

A SURVEY ON THE EFFECTIVENESS OF COOPERATIVE LEARNING  
IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING IN CHINA

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## **ABSTRACT**

Cooperative learning has been widely accepted in international English language class for over ten years, but today due to many different reasons it has not been widely used in the English language teaching practice in China, and therefore it may still have a long way to develop the cooperative learning in the English language teaching. In this paper the researcher conducts a brief questionnaire on the effectiveness of the cooperative learning in English language training class in the International School of Wuhan University of Science and Technology. The researcher reviews some theories regarding cooperative learning, and then the researcher analyzes informant's feedback on the effectiveness of cooperative learning. Finally, the researcher suggests that cooperative learning, in spite of the pressure of examination, should be promoted by teachers and educational administrators as it can stimulate student's motivation, develop students' potentials and critical ability, which are all crucial for students' academic development in future.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

APPROVAL PAGE .....	i
TITLE PAGE .....	ii
ABSTRACT.....	iii
TABLE OF CONTENTS .....	iv
CHAPTER	
I. INTRODUCTION .....	1
Statement of the Problem	
Purpose of the Research	
Significance of the Problem	
Delimitations of the Research	
Definition of Terms	
II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE .....	5
III. METHODOLOGY .....	9
IV. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION .....	10
V. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION .....	15
REFERENCES .....	16
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	
APPENDIX	

# CHAPTER I

## INTRODUCTION

In the past decade, many higher educational institutions have been actively seeking cooperative educational programs with overseas educational institutions; therefore, many cooperative programs at higher levels are being carried out in many different forms in the field of education. Some of these programs have introduced international textbooks and teaching resources directly from the partners, and some even have employed some foreign professors to teach the courses or create international campuses offshore. However, for most cooperative programs in China, both the foreign and Chinese administrators have to face a common problem: how to help students successfully overcome their language barrier? Today how to help students to improve their language is a critical challenge for all language teachers and program administrators.

The researcher will concentrate on a China-Singapore program being facilitated in Wuhan, China. Most students in the cooperative program are students who have graduated from high school and passed the university entrance examination in China. In the cooperative program in China, according to the mutual agreement the students will be sent to an overseas university to study for a business diploma after they have fulfilled their language intensive training course, 120 hours total, and some logistics courses at home, but the students must do English language courses in China before they leave. Also, all their logistics subjects will be instructed in English in Wuhan after the language course is over.

So how can students quickly improve their English proficiency before they initiate their logistics courses in China? Probably one of the best approaches to teach the textbook might use the cooperative learning method to fulfill the tasks in class. In this cooperative learning style the students will dominate the English learning class, rather than the teacher. Actually in the English intensive training course, all the teachers were trying to switch the students from

the traditional learning method into the cooperative learning style, and some foreign teachers employed from overseas were also using cooperative learning methods in class to teach English. However, the question here is: what is the students' feedback on the cooperative learning in English language teaching class? What about the effectiveness of cooperative learning in China's English language teaching class? Do students like the new form of learning style in their class? What are the merits and demerits of cooperative learning for the students if they can be taught in a cooperative style? Can they accept the new teaching style in the English course? What do they expect their teachers to do?

There are many uncertainties in the English language teaching as the cooperative learning is implemented in China. In this paper, the researcher will conduct a brief survey among the students in Wuhan, China, the purpose of which aims at determining the success of application of cooperative learning techniques in English Language teaching (ELT). This paper will try to discuss all the problems associated with this strategy and offer some suggestions for English as a second language (ESL) courses.

#### Statement of the Problem

The key point in this paper will focus on the effectiveness of cooperative learning in English language teaching course. What might be the teacher's role in ESL class? Does cooperative learning play a positive or a negative role for improving student's English proficiency in China? All the answers to these problems will be explored in the paper.

#### Purpose of the Research

The purpose of the paper is to explore the effectiveness of cooperative learning in English language teaching in China. The paper may also find out some possible suggestions for improving the cooperative learning in English language teaching in China.

#### Significance of the Problem

The Cooperative learning is a popular way for students to improve their academic ability

in ELT class. This paper will try to analyze the influence of cooperative learning in ESL class, and it will help teachers to instruct the students in the English language course in their future teaching practice. Also, the research will facilitate ESL teaching in some cooperative programs in China.

