions and have to give feedback, as Cohen (1994, p. 15) points out:

[...] discussion within the group promotes more frequent oral summarizing, explaining, and elaborating what one knows; cooperative learning promotes greater ability to take the perspective of others [...]. in the group setting, one’s thinking is monitored by others and has the benefit of both the input of other people’s thinking and their critical feedback.
Though the influence of cooperative learning on academic learning named above can be transferred to EFL, it has to be emphasized that in the context of EFL teaching and learning the language and not the content plays a major role. Therefore the following theories and factors have to be taken into consideration in the context of language learning and cooperation in the EFL classroom:

- The input hypothesis
- Zone of proximal development (ZPD)
- The interaction hypothesis
- The output hypothesis
- Learning strategies

According to the *input hypothesis* “second language acquisition (SLA) is driven by *comprehensible input*, that is, language that is read or heard that is just a little beyond what the learner already has acquired, a notion Krashen stated in theoretical terms as *i+1*” (Jacobs & McCafferty, 2006, p. 18). Since cooperative learning in English lessons fosters the increase of verbal exchange among students and the improvement of oral communication (Cohen, 1994, pp. 16-17; Schwerdtfeger, 2003, p. 254) it can be argued that the students’ mutual input, though it might contain incorrect forms, is comprehensible and contains examples of *i+1* for many language learners. In this context the *zone of proximal development* (ZPD) by Vygotsky (1978) also has to be taken into consideration. The ZPD can be defined as the difference between what learners can do without help and what they can do with help. By following an adult’s example or an example of a student, a learner can develop the ability to do certain tasks without help or assistance. Thus, individual learning can be encouraged by providing the learner with experience which are in their ZPD. The relevance of the ZPD in connection with cooperative learning is also pointed out by Newman & Holtzman (1993, p. 77, cited in Jacobs & McCafferty, 2006, p. 22):

> Vygotsky’s strategy was essentially a cooperative learning strategy. He created heterogeneous groups of … children […], providing them not only with the opportunity but the need for cooperation and joint activity by giving them tasks that were beyond the developmental level of some, if not all, of them. Under these circumstances, children could create a ZPD for each other, […].

Another theory which is relevant in the context of cooperative learning is the *interaction hypothesis* which focuses on the role of the learner in social interaction. The
theory claims that communication and the negotiation for meaning, such as asking for repetition or clarification, increases the amount of comprehensible input and has a positive influence on language learning. Thus, cooperative learning in small groups and without the fear of being corrected by the teacher offers an ideal setting for the realization of communication and the negotiation for meaning.

Second language learning is not only influenced by comprehensible input, but also by the learners’ output as the output hypothesis claims: Consequently, learners “need to produce language via speech or writing, and to receive feedback on the comprehensibility of their output” (Jacobs & McCaffery, 2006, p. 20) to improve their language proficiency. Cooperative learning plays an important role in this context since it offers students many opportunities to talk to each other, as the results by Long & Porter (1985, cited in Jacobs & McCaffery, 2006, pp. 20-21) make clear:

Long and Porter (1985) found that in an L2 class of 30 students, under typical teacher-fronted, or lockstep, procedures the average time that a student spoke was only 30 seconds per 50-minute lesson. However, when students worked in groups of three for just one quarter of a 50-minute period, the quantity of student talk increased more than 500 percent.

But not only the quantity of student output also the quality can change through cooperative learning since the students have the chance to use a variety of language functions and can practise different aspects of communicative competence.

Cooperative learning activities also offer the opportunity to develop and practise strategies for learning and using language. Especially social-affective strategies such as asking for help and cooperation (O’Malley & Chamot, 1990, p. 139) are fostered in cooperative settings. Consequently, autonomous learning and the ability to plan, control and evaluate the learning process can be enhanced by cooperation.

