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## HOW INDIVIDUAL ACCOUNTABILITY IN COOPERATIVE LEARNING HELPS EFL LEARNERS LEARN THE TARGET LANGUAGE

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### Abstract

Individual accountability is one of cooperative learning (CL) principles (Johnson & Johnson, 1999; Kagan, 1989; Olsen & Kagan, 1992; Slavin, 1995). This study defines it as an activity (performance or presentation) done by individual students in front of their CL peers to complete a learning task. The study took place in Indonesian secondary school EFL classrooms. Among the questions explored was: How does individual accountability in CL help EFL learners learn the target language? To address the question, qualitative case study was employed. Data were collected through participant observations, in-depth interviewing, and document analysis. To guide data collection and analysis, constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2014) was used. Four levels of individual accountability in CL were identified: 1) individual accountability in pairs, 2) in home groups, 3) in other groups, and 4) to the whole class. Peer interaction usually takes place between two levels of individual accountability and an initial or lower level of individual accountability usually prepares EFL learners for a higher level of individual accountability. A performance or presentation of individual accountability in CL is carried out either in spoken or written mode. In the studied classrooms, these activities of individual accountability in CL promoted the EFL learners' production of spoken English. This role of individual accountability in CL helped meet the need of the EFL learners because, as they reported, speaking was the most challenging language skill to learn. This finding fills the gap in the literature on how communicative approach to language teaching (CLT) is put in practice.

**Keywords** - individual accountability, cooperative learning, EFL

### Introduction

Generally speaking, cooperative learning (CL) is a group learning activity in which learners' interaction is structured to promote their responsibility for their own learning and for the learning of their peers. Research literature shows that CL has been used in the teaching of English as a foreign language (EFL) to improve learners' communicative competence. Most studies, however, did not reveal how CL enhanced EFL learning. Specifically, the existing research demonstrated that CL improved learners' proficiency in language skills and their mastery of language components. However, they did not portray the process of how CL was used, such as activities involved in it and

how these activities helped learners learn the target language. In other words, there is a lack of research on how CL helps EFL learn to improve their communicative competence.

There is also a gap in the literature on the defining elements or the principles of CL despite the fact that, as highlighted by a number of CL researchers and developers, the benefits of CL can be reaped when its principles are enacted (Chen, 2011; Olsen & Kagan, 1992; Johnson & Johnson, 1999; Slavin, 1999). Hence, this area warrants research, including in the field of EFL teaching, to promote the availability of references on effective CL implementation

that teachers can use as guidance in their practice.

The principles of CL are, among others, positive interdependence, individual accountability, equal participation, and simultaneous interaction (see e.g., Kagan & Kagan, 2009). My study focused on individual accountability because it is the point of intersection of researchers' proposals of CL principles (Johnson & Johnson, 1999; Kagan & Kagan, 2009; Olsen & Kagan, 1992; Slavin, 1983). These researchers assert one's responsibility for his or her learning and for the learning of other learners as the underlying notion of individual accountability in CL. To put it differently, they view individual accountability as a key principle of CL.

In addition to their unanimous argument on the importance of individual accountability in CL, most researchers highlight the element of assessment in their articulation of this particular principle. Specifically, individual students are assessed to ensure that they do the share of their group's work. Nevertheless, since my study focused on the process of CL, I aligned with Kagan and Kagan (2009)'s definition of individual accountability that says that it is an activity in which individual students' performance is done without help, witnessed by other students, and required to complete a given task. In other words, my study put aside the element of assessment in individual accountability in CL and focused on its process, particularly activities involved in it (activities within a CL activity).

Little is understood about the role that individual accountability in CL plays in EFL learning, including how it helps learners learn the target language. For this reason, my study was conducted. It took place in EFL classrooms of Indonesian secondary schools (middle and high schools). Additionally, since 1980s English instruction in Indonesia has adopted communicative language

teaching (CLT) (Lie, 2007), which is an approach to language instruction that embraces CL. Nevertheless, little is known about the implementation of this approach in English classrooms; there is a huge gap between ministerial rhetoric and classroom reality (Nunan, 2003), which adds warrant for my study.

### **Theoretical Frameworks**

I used Cultural-Historical Activity Theory or CHAT (Engeström, 2000; Leont'ev, 1978; Jonassen & Rohrer-Murphy, 1999; Yamagata-Lynch, 2003; Yamagata-Lynch, 2007; Yamagata-Lynch, 2010) and Interaction Hypothesis (Long, 1996) as my theoretical frameworks. Through CHAT's concepts of activity system and its components (subjects, tools, object/goal, rules, community, and division of labor), the theory was used in the study to make sense of how individual accountability as an activity in CL serves as a medium of conscious learning in the EFL classrooms. Two activity systems were analyzed: 1) the implementation of CL in the middle school's EFL classroom and 2) the implementation of CL in the high school's EFL classroom.

