

## **COOPERATIVE LEARNING: ENGAGING YOUNG LEARNERS IN A LARGE CLASS**

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### **Abstract**

While the teaching learning process for English young learners is considered engaging in small class size, the phenomenon of large class are still found in elementary schools in Indonesia. The paper bases itself on classroom action research which is aimed at improving the engagement of grade four students in a large class. The action research implemented Cooperative Learning in combination with the use of grouping technique, group member roles, and fun cooperative activities. This study was implemented in two cycles consisting of three meetings in each cycle. The data collection techniques were observations, interviews, and students' self-evaluation questionnaire. The students' engagement is indicated by students' mood, focus, responsibility, group participation, as well as the task completion time. The findings show that the exact grouping technique improves their participation in their groups. Group member roles improve the students' responsibility and promotes positive interdependence among the group members. Fun and various cooperative activities improve students' mood and focus on the tasks. Cooperative learning also helps them to complete the tasks on time. The improved students' engagement results in the reduction of behavioural problems. It also benefits the teacher to give more time for instruction than behavioural management. In addition, the actions successfully improve the teacher-student, student-teacher, and student-student interactions and develop the students' social skills.

**Key words:** Students' Engagement, A Large Class, Cooperative Learning, Classroom Management

### **INTRODUCTION**

There are many determining factors in the successful teaching-learning process. One of them is the class size. An ideal language class consists of 25 students (Blatchford, 2007: 149). In this class, it is easier for teacher to engage their students by using various methods and techniques and pay closer attention to all students. A small class benefits children due to a number of factors, including increased teacher's contact, differentiated instruction and improved classroom management (Benbow et al, 2007: 5). As a result, students in the type of class have more opportunities to participate in class activities and to interact with other students. Therefore, they can fully engage in the teaching-learning process.

It is important to engage students in the teaching-learning process because it is related to students' behaviours management. The engaged students will show positive emotions to get involved sustainably in the learning activities. When they were engaged in the teaching-learning process, the classroom disruptions and discipline issue in the class are also reducing. In the ideal situation, the teaching-learning process can run

well. Students' engagement is the students' sustained involvement in learning activities accompanied positive emotions (Skinner and Belmont, 1993 in Chapman, 2003:2). They state that the students can be called as being engaged when they show their willingness to select the task, to voluntarily participate, and to show efforts and concentration. Despite challenges and obstacles, the engaged students get involved in the work and take visible delight in accomplishing their work (Schlechty, 2001 in Saeed and Zynger, 2012: 253).

In the large class, the English teacher needed to adapt her teaching and to create different strategy based on the students' needs in the type of class. However, based on the preliminary interview, the teacher had not found the effective way to give every student individual attention in the class. It was difficult for her to supervise the students sitting at the back rows or to assist every student who needed her help.

It influenced to the student's perception about their teacher because the teacher did not always show her care for them or treat them in fair. Sometimes their behaviours were disruptive and they were off-task in the learning activities. Therefore, the teacher became busier to deal with

the behavioural management than the instruction. Moreover, it was time-consuming to manage the students' behaviours in the large class.

According to the research conducted by Finn, Pannozzo, and Achilles (2003 in Blatchford, et. al, 2007: 149), class size in the elementary grades gives impact to their social-psychological engagement (Damico & Roth, 1994 in Parn, 2006:11).

Specifically, Dunleavy (2008, in Taylor and Parsons (2011:18) describes three types of student engagement, namely behavioural, academic-cognitive categories, and social-psychological categories. Behavioral engagement (BE) is indicated with value of schooling outcomes, participation, and attendance. Social-psychological engagement (SPE) is related to sense of belonging, relationships, interest and positive feeling. Academic-cognitive engagement (ACE) is shown by being time-on-task, homework completion, response to challenges in learning, concentration and effort directed toward learning. Dealing with the study, students' engagements are indicated by students' mood (SPE), focus (ACE), responsibility (BE), group participation (BE), as well as the task completion time (ACE).

