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Promoting Cooperative Learning in ELT Classes through the Use of CoRT Thinking Tools

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Abstract:

The author examines the use of CoRT (Cognitive Research Trust at Cambridge) Thinking Tools in Cooperative Learning activities in undergraduate university English language classes at a private university in Turkey. CoRT I and CoRT IV thinking lessons are demonstrated to provide practical and accessible content for ELT cooperative learning activities for learners at various language ability levels. Results demonstrate that students increased their facility and knowledge of cooperative learning strategies through use of CoRT thinking tools, and, as a corollary result, promoted writing and speaking in real-life contexts. Survey results show that students intend to use cooperative learning in their teaching. Written responses include CoRT lesson work cards and student anecdotal reports. Group presentations and peer feedback are shown to increase facility and confidence with spoken language. Evidence indicates that CoRT tools used in cooperative learning assist students to break down participatory barriers, develop different ways of framing situations, and develop greater language use and interactive discussion amongst learners, with opportunities for immediate, specific contextualized feedback in a low-risk environment. Using cooperative learning strategies with CoRT thinking tools is shown to be an adaptable strategy for initiating productive language.

Keywords: CoRT (Cognitive Research Trust at Cambridge) Thinking Tools; ELT, cooperative learning; creative thinking; productive language.

Introduction

Established as a private university in 2009, Mevlana University, Konya, opened its doors to students in the fall of 2010. In the first year of operation, the University (due to a selection process of the Turkish Higher Education Authority), accepted both students who scored well above the median in the Higher Education Examination-Undergraduate Placement Examination (*Yükseköğretime Geçis Sınavı-Lisans Yerleştirme Sınavı*, YGS-LYS, 2012) testing as part of the Student Selection and Placement System (*Öğrenci Seçme ve Yerleştirme Sistemi*, ÖSYS, 2012), along with those students who scored poorly but who chose the option of attending a private foundation university as their higher education option. As there was no English preparatory year program in place at that time, students entered their respective programs directly. Given the accommodation made for acceptance, students exhibited a wide range of English language proficiency. The sample population was enrolled in a first-year ELT reading and writing course, a second-year oral communications class, with the remainder in a Medical English productive language course.

Given the remarkable changing social and learning environments of this century, educators have come to realize the need to provide opportunities for students to acquire social skills that incorporate interpersonal communication, develop cooperation, foster intercultural competency (Kurt & McKeown, 2012), and support conflict resolution. As these skills are deemed essential to success in school, employability and for a satisfying life, cooperative learning has emerged as a powerful method for fostering student achievement, social development and educational cultural convergence (Diboll & McKeown, 2011).

Review of Literature

(i) Cooperative Learning

Cooperative Learning is essentially a set of instructional methods in which students work together in small, mixed-ability learning groups in order to maximize their own and each other's learning (Slavin, 1986) and their understanding of a subject. The students in each group are responsible for learning the content taught, and for helping their group members learn. Each member of a team is responsible not only for learning what is taught but also for helping other group members learn, thus creating an atmosphere of achievement. Students work through an assignment until all the group members successfully understand and complete it.

Extensive research has provided overwhelming support on the usefulness of cooperative learning. During the past 90 years, more than 600 studies have been conducted by a wide variety of researchers in cooperative learning and more is known about the efficacy of cooperative learning than almost any other facet of education (Johnson & Johnson, 1994). Cooperative learning is recognized as an approach that allows students to cooperate with one another, lessens competitive behaviors, increases overall learning and enhances interpersonal relationships (Johnson, Johnson & Holubec, 1993).

Researchers studying the effects of cooperative learning on achievement found positive academic outcomes for cooperative learning compared to competitive and individualistic learning. Slavin (1995) found that 72% of 68 comparative studies favored cooperative learning methods. In particular, three elements were found to contribute to its success: group rewards, individual accountability, and equal opportunity. Similarly, Johnson and Stannes' (2000) meta-analysis of over 300 studies found that the most positive outcomes prevail under conditions of positive interdependence, individual accountability and direct teaching of collaborative skills, and further that cooperation results in significantly higher achievement and retention than do either competitive and individualistic efforts.