Interaction Hypothesis (Long, 1996) that encompasses the concepts of comprehensible input, comprehensible output, interaction, and negotiation for meaning was utilized to understand how individual accountability in CL promotes second language acquisition and development. The two theories (CHAT and Interaction Hypothesis), in combination, were employed to understand the role of individual accountability in CL in enhancing EFL learning in the studied classrooms, including how it helped the EFL learners learn the target language.

### **Research Methodology**

To address the research question, I employed qualitative research methodology. As indicated previously, the purpose of the study was to explore the role of individual accountability in CL in enhancing EFL

learning. To meet this purpose, I used qualitative case study because I needed a case or cases as specific illustration of the enactment of individual accountability in CL in EFL classrooms. This qualitative case study is categorized as multi-case study because two cases were involved and they were also the study's units of analysis: 1) individual accountability in CL in middle school EFL classroom, and 2) individual accountability in CL in high school EFL classroom. I gathered the data through three data collection strategies: 1) participant observations, 2) in-depth interviewing, and 3) document analysis, and used constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2014) to guide data collection and analysis.

One teacher from each school was involved: Andini (middle school) and Putri (high school, both names are pseudonyms). Since students were the subjects in the activity systems (i.e., the doers or performers of individual accountability in CL), the students of the two teachers were also involved as research participants, especially those whose class was observed (the eighth and tenth graders). Additionally, I recruited four focal ("telling," Wallestad, 2010, p. xxii) students for the in-depth interviewing.

Regarding the schools, since both were secondary schools, they shared a number of similarities. One major difference, however, was that the middle school implemented the 2013 curriculum while the high school implemented the 2006 curriculum. Notwithstanding this difference, the Process Standard for Primary and Secondary Education (Board of National Education Standards, 2007/2013) for the curricula advocate the use of CL.

### **Findings and Discussion**

This paper will report on a few parts of the study's findings. More specifically, it will depict the activities involved in individual accountability in CL and describe how they

helped the EFL learners learn the target language.

### **Activities of individual accountability in CL**

Studying Andini and Putri's use of CL instructional strategies/techniques/structures (the latter term will be used henceforth) in their classrooms, I identified four levels of individual accountability: 1) individual accountability in pairs, 2) in home groups, 3) in other groups, and 4) to the whole class. One example for each level, (but one, i.e., individual accountability in home groups) is laid out as the following. Performances of individual accountability in pairs were observed in the use Think-Pair-Share in Andini's eighth grade classrooms, i.e., each student shared their understanding of the notice (the day's target text genre) they had with their partner (Field Notes, 20150331, 20150404). Students' performance of individual accountability in other groups was displayed when Putri's tenth graders, through One Stray, shared with members of other groups their list of vocabulary related to news (the day's target text genre) (Field Notes, 20150318). Performances of individual accountability to the whole class were observed when Andini and Putri used Numbered Heads Together in their classrooms (Field Notes, 20150431, 20150318). Specifically, Andini's eighth graders told the whole class what they knew about the notice they had, and Putri's tenth graders came to the white board to write their answer (i.e., a word or phrase to complete written news). Unfortunately, as indicated earlier, performances of individual accountability in home groups were observed neither in Putri nor Andini's use of CL structures. For example, in their use of Numbered Heads Together, they missed a step that requires students to students stand up and "put their heads together," showing answers, discussing, and teaching each other (Kagan & Kagan, 2009, p. 6.28).

In addition to the levels of individual accountability in CL described above, I also identified that there was usually peer interaction between an initial level and a higher level of individual accountability. Take the use of Think Pair Share in Andini's classroom as an example. After Andini's eighth graders told their partner their understanding of the notice they had (an initial level of individual accountability, i.e., individual accountability in pairs), they conversed with their partner about each other's notice, gave feedback to their partner's performance, and became their partner's audience for the next performance of individual accountability (a higher level, i.e., individual accountability to the whole class).

**How individual accountability in CL helps EFL learners learn the target language**

My study identified a number of roles of individual accountability in CL in the studied EFL classrooms that answer the question of how this particular CL principle help EFL learners learn the target language. In this paper, I will present one of these roles, i.e., through individual accountability in CL, EFL learners have the opportunities to use the target language, especially in spoken mode. This role was identified by looking at the relation between the subjects (i.e., the EFL learners as the doers or performers of individual accountability in CL) and the object, or "what is to be accomplished" (Jonassen & Rohrer-Murphy, 1999, p. 63), as well as the expected outcome in the two activity systems. The object of each observed lesson was indeed the attainment of its objectives. The lesson objectives, as mandated by the curricula guiding the studied classrooms, cover the development of the four language skills in English: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. As the curriculum and instructional documents demonstrated, the expected outcome (or results) of English instruction in Indonesian secondary schools, including the

implementation of CL in their classrooms, was the students' improved communicative competence in English. In order to achieve this, as Larsen-Freeman (2012) and Richards (2002) advocate, language learners should learn the target language through using it to communicate with their peers; this is the hallmark of CLT.

