You can do it, too!

Cooperative Learning in a Japanese Junior High School

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The Japanese secondary education system is often portrayed as resistant to change, not responsive to broader educational trends, and alienated from students. This is certainly not true of one private secondary school near Nagoya. The English Department there has recently introduced a unique cooperative learning approach to all junior high school English classes. The program begins with team-teaching in first year, continues with a group-based cooperative learning approach in the second and third years, and includes cooperative assessment tasks. It has improved student attitudes towards learning English. The approach was implemented by personal and professional collaboration, and is now considered an important element of their school program.

The School
Seirei Junior and Senior High School (‘Seirei’) is a private Catholic girls’ school with about 1300 students situated in Seto City, Aichi Prefecture. The school is a six-year secondary school with both junior (JHS) and senior high school (SHS). Almost all Seirei JHS graduates go on to Seirei SHS. Seirei was founded 54 years ago by a religious order, the Holy Spirit Convent. The motto of the school is from Ephesians 5-8, “Walk as children of light”. The school has a warm and friendly atmosphere, and the relationship between the students and school staff is close. Seirei has had a student exchange programme for twenty years with Catholic girls’ schools in Melbourne, Australia, presently with Mount St. Joseph Girls’ College.
The JHS English Program

The English department comprises thirteen full-time and three part-time Japanese teachers, and two native speakers. Among them, seven Japanese teachers teach regular JHS English classes while two native speakers teach English conversation to the JHS second and the third graders once a week. The number of English classes per week varies according to the year: the first year students take four classes per week; the second year students four regular classes plus one English conversation class; and the third year students five regular classes plus one English conversation class. Although there are some exceptions, many public Japanese JHS students can take only three English classes per week, so comparatively speaking Seirei JHS students have substantially more exposure to English. Each year consists of five classes of nearly forty students, a typical class size in Japanese JHSs.

Cooperative Learning at Seirei JHS

First year program

The first year English classes are team-taught by two Japanese teachers. Before team-teaching was introduced, each class was divided into two groups of twenty students, and two teachers taught in separate classrooms. This was because forty students in one class was felt to be too large for absolute beginners. However, about 10 years ago, the English teachers began to feel that it was unfavorable for the students of one class to learn separately from different teachers. We were concerned that it may have caused a sense of inequality among the students. What is more, if the homeroom teacher were an English teacher, it would be quite an awkward situation for her, as she could only teach half and not all of her own homeroom class. Thus, team-teaching was introduced eight years ago.

Team teaching was initially a challenge for the teachers since they were not familiar with the idea of teaching one lesson together with another teacher. There was also some conflict with the school administration, as the idea that one teacher teaches 40 students was so dominant that team-teaching was not acceptable to them at first.
However, team-teaching the first year students is now one of the selling points of the Seirei JHS English Department.

The first year class is team-taught most of the time, but is divided into two when intensive grammar exercises are necessary, or to play games. The authorized textbook used in the freshman class is *New Horizon English Course*. The first year students also use *Take Off With Phonics* (Matsuka, 1988) during the first month of their learning. *Take Off With Phonics* has a lot of pair or group activities, so the students naturally get the idea that they learn a language through interaction with others.

We sometimes devise easy games for the students. For example, in the very beginning, the students play a “phonics alphabet karuta” game to remember the phonics alphabet. Students make 10 groups of four according to the seating arrangement in the classroom. Then a set of 26 picture cards is distributed to each group. The pictures are those taken from the textbook. Students spread the cards on the desk and wait for the teacher to say one English word or pronounce a single sound (vowel or consonant). On hearing a word or a sound, the students race to pick up a picture card that corresponds to the word or the sound. At the end of the game the students count the cards, and decide on the winner of the group.

In every class, some sort of pair or group work is included in the common lesson plans, used by all the first year teachers. It is a prerequisite to begin each class with a dialogue between the two teachers so that the students review what they did and predict what they are going to learn. Common lesson plans are prepared by one teacher, in turn, who discusses and consults with all the first year teachers before it is put into practice in the classroom. Teachers learn to cooperate before teaching the students how to cooperate.
Second and third year program

Second and third year English classes are taught by one teacher not two. The first English class of the second year starts with a review of the good points about English class the previous year. The students usually make positive comments about pair work and group work, and team-teaching. Students often comment that playing games with classmates is a lot of fun and, group work helps them understand the classes better. As for team-teaching, they comment that having two teachers is convenient for them. When they have a question, they can ask a teacher at hand any time during the class. What is more, they can understand the situation where communication takes place between two people. It serves as a model for the students’ pair work.

Having reviewed the first year English class, the teacher has the students make ten groups of four people, by asking students to line up according to their birthday, or by playing games. Making groups is a very important first step for the students to begin to cooperate with their new class. After the students settle down in their groups, the teacher explains that the students are to learn English in groups for the whole year, the same group for half semesters, and cooperation is the most important skill to be learnt.

