

Cooperative English

Real World Activities in the Classroom



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Introduction

In English, two—or more—heads are often better than one. That’s because language is collaborative. When you speak, you need a listening partner. When you write, you need a reader. When you put on a TV show, you’ve got to have a director, a camera operator, performers and viewers. This kind of natural teamwork is the goal of the cooperative, whole-language approach presented here.

REAL-WORLD FORMS OF COOPERATION

The activities in this book are based on real-world models. For example, “Picture-book Partners” reflects the fact that many children’s books come from writer-illustrator teams, such as Margaret Wise Brown and Clement Hurd. “Read-aloud Writing Groups” echoes famous politician Abraham Lincoln’s comment that oral reading helped him develop and polish his style. All of the projects fit into one or more of the following categories.

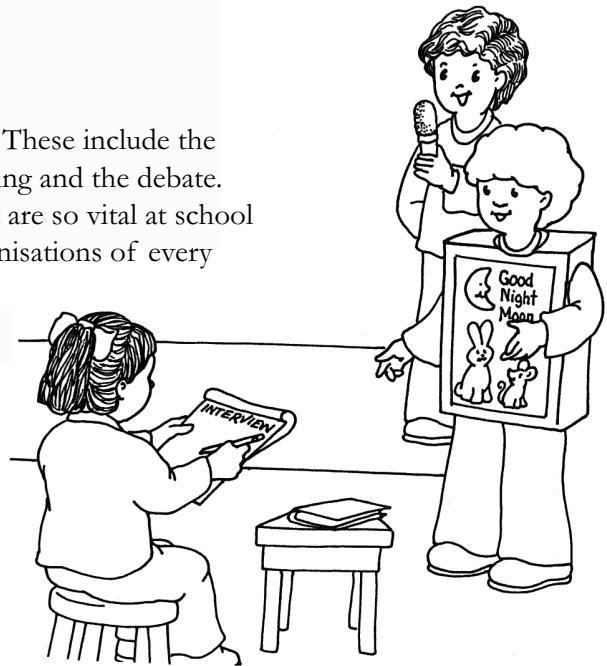
- **Team cooperation:** The given task naturally requires participants to play a variety of roles. For example, when putting on an old-time radio drama, there will be writers, a director, one or more sound effects people, and actors. All of these people must work together in order to create a successful show.
- **Shared-role cooperation:** Two or more people carry out a single task. Classic examples include co-authored novels and movie scripts. But the same approach is often used with seemingly “solo” forms, as when a group of comedy writers creates a monologue for a comedian, or several speech writers work on a politician’s address to the nation.
- **Creator-audience cooperation:** Most writers consider their work finished only when it’s read by someone. The title of a well-known book—*Writing to Be Read*—perfectly captures this idea. In a very real sense, the most important cooperation in English happens between the message maker and the message receiver. That’s why it’s so important in the classroom to have most activities culminate in some form of “publishing”, whether done live (orally), on tape or on paper.



THE COOPERATIVE SKILLS

Each project deals with an important language format. These include the friendly letter, the speech, the book review, choral reading and the debate. Simultaneously, students practise cooperative skills that are so vital at school and throughout life—in the home, at work and in organisations of every sort. These key skills include:

- setting goals
- breaking a task into manageable chunks
- listening and speaking
- sharing resources
- giving and taking feedback
- teaching
- compromising
- evaluating



TEACHING THE ACTIVITIES

Many of the projects, such as “Mime Show” and “Instant Legends”, take little time and use readily available materials, or no materials at all. A few projects, for example, “Literary Magazine”, are longer-term experiences. Several, such as “Television Dramas”, provide the opportunity to use the camcorder, the computer and other modern communication tools.

You’ll find easy-to-follow, step-by-step directions for teaching every activity. In many cases, reproducible worksheets clarify or extend the given task. For example, in the “Interview a Book” project, a model interview with *Goodnight Moon* shows how to lay out a simple script. The Resources section offers acting tips as well as a complete unit on peer editing, plus strategies for getting the most out of a camcorder.