One of the ways to improve students' engagement in a large class is to allow students to do a small-group work. Some researchers believe that small groups can give a teacher chances to manage a large class and give students opportunities to participate more actively. However, to make students work in groups, merely seating them in a group could not encourage them to interact. Thus, Cooperative Learning was used as a strategy to structure students in the effective group works.

Cooperative learning is the instructional use of small groups so that students work together to maximize their own and each other's learning (Johnson, et. al, 1991:2). Students seek outcomes that are beneficial to all. They discuss material with each other, help one another to understand it, and encourage each other to work hard. Cooperative groups can be carried out productively if the teachers fulfill five elements of Cooperative Learning (Johnson and Johnson, 1989: 17): positive interdependence, face-to-face promotive interaction, individual accountability, interpersonal and small group skills, as well as group processing.

Thus, Cooperative Learning will be able to engage students in the teaching-learning process. Therefore, the study is conducted to solve

problems in a large class based on a research question: how can Cooperative Learning be applied in a large class to improve students' engagement?

## RESEARCH METHOD

The action research adapted cynical action research model proposed by Kemmis and McTaggart (1988 in Burns, 2010). The study involved the research collaborators in finding the problems, planning the solution, implementing the action, evaluating and reflecting the effectiveness of the actions (Burns, 2010:9). This study was implemented in two cycles consisting of three meetings in each cycle.

It involved 34 students in the fourth grade in a public elementary school. The class had 14 girls and 20 boys. Their ages varied around 9 to 10 years old. They have experienced English learning since in the first grade with the same English teacher in the fourth grade.

The research took qualitative and quantitative data. The qualitative data were in the form of field notes and interview transcripts. The quantitative data were the percentages of the number of the engaged students. To get the qualitative data of the research, Observation checklists and interview guidelines were used. Meanwhile, students' self evaluation questionnaire items were used to get the quantitative data of the research.

The questionnaire was adopted from the rubric of engagement designed by Parn (2006:36). There were five questions in students' self-evaluation questionnaire, concerning on the students' feeling, focus, responsibility, group participation, and tasks completion time. Students were categorized based on the levels of engagement. The categories of the students' were namely fully engaged, fairly engaged, slightly engaged, and disengaged students. The scores and the category of the students are shown in table 1.

Table 1. The Categories of Students based on the Levels of Engagement

Scores	The level of Students' Engagement
16-20	Fully engaged
12-15	Fairly engaged
8-11	Slightly engaged
4-7	Disengaged

To answer the research question, the analysis of action research data was conducted in a

continuing process of reducing information to find explanations and patterns. The data of this research was analysed by using five steps of data analysis adapted from Burns (2010: 157-160). Those steps are assembling the data, coding the data, comparing the data, building meanings and interpretations, and reporting the outcomes.

The validity of the data was based on five criteria proposed by Anderson *et al.* in Burns (1999: 160-162) for better and respectable result of the research. The criteria included democratic validity, outcome validity, process validity, catalytic validity, and dialogic validity.

Furthermore, triangulation technique was used to ensure the reliability based on Burns (2010: 96). The first one was time triangulation. The data were collected at different points of time to get sense of what involved in the process of the changes. The researcher took note the implementations observed in every meeting. The second one was the investigator's triangulation. In the triangulation, more than one observers are used in the same research setting. According to Burns (1990: 164), this helps avoid bias and provides checks on the reliability of the observations.

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Cooperative Learning was implemented by emphasizing on three actions: grouping students, giving group member roles, and carrying out cooperative activities.

1. *Grouping*: students would work in pairs and a group. In pairs, the students would get the opportunities to participate and to build relationship. In groups, the students got the opportunities to interact with peers while to increase the speed of task completion time. The research applied random technique in order to make the grouping fair for students. Thus, the students were in different groups in each meeting. The heterogeneity was based on sex categories.

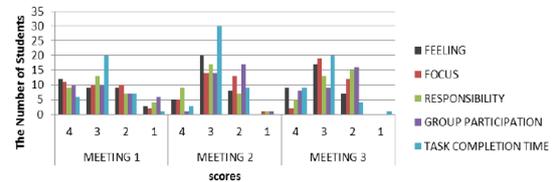
2. *Group member roles*: every group member would have different role in a group. In the cycle, their parts were helping each other to gain the group's point and being the representative of the group in the class performances.