#### Delimitations of the Research

The research will be conducted through the Karrmann Library at the University of Wisconsin-Platteville. Primary searches will be conducted via the Internet through EBSCO host with ERIC and Academic Search Elite as the primary sources. The questionnaire created to determine the effectiveness of cooperative learning techniques in reading classes will be administered to 30 students from the International School of Wuhan University of Science and Technology. The limited time and small number of informants might result in the inconsistency of the data with a larger number being surveyed; this may also result in conclusions being reached through the analysis of such data will have relevance only for the particular group surveyed by this researcher.

#### Method of Approach

A brief review of literature on cooperative learning and ESL teaching will be conducted. The researcher will also conduct a questionnaire collecting the relevant data from 30 subjects. In the process of the research, the data will be analyzed and interviews will also be conducted with some students. The findings will be summarized and recommendation will be made in the final chapter of the paper.

#### Definition of Terms

**Cooperative learning.** A group learning activity organized so that learning is dependent on the socially structured exchange of information between learners in groups and in which each learner is held accountable for his or her own learning and is motivated to increase the learning of others (Olsen and Kagan, 1992).

**ELT.** English language teaching

**ESL.** English as a second language

## CHAPTER II

### REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

#### Theories on cooperative learning

Olsen and Kagan (1992) define cooperative learning as “a group learning activity organized so that learning is dependent on the socially structured exchange of information between learners in groups and in which each learner is held accountable for his or her own learning and is motivated to increase the learning of others”. Over the past few decades, Cooperative Learning has been proposed as a framework for the teaching of a second/foreign language because it maximizes authentic and purposeful interactions among students (Shaaban & Ghaith, 2005) and it provides means of integrating four language skills (McCafferty, Jacobs & DaSilva Iddings, 2006). Cooperative Learning is one of the greatest success stories in the history of theory and actual classroom use, and there are some theoretical bases for the implementation of the cooperative learning.

According to Chen (2008), motivational theory focuses on the impact of incentive structures such as group rewards and class rewards on learning. Motivational theorists criticized that the competitive grading and informal reward system of the traditional classrooms create peer norms that has a counter effect on academic efforts. The incentives offered in the competitive grading system provide students with the opportunities to demonstrate superiority over one’s peers. And the incentives offered in informal reward system increase only one’s own achievement. Therefore, motivationalists build incentive structures to incorporate both variables, i.e., one’s own and peers’ achievement into cooperative learning methods. The rationale for these structures is that if learners value the success of the group, they will be motivated to help one another achieve (Slavin, 1996). Chen (2008) remarks that motivationalists’ reward structures also allow all students and teams an equal opportunity for success since recognition is based on gains. The fact that group rewards

are given based on group members' behaviors is enough to induce students to engage in behaviors which help the group to be rewarded. For example, goal-directed behaviors such as peer-tutoring are likely to help students pursue better team performances. In order to maximize group learning outcomes, students are motivated not only to increase their own achievement but the achievement of peers.

In addition to motivational theory, social interdependence theory is interrelated to the motivational perspectives. Unlike motivational theorists who hold that students help their teammates because of incentive structures, social interdependence theorists emphasize that students help one another learn because they care for members within the group. Social interdependence perspectives postulate that the effects of cooperative learning are strongly mediated by the cohesiveness of the group. Group cohesiveness, an index of the level of group development, determines peer interaction which, in turn, determines outcomes (Johnson, Johnson, & Holubec, 1994). Cohesive groups are more productive than non-cohesive ones. In other words, positive interdependence results in promotive interaction as group members encourage and facilitate one another's efforts. The more time group members spend together, the higher intermember acceptance and cooperation becomes (Chen, 2008).

#### Main problems of traditional English language teaching in China

Cooperative learning is not a new concept in the Chinese English education practice, but the traditional English teaching and learning style are still widely accepted and have great influence on the teaching and learning practice in China. Some scholars think that the traditional way of learning and teaching can not satisfy the new challenges in the English language teaching. Geng (2007) explored that a few toxic English teaching and learning styles could be corrected because they are malfunctions in terms of relationships, enthusiasm

and adjustment to modern times. They undermine the teaching and learning environment; contribute to pessimism among teachers and students.