3.2 Social-affective learning

Another advantage of cooperative learning can be social-affective learning. Pupils can learn to support each other, to deal with heterogeneity in a group, to work in a team and to deal with the perspective of others. A further advantage is that students are able to learn to listen to each other and to solve problems together. This can lead to less fear and stress in a class and can increase the motivation (Slavin, 1995, p. 70). All in all, the
classroom atmosphere can be improved through cooperative learning, as Sapon-Shevin 
(2004, p. 3) demonstrates:

Cooperative learning encourages mutual respect and learning among students with varying 
talents and abilities, languages, racial, and ethnic backgrounds (Marr, 1997). Sudzina 
(1993) reports that cooperative learning is effective in reducing prejudice among students 
and in meeting the academic and social needs of students at risk for educational failure.

Moreover, group work is a very good opportunity to manage a heterogeneous group 
(Cohen, 1994, pp. 21-23). The teacher can integrate high and low achieving students, 
allowing them to support and help each other collectively in the group.

These aspects are closely related to EFL teaching and learning: Thus, affective factors 
such as motivation and the reduction of anxiety to use the foreign language as a means 
of communication are especially relevant for language learning, as Long & Porter 
(1985, p. 211, cited in Jacobs & McCafferty, 2006, p. 27) state:

In contrast to the public atmosphere of lockstep instruction, a small group of peers provides 
a relatively intimate setting and, usually, a more supportive environment in which to try out 
embryonic SL [second language] skills.

Consequently, the willingness to speak and act in a foreign language increases in small 
groups and students feel more confident to produce utterances in their L2 (Dörnyei, 

Though it was emphasized how cooperative learning can influence social-affective 
learning, it has also to be pointed out, that many factors are required in order to foster 
social-affective learning: For example interpersonal and small-group skills such as 
“active listening to each other” and “providing constructive criticism” (Gillies, 2007, 
p. 41) have to be taught in a class, as Gillies (ibid.) makes clear:

Placing children in groups and telling them that they are to cooperate does not ensure that 
they will use the interpersonal and small-group skills needed to work effectively together. 
These skills must be explicitly taught if children are to benefit from their small-group 
experiences.
3.3 Personality development

Cooperative learning can also be highly motivating for the students since it can strengthen the confidence in their own abilities. If learners realize that their contributions are accepted in a group and even necessary and useful for the aim of the group, their self-esteem might rise (Huber, 2004, p. 4).

Giving the learners more authority to make their own decisions, the teacher also prepares the students for their role as citizens in the adult world, as Cohen (1994, p. 19) points out: “They will have more of a sense of control of their own environment, and they will learn how to be active citizens [...]”

4 Research on cooperative learning in the EFL classroom

As already mentioned, cooperative learning in general and especially in the EFL classroom plays an important role. This is also evident if you look at research and publications on this topic. A databank research in FIS Bildung (2007)\textsuperscript{2} has shown 588 publications on the key word “Kooperatives Lernen”.

Among the results are many handbooks with general information about cooperative learning and its implementation in the classroom. Many of these handbooks and guides are publications dealing with research on cooperative learning, the theory behind this concept and tips for the use of cooperative learning at school (e.g. Thousand, Villa & Nevin, 2002).

Another focus can be found on cooperative learning for computer based and web based learning (e.g. McConnell, 2000; Mevarech, 1992; Finkbeiner & Knierim, 2006) and on cooperative learning in the natural sciences, especially in chemistry and physics. Many of the articles present sequences or lessons, which use cooperative learning to deal with specific topics. The publications also present various methods (e.g. jigsaw puzzle, group work or group rallye) as well as educational games which involve cooperative learning. Some articles also discuss the advantages of cooperative learning in the natural sciences and others describe evaluation and assessment in the context of cooperative learning. In general, publications about cooperative learning in the natural sciences cover various topics providing teachers with general information as well as tips for practical usage (e.g. Berger, 2007; Dittmer, 2007).
In addition, the databank FIS Bildung contains publications on *cooperative learning and physical education*. Articles and books about cooperative learning in physical education deal with different methods (e.g. working in pairs, jigsaw puzzle or games), present lesson plans, describe requirements for a successful implementation of cooperative learning and consider the role of the teacher (e.g. Bähr, 2005; Külmer, 2005).