3. *Activities*: the researcher and the English teacher used Cooperative Learning activities which suited the materials and the teaching objectives. The activities involved working in pairs and groups. The Cooperative Learning activities in the actions were Numbered Head Together, Think-Pair-Share, Three-Step Interview, and Rally Table.

In Cycle 1, it is found that most of students

are engaged. They could get involved in cooperative activities because everyone favoured physical activities and games. Their improved engagement were mostly indicated by their task completion time and feelings. They admitted that they could accomplish the task on time. Most of them were also happy during the teaching-learning process. The improvement is shown in the chart below.

Chart 1. The Improvement of Students' Engagement in Cycle I



In addition, working in cooperative group encouraged students to use social skills to do the tasks. They shared happiness with their groups in the group celebration. They began to compensate and to accept the variety of their friends' characteristics and abilities in a group work. They also used their skills to give opinion and to respond others.

However, they still needed frequent occasional reminders to be on-task in their group. They also still participated when being encouraged and reminded. It resulted to their minimum group participation. In addition, some students also still relied on the higher ability students to work so that the teacher could not predict their cognitive efforts.

Meanwhile they were not able to develop some skills to solve group or inter-group conflicts such as sharing table with others and respecting the opposite gender. They were also still shy of talking with others unless their close friends.

It is also found some weaknesses in Cycle I: the ineffective technique to explain the instructions and time-consuming grouping. Therefore, in Cycle 2, the actions included solutions to deal with those problems.

The researcher created *the group seating map* which displayed the positions of the group tables in the class. Without yelling out the name of their group, the map made students easy to find their group members in a certain space. They also did not have a dispute with other groups to get a space anymore. Moreover, the teacher could save her energy to manage the class.

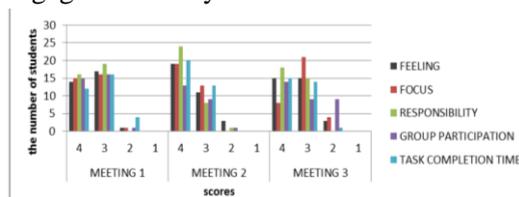
Another action is a technique to explain the guidelines of the tasks. In Cycle 2, Some students would be involved to help the teacher

explained the game instruction. The steps of the explanation by the teacher were as follows: (1) inviting the students to come forward voluntarily, (2) explaining briefly about the tasks, (3) guiding the the volunteers to demonstrate how to do the task.

After discussing with the teacher, the action also involved *redesigning the group form*. The grouping was redesigned based on students' ability. This designed arrangement was aimed at providing the safe environment for low ability students to interact and to participate in the group work. It was also aimed at guarding the high ability students' engagement in the learning process.

As a result, there was an increase of the number of students from being fairly engaged to be fully engaged and from slightly engaged to be fairly engaged. Moreover, the slightly engagement was went to 0% and there was no disengagement since in the first meeting. In addition, the increase of the number of fairly engaged students was indicated by their enthusiasm, their focus and task completion time as shown in the chart 2.

Chart 2. The Improvement of Students' Engagement in Cycle 2



The increase of the number of fully engaged students was indicated by feeling, responsibility, focus and task completion time. They enjoyed learning in groups.

Othe results showed that they were able to use social skills as their strategies to deal with their friends who have different characteristics and abilities. It means that they had been familiar to have cooperative activities with different friends.

They accepted their responsibility based on their roles as the member of the group. It was because they could understand the teacher's instruction about every member's job description. The safe environment to do the tasks also influenced their participation in their group. Moreover, they preferred to have an important role in a group and to get the rewards from the teacher. It encouraged them to master the material with positive feeling.

The result revealed that the students'

engagement was improved by using strategies as follows:

### 1. Grouping

Children could interact and participate when, in the first step, they were given pair assignment and, in the second step, given group assignment. It is line with what Maxim (2006: 175) said that the initial groups should be pairs. It was aimed at promoting relationship and ensuring participation. Then, they could work in group. In group work, children practiced to do the task by yielding different perspectives and employing more sophisticated social skills.

