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Integrating Language Functions and Collaborative Skills in the Second Language Classroom

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Introduction

Language learning materials frequently include group activities, and many books and journals for language teachers recommend that groups be an important part of teachers' instructional repertoire. Unfortunately, group activities sometimes fail because students lack the skills necessary to function effectively in groups. For instance, teachers often find that students do not participate equally in group activities, that they do not help one another, that disagreements lead to bad feelings, and that groups get off task.

But is spending time helping students learn to function together the language teacher's job? Wouldn't that just be a distraction from our main job of teaching the language? We've already got enough to do. Wouldn't it be better just to skip using groups and avoid the headache of trying to get students to work together?

In this article we maintain that helping students learn and practice collaborative skills is not a distraction from language teaching. Instead, the language necessary to use these skills involves basic language functions (such as greetings, information requests, and apologies) which students will find useful in the many ways they interact with other people.

This article has four parts. In the first part, we describe the teaching of language functions. In the second part, we discuss the teaching of collaborative skills. Next, we give examples of how, in using cooperative learning activities, we integrate the teaching functions with instruction in collaborative skills. Finally, we relate the story of one student who benefited from such instruction.

Language Functions

The teaching of language functions forms part of the general movement toward communicative language teaching (Richards & Rodgers, 1986). The idea is that the function of language is to communicate. Thus, language is taught as a means of communication, not as a system of grammatical structures. In other words, the emphasis

is on language use, rather than language usage, and a key aspect of language use are the functions to which language is put by its users. The functional approach to second language instruction began in the 1970s. Finocchiaro and Brumfit (1983) describe the perspective that led to the development of the approach:

> "Language was much more appropriately classified in terms of what people wanted to do with the language (functions) . . . than in terms of the grammatical items as in traditional language teaching models" (p. 12).

In a functional syllabus, rather than using grammatical structures as the basis for sequencing instruction, functions become the unit of language upon which sequencing is based.

Key language functions

Many lists and categorical systems exist for language functions. Here is an abbreviated version of Finocchiaro's categorical system (Finocchiaro & Brumfit, 1983, pp. 65-66):

Personal (Clarifying or arranging one's ideas)

1. Expressing one's thoughts or feelings: love, pleasure, surprise, likes, dislikes, distress, anger, fear, sorrow
2. Communicating moral, intellectual, and social concerns
3. Expressing everyday feelings of hunger, fatigue, cold, or warmth Interpersonal (Enabling us to establish and maintain desirable social and working relationships)
4. Greetings and leavetakings
5. Introducing people to others
6. Extending invitations—Accepting invitations
7. Refusing invitations politely or making alternative arrangements
8. Apologizing
9. Indicating agreement—Indicating disagreement
10. Interrupting another speaker politely
11. Complimenting someone
12. Expressing gratitude—Acknowledging gratitude

Directive (Attempting to influence the actions of others; accepting or refusing direction)

13. Making requests
14. Making suggestions
15. Refusing to accept a suggestion or a request but offering an alternative
16. Persuading someone to change their point of view
17. Asking for help—Responding to a plea for help
18. Giving instructions—Responding to instructions

Referential (Talking or reporting about things, actions, events, or people in the environment in the past or in the future; talking about language. This is often termed the metalinguistic function.)

19. Asking for a description of someone or something
20. Defining something or a language item— Asking for a definition
21. Requesting facts about events or actions—Reporting facts
22. Evaluating the results of an action or an event

Imaginative (Expanding ideas offered by others or by a listening or reading passage)

23. Creating rhymes, poetry, stories, or plays
24. Solving problems or mysteries

Teaching language functions

Most approaches to teaching language functions use methods which fall under the general umbrella of communicative language teaching (Richards & Rodgers, 1986). Important characteristics of such approaches include (Finocchiaro & Brumfit, 1983):