In Lithuania, Klimoviene (2006) conducted research with 90 second-year Economics and Management students in Business English classes, focusing on the significance of cooperative learning activities in developing students' thinking skills. The activities included asking pertinent questions, debating ideas, summarizing and synthesizing, critiquing ideas and communicating. The findings revealed a positive correlation between the use of cooperative learning and student performance in the listed activities. The research also revealed that students became more adept in critique, developing their own position, and making decisions based on support from group members.

Despite the diversity of cooperative learning approaches, cooperative learning shares five common attributes:

1. Positive Interdependence in which each group member's efforts are required for combined success and where each group member is recognized with their own unique contribution to make to the joint effort. Within cooperative learning situations, students have two responsibilities to learn the assigned material, and to ensure that all members of the groups learn the material.
2. Face-to-Face Interaction is promoting each member's success by providing each other with effective assistance, exchanging information and resources, processing information efficiently, providing feedback, challenging conclusions, reasoning to promote greater insight into the problems being considered, and, by maintaining low anxiety and stress levels.
3. Individual and Group Accountability is essential as the group comes to recognize who needs more assistance, support and encouragement in completing a task. Group members recognize that they cannot "hitchhike" on the work of others.
4. Interpersonal and Small-group Skills are activated when students accept and support each other, communicate accurately and unambiguously, and resolve conflict constructively.
5. Group Processing provides the opportunity for group members to share how they are achieving their goals and maintaining effective working relationships. Throughout this process, they describe what member actions are helpful and not helpful, and consequently decide about what behaviors ought to continue or change (Kagan, 1992).

As working in groups requires the use of interpersonal and small-group skills, students are given opportunities to practice these skills. With the goal of meeting individual learning needs within a heterogeneous, cooperative learning lesson, Johnson, Johnson & Holubec (1993) describe a six-step process for directly teaching cooperative skills:

1. Identify the skill by naming it and defining it

2. Explain why it is needed
3. Demonstrate the skill
4. Provide opportunities to use and practice the skill
5. Provide feedback on the skill
6. Reflect on the performance of the skills and set further goals.

There are benefits to using cooperative learning methods. Based on compiled cooperative learning research by Marzano and Associates (2001), using groups is a better teaching option than not using groups at all, and that organizing groups based on ability levels is best done sparingly. Homogenous grouping seems to have a positive effect on student achievement when compared to no grouping. But it is heterogeneous groupings that provide the most substantial gains in student attainment.

(ii) Rationale for using cooperative learning strategies in second-language instruction

Krashen's (2003) input hypothesis posits that a low anxiety setting helps comprehensible input build students' language competence. Swain (2000) in the output hypothesis shows that to learn a second language, in addition to comprehensible input, students need to create comprehensible output. Comprehensible output involves students speaking and writing in a manner that others can understand. Based on social-cultural theory (Lantolf, 2000), demonstrates that learners make faster progress than they could on their own because what students can do at first when working with others, they can later do on their own. In this way, interaction helps promote effective learning. Research in task-based language teaching (Edwards & Willis, 2005) demonstrates that learning is facilitated when students use language to perform meaningful tasks. Tasks encourage purposeful language use, allow learners to solve problems using their own resources, and encourage them to reflect on their language use.

(iii)The Cognitive Research Trust at Cambridge – The CoRT Thinking Program

The *CoRT Thinking Program* lessons have been in use since 1970 in many countries (Edward de Bono, 2012) for the direct teaching of thinking. *The CoRT Thinking Program* endures due to the concrete nature of the lessons, which are "simple, practical, clear, focused and serious" (6:2012). The lessons have been used in a range of schools from elite to disadvantaged, mainly by teachers without previous training in the use of the lessons. The format allows easy access to instruction to a wide age range and for differing abilities, and, for L2 learners. For de Bono, basic thinking processes are the same for any age and levels of ability. Lateral thinking materials developed by Edward de Bono have been advocated for use in the ELT classroom by Simon Mumford (2006) previously.

