

Adapting Textbook Activities FOR Communicative Teaching AND Cooperative Learning

IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING, COMMUNICATIVE LANGUAGE TEACHING (CLT) and cooperative learning (CL) share a common characteristic: in a meaningful task students are asked to exchange information among themselves in small groups and/or with the teacher. This kind of student collaboration has two benefits. First, the whole class actively participates in a task at the same time and students can then compare their findings when the task is over; and second, the meaningful task is rehearsed in class for later use in real communication outside the classroom. In some ELT settings, Hong Kong for example, many obstacles have deterred secondary school English teachers from using either CLT or CL in their classes. These include large class size, lack of training in communicative and cooperative techniques, and mistaking any group work for communicative teaching and cooperative learning. One obstacle that most schools cannot overcome is the extensive language syllabus prescribed by the textbook. Actually, each level of a textbook is often a set of texts, which may include an all-in-one

textbook, listening tapes, a grammar book, and a short story book. In theory, teachers have to follow the rationale and sequence of each chapter; but in reality, for a variety of reasons, teachers skip items in the textbooks.

If the syllabus is too long and detailed, students' abilities are low, or teachers have a heavy schedule of extracurricular activities, teachers may choose only the essential tasks, that is those that require little or no class preparation. When this happens, teachers have little flexibility to explore the use of communicative language teaching and cooperative learning in their classes. This article explains how textbooks can be adapted so that classes include more communicative and cooperative activities, especially for teachers who are hesitant to use CLT and CL because of textbook constraints. Using two microteaching classes taught in City University of Hong Kong as examples, this article demonstrates that even when teachers are required to have students complete tasks in the textbook, they can successfully apply the principles of CLT and CL.

Defining Communicative Language Teaching and Cooperative Learning

Communicative language teaching began in Britain in the 1960s, in part as a replacement for the earlier, highly-structured method of situational language teaching. In this early model, students were given a specific situation or a dilemma that they had to solve. The given situations, more often than not, were irrelevant to the needs of students. For example, teenage students role played as the manager and staff of a company that was having a financial crisis. Unfortunately, many language textbooks are still presenting this model of situational teaching. This is because textbooks are written for a large readership in different countries where English may be the first, second, or a foreign language. If a teacher uses such an activity without any adaptation, English students will be distanced from the situation because the task won't be meaningful to them. Communicative language teaching requires authentic communication, which includes a believable setting, a normal speed in speaking, a range of lexical items suitable for the students' ages, and an overall promotion of learning. Wilkins (1972) believes that people should learn a foreign language for performing different func-

tions. Therefore, it is natural to introduce authentic learning material in class (Nunan 1991; Dubin 1995; Widdowson 1996).

Cooperative learning tasks go a further step by encouraging students to work together and by promoting an equal opportunity for every student to participate in the activity. Improving self-esteem, enjoyment of school, and interethnic relations are key in this approach (Johnson, Johnson and Holubec 1993; Slavin 1995). Cooperative learning also requires strategies for student collaboration and attention to how strictly the teacher should structure activities to help encourage effective cooperation (Sapon-Shevin and Schniedewind 1991). Indeed, many cooperative learning activities combine a group component with other components in which the teacher demonstrates and students work alone (Slavin 1995). In most cases, both CLT and CL require teachers to provide language support in terms of useful vocabulary and grammar so that students are able to succeed in the task (Richards 1995). Students will benefit more from CLT and CL if they understand that communicating and sharing with peers is a language learning strategy that they can apply outside a class setting (Oxford 1990).

The Hong Kong government acknowledges the importance of such concepts in a document stipulating that learners be provided with greater opportunities "for purposeful communication both inside and outside the classroom" (Curriculum Development Council 2002:5). According to the document, in the learning process, teachers should help learners to "learn how to learn" and "think and act independently" (Curriculum Development Council 2002:80). These notions apply not only to Hong Kong; they should be guidelines for teachers in ESL/EFL settings everywhere. To apply the guidelines, teachers should bear in mind the following rules of thumb when they prepare for a communicative or cooperative activity:

1. The activity must be purposeful and meaningful. Students should be given convincing reasons for doing the activity, and they should know what they will have achieved upon completion of the activity.
2. The activity must be authentic. The items taught in the activity must suit students'

ages, habits, and environment. Students must be able to use the items for academic and non-academic purposes.

3. Teachers should feel free to adapt textbook activities.
4. Mechanical drills should not be the only activity in pair or group work.
5. A diversity of activities is needed.