1) Meaning as the focus
2) Language taught in context
3) Fluency the main aim, although accuracy also important
4) Cultural appropriacy as a component of accuracy
5) Group activities used to provide opportunities for real communication
6) Rote learning infrequently or never used
7) Students encouraged to communicate about their backgrounds and interests

Collaborative Skills

A pervasive demand of the information age in which we live is that everyone be abl to do complex thinking, such as problem-solving. Complex thinking often takes place bes in groups, which means that people need to be able to share ideas and to collaborate witl one another (Dumaine, 1990). We see this trend in schools in the form of cooperativ learning (Slavin, 1990) and other methodologies. In order to prepare students fo successful learning and achievement in groups, at school and at work, educators– including those of us in language education—should help them learn the collaborativ skills they will need to work and to learn with others.

Many advocates of cooperative learning, (e.g., Johnson, Johnson, & Holubec, 1993 consider the teaching of collaborative skills to be an essential component of instruction i which group activities are used. What are the collaborative skills that students need t learn? As with functions, many lists and categorical systems exist. Below is one attemp at listing and categorizing some of the important collaborative skills (Jacobs, Gan, & Ball 1995, pp. 82-83).

Key collaborative skills

Group Forming Skills

1. Getting into groups efficiently Greeting others
2. Greeting others
3. Introducing oneself—Introducing others
4. Using people's names when speaking to them
5. Ending a group activity
6. Saying goodbye

Basic Group Functioning Skills

7. Saying thanks—Responding to thanks.
8. Attentive listening
9. Giving praise
10. Waiting patiently—Trying not to keep others waiting
11. Asking for help
12. Giving help
13. Apologizing— Accepting apologies

14. Encouraging others to participate—Responding to encouragement to participate
15. Asking questions—Responding to questions
16. Saying "No"—Accepting "No"
17. Giving instructions—Following instructions
18. Interrupting appropriately—Accepting appropriate interruptions
19. Using humour to help group functioning
20. Getting the group back on task
21. Paraphrasing
22. Observing and commenting on group functioning

Idea Exchange Skills

23. Making a plan
24. Making suggestions—Responding to suggestions
25. Asking for reasons—Giving reasons
26. Asking for feedback—Giving feedback
27. Giving negative feedback—Responding to negative feedback
28. Disagreeing politely—Responding to disagreement
29. Checking accuracy
30. Checking for understanding
31. Persuading others
32. Compromising
33. Summarizing

Teaching collaborative skills

Johnson, Johnson, and Holubec (1993) propose a six-part procedure for teaching collaborative skills. (See Dishon & O'Leary, 1993 and Kagan, 1994 for other ideas.)

The six parts are:

1) Explain the need for the skill
2) Help students see what the skill looks and sounds like

3) Provide opportunities for students to practice the skill in isolation from other course content
4) Encourage students to use the skill as they work together on other course objectives
5) Provide time for students to think about and discuss their use of the skill and plan their future use
6) Help students persevere in using the skill on a long-term basis

Integrating Language Usage Function and Collaborative Skills

There is much overlapping between the language functions list and the collaborative skills lists presented here, and it is not coincidental that such overlapping exists. After all, 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 collaborating. Language educators can help students learn language functions and collaborative skills by integrating these two key areas.

The following section presents some examples of how the authors of this article have integrated language functions and collaborative skills.