Each lesson presents a new thinking tool. CoRT I "breadth" thinking lessons are taught first. After the initial few lessons, a variety of tools can be introduced. The lessons all follow the same format for consistency. Tools from CoRT I include, for example, "APC" (Alternatives, Possibilities, and Choices), "CAF" (Consider All Factors) and "FiP" (First Important Priorities). Interestingly, the strangeness of the tool names appeals to students. Each student receives a copy of the reproducible student tool workcard where practice topics are provided. The complete

CoRT Thinking Programme is available on CD from The Edward de Bono Foundation and is broken into six segments of ten lessons each:

> **CoRT I:** Breadth. This section helps students broaden perception.
> **CoRT II:** Organization. The tools give students a variety of tools to organize their thinking.
> **CoRT III:** Interaction. Helps students observe the thinking involved in arguments, how a point of view is presented or defended, and the value and types of evidence.
> **CoRT IV:** Creativity. Students learn tools to generate fresh new solutions to challenges.
> **CoRT V:** Information and Feeling. Tools used to separate emotions from facts.
> **CoRT VI:** Action. This section begins with purposes, and ends with specific action steps for the implementation of the outcome of thinking.

Edward de Bono defines thinking as "the operating skill with which intelligence acts upon experience" and notes that "thinking is the deliberate exploration of experience for a purpose" (11:1982). He maintains, however, that here is sufficient individuality in thinking styles to suggest that thinking may be a skill which can be developed and improved. De Bono (1970) cautioned that too much logical thinking which focuses only on judgments of right and wrong can be defective as it omits the generative and creative aspects of thinking. He maintains that the way to achieve an expansion of thinking is via a conscious and deliberate thinking which involves provocation, exploration and risk-taking, and allows the thinker to come up with novel ideas and solutions. For de Bono, being a thinker involves deliberately practicing and focusing on the "operating skill" (9:1982), and similar to any skill development, such as playing football, can be improved over time. One of the core advantages of using CoRT thinking program workcards is that the format is simple, the language is accessible to the participants, and further, the lessons are engaging, interactive, dynamic and enjoyable.

Population

The sample population was composed of 94 undergraduate students (59 female and 33 male), aged 18-22, at a private university in Turkey. Students in the sample population were taught by the author in: (i) two sections of *Advanced Reading and Writing* in a first-year undergraduate ELT education degree program; (ii) one section of a second-year of *Oral Communications* course also part of an undergraduate ELT education degree program; and, (iii) one section of medical candidates studying productive English language skills as part of their first-year program of studies in the Faculty of Medicine. Students were advised that they were not required to participate in the study but that a group presentation was part of the required course term work.

All students willingly agreed to participate in the research and CoRT presentations. Language proficiency varied amongst the participants and, based on levels associated with the Common European Language Framework (CEF), were A1 through B1.

Methodology

Cooperative learning strategies were introduced at the outset of the courses to support peer editing, spoken interaction, and in writing workshops. The process involved explaining academic tasks and the cooperative learning strategy, specifying criteria, explaining positive interdependence and individual accountability, setting expected behaviors and structuring inter-group cooperation. During cooperative learning sections, the tutor monitored the groups and intervened when needed to improve task work or teamwork, resolve conflicts, or to bring a lesson to a close. The tutor reviewed group-skills and facilitated problem-solving, checked homework, initiated discussion, led reading groupings (reading and explaining in pairs, reading comprehension triads, and jigsaw/expert groups), and set writing compositions and dialogues. Most students reacted positively to the use of these strategies.

In planning cooperative learning, the author determined learning parameters including the use of target language within the lessons, group size, appropriate cooperative learning strategies, ways to assign students to groups, the choice of individual roles within the groups roles (e.g., summarizer, coach, record keeper, time-keeper, observer), and arrangement of the class to facilitate group interaction. In working with groups, the tutor noted that there was still some resistance to using groups, and as a result, decided to investigate if CoRT thinking tools would encourage students to adjust to a cooperative learning approach in their language classes.