The following sections on listening and grammar illustrate common mistakes made by teacher trainees who too rigidly adhered to the textbook's prescribed lessons and exercises without regard for the guidelines offered above for a successful communicative or cooperative activity. The sections also show how the trainees then modified or might modify their lessons to make them more authentically communicative and cooperative.

Microteaching 1: Listening

For a lesson on listening, English teacher trainees were taught to use pair and group work to maximize cooperative learning. In a microteaching class, a trainee followed a lesson in *Oxford Junior English 2A*, the most popular English textbook in Hong Kong for students aged 13 (Etherton, Kingston, McArthur and Leetch 1999). The objective of the lesson is for students to identify objects from a spoken description. The situation is that a woman's house was burgled and five pieces of jewelry were stolen. The police have retrieved some jewelry and want the woman to describe the stolen items. In the student book, 17 pieces of jewelry are shown. Students are to listen to the description recorded on the accompanying tape and then match the description with the pictures in the book (see appendix A).

In this microteaching class, the trainee clearly explained the classroom language and procedures in the lesson plan to her "students" (in reality, her classmates). She first introduced the vocabulary words: *gold, silver, bracelet, necklace, ring, earring, diamond, emerald, and ruby*, according to the guidelines in the teacher's book (appendix B). She then played the tape and had students identify the objects. After the listening task, she put students in groups and had them check their answers within the group. Then, still following the guidelines suggested in the teacher's book, the trainee asked each student to describe one

piece of jewelry shown in the book to the other members of the group. The trainee explained that she considered this series of activities meaningful and authentic because students had to talk to each other to find the answer. Actually, the task as presented in the microteaching class was neither meaningful nor authentic because rarely would a 13-year-old student need to describe lost jewelry. At best, the activity could only be a weak version of CLT (Holliday 1994). A small change was suggested by another trainee: students could pretend that they were shopping for jewelry with their mother in an English speaking country and they could translate for the mother, who speaks little English. This is still a weak version of CLT because if students have to pretend, authenticity is reduced, although it may still be somewhat meaningful.

It was suggested that cooperative elements be incorporated into this task, thereby changing the activity from situational language teaching to a game. Of course, teachers should introduce necessary vocabulary words before the cooperative activities, which include the "three-step interview" and "think-pair-write" processes described below (see Kagan 1992 and Jacobs, Lee and Ball 1997).

Before the three-step interview, each student is given three letters from a to q, each of which represents one of the 17 pieces of jewelry that should be described. Then students sit in groups of four and do the following three-step interview. In step one, each student in the group writes what she has just heard described item by item. In step two, each student writes what she wants to know more about from the description just heard. Then in step three, each student tries to find the answers within the group (think-pair-write). When all have finished, the teacher writes the numbers 1 to 5 on the board, representing the five pieces of stolen jewelry described by the woman on the tape. The teacher then plays the tape, and students who think they have the letter corresponding to that piece of jewelry will race to stick their letter under that number. The group with the most correct matches wins the game. The game changes the activity from a weak CLT version to a stronger one, plus the game is meaningful and authentic. The teacher only needs to prepare pieces of paper with the letters on them, and to write the numbers 1 to 5 on the board.

The insertion of cooperative elements in the group work also promotes equal learning opportunity and teamwork.

Microteaching 2: Grammar

In a micoteaching class for grammar, another teacher trainee delivered a lesson on the passive voice, also using *Oxford Junior English 2A*. (The grammar lesson is part of a chapter based on a reading about an elderly man who practices traditional Chinese fishing using cormorant birds.) She taught the grammar part (appendix C) by following the steps given in the teacher's book (appendix D). She first introduced the differences between active voice and passive voice, then she had the "students" (her classmates) do exercises A1 and A2 (appendix C) on identifying the subjects and the voice of the sentence. Next, she asked the students to complete the fill-in-the-blanks exercise in A3 (appendix C), which is based on the reading about traditional fishing. After the students had finished, she had them sit in groups of four and check their answers among themselves. The trainee said she considered this activity communicative because, in her words, "students had to help each other in a meaningful task, which is to check the correct answers."

Admittedly, teaching grammar to ESL/EFL students may sometimes involve mechanical drills, but even drills should require students to think. However, the exercise this trainee used required little effort on the students' part. In fact, exercise A3 is more like a vocabulary exercise than one for passive voice because the verbs have all been transformed into their participial forms. Students only need to understand the meaning of the verb and then read the noun immediately preceding each blank in order to decide whether *is* or *are* should be inserted before the participle verb in the blank.