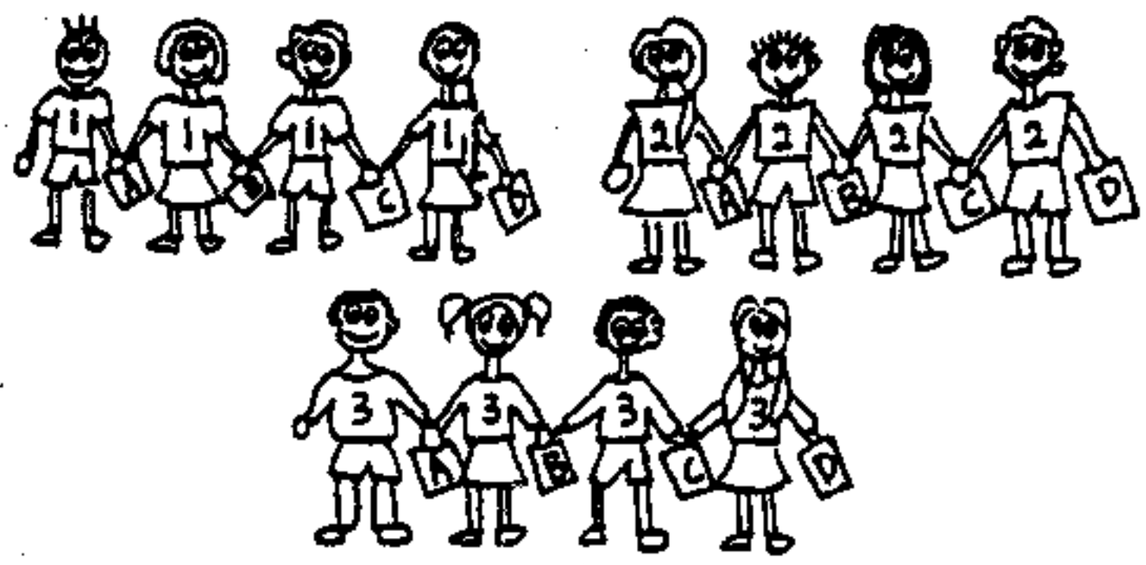
Jigsaw

One of the best known cooperative learning techniques is Jigsaw (Coelho, 1992b). Here's an example of how we use Jigsaw. A reading passage on the causes and solutions to the problem of air pollution is divided into parts, just like a jigsaw puzzle is divided into pieces. Students form groups of four called Home Teams. Each home team member gets one piece of the passage. They then leave their home team and form an Expert Team with three people from other home teams who have the same piece of the passage. The job of the expert team is to learn their piece well and prepare to teach it to their home team.

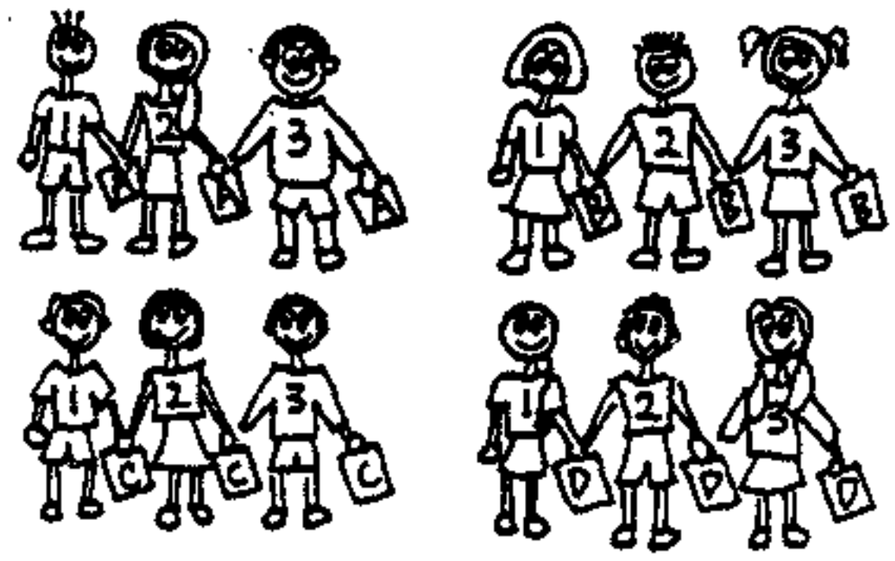
Next, the expert teams disband, and students return to their home teams where they take turns teaching their pieces of the passage. Finally, the group does a task requiring information from all the passage pieces: they are to decide which of the proposed solutions for air pollution is possible and what they can do to make it happen. The drawing below illustrates one way of doing Jigsaw (Jacobs, Gan, & Ball, 1995, p. 16).