The broad outlines of the CoRT progamme were introduced and each class was guided through two tools, CoRT I “PMi” (positive, minus, interesting) and CoRT IV “Po” (a new thinking word used to encourage creativity). The class established a rationale that resources required would be limited to CoRT materials including the teacher notes from the handbooks. It was decided that session leaders would limit their speaking to one minute intervals (to avoid lengthy explanations or tedious power-point explanations and to focus on class responses), and that English would be used to discuss and record responses.

Students self-selected groups of three or four members and then chose one tool from CoRT I or CoRT IV to present in a participatory lesson format: the thinking tool combined with a cooperative learning strategy. Groups during their respective presentations led the class through the CoRT workcard sections (introduction, discussion, summary) for about 5-7 minutes to produce group responses for a total of 25-35 minutes per presentation. The student-led group presentations were held over a period of six weeks. Student-generated notes were written directly on CoRT workcards and were collected at the end of each session as evidence of the writing generated during the presentations. Students provided peer feedback orally on the presentation lessons.

A survey was completed by 94 participants at the beginning of the course. The survey was intended to: (i) access to what extent they knew about thinking as a subject area; (ii) reveal their past experience with cooperative learning and thinking strategies; and, (iii) determine what they might know about CoRT tools. The same survey was given to 67 participants at the end of the course to determine any changes. The survey consisted of 18 statements with Likert-scale responses consisting of "none", "a bit", "some", "a lot", and, "expertly". Seven of the questions related directly to students' experience of cooperative learning, five questions related to their exposure to CoRT thinking tools, and four questions focused on their "thinking" in past educational experience. There was also a space provided in which participants could add comments.

Findings

The findings are extracted from participants in three different language courses of 14 weeks with three contact hours per week. For the purpose of this study, the researcher will focus the CoRT responses that student groups were requested to gather on the workcards, the survey on cooperative learning strategies and thinking skills, and on student reflections and tutor observations during and after the process.

(i) Survey Results

Results of the first survey, given at the beginning of the course, were compared with the results of the same survey given at the completion of the course. The survey results indicate that students by the end of the course recognized more specifically what cooperative learning was, and that according to the survey, they "know about Cooperative Learning" (moving upward 10% through all scale items), "can name cooperative learning strategies" (moving upward through scale items from "none" at 30%, and "a bit at 31%, to "some" at 40%, and to "a lot" at 22%). When asked if they could "use the strategies in their ELT classes", the results moved dramatically through 32% at "a bit" and "some", upward to 20% at "some", 50% at "a lot" and 25% to "expertly".

Survey responses showed that students knew "something about what CoRT thinking tools can do" (from 32% at "none" and 33% at "a bit", to 34% at "some" and 47% at "a lot" – a significant increase in their understanding). Responses to "I could use thinking techniques with students" showed a 29% increase overall, and "I could "select a thinking strategy and use it when needed" showed a 14% increase.

In a statement related to students' experience of cooperative learning, "in high school my teachers used cooperative learning", there was a significant decrease in the second survey. On the initial survey, students had believed that their teachers' use of groups equated with cooperative learning, and afterward, they were better able to distinguish the difference between the two. In statements about the potential pedagogical application of cooperative learning, and

the possible use of CoRT thinking tools in their work as teachers: "cooperative learning can be used in ELT" had a 33% increase into "a lot" and "expertly" categories.

Responses to "individual learning is better than in groups" had a 18% increase. Surprisingly, after considering the above responses and the significant change in knowledge and attitude, for the statement, "I learn better on my own", there were some individualistic hardliners: the result *decreased*. Perhaps this was due to a misunderstanding: they were responding to a prompt about what they had learned as an individual student in the class. There is a competitive student environment in Turkey with a strong emphasis on testing; these factors may also account for this emphasis on individual learning.

A limitation of the survey is that it did not address students' affective perceptions of their development of productive language during the course sessions. This is a potential area for investigation by a future researcher. There was also a space provided for participants' comments which will be examined as written feedback.

(ii) Written Feedback

Part of the findings are extracted from student-generated responses on the CoRT workcards, and from from student comments. Included are comments that demonstrate their changing interest and commitment in using cooperative learning strategies and CoRT tools. Here is a selection of comments from Survey 1.