THE NUTS AND BOLTS OF COOPERATION

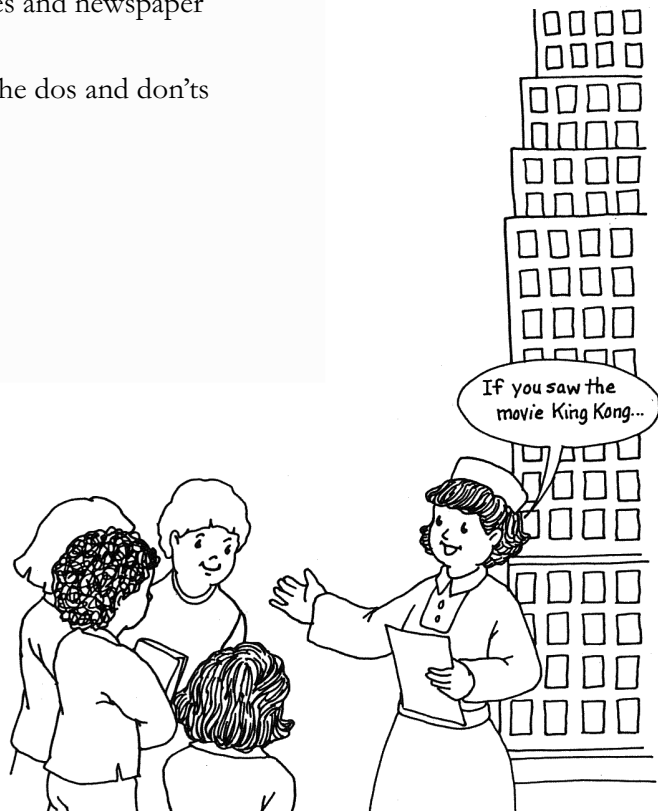
The popular image of cooperative learning is of several students sitting at a table, helping each other master a skill or body of knowledge. This is a valid approach, and there are many examples of it in the pages of this book. But it is only one of many options.

These options become apparent with the following definition: *Cooperative learning is an activity in which two or more students contribute to the end result.* The students can be working side by side, or their efforts may be sequential, as when one child writes a script and two others perform it. It's even possible for students in your present class to get involved with those from the past or even from the future. (See "Classroom Operating Manual".)

TEAMWORK WARM-UPS

If your students have already had successful cooperative learning experiences, then begin with any project that interests you and fits your curricular needs. On the other hand, if your students need to learn the basics of cooperative learning, try some or all of the strategies listed below. No matter how you launch your cooperative endeavours, once students become adept at working with each other, your job will become a lot easier and more satisfying,

- Read about cooperation. To help students realise that cooperation extends beyond the school, read aloud stories featuring real-world collaborators.
- Go on excursions to cooperative enterprises. Examples include ad agencies, magazines, theatres, publishing companies and newspaper offices.
- Create a display board or handout that highlights the dos and don'ts of cooperation. (See the sample on page 9.)



TEACHER TIPS FOR COOPERATIVE SUCCESS

1. Keep groups small.

Self-managing large groups requires maturity and practice. Therefore, especially at first, provide many two-person group experiences. Pairs usually have an easier time helping each other. Also, in a pair each partner is likely to make a contribution. (There's no place to hide.)