In contrast to the amount of publications dealing with cooperative learning in the natural sciences or in physical education, there are only few publications about *cooperative learning in foreign language learning and teaching* (e.g. Finkbeiner & Knierim, 2006; Finkbeiner, 2004; Finkbeiner & Koplin, 2002; McCafferty, Jacobs & DaSilva Iddings, 2006; Oxford, 1997; Wilden, 2006). In addition, the databank does not contain many entries on the key word *empirical research and cooperative learning*. One of the few empirical research projects on cooperative learning in the EFL classroom is the ADEQUA project (Finkbeiner, Ludwig, Wilden & Knierim, 2006). The ADEQUA project focuses on “situationally adequate learning strategies in self-regulated, text-based cooperative literacy events in the English as a foreign language classroom” as the following quote emphasizes (ibid., p. 257):

The ADEQUA research project, which is funded by the German Research Foundation (DFG), wants to gain empirical evidence as to how autonomous learning in the EFL classroom can effectively be supported during textbased classroom activities. For this purpose, new task formats for the EFL classroom have been developed which allow for independent work with texts in the foreign language (text comprehension) in cooperative literacy events that make cooperation among the learners compulsory. [...] The research project is situated within the context of current efforts in education to implement high-quality student-centered, cognitively challenging classroom activities and to foster autonomous, student-active learning.

In conclusion, it can be claimed that despite the fact that cooperation is a very relevant issue not many empirical studies have dealt with cooperative learning so far. Consequently, there is not much literature on cooperative learning in the EFL classroom. Therefore, it is of intrinsic importance to focus primarily on the aspect of cooperation in the EFL classroom.
Cooperative learning in the EFL Classroom: A survey

At the beginning of the winter term 2007/2008 I conducted a survey on students’ opinions about cooperative learning in the EFL classroom in my class Introduction to English Teaching Methodology at the university of Kassel (Germany).

5.1 The participants

The questionnaire was answered by 99 EFL students, 74 of whom were female (75.15%) and 25 male (24.85%). Most of the participants were between 18 and 21 years old (80.7%). The rest of the course was between 22 and 28 years old.

Most of the participants (85.9%) were in their first semester. The other participants were in their second (4.04%) or third (8.08%) semester. Only one student was a more advanced student.

96.5% were of German, one of Turkish and one of Russian nationality.

5.2 The questionnaire

The questionnaire which was developed on the basis of a questionnaire by Finkbeiner (2001) and Finkbeiner & Fehling (2006, p. 103) consists of 18 questions such as:

- What do you associate with the term cooperation? - Please write down 10 to 15 terms.
- Please complete the following sentence: “Cooperation is …”
- How often did you use cooperative methods in your EFL classes?
- Which experience did you have with cooperation in your EFL classes?
- Please draw a mind map concerning the topic “cooperation”

5.3 Data analysis

In the following part the evaluation of the following question is shown: “What do you associate with the term cooperation? - Please write down 10 to 15 terms.”

In order to analyze the answers a content analysis was carried out (Mayring, 1999). Through this analysis the following categories were found:
1. Academic learning
This category contains answers which focus on academic learning through cooperation. Terms referring to Cohen’s “higher order thinking skills” (1994, p. 14) are also part of this category.
Examples: Exchanging knowledge, improving (language) competence, explaining, questioning.

2. Social-affective learning
This category includes answers which primarily concentrate on the social aspect of learning such as working in heterogeneous groups. In this respect, the given answers considered cooperation as something motivating. Finally, answers which referred to a good learning atmosphere are also included in this category.
Examples: pleasant learning atmosphere, less pressure, respect, solidarity, tolerance.

3. Personality development
This category contains answers focusing on cooperation and personality development.
Examples: Courage, self-confidence, trust.

4. Methods
This category includes methods which are used in connection with cooperative learning.
Examples: Role plays, presentations, project work, partner work.

5. Role of students and teachers
Answers describing the student’s and teacher’s role within cooperative learning are grouped in this category. Furthermore, answers which characterize the relationship between teachers and pupils are part of this category.
Examples: Students as teachers, student oriented lessons, teacher as a supporter.

6. Group processing
This category focuses on the assessment of cooperative learning.
Examples: Individual assessment, feedback.
7. Disadvantages

The disadvantages of cooperation mentioned by the students are summarized in this category.

Examples: Social idling, competition.