Figure 1.

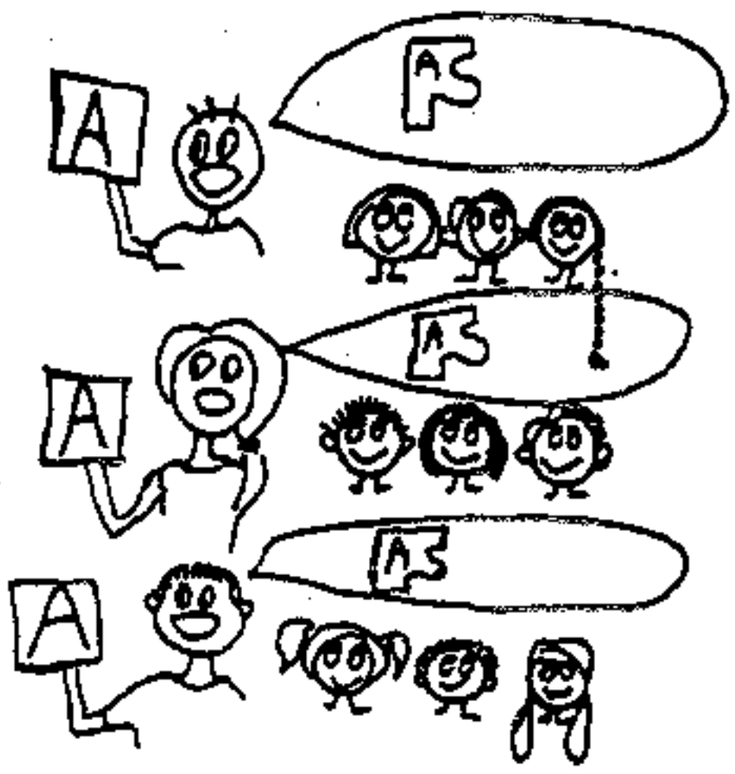
Jigsaw 1.



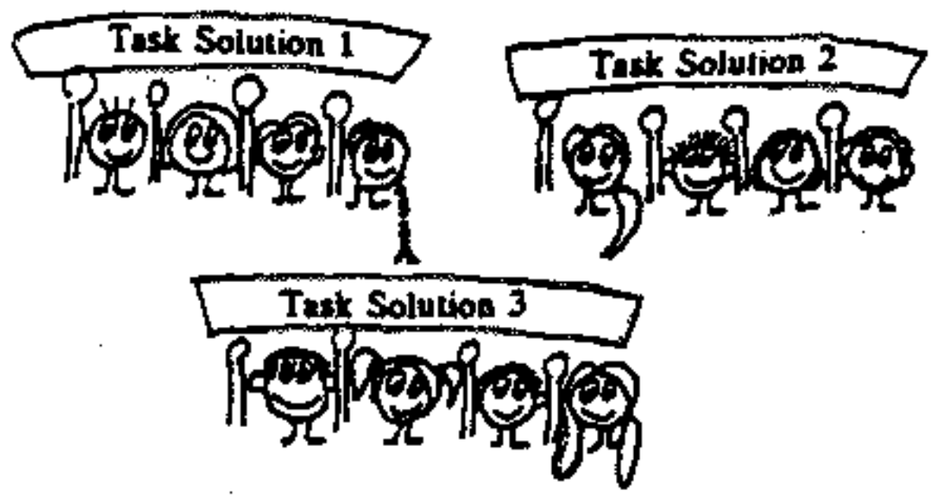
1. Each home team member gets a different piece of the reading material: Piece A, B, C, or D.



2. They form expert teams to become experts on their piece.



3. They return home and teach their piece to their home team.



4. Home teams combine the information from their experts with their other knowledge to perform a task.

Jigsaw facilitates learning of both language and content by providing a highly interactive way to structure instruction. Each student must learn the content and the relevant language to teach to their home team members, and then the home team must listen carefully and put together the information to complete the task.