A small change to the lesson plan can maximize cooperative learning in this lesson. Students could still be asked to complete exercises A1 and A2, but they should close their books for exercise A3. Then, instead of merely filling in the blanks, each student should use five of the ten verbs used in A3 to rewrite or summarize the story of the elderly fisherman, which they had read earlier, in passive voice. The teacher can then introduce the cooperative activities "round robin" and "numbered heads" described below.

After students have finished their individual summaries, they work in groups of four. Each student takes a turn reading her short piece to the other group members until everyone has read their complete summary out loud (round robin). Students then compare their versions and choose the best one. When the teacher calls a number, the student in each group with that number will deliver the best version chosen by the group (numbered heads). After all groups have presented, the teacher chooses the best summary. Students then complete the fill-in-the-blanks exercise of A3.

Such modification allows more communication among students and stresses autonomy and creativity, because students choose their own five verbs and decide what they should include in their summary. This modification also allows the teacher to check on how well the students understand passive voice, not only its written structure but also its pronunciation.

As a cooperative follow-up activity to further consolidate the understanding of passive voice, the teacher can prepare small blank cards for students. Students sit in groups of three, and each student receives eight cards. Student A in each group writes a subject on each card, student B writes a verb, and student C writes an object. Then they shuffle the 24 cards and place them on their desk facing down. Each student takes a turn turning over three cards. When the three cards consist of a subject, a verb, and an object, together the group members create a complete sentence in passive voice. If the three cards do not represent the three categories, they have to be turned face down again and three other cards are turned over. The game continues until the teacher signals the end, after which the teacher can check to see which group has the most correct sentences. This activity stresses structure and creativity because students have to provide their own words, and their sentences will not be the same as those created in other groups. This will also be a good chance for students to explore the differences between transitive and intransitive verbs, since the latter cannot be used in passive form. The teacher can also write the best sentences on the board so that the rest of the class can learn from their peers in other groups.

Conclusion

New teachers always feel an obligation to complete all tasks in the textbook. Although they might have learnt about the usefulness of CLT or CL in their teacher training, they cannot always put them into practice because of busy class schedules and other administrative duties. However, as Jacobs and Hall (In press) point out, it has never been suggested that a class be organized in cooperative groups all the time. It is impractical to think that one or two approaches can work wonders for all students, even when they have identical educational backgrounds. In fact, teachers have to make changes from time to time when delivering a lesson. This article suggests small modifications of activities, so that even when teachers have to follow textbook tasks, they can easily adapt them for communicative teaching with minimal extra preparation for themselves or their students. Also, this article shows that a small change of task can make it more authentic for students and enhance the cooperative learning potential of a textbook activity.

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APPENDIX A

Adopting Textbook Activities... • Yang and Cheung

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Listening

Identifying objects from a description

Last week a burglar stole five pieces of jewellery from Mrs Karen White's flat. Now the police have arrested a man and discovered all the jewellery in the picture below.



APPENDIX B

Adopting Textbook Activities... • Yang and Cheung

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Listening

Identifying objects from a description

- 1 Explain that the police have found the jewellery in the picture. Make sure students know the words bracelet, ring, necklace and ear-ring, and also the words gold and silver and the precious stones listed below. They should also know the useful phrase in the shape of.
- 2 Play the recording once or twice (if necessary), while students identify the five pieces of jewellery.
- 3 After the Listening task, you can use this picture for an oral exercise. One student must describe one piece from the picture, and others must identify the right one.

Vocabulary:

diamond (n.) a very valuable stone, clear in colour

emerald (n.) a very valuable stone, green in colour

ruby (n.) a valuable stone, red in colour

Tapescript:

Policeman: Hello, is that Mrs White?

Woman: Yes, it is.

Policeman: I'm Detective Wu. I visited you after your burglary last week.

Woman: Oh, yes, I remember.

Policeman: Well, we've arrested a man, and discovered a lot of stolen jewellery, and I think your five pieces may be here. Could you describe them again for me?

Woman: Oh, that's good news! Yes, well, there are five missing pieces. The first piece is a bracelet. It's made of gold. It's not a complete circle. The two ends of the bracelet are in the shape of lions' heads. They have little red rubies for their eyes. (pause) The second piece is an emerald ring. It's very valuable. It's made of gold, and in the middle there is a big, green emerald. On each side of the emerald there is a diamond. It's a lovely ring. (pause) The third piece is my pearl necklace. It's very simple — just one string of pearls. The pearls are all about the same size. It's quite a short necklace. (pause) Next, there is a silver bracelet. This is not so expensive, but it's quite pretty. It's like lots of little rings, all joined together. It has a silver figure on it, in the shape of a little dog. (pause) The last piece is a pair of ear-rings. They are made of gold. Each ear-ring is in two parts. There is a red ruby on top, and hanging under the ruby there is a large white pearl.