Geng (2007) describes a few toxic English teaching and learning styles. The first toxic style is the Authoritarian style. Under the influence of Confucian teaching, all the Chinese teachers make the decisions during the class. They decide what to teach and learn, how to teach and learn, when to teach and learn and where to teach and learn. Even when the decisions are harmful to the learners, no one dares to challenge teachers. The standard mode of authoritarian style is command and control, with no regard to diversity and efficiency of teaching and learning. With authoritarian style, learners are to be controlled, manipulated and occasionally pacified like little children. They are motivated by fear rather than enthusiasm or passion for learning. They are expected to do what they are told without questioning. As a result, competent performers who dare to question are sidelined, while those who obey the decisions blindly get the reward. The second toxic is the rigid style. There is a strong resistance to any kind of change. Some teachers cling to out-dated methods and traditions, unwilling to adapt to the changes in the world. They teach for a number of years, the dominant texts, which are often authorized by officials. Students are discouraged or even reprimanded for suggesting innovative ideas. As a result, the world passes them by and eventually they are left with an empty shell of the former self. The third toxic is the Chinese-based style. There seems to be a powerful Chinese-based or Chinese oriented style for English teaching and learning all over the country. Some teachers rely on the rivet of the Chinese grammar. They spare a lot of energy and time on the comparison of the English grammatical rules with the Chinese grammar. Some students learn English but think in Chinese no matter whether there is similar correspondence or not. All these traditional styles of teaching and learning have hindered the Chinese student's English language learning.

However, the choice to integrate western cooperative learning strategies into an

educational program that is committed to more eastern traditional style of teaching has its problems. Firstly, the school commits their instructors and administrators to a challenging task. Cooperative learning represents a major paradigm shift in focus from what is being taught to what is being learned. Secondly, this shift in focus and accountability is not an opportunity for the instructor to step back and let things happen. Thirdly, at its finest, very little would get done on the learning level; at its worst, it could result in real loss for the student's comprehension of cooperative work. For cooperative strategies to work, careful planning, inconspicuous observation and evaluation and preplanned adjustments (alternative activities) are essential to help learners move consistently forward (Hardwick, 2000). Effective cooperative teaching strategies are somewhat different from traditional teaching strategies because they require increasing accountability between individuals. Each participant does a fair share through active participation with cooperative social skills and successful and appropriate communication skills that bring task to completion (Messier, 2005).

In this short survey, the researcher chooses a group of students who have just enter a university to explore the effectiveness of cooperative learning in English language learning.

## CHAPTER III

### METHODOLOGY

The small investigation was conducted amongst the freshmen in the logistics diploma program cooperated by the International School of Wuhan University of Science and Technology, China and Ngee Ann Polytechnic College, Singapore. In the end of August 2008 around 80 students just enrolled in the international school, and they started their English language intensive training course for 120 hours in 4 weeks (20 days) from early September 2008. According to the teaching schedule, they started their logistics courses in English from the 5<sup>th</sup> week in this semester. During the 120-hour's language training course, the students were arranged randomly in 5 small classes, and each small class has 16 students and two to three teachers are involved in the English language instruction. All the teachers have been trained before they began to teach in the class, and all the students were taught by the same syllables and some extra supplement materials were provided by the teachers in each class.

In the process of teaching, the cooperative learning is widely used by all the teaching staff. Also, the students were not facing the pressure from the English language proficiency test, but they were strongly motivated because all the logistics diploma courses will be taught in English by the instructors from Singapore. After the English intensive training course, the researcher prepared 30 copies for the students in the program, and all the subjects were randomly selected from different small classes by the student volunteers.

All the survey is conducted anonymously. The questionnaire is comprised of open-ended and multiple choice questions. Students have sufficient time and space to consider their responses to these questions. Meanwhile, as the survey is anonymous, they also do not have to worry about losing face before the researcher and their peers when they are answering these questions. The questionnaire is attached as appendix A.