The group compositions based on students' ability in cooperative activities benefited students who had different academic development. It gave them a chance to participate in a group work by peer tutoring. It was in line with the literature that Cooperative learning develops an understanding of the need to help and support each other's learning (Gillies, 1998: 90). However, the findings conflicted with Dallimore's assumption (2006 in Meyer (2009, 4) that participation was oral. As a contrary, the findings supported Meyer (2007, in Meyer 2009:4) who said that some students actively participate in the classroom not only through oral engagement, but also other means even though they remain silent. In the study, the silent forms of cognitive engagement involve paying attention, taking roles during class and thinking about the material presented in the class. Their posture showed their attention and concentration by sitting up straight, bowing and watching to the speakers.

### 2. Group Member Roles

The division of roles created the position and the responsibility of each student within the Cooperative Learning groups and promoted positive interdependence amongs the group members in the classroom. However, the teacher needed to make sure that the instruction about the group member roles was clear. For children, the instruction should be by using demonstration. It was consistent with the research literature that the teacher needed to tell the class what to do to complete the assignment and how to do it (Johson, Johson and Holubec, 2009:2).

### 3. Fun Cooperative Activities

Children favored the activities which involved body movement. The finding supported Brewster's statement (2003:27) that the activities which are suitable for children at the ages are those which involve their physical energy. The tasks that were

related to their own life are also enthusiastic for them because, as Brown (2001:90) stated, the tasks and activities in the classroom which are based on students' perspectives can improve students' attention. As a result, those activities can increase the number of engaged students. It is in line with Taylor and Parsons (2011:11) who said that fun and interesting activities help teachers to engage students and reduce behavioural problems in classrooms.

By using cooperative activities, the off-task students turned to be on-task. The activities which challenged the students to work on them in the limited time evoked them to give their most attention to their tasks. It is in line with another findings that students would be engaged if they were attracted to their work, which take their challenges and obstacles, and enjoy them (Ganeshini, 2011:11).

Cooperative Learning also changed students' feeling in a class as individual to be as a part of a group. They shared their anxiety by asking for and giving help and then eventually they shared satisfaction with each other by chant celebration. They used their social skills to be respectful, tolerant and patient. They also used their skills to speak and to listen. It means that frequent interactive activities with different peers changed their feeling to be comfortable to talk with their classmates. It supported Slavin's statement (1995) that Cooperative Learning could encourage students to employ social skills to be cooperative in order to achieve the group's goals.

However, cooperative activities resulted to group conflicts. The conflicts occurred because of the disputes about the division of roles. As the consequences, some students withdrew from a threatening situation by having their own activities or joining another group. Based on the finding, it was important that the teacher played her role to respect their choice to solve the problems (by avoiding) or guided them to give group solution.

## CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTION

Based on findings in the study, there are three points underlined about dealing with young learners in a large class: the importance of student-teacher and student-student interaction, fun activities, and teachers' roles in group activities.

The first point is the importance of student-teacher and student-student interaction to answer the challenge of individual attention in

the large class. Cooperative activities are able to encourage the students to support each other by using peer tutoring. In the other word, Cooperative Learning can facilitate student-teacher and student-student interaction.

The second point is the importance of fun cooperative activities to deal with classroom management in the large class. Students will be enthusiastic and happy to get involved in hand-on and cooperative activities which results to reducing non-participative behaviours. It means that Cooperative Learning can be the strategy to manage the classroom.

The third point is the importance of teacher's appropriate decision to group students based on their ability. For example, the average ability students contribute actively by working with lower ability students. In addition, the higher ability students is needed to engage in the group activities by working with the similar ability students. Therefore, the understanding of the learners' ability before grouping them could prevent any students to withdraw in class participation. It means that the teacher has an important role to determine the composition of group in cooperative activities. The appropriate group composition in cooperative group can effectively improve students' participation.

However It is necessary to follow-up this study by carrying out more actions in a large class. Other researchers could have the actions to develop social or language skills by using Cooperative Learning in the large class. It is also necessary to have a study about the effectiveness of Cooperative Learning as the appropriate teaching strategy in a large class with different range of children's age.

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