5.4 Results

The results give some interesting insight into the students’ concept about cooperation as can be seen in the following table:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>category</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Social-affective learning</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Methods</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic learning</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Role of students and teachers</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personality development</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group processing</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disadvantages</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1: Results of the question: “What do you associate with the term cooperation?”

As table 1 shows most students associate “social-affective learning” with the term cooperation (30%) and mention various cooperative methods (28%). In addition, “academic learning” (26%) is an important issue for many students concerning cooperative learning. While the “role of students and teachers” (10%) is mentioned less frequently, the aspect of “personality development” (4%), “group processing” (1%) and “disadvantages” (1%) are even less important for many students.

Referring to these results it can be said that almost all answers (99%) are positive. They describe advantages of cooperative learning regarding academic and social learning, positive outcomes as well as a variety of methods. Therefore, cooperative learning seems to have a positive connotation for the students.

Nevertheless, the results also show that many students have only a vague idea of cooperative learning since 11% of the students associated *Gruppenarbeit* (*group work*) with cooperative learning. Despite the fact that the German term *Gruppenarbeit* can be used in connection with cooperative learning (Finkbeiner, 2003, p. 15) and “that the keyword ‘Kooperation’ (cooperation) hardly appears in established German hand-books of school education” (ibid.), both concepts are not necessarily the same and have to be differentiated (Huber, 2004, p. 5): Whereas in group work the group product (e. g. filling out a work sheet, working on a text together) is often the main emphasis, the
focus in cooperative learning is on learning and social processes of each individual student during the students’ collaboration (ibid., pp. 5-6; Weidner, 2003, p. 29). In traditional group work there is consequently the risk that students might not participate in the group work, since they might rely on the strongest group members to accomplish the group task. This is known as social idling or social loafing (Huber, 2004, pp. 5-6).

In addition, the results of the question “How often did you use cooperative methods in your EFL classes?” is very surprising: While 14% of the students used cooperative learning regularly and 47.4% used it often in the EFL classroom, 38.6% of the students used cooperative learning only seldom in the EFL classroom. It has to be mentioned, however, that it is unclear whether all students refer to cooperative learning or rather to traditional group work in the questionnaire. Though the students did not have to differentiate between both concepts in the questionnaire, the frequent use of the term group work in answering the question “What do you associate with the term cooperation?” seems to confirm the assumption that the students rather referred to group work.

6 Conclusion

This article has demonstrated that cooperative learning is a highly relevant matter not only with regard to academic and social-affective learning such as the ability to work in a team but also concerning second language learning.

However, the article has also emphasized that there is a lack of empirical research on cooperative learning in general and especially on cooperative learning in the EFL classroom. Moreover, the results of the survey have shown that many students have only a vague idea of cooperative learning and that cooperative learning is not always integrated in the EFL classroom.

Consequently, empirical research in the EFL classroom such as the ADEQUA project (Finkbeiner, Ludwig, Wilden & Knierim, 2006) has to be intensified in order to answer questions such as:

- Why is cooperative learning not used in every EFL classroom?
• How is cooperative learning implemented in the EFL classroom?
• What are the effects of cooperative learning on the learning process?
• How can the effectiveness of cooperative learning in the EFL classroom be evaluated?

In addition, cooperative learning should be an indispensable tool of teacher training at the university and at inservice teacher training, so that the importance of the issue becomes clear and the following claim by Johnson & Johnson (1994, cited in Weidner, 2007, p. 25) can be realized:

Most careers do not expect people to sit in rows and compete with colleagues without interacting with them. Teamwork, communication, effective coordination, and division of labor characterize most real-life settings. It is time for schools to more realistically reflect the reality of adult life. The most logical way to ensure that students master the cooperative skills required in most task-oriented situations is to structure the majority of academic learning situations cooperatively.

Endnotes

1: I want to thank Prof. Dr. Claudia Finkbeiner (University of Kassel) for her valuable information on cooperative learning and for revising the article, Mr StR Stephen Mason (University of Kassel) for proofreading the article and Ms Julia Bohn (University of Kassel) for her help in connection with the data base research.

2: FIS Bildung is a German databank with an electronic collection of recent literature and research on all different fields of education (http://www.fis-bildung.de).

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