- I don't know what is CoRT.
- I think my teachers made us to speak English in class.
- I think cooperative and individual activities may be balanced.
- Sometimes cooperative learning may be better.
- I want study alone.
- I think individual learning is better.
- Learning on my own helps me to concentrate on my work and to think deeper about it
- Absolutely individual learning is better than groups.
- Group studying isn't useful.
- I think we couldn't even write in groups.

In Survey 2, the number of comments received as well as their content show a shift toward using cooperative learning strategies in ELT classes, and a casual familiarity with CoRT materials.

- The group activities are helpful for my English.
- That was fun I used to think that it was hard to speak but can see now that it is not so hard.
- I liked them.
- It was good to work together.
- I liked the way we were able to talk without teacher bothering us
- I liked working with the other groups.

- It seems too easy but then you get the tools can be used.
- By using CoRT we learn the group way.
- CL strategies can be useful for learning/teaching a foreign language.
- I like CoRT thinking mostly because I improve myself much better in cooperative learning.
- CoRT tools make us to speak more.
- I am happy to use them.
- It helped me to learn new words and know more about my friends.
- Some situations learning in a group better.
- Cooperative learning is something useful.
- Working in groups may help us learn from other members of the group.
- I now like working in groups.
- I can use them but it was difficult.
- I will use when teacher.

In examining the written responses on the CoRT workcards, it can be seen that their language use is functional and immediate, and was completed without editing or correction of errors. These samples showed that students could quickly produce written language, sometimes in phrases, and sometimes in sentences (utilizing the same grammatical structures; they found form of sentence syntax and structure and repeatedly used it), coherently, and on demand. It was interesting to note that in almost all cases, one person was responsible for the writing, and as the groups changed composition often, each participant had a turn as scribe. In response to the prompts, students aimed to capture their group members' responses related to the tool, and to report these directly to the larger group. There was no evidence of a fear of writing but there was evidence to indicate that they were writing for meaning and for immediate communication. There were many examples of linguistic convergence (Giles and Smith, 1979) as seen in the translation of specific words or phrases from Turkish to English.

(iii)Peer Feedback

Students provided verbal feedback to the respective groups after each of the CoRT group presentations and were thus able to share immediately with their peers in a direct and responsive way. These comments began with simple statements such as "thanks" or "good job", and developed into much more specific comments about the cooperative learning strategy that was used, the way that the group worked together, or on the effectiveness of the CoRT tool lesson. Based on comments taken from student reflections and peer feedback on CoRT presentations, they noted that CoRT lessons were an ideal vehicle for cooperative learning strategies. Students noted a significant increase in confidence that they exhibited while making their presentations, along with enhanced student participation and peer interaction.

Discussion

It may be worthwhile to note a few observational points on the mechanics of cooperative learning lessons using CoRT tools. It was found that groups of 3-4 worked effectively to provide enough time to illicit reponses and participation, and that CoRT lessons worked most effectively when used in one lesson per week. As CoRT lessons adhere to the same structure, students could focus on the tool and this meant more time to focus on practice prior to presenting. In friendship groupings, participants demonstrated cooperative elements including group processing, accountability, and responsibility.

In the author's experience, questions posed to the whole class were often answered by a few more able speakers who tended to dominate discussions, or not at all. With the class divided into groups, less able students have more opportunity to contribute with time available to think longer, giving those who are not as able in English the chance to have, and express, ideas. Groups allowed for as much thinking time as was needed (really a peer discussion), and with five smaller groups broken out for practice of the CoRT tool, there was five times as much discussion going in a class as there would have been without any groups.

Since during CoRT lessons small groups work independently from each other, at the end of a lesson there was a greater variety of ideas and language used than if the tutor had asked for individual responses. Sooner or later even the most reluctant student had to serve as spokesperson for a group. Because that student was expressing ideas the group had shared (and not necessarily having had to take on any other initiative other than summarizing the group's points), they demonstrated more ease in speaking and greater use of the language taken from the workcards. Students who lacked confidence operated more naturally in a peer group and spoke with greater frequency and at greater length.