Jigsaw could involve the majority of the language functions on Finocchiaro and Brumfit's (1983) list as well as the majority of the collaborative skills on Jacobs, et al.'s (1995) list. A few of these are listed in Table 1.

Table 1.

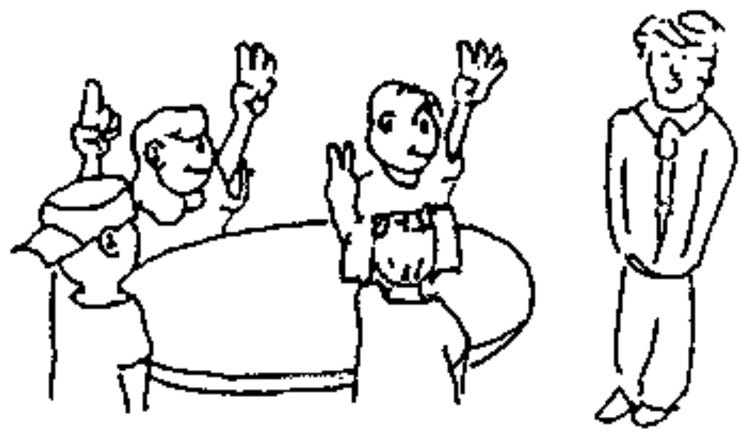
Language Function		Corresponding Collaborative Skill		Example
Category	**Function**	**Category**	**Skill**	
Personal	1.*Expressing pleasure	Group Forming Skills	2. Greeting others	When students form the expert teams and meet the other members, they might say, "Hi John, it's nice to work with you again."
Interpersonal	11. Compli-menting someone	Basic group functioning	9. Giving praise	After someone finishes teaching their piece to the home team, some might say, "You taught us your piece very well. Thank you."
Directive	13. Making requests		15. Asking questions	If one team member doesn't understand what another has said, they might say, "Would you say that again please?"
Imaginative	24. Solving problems	Idea Exchange	24. Making suggestions	When the team is doing their task, one member might suggest a solution by saying: "I think it will be possible to reduce air pollution if we all try to walk more and take cars less."

Table 1 - Language Functions and Collaborative Skills Useful in the Jigsaw Technique

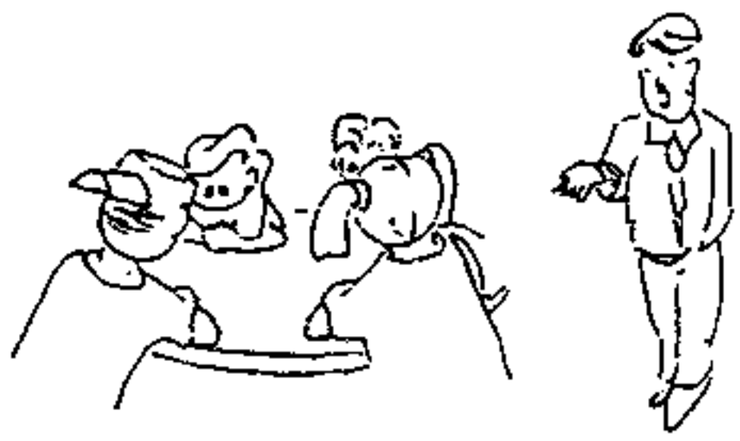
* Numbers refer to the numbers from the lists of language functions and collaborative skills given earlier in the article.

Another popular cooperative learning technique is called Numbered Heads Together. Here's an example of how we use it. Students form groups of four. Each group member gets a number: 1, 2, 3, or 4. That's where the "Numbered" part of the name comes from. Then, the class reads a passage. Next, the teacher or a student asks a question about the passage. (We try to include thinking questions, in addition to questions where the answer can be taken directly from the passage.) Group members collaborate to develop an answer to the question and an explanation for their answer. This is where the "Heads Together" part of the name comes from. Finally, the teacher calls a number, and the student in each group with that number presents their group's answer and the reasoning behind it. The following drawing illustrates Numbered Heads Together (Jacobs, Gan, & Ball, 1995, p. 57).