## CHAPTER IV

### FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

#### Subjects' characteristics and background

The basic information of the subjects have been collected and demonstrated in the following table, and it is the foundation for all of us to perceive the outcomes of the survey.

scope	The scores of NEEU (out of 150)				Years of learning English				
	<90	90-100	100-110	>110	6	7	8	9	10
number	4	14	4	8	24	1	3	1	1

NEEU: National Entrance Examination to University

It is not difficult to find that most of the subjects (87%) have passed the English language test in the NEEU, but 13% of them have failed the test. Another phenomenon is that most of them (80%) just started learning English in the middle school and have studied for six years. Only six students have studied English for more than six years. The possible reason is that they have started their learning in the primary school or that they have repeated their learning in the middle school or the high school. It could be predicted that they must have great pressure from the logistics course instructed in English, because they need to learn how to change from learning English for examinations in the past to learning English as a tool for other academic subjects now.

#### Data and effectiveness analysis

When talking about their attitudes toward the cooperative learning, most students have shown great enthusiasm toward the new learning style. 63% of the subjects thought that the cooperative learning is a good way to improve their English proficiency, and 33% of the students agreed that the cooperative learning is a very good way to study with others. However, only one student thought that the cooperative learning is not a good way; the student did not give further explanation, and perhaps the student did not adapt himself or

herself to the new learning style.

Comparing the ways of learning English in their high school to the ways in their university English course, we also found that the outcomes are in favor of the cooperative learning. According to the questionnaire, 66% of the informants preferred the cooperative learning in the university, and 20% of the informants admitted that they could accept both the traditional way of learning and the cooperative learning. In addition, only one student preferred the traditional way of English learning in the high school and three students chose that they did not like either of the learning styles. These statistics suggest that most students preferred the cooperative learning in the university. Probably most of them have not tried to learn a foreign language utilizing the cooperative learning style, and they are curious about the new way. Another possible reason is that they had chances to communicate with other classmates and they could interact with each other in the class. Maybe they thought that there would be no examination pressure at the end of the intensive training course which is another way for them to feel good about the learning process. With regard to the merits and demerits of the cooperative learning, there are some outcomes from other scholars previously. Chen (2008) argued that there are at least three benefits of the cooperative learning: linguistics development, cognitive development and affective development. Geng (2007) also claimed that “with the help of this style, learners are not simply taught and dominated like little children. They are motivated by enthusiasm or passion for learning”. In the questionnaire, students are also asked to describe the main merits and demerits of the cooperative learning in their English intensive training course. The main points could be summarized as follows:

<b>Merits of the cooperative learning</b>	<b>Demerits of the cooperative learning</b>
Helping students to communicate in English class	Lack of communication with teachers
Improving the friendship between the classmates	Lack of the opportunities to demonstrate the
Learning how to cooperate with other classmates	personal ability in the class
Learning English more efficiently in the class	Not having enough chances to solve the problems
Providing more chances for oral English practice	individually
Tackling the questions easily in the class	Hard for the teacher to know the individual ability
Learning how to manage class interrelationships	in the class
	Unable to study efficiently if the members lack
	self-control
	Relying too much on particular group members

Obviously, the cooperative learning has both benefits and drawbacks in the English language teaching practice. As a good English teacher, she or he should try to exert all the benefits to help students while avoiding the demerits of the cooperative learning. There are four classroom recommendations regarding cooperative learning reviewed by Hill & Flynn (2006):

1. Teachers should use a variety of criteria for grouping students.
2. There are several types of cooperative learning groups that will help you vary group makeup.
3. Teachers should manage group size.
4. Combine cooperative learning groups with other types of classroom instruction.

In addition to these, most students have noticed that the cooperative learning is a good way to improve the relationship between students. Most of the students born in the 1990s are the only child in their family, so the interpersonal relationship in the learning is another issue for some students. The majority of students (90%) have noted that the cooperative learning should be recommended to other students as an effective way of learning. One possible

reason is that they found their English language has been improved in the short training course, and another reason is that they found that many tasks in their logistics courses are conducted by the cooperative learning after they have experienced the logistics course instructed by the staff from Singapore in this semester.