The first cooperative group activity is to name their own group. Instead of being called “ippan” ("group 1"), and so on, students enjoy being called for example “Kitty-chan group” by the teacher. Then each member of a group decides on one role, namely the ‘starter’, the ‘homework checker’, the ‘questioner’, and the ‘recorder’. They keep the role until they change groups. It is favorable for them to experience the four different roles during the year. The starter literally tells the member to start doing the task given by the teacher. She encourages the members to work and participate in the task. The homework checker checks to see if all the members did the homework or not and reports this to the teacher. The questioner asks questions during the class on behalf of the group. The students are supposed to help each other during the class, so many of the questions are actually answered by the group members. Weak students tend to avoid asking the teacher even when they have important questions. But they do not hesitate to ask their...
peers questions, and those asked also benefit from reviewing what they have learnt by answering. The *recorder* is responsible for recording group members’ ideas or answers to the questions given by the teacher. The students change groups twice during the term, and play different roles in the new groups.

Although the organization of class activities is based on a cooperative learning approach, the lesson flow follows a relatively traditional pattern. Class starts with the review of the previous class, then new material is introduced, the teacher writes grammatical points on the blackboard, followed by practice of new words and phrase, model reading of the text, then choral reading, and concludes with some tasks to reinforce the new material introduced earlier.

We use many cooperative learning activities regularly in the classroom. For example, the students ask and answer the questions or check a work sheet among the group to recall what they did. New material is introduced by interaction between the teacher and the students, and among the students, to learn a new grammatical structure. After the class reads the text aloud all together, the teacher gives a comprehension check. The teacher appoints not an individual student but a group to answer the questions. The student who represents the group feels confident in her answer because of the group effort to reach the answer.

For pair work, the students can form three different pairs among the group, so they have more practice. We can modify pair work among the group, too. For example, one pair can interview each other while the two other members listen to them, take notes, then report it to the class later. Reading aloud in groups is more fun for the students and easier for the teacher to monitor.
Assessment

Since the introduction of the cooperative learning style approach, Seirei English teachers have been discussing how to assess students’ English ability. One solution is to give them various types of assessment so we may evaluate different aspects of students’ learning process. For example, at the end of each unit comes the unit-end group task. Firstly, students take formal examinations individually and their score reflects their own performance. Secondly, though, students take a test as a group. It is a test in which the individual students can ‘cheat’, as they are encouraged by the teacher to refer to the textbook, notebook, workbook and discuss the question with the group members to reach an agreed answer to each question.

This cooperative learning test serves two main purposes: one is to review of the unit, the other for the group members to help each other to master the unit through problem-solving tasks. This task is particularly beneficial for weak students, because they can learn how to tackle the problem with assistance from the peers, and there is a good peer pressure that she has to take part in solving the problems.

The task consists of questions and answers about the text, and a composition. In the composition part, for example, the students have to interview their group members to make sentences in English. Only one test paper is distributed to each group, the students have to literally put their heads together and work on it. The writer fills in the test paper while other members check her spelling. The teacher collects the test papers after 25 minutes, and marks them. Since all the group members participated in the test, each member gets the same score. That is, even those who are weak in English can get full marks as a result of group cooperation, while those who are good in English sometimes gets a bad mark if the group does not cooperate. During one school year, the total score of unit-end group task amounts to 200 points, which equals two formal examinations. Considering the fact that there are seven formal examinations per year, which totals 700 points, the unit-end group task score is not a small figure.
Recitation Contest

The annual recitation contest in the third term is the yearly highlight of cooperative learning. In first and second years, students recite a given text individually in class. First year students use *Brown Bear, Brown Bear, What Do You See?*, by Bill Martin Jr., and second year students a text of the year teacher’s choice, such as *The Rainbow Fish* by Marcus Pfister last year.

After practicing a few times in class, students try to learn the text off by heart individually since it is part of their winter holiday assignment. Each student recites in front of the class, and the other students give marks for her performance. Based upon these marks, two or three students are selected as class representatives. Although the preparation is not cooperative, student selection is student determined, and students learn to praise their classmates through this activity.

The third year recitation contest is not an individual performance but a group one. We have used *The Giving Tree* and *The Diary of Anne Frank* as texts, and allocate about two weeks or ten lessons to preparing for it. Every student has two roles in this activity. They have to play a role from the text, but more importantly also as a group member - as the director, the checker, the recorder, or the person who asks for help from the teacher. The third year students must not only recite the phrases, but they have to perform in front of the class. They are supposed to have overcome their shyness or hesitation, and built up good teamwork by the time they act out their roles.

The Teacher Development Challenge

The process towards using a cooperative learning approach at Seirei began when a close colleague and I were appointed to be first year homeroom teachers six years ago in 1998. For us both, it was our first time to be a homeroom teacher to first year students, although I had taught them English once before. We quickly discovered that being a subject teacher is one thing and a homeroom teacher quite another. We began talking about what is the purpose of secondary school education, what is the most important
thing to be learnt at school, the advantages and disadvantages of competition and cooperation, and ..., well, many different things! We paid a lot of attention to slow learners, and tried to establish a good way to support their learning. We started counseling those who were not good at English, and kept a record of these conversations. Both of us began to believe more strongly that all students want to learn, understand, and be confident in their academic work.