The previous section has laid out the four levels of individual accountability in CL and peer interaction. In the studied EFL classrooms, these activities of individual accountability in CL promoted the use of the target language. The EFL learners' performances of individual accountability were carried out in English be it in spoken or written mode. Therefore, when the students performed more than one level of individual accountability, they used English more, a condition supportive to the attainment of their lesson objectives and the goal of their EFL learning.

Both Andini (First Interview, 20150406) and Putri (Follow-up Interview, 20150604) stated that speaking was the most challenging language skill for the majority of their students. In Andini's view, most of her students were afraid of making mistakes when speaking in English. Putri shared a similar view in that she considered the majority of her students tended to have a little confidence in speaking in English. This was also acknowledged by three out of four focal students (First Interviews, 20150404, 20150408). The following paragraphs depicts how through individual accountability in CL Andini and Putri's students had the opportunities to use spoken English to communicate what they learned.

Although the eighth graders' (Andini's students) preparation for their individual accountability performance was carried out in an interaction with only a little use of English, when they were performing their individual accountability (e.g., in Think-Pair-

Share and Whispering Game), they used English without any Indonesian and/or Javanese words. Specifically, English was used by Andini's eighth graders when they were: 1) presenting to their partner the answers to the given questions about the notice they had (the Pair phase of Think-Pair-Share), 2) presenting the same answers to the whole class (the Share phase of Think-Pair-Share), 3) delivering the given short message to another group member (Whispering Game), and 4) presenting the given short message to the whole class (Whispering Game) (Field Notes, 20150331, 20150401, 20150404). As in the case of Andini's students, when they were interacting with their peers (between two levels of individual accountability), Putri's tenth graders used English only a little. Nevertheless, when they were performing their individual accountability (i.e., presenting their list of news-related vocabulary and the assigned aspect of a news item through, respectively, Jigsaw and One Stray), they used English (Field Notes, 20150318, 20150401). To varying degrees, the levels of individual accountability in the selected CL structures promoted the use of spoken English in the studied EFL classrooms.

As indicated earlier, peer interaction that usually follows a lower level of individual accountability is also an arena in which the students practiced using spoken English. For example, in the use of Think-Pair-Share in Andini's classrooms (Field Notes, 20150331, 20150404), peer interaction took place after her students performed their individual accountability to their partner, i.e., sharing their understanding of the notice they read. These students gave feedback to each other, which was mostly on vocabulary, so that they could present their answers with no Indonesian words and with vocabulary that suited the given notice in their performance of individual accountability to the whole class (Field Notes, 20150331). In Putri's classroom, peer interaction was observable,

for example, when her students were learning about news items through One Stray. After presenting their list of news-related words/the assigned aspect of news item (i.e. individual accountability in other groups), these tenth graders conversed with other groups' members about what they had just presented (Field Notes, 20150318, 20150401). This showcases the use of English in the high school classroom, specifically when the learners were interacting with their CL peers despite the fact that their spoken production centered on words or phrases.

In sum, through individual accountability in CL, the middle and high school students had the opportunities to use English, particularly in spoken mode, which are indeed needed in their English learning, especially since speaking was one of the four language skills taught and was the skill that they found as the most challenging. Looking at this finding through a CHAT lens, it can be stated that the preset procedure of the selected CL structures as one of the rules applied in the two activity systems contributed to the students having the opportunities to use spoken English. More than two components in the activity systems, hence, accounted for this particular role of individual accountability in CL to emerge: the subjects, the object/outcome, and the rules.

Seen through the lens of Interaction Hypothesis, the same finding demonstrates how individual accountability in CL accommodated the EFL learners' production of comprehensible output, which is needed for testing their hypotheses about the nature of the target language (Gass & Mackey, 2007). Specifically, while they are producing the target language, the learners may: 1) notice that there are words or phrases that they do not know how to say to convey accurately the message they wish to convey, 2) test their hypothesis of how to say their intention, and 3) reflect on the language used

by themselves or their peers (Swain, 1985). In essence, it is the action of producing the language that promotes second language learning and the proficiency of the language taught (Swain, 1985).

### Conclusions and Recommendations

Individual accountability in CL is a performance(s) that demonstrates learning. In the context of this study, i.e., Indonesian middle and high school's EFL classrooms, learners' performances of individual accountability in CL demonstrate not only their mastery of the content knowledge (e.g., the target text genres) but also their use of the target language. To put it another way, the EFL learners involved in this study communicate what they learn to their peers using the target language. This depicts how CL can be used to put CLT in practice, especially for giving learners the opportunity to produce spoken English, including comprehensible output.

For teachers new to CL, my study suggests that they first use CL structures developed by CL developers or researchers exactly as described (i.e., following the rules). Doing so will give them the idea of activities involved in individual accountability in CL and how these activities can benefit their students, i.e., helping them to achieve the objectives of their English learning. For teacher education programs, my study recommends the inclusion of CL principles in the teaching of CL, such as in teaching methodology courses.

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