Regarding the relationship between the teacher and students, Geng (2007) suggested that it is essential to establish a cooperative relationship between teachers and students. Both of them are equal in cooperation. Teachers are responsible for macro design and students are real participants of the operation; meanwhile students are motivated by enthusiasm or passion for learning. They are expected to do what they are supposed to. According to the outcomes of the questionnaire, almost all the students described the teacher's role in their class as "guide", "assistant", "friend", and/or "facilitator". It is not difficult to find that the traditional relationship between teachers and students has changed in the cooperative learning style. If the main role in the class has returned to the students, the students will be the strongly motivated and the effectiveness of the English language class will be much better than the traditional English class.

Another effect of cooperative learning highlighted by the survey is the skill that they have improved most in the cooperative learning. 83% of the informants think that their speaking and communicating ability has been improved in the course. Only 7% of the students don't know which specific skill has been strengthened, and 10% of the students comment that their listening skill has been improved most in the cooperative learning class because they have to listen to their group members in the cooperative learning.

When talking about the long-term effectiveness of cooperative learning, 87% of the subjects think that the way of learning is helpful to other courses, because in the logistics course they found many tasks are done by groups, and the cooperative learning in the English language course has laid a good foundation for their further academic learning. However,

there are still obstacles in the process of cooperative learning. The main difficulties could be categorized into three types: the language, the cultural and the method. By the language, some students think that their language is still not good enough to carry out the English discussion in class, so sometimes they have to resort to their native language to finish the discussion in the class. By the culture, some students think that they are still influenced by the Confucian culture patterns in the English class. All cultures teach their members the “preferred” ways to respond to the world, which are often labeled as “natural”, or “correct” (Lustig & Koester, 2007). Therefore, some students think that they still need time to adjust themselves to the all-English atmosphere in the class because they might worry that their misbehaviors in the group might be criticized by their peers after the class. Furthermore, the informants think that the method of cooperative learning can have many different varieties in the class. They hope that the teacher in class can provide many varieties of activities in the cooperative learning setting

## CHAPTER V

### CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

Many statistics and facts have proved that cooperative learning is an effective way to help students to improve English language ability, but cooperative learning in China still need a long way to promote, especially in some underdeveloped areas. Even in urban areas cooperative learning is still confined to many factors such as textbook, teaching facility, quality of teacher, student's cooperative awareness and traditional Chinese culture influence. In addition, many teachers and students would not like to choose the cooperative learning because they still have to face the pressure of various examinations. However, English teaching has been called upon to provide the students with the basic ability to use the language, to receive and to convey the information associated with their specialist studies. This is particularly so in the developing countries where textbook material is not available in the vernacular languages (Allen and Widdowson, 1974). Therefore, it can be predicted that the performance of cooperative learning in Chinese students' class can be improved significantly in the future. Undoubtedly cooperative learning can help students to fully interact with each other and students learn English in the cooperative style will achieve better results in English language class. Meanwhile, in the cooperative activities students can discuss and give creative responses, which will help them to think critically in the future. Hill & Flynn (2006) also have offered some advices for the cooperative learning in the class. First, cooperative learning groups should rarely be organized by abilities; second, cooperative learning groups should be small; third, although cooperative learning groups should be used regularly, teachers should take care not to overuse them. Therefore, a good teacher should combine many learning styles and vary them in the class according to the specific tasks; otherwise, students might feel bored with the cooperative learning if too much time is spent on the monotonous style in the English teaching class.

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## APPENDIX A

Questionnaire for the Intensive English Training Course in  
Ngee Ann Polytechnic College program co-conducted in Wuhan, China

1. Briefly describe your personal information about yourself including gender, age, birth place, and your middle school, your English score in the National Entrance Examination to University and years of English learning.
2. What is your impression of cooperative learning?  
A) Good      B) Not good      C) Very good      D) I dislike it.
3. Comparing to your traditional learning methods, which one do you prefer?  
A ) high school      B ) university      C) both      D ) neither of them
4. What are the main merits of cooperative learning in the English class?
5. What are the main demerits of cooperative learning in the English class?
6. What do you think the teacher's role in the cooperative learning?
7. Do you still like the way of English teaching in your high schools? Will you recommend the cooperative learning to others?
8. Which language skill have you improved most by cooperative learning? Why do you choose this skill?
9. What are the main barriers for you to further cooperative learning in the class?
10. Does the cooperative learning bring benefits to your learning in other course? Why do you think so?