In that same year, I had an opportunity to go to Canada to give a short presentation about the Seirei school community at a mini-conference at Toronto University. The Japanese and Canadian university professors there introduced me to an influential book, *TRIBES: A New Way of Learning and Being Together* (Gibbs, 1995) (‘TRIBES’), which seemed to be widely used by primary and secondary teachers as a reference in Toronto. I also went to observe an in-service for secondary school teachers on how to make good use of the book in their classrooms, and had the chance to visit a few primary and secondary schools to talk with the teachers and principals. At those schools, the teachers placed a special emphasis on cooperative learning based upon *TRIBES*.

In Japan, every teacher is familiar with group work as a technique to be used in class. Usually group work is only occasionally employed, with different groups each time, and with no connection among the subjects. However, *TRIBES* assumes that the same groups are used for a longer period, up to one semester or the whole school year. Many Seirei teachers were concerned that students could not communicate well with each other even in Japanese. In order to help students to relate to each other better, a cooperative learning style seemed ideal, as it seemed that a cooperative learning approach could help students develop more effective interpersonal and intrapersonal skills.

When I came back from Toronto in October that year, I looked for a book related to cooperative learning, written in Japanese. I soon found *Gakushu no Wa* (Johnson and Johnson, 1990), originally written in English as *Circles of Learning*. With *TRIBES* and this...
book, I began to talk to my close colleague, and then the other JHS teachers at Seirei. We knew that team-teaching was quite an effective method for the first year students, but due to budgetary and administrative reasons could not continue with it through the second and third years. A cooperative learning approach seemed ideal. Quite soon, all JHS English teachers had bought copies of Johnson and Johnson's book. From that October, we had only five months to prepare before starting cooperative learning for the second year classes in April 1999, but we did it. That Seirei teachers are willing to learn to make things better, and to openly share effective teaching ideas and activities, is a very good point about our Department.

Present and Future Challenges

At the end of the first year of cooperative learning, second year students completed a questionnaire. Most students favored a cooperative style of learning. They said that they had learnt to help each other, and cooperation helped them better understand English, and made English class more fun. This may be because they had more time to interact in English as well as in Japanese with their classmates, compared with a traditional teaching/learning style. Some students did note that they sometimes got too noisy during the class, and that it was sometimes hard for them to share materials among the group. This may partly be because we would intentionally give the students a minimum amount of learning material so they would have to share. However, the most important comment came from the slower learners or weaker students. They said that they could follow class with help from their group-mates, and did not feel inferior to them. When we read this, we felt greatly rewarded for adopting a cooperative learning approach for the whole year.

Every student at any academic level wishes to take part in class and feel that she is part of it. In other words, inclusion through cooperation is one means to make learning more meaningful for students. If a student is seen but not heard in the classroom, how much would she learn? How would she feel? Creating the learner-centered classroom might in fact be an indispensable idea for teachers.
Seirei JHS English teachers hold evaluation meetings more than twice a year. We discuss issues such as the kinds of tasks given to the students, how to help slow learners, how to improve cooperation among the students, and so on. In this meeting we frankly talk about the problems we have had. The noise level and the issue of inclusion are most often talked about. At the end of the school year, each year teacher passes down the teaching plans she used to the new year teacher. By doing so, we can refer to what another teacher did the previous year and plan the annual curriculum on the basis of her teaching plans. We do not hesitate to revise or follow the tasks that another teacher did, since teaching plans are our common property. Cooperative learning facilitates not only cooperation among the teachers but discussion about the curriculum.

When we first adopted team-teaching in English class, it took a while to receive recognition from other subject teachers. However, through accumulation of our experience and students’ favorable reaction, it has come to be seen as an indispensable part of English classes at Seirei. These days we give mock English lesson to those elementary school students who come to Seirei Open School Day. Now it is time that cooperative learning is recognized as a new way of learning to help students and teachers work together in the classroom. Some homeroom teachers use cooperative learning groups in their own homeroom class activities. This is an unexpected delight for us English teachers, because if the cooperative learning groups are only limited to English classes, it would be something rather “special” for the students. However, if the students work in the same cooperative groups in different areas in their school life, it would be more beneficial for them. We hope there will be no boundaries between the subjects and all the teachers in the school community will cooperate to make our school a better place for learning and growing together.
References

The Author
Toshiko Suzuki has taught at Seirei JHS and SHS for about 18 years. She strongly believes in the value of cooperative learning, and hopes that it is adopted by more Japanese EFL teachers. Her experience of having taught at an Australian school and studying in the UK changed her from her previously traditional approach to teaching, and gave her new perspectives about education. She encourages all secondary teachers to try and find opportunities to work or study in another country.