High performing language students turned out to be the most resistant to initiating group activity. This could be because they were not able they get the recognition they usually received or that they were now more closely connected to less able students, or that they felt as if working in group situations might impede the speed of their progress. CoRT tools were found to be a leveler in this regard.

The implementation of CoRT and cooperative learning depends on adaptions made to accommodate students' needs and interests. The tutor modeled a brisk pace to ensure that the focus remained on the tool and not on the content. The implication is that whoever is leading the CoRT session needs to provide encouragement by listening to and accepting ideas in a positive way. To promote that sort of discussion, students needed a repertoire of replies that gave value to responses in the absence of right or wrong answers. Some of these included "that's very interesting", "that's an original idea", "that's an important point", "no one thought of that", "I hadn't considered that", "that's a useful idea", or "you can piggyback on that idea". There are other ready-made phrases available in the teacher handbooks that can be shared with student

groups. It is important to provide support to the ideas and the way in which they are expressed. What was to be avoided was accepting certain ideas as the "correct" ideas while dismissing others.

At the beginning of the study, it appeared that the CoRT workcards might not be necessary for each student to have. However, in practice, they were needed for each individual to focus the student's attention; they made the lesson more definite and concrete. Although students could often understand what a group said, they had no way of knowing what was going to be said *next*. With the workcards, students had everything that was needed and could look more easily at the basic nature of the lessons and its extent. The cover design helped to anchor the idea of the lesson and was often used to introduce a specific tool.

Conclusions

There are number of benefits from combining cooperative learning strategies with CoRT in the study. CoRT tools can be simply introduced and are adaptable to an ELT class environment; it takes 30-40 minutes to learn a tool and practise it. The nature of the tools is such that a number of cooperative learning strategies can be used to create learner groupings within a class with different purposes.

Using this combination, there is increased group interaction, particularly in speaking. The speaking has supports. Each group processes how they worked together based on what they learned from the tool, the five elements of cooperative learning, and from peer feedback. Use of the tools makes learning relevant to the student as they add their ideas from their own background and access their prior experience. In this way, CoRT can provide a low-risk environment for the sharing of ideas. For the tutor, the CoRT tool format is already established with minimal preparation needed. This allows the tutor to provide support and feedback for the groups as they work together and develop the use of cooperative strategies.

As there are no right and wrong answers in the CoRT sessions, there is a climate of confidence rather than of anxiety. Through the group work, students are given practice in observing their thinking plus the thinking of others in an objective way: the lessons have a positive effect on student behavior as their self-image is bolstered (e.g., "I am a thinker" versus "I am a language learner"). They interact in this environment with a sense of achievement. Adopting thinking tasks centered on cooperative learning strategies helps improve social relationships among team members, gives learners the opportunity to learn, practice and absorb the cooperative learning technique while at the same time using the target language.

Students used the tools as means to an end: to get on with the task and engage in using the thinking tool while simultaneously putting into practice the language that they had learned in class cooperatively. CoRT tools were an ideal vehicle to practice target language while engaged in cooperative learning.

In this research, most students did not realize that while working on the tools, they were in fact, practicing speaking and writing skills. One student's response particularly summarized the value of combining CoRT tools with cooperative learning strategies: she had the '*guts to share my thoughts and was more confident in my own judgment'.*

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Canadian, **Dr. John McKeown**, has served as teacher, administrator, trainer and consultant in Canada, Angola, Turkey, UAE, Qatar and UK. He is a CELTA holder and experienced ESL teacher and ELT trainer. In Doha and Abu Dhabi, he was Director of Academics for Mosaica Education supporting government-sponsored education reform initiatives. He has taught in higher education in both Bahrain and Turkey. He holds an B.A.(Hons) in English and Philosophy and graduated from the University of Toronto with a B.Ed. and a M.A. His Ed.D. focused on building community through shared practice. He is currently piloting a new model to develop tutor intercultural competency, "educational cultural convergence" ("ECCO"). Dr. McKeown is an administrator at MEFIS International School - Istanbul.

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