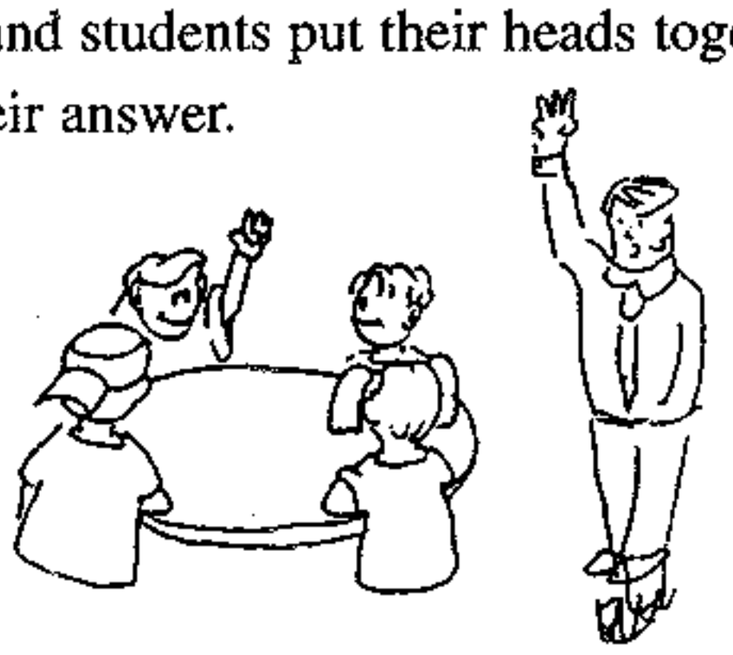
Figure 2.
Numbered Head Together



1. Each student gets a number: 1, 2, 3, or 4.



2. Teacher asks a question, and students put their heads together to develop an answer and an explanation for their answer.



3. Teacher calls a number: 1, 2, 3, or 4. The student with that number in each group gives their group's answer and explanation.

Numbered Heads Together encourages peer tutoring, because students need to explai their answers. It does not help students learn if their groupmates just give them the answe but learning is promoted when students see how the answer was obtained. Numbere Heads Together also encourages all members to participate and to learn in the grou because they do not know which number the teacher will call; so, they all need t understand their group's answer and be able to explain it. In contrast, in typical grou activities, the top student in the group is the one who almost always acts as th spokesperson.

Numbered Heads Together, like Jigsaw, could involve most of the language function on Finocchiaro and Brumfit's (1983) list as well as most of the collaborative skills on th list by Jacobs, et al. A few of these functions and collaborative skills which may occu when the technique is used are listed in Table 2.

Table 2.

Language Function		Corresponding Collaborative Skill		Example
Category	**Function**	**Category**	**Skill**	
Inter-personal	9.* Indicating disagreement	Idea exchange	28. Dis-agreeing politely	A group member disagrees with another's answer and says, "You may be right, but here's another possible answer ..."
Inter-personal	6. Extending invitations	Basic group functioning	14. Encou-raging others to participate	A group member has not contributed any ideas to the group. Another member asks, "Susan, what's your opinion about this?"
Referential	20. Asking for a definition	Idea exchange	30. Checking for under-standing	A group member does not understand a word in the text and asks, "What does 'belligerent' mean?"

Table 2 - Language Functions and Collaborative Skills Useful in the Numbered Heads Together Technique

* Numbers refer to the numbers from the lists of language functions and collaborative skills given earlier in the article.

One Student's Story

Teachers who try cooperative learning often mention the problem of dealing with students who are behind others in terms of acquisition of academic language and skills.

