



ONCE UPON A TIME... A COOPERATIVE LEARNING LESSON

Lesson plan for teachers

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1. Lesson content – Introduction of the topic; Topic and method relation:

One of the many arguments brought up against cooperative learning is that teachers must prepare and plan much more than in the case of different teaching/learning strategies. With this lesson plan I am intending to show that teachers' creative thinking can and should substitute fancy (and often expensive) accessories – while still keeping Kagan's four basic principles of cooperative learning. My aim is to provide an easy way to utilize basic cooperative structures in the language classroom environment, as well as giving some ideas to teachers to spice up their regular activities and lessons.

One of the most important language skills is to be able to tell stories – stories about ourselves, our families, friends and all that surrounds us. In order to do so, students must creatively use past tenses in situations not encountered before. Also, telling a story is a fun and inspiring way to practice the ever-problematic past tense. I think the biggest virtue of such techniques is that they can be adapted to other age/skill groups with only slight effort and the bare minimum of required materials.

This lesson plan presumes that the teacher is working with four or five groups, four students in each. Finishing and performing their stories will probably take a 45 minute lesson – however, smaller groups may finish earlier. If the time left permits, the groups can write dialogues/monologues for the story. I usually do this as a whole follow-up lesson. On more advanced levels students can write about others' stories using reported speech.

2. Competences to improve:

Personal competences	Social competences	Cognitive competences
accepting ideas, being open minded and sensible, building self-confidence and reliability	communicating, cooperating, being flexible	applying, making decisions, associating, presenting, narrating, being creative





3. Target group:

10-12-year-old second language (L2) learners, pre-intermediate level (however with some minor changes both could be anything)

4. Preliminaries:

basic knowledge of word classes (nouns, verbs, adjectives), forming sentences in the past tense, basic vocabulary

5. Teaching materials and equipment:

sheets of paper (“Story Sheets” & “Word Sheets”), markers (different colours)

6. Comments and remarks:

The lesson plan (especially the video example) presumes that the group is familiar with basic structures of cooperative learning – just like group roles, methods for group discussion and debate, etc. However, it is not necessary for the learners to know these structures from their previous studies, as all can easily be explained and understood. While the above competences are greatly affected by constant and thorough use of the basic cooperative structures in the learning environment, even periodic and occasional encounters with them benefits the students. The teacher may also observe and test these competences, and decide whether they need improvement or not. As it is not the aim of present lesson plan to cover cooperative structures, only the basics are mentioned. (See the Bibliography for works on the subject.)

7. Lesson plan:

E (evocation)



Task 1

“Today we are going to write a story together. On your small pieces of paper please collect me 4 characters, 4 objects, 4 adjectives and a location.

If you are ready, collect the small pieces of paper and pass out one to each group!”

Students must collect one or more characters (preferably pronouns), objects (nouns), adjectives and a location all by themselves on little pieces of paper (commonly known as ‘the inventory sheet’). Discussing the main idea behind these word classes may be necessary. Students do this individually; discussion in the group is permitted. The teacher should give proper examples in the ‘fairy tale tone’ (eg. ‘princess’, ‘sword’, ‘strong’ and ‘forest’). Different word classes can be used during this phase. More than one word for each category can also be collected. The teacher may also guide the composition of the lists.

The lists prepared individually should be spread out among other groups/students to provide them with new words and ideas. It is best to randomly pass out the word lists.





R (realization of meaning)



Task 2

“Read the papers you have got. Try to discuss and understand every word on them. If you are ready, make a list of 3 characters, 3 objects, 3 adjectives and a location. You can choose any word from the small pieces of paper.”

The groups receive and study the word lists they have received. In order to be able to continue they must understand each and every item they have got. Group discussion is strongly advised during this phase. (While more elaborate structures enable groups to send ‘emissaries’ to other groups to find out the meanings of unknown words, these also require previous experience with the aforementioned complex structures.)

It is not absolutely necessary to inform the students about their final task before this point. As far as my experiences go they find certain randomness and the surprise-factor more interesting than if they would have prepared for writing a story all way along.

Tell the students that they have to write a story with a selected few words from their ‘little pieces of paper’. Groups then should compose a list of the words they find interesting or useful for writing a story. Common structures for group discussion may be utilized at this point (see Kagan). It is advised to keep the required number of characters by the number of the group members *minus one*, as they are going to need a narrator for the story-telling phase.



Task 3

“What words did you choose? Read out your selection of words to the other groups please!”

After everybody is finished, a member of each group should read out their selection. This keeps up the others’ attention and also evokes interest for the upcoming stories (typically like “Oh, that’s my character! What are they going to do with the poor thing?”). Problematic words should also be discussed during this phase, which is an excellent opportunity to extend the students’ vocabulary.



Task 4

“Write a story with your word list! You must use all three characters, objects, adjectives and the location as well. One student can only write one sentence, then must pass the paper. You can help each other, but everybody should write his or her own sentence on the paper! Don’t forget that every story has got a beginning, a middle and an end. Try to make a full story!”

Students should now proceed to the actual writing of the story. If they are not familiar with cooperative group writing structures, tell them the following rules:





- Each group member should use his/her own colour (marker) to write sentences.
- Every group member can only write a single sentence, then must pass the “Story Sheet”.
- Group members may discuss the actual sentence, but the currently ‘active’ member has to write it down.

By keeping these simple rules the students can start writing the story together. Probably they will come up with grammar/vocabulary questions – and while it is a general rule that they should settle such matters in-group, the teacher can surely provide assistance if it seems necessary.

It is also important to draw the students’ attention to the fact that every story should have a title and a proper ending!



Task 5

“Decide who is going to be the narrator of the story, and who will be the three characters. Act out the story!”

Now it is time for the big finale! Ask the students to assign a character’s role to each group member as well as electing a narrator (a quick and smooth voting process is preferably a habit within cooperative groups, and it is also very useful at this point). The groups then act out their stories according to their own narrator, who reads the story out loud.

R (reflection)



Task 6

“Write conversations for your story! Every character should write his or her own lines. You can help each other, but like before everybody must write down their own sentences! Perform the story again, now with conversations!”

As I have mentioned in my introduction, writing and performing the story in typical classes of 12-20 students may take up a whole 45 minute lesson. As a follow-up activity (preferably, but not necessarily the next lesson) groups should write conversations and monologues for their characters, and perform the stories again, now with speech. Also they can tell/write about other groups’ stories. The teacher can collect the story-sheets (and conversation-sheets) to check and correct them later. Written feedback is also a possibility – I usually give my students evaluation sheets with a collection of their mistakes, as I do not like to mess up their story-sheets. During the follow-up lesson students can study and discuss their mistakes.

8. Visuals:





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9. Evaluation and assessment:

It is up to the teacher to decide whether giving collective feedback about the performances is necessary or not. It is usual to give remarks based on collective and personal performances in the end, but confrontation should be avoided – maybe by providing scoring sheets or by asking a positive opinion paired to each negative one. Forming negative sentences is surely a skill to be practiced on beginner levels, too.

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