2. Make sure everyone understands the task.

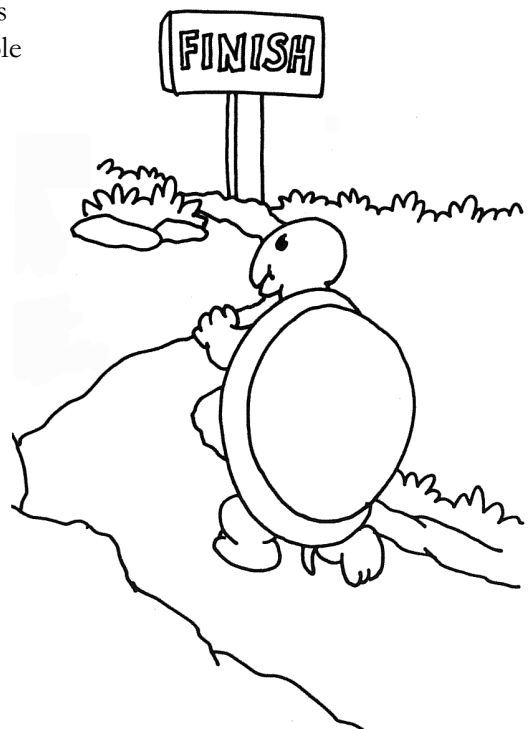
Display a set of directions or list them on a handout. As students become experienced, have them create their own "to do" lists for you to check. When an assignment involves a new format, consider doing it first as a whole-group activity. Demonstrate the work at the front of the room. With written work, provide models. For example, if students are writing radio scripts, give them samples. Explain that you don't want them to copy the content, but only to use the structure (how the character names are laid out, where the dialogue goes, and so on).

3. Monitor progress along the way.

As your own experience on teams should confirm, cooperative work can lose momentum at times. Indeed, learning how to deal with interactive difficulties is a major reason for giving students cooperative experiences. By sitting in on groups, you will be able to help students identify problems before they become calamities. Points to look for include:

- Involvement: Is everyone getting a chance to share?
- Responsibility: Is everyone shouldering the load?
- Helpfulness: Are stronger members willing to help those who are struggling?

Sometimes, what you observe can be shared with the whole class in terms of generic comments. You might even talk about your own experiences in groups.



READ-ALoud WRITING GROUPS

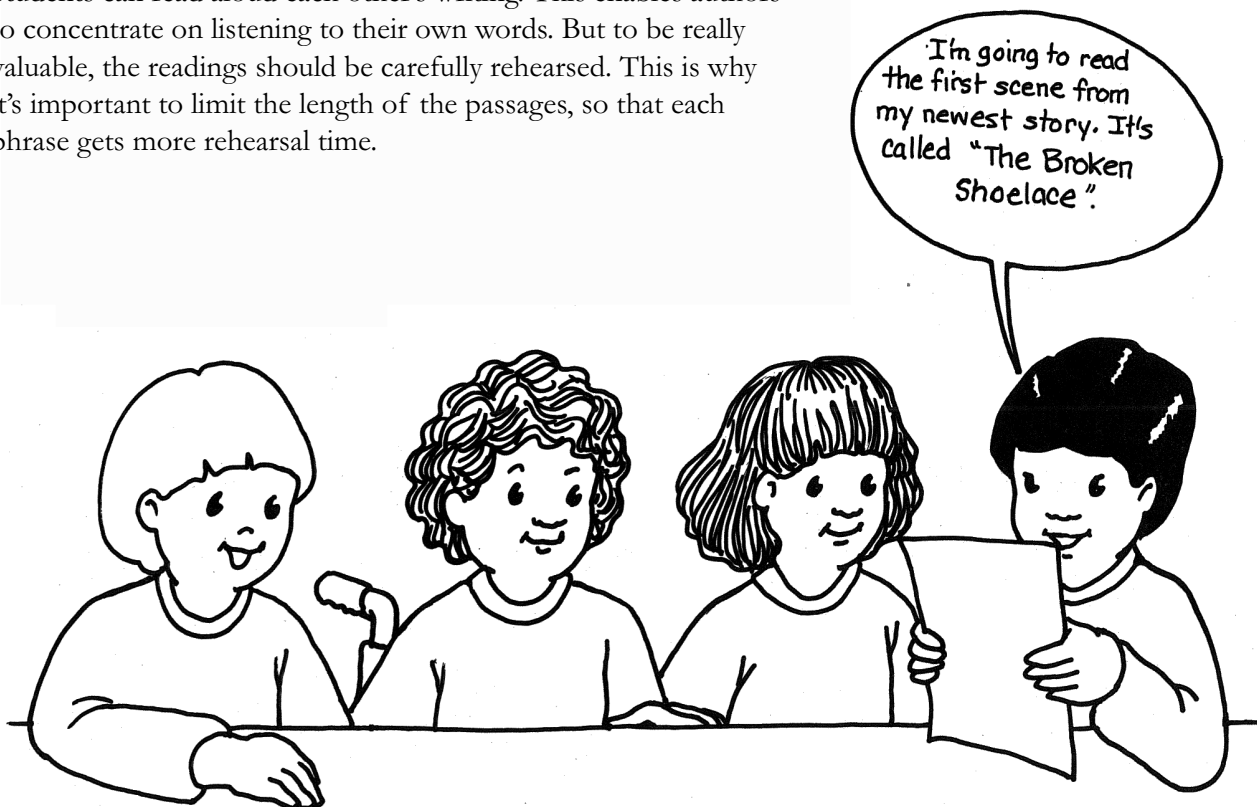
For many writers, oral reading is a key step of the writing process. It enables them to check their sentences for smoothness while learning how the audience reacts. The activity also develops reading and listening skills.