Every term, we have a few such students with significantly lower proficiency than their classmates. Often, due to cultural reasons, the less proficient students don't want to publicly acknowledge their need for additional help by coming to us. One effective way to give such students the help that they need is to involve them in cooperative groups of mixed proficiency because they often feel freer to ask for help from their peers.

A case in point is Alexander, a professional from a highly oral Middle-Eastern culture who came to the United States for special computer training. Alexander needed to pass a series of English courses before applying to a technical college. His ESL teachers observed that his literacy skills in English were extremely low, that he suffered from a number of physical symptoms related to stress (severe headaches, eye strain, etc.), and that he didn't mix well socially with other students because of his low self-confidence.

Attempts to talk to him about his difficulties with English were unsuccessful due to his personal and cultural beliefs about what it means to be a slower learner. Work in cooperative learning groups proved to be the most successful method of helping him. Cooperatively structured work in small groups also helped him to improve his collaborative skills and his conversational ability in English. Furthermore, his self-esteem greatly improved from his interaction with other students.

Alexander remained in the U.S. and became a functioning member of the culture, capable of conversing with Americans and others in fairly fluent English. It is questionable whether or not he would have achieved any of these things if he had not had the exposure to cooperative learning and opportunities to practice the various functions of American English in a supportive setting.

Closing Comments

The purpose of this article has been to argue for the teaching of collaborative skills as part of the use of group activities. We believe that such teaching, far from detracting from language learning, actually aids it. As Coelho (1992a) states:

> The many parallels between linguistic functions and cooperative group skills suggest that cooperative learning can provide the foundation for a communicative curriculum design. In providing opportunities for students to develop specific group skills, we can focus on the corresponding language functions. (p. 39)

Group activities form an important part of modern communicative language teaching. By spending time helping students learn the collaborative skills necessary for successful group functioning, we language teachers also help students learn language which will be useful in and out of the classroom. The six-step procedure, described above, for teaching collaborative skills provides good ideas for doing this. However, in the rush to get through the syllabus or the textbook, there is a great temptation to skip some or all of these steps. Please consider the wisdom of omitting this potentially important element of instruction.

According to McDonell (1992), learning through groups provides students with many benefits, but teaching students to function in cooperative groups takes time and is a gradual process that requires patience and a guiding hand from the teacher while students learn to listen to and trust each other. Given time, cooperative learning can be a supportive and successful method of learning for many different types of students.

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Conference Announcements

TESOL Association of Aotearoa New Zealand, Hamilton, New Zealand. September 18-21, 1996. Contact Jill Hobden, Conference Convenor, c/o The University of Waikato Language Institute, the University of Waikato, Private Bag 3105, Hamilton, New Zealand. Tel. 64-7-838-4193. Fax 64-7-838-4194. E-mail: j.hobden@waikato.ac.nz

Association of Teachers of English in the Czech Republic, Ceské Budéjovice, Czech Republic. September 20-22, 1996. Contact Mr. Prokop Pitter, Pabláskova 5,37001 Ceské Budéjovice, Czech Republic. Tel. 42-38-58518.

Korea TESOL. Annual conference, Seoul, Korea. October 25-27, 1996. Contact Carl Dusthimer, Hannam University, Department of English, 133 Ojungdong, Taejon 300-791, Korea. Tel. 82-42-634-9235. Fax 82-42-623-8472. E-mail: bustman@eve.hannam.ac.kr.

The Slovak Association of TESOL, High Tatras at Poprad, Slovakia. October 25-27, 1996. Contact James Sutherland-Smith, Metodicke Centrum, Tarasa Sevcenku 11,080 40 Presov, Slovak Republic. Fax +42-7-497296.

Japan Association for Language Teaching. Annual International Conference, Hiroshima, Japan. November 1-4, 1996. Contact JALT Central Office, Florious Tokyo #301, 2-32-10 Nishinippori, Arakawa-ku, Tokyo 116 Japan. Tel. +81-33802-7121. Fax +81-33802-7122. Http://www.aichi-gakuin.ac.jp/-scott/jalt96.html