Policeman: Yes, you're very lucky. I think we have all of those pieces here at the police station. Could you come down to have a look at them?

Woman: Yes, of course. I'll be there within one hour. Thank you so much! Goodbye.

Policeman: Goodbye.

APPENDIX C

Adopting Textbook Activities... • Yang and Cheung

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Grammar

Passive voice

A Active and passive sentences

Active sentences tell us who or what does something.

Chung Man pushes the birds into the water with his pole.



Passive sentences often do not tell us who or what does something.

Some of the fish are sold.



A1 Answer these questions, saying what or who does the things.

- 1 What use their feet to push them quickly through the water?
- 2 What catch fish for Chung Man?
- 3 What frightens the fish?
- 4 Who removes the fish from the cormorants' mouths?
- 5 Who is teaching his grandson everything he knows?

A2 Read these sentences and mark them **A** for active or **P** for passive.

- 1 Sometimes a cormorant sits on Chung Man's head.
- 2 Chung Man sets off on his bamboo raft with his birds.
- 3 A piece of grass is tied around the neck of each bird.
- 4 Chung Man bangs the water with his pole.
- 5 At night a light is hung from the front of the raft.
- 6 The rest of the fish are divided between Chung Man's family and the cormorants.

A3 Complete each space in this passage with **is** or **are** and one of the verbs from the box. The first one is done for you.

Once a year, a new cormorant (1) is raised by Chung Man. A male and female cormorant breed and produce several eggs. The eggs (2) _____ by Chung Man, and the best one (3) _____ from the nest. After 25 days, it (4) _____ by a chicken on Chung Man's houseboat where he lives with his family. At this time it (5) _____ very carefully by the fisherman. As soon as he sees the cormorant breaking the egg, he takes it away from the chicken. Then the baby cormorant (6) _____ by Chung Man himself. For 10 days it (7) _____ every hour. The temperature (8) _____ to keep the baby warm. The other family members (9) _____ to go near the baby. Gradually, the baby bird grows stronger. After two months it (10) _____ to join the other birds on the raft, although it will not learn to catch fish for another year or more.

watched
taken
looked after
raised
examined
hatched
fed
not allowed
controlled
removed

APPENDIX D

Communicative Language Teaching Revisited... • Yang and Cheung

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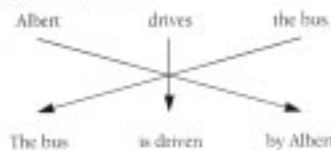


Grammar

Passive voice

A Active and passive sentences

- 1 The passive tense is formed by changing the status of the grammatical subject.



- 2 The normal order of an English sentence is to put the thing that we are talking about first, and then to give information about it. This is referred to as the given new structure. In most cases we are interested in the doers (i.e., the agents) of sentences, so *The cat sat on the mat* is a basic English sentence. However, sometimes we are more interested in the thing which is acted upon (i.e., the patient). In this case we use the passive construction *The mat was sat upon by the cat*. We can even remove *by the cat* completely if we are only interested in the mat.

- 3 The subject about which we are talking (often referred to as the focus) can be maintained at the centre of attention by using the passive voice. This is, indeed, the principal use of the passive voice. Write this short paragraph on the board.

Basketball is a popular sport. It is played by thousands of people. The game does not need large fields. It can be played on a small area.

Explain that the topic of the paragraph is basketball, and it is kept in focus (i.e., as the subject of each sentence) by means of the passive voice.

- 4 These initial exercises aim to show the students the effect of the passive voice on the subject, without using technical terminology. Read through the text carefully with the class and do Exercises A1 and A2.

Answers:

- A1 1 Cormorants.
2 Cormorants.
3 The noise (of Chung Man banging the water).
4 Chung Man.
5 Chung Man.

- A2 1 A
2 A
3 P
4 A
5 P
6 P

- 3 Exercise A3 aims to familiarize the students with the form of the passive voice before explicitly teaching it. The students can complete this exercise in pairs.

Answers:

- A3 2 are examined
3 is removed
4 is hatched
5 is watched
6 is looked after
7 is fed
8 is controlled
9 are not allowed
10 is taken

Note:

This is a fairly difficult exercise and students may need some help in understanding the point that Chung Man removes the best egg from the cormorants and gives it to a tame chicken to sit on for 25 days, and then takes it and looks after it himself. (Thus the baby bird thinks that Chung Man is its parent. This is a process known as 'imprinting'.)