DIRECTIONS:

1. Students choose a passage that they've recently written. It could be a very short piece or an excerpt from a longer work. Either way, limit the material to about a minute's worth.
2. Allow time for the student to practise reading the work aloud. The goal should be to have a smooth delivery. Words should be correctly pronounced and read in a way that emphasises their meaning.
3. Divide the class into small groups in which members take turns reading their work aloud.
4. Have group members give each other feedback on oral presentation techniques. (See the "Help-a-reader Checklist" on page 71.)

EXTENSION:

Students can read aloud each other's writing. This enables authors to concentrate on listening to their own words. But to be really valuable, the readings should be carefully rehearsed. This is why it's important to limit the length of the passages, so that each phrase gets more rehearsal time.



Help-a-Reader Checklist

Use this page to help a classmate improve his or her oral reading. As you fill in the blanks, think about the kind of advice that you would like to get to help you do a better job.

1. Name of the listener (you): _____

2. Name of the speaker: _____

3. Date you heard the speaker: _____

4. Title of presentation: _____

5. Kind of presentation:

poem report story other (tell what kind) _____

6. Describe what you liked best about the speaker's presentation. (If you need more space, write on the back.)

7. Speed (check one). The speaker read:

too fast too slow just right

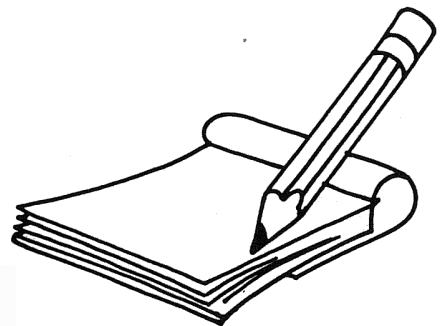
8. Volume (check one). The reader talked:

too loud too soft just right

9. Clarity (check one). The reader's words were:

very clear clear not clear enough

10. What other helpful advice do you have for the reader? _____



RECYCLED WRITING

Many top writers, including Shakespeare, based new stories on earlier ones. Students can continue this tradition by adapting each other's work. The idea is to change the original in an important way, for example, by turning a poem into a story or by treating the villain as the hero.

DIRECTIONS:

1. Everyone writes a short piece using the same format, for example, a descriptive paragraph about the weekend.
2. Students exchange papers.
3. Each student rewrites the partner's paper in a new way. For example, the descriptions could be adapted as limericks or as short stories. (See page 74 for a list of ways to recycle writing.)
4. Students can share their adaptations by reading them aloud in small groups or by posting them with the originals.

EXTENSION:

Have students adapt fairy tales, fables, picture books or other well-known works. To introduce this activity, divide the class into pairs and have partners read the mini-play "Talking to a Star" on page 75. You might also read aloud Jon Scieszka's amusing picture book *The True Story of the Three Little Pigs* by *A. Wolf* (Viking).

