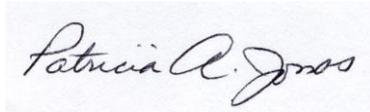


HOW COOPERATIVE LEARNING AFFECTS SECOND LANGUAGE
ACQUISITION OF COLLEGE STUDENTS

A rectangular box containing a handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Patricia A. Jones".

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Paper Advisor

HOW COOPERATIVE LEARNING AFFECTS SECOND LANGUAGE
ACQUISITION OF COLLEGE STUDENTS

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ABSTRACT

This research paper explores how cooperative learning affects second language acquisition by college students. Cooperative learning is now recognized as a good teaching and learning method for students' second language acquisition.

This paper will make a brief examination of Krashen's theory of second language acquisition. The essence of Krashen's theory is that subconscious acquisition is very important for students' second language acquisition. Now the question is: How does cooperative learning as a methodology provide a way to apply Krashen's second language learning theory in the classroom?

Cooperative learning, in addition to academic learning benefits, also has great impacts on personal development. In Krashen's theory learning the form (rules) is not seen as relevant to language acquisition. However, this area is very important to appropriate academic use of a foreign language. Our findings suggest that 1) we need to take context into account when we use cooperative learning 2) we can adapt cooperative methods and strategies to address what teachers expect from students and 3) cooperative learning can also be used for learning grammar.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

As a college English teacher, how to teach English as a foreign language more effectively is a question we need to be concerned about as professionals who care about our students. Chinese teachers usually use traditional teaching methods, such as the grammar-translation-based instruction. This method (teacher-oriented model) is mostly used to teach a second language's grammar in order to pass examinations necessary for entrance into college as well as competency certification before exiting undergraduate school. Unfortunately, many students are not demonstrating effective communicative competence of English in China. They tend to listen to the teachers' answers about language structure, but they tend to ignore acquiring true communicative ability; they become accustomed to un-inspiring English teaching methods; then they acquire a growing dislike of English, seeing it as boring and of little merit except to pass examinations.

Because of this generally prevalent attitude toward English language learning, we need to re-consider the teaching methods that have contributed to this student attitude. The challenge becomes, in our English classes, what, besides the traditional method, can we use as effective teaching methods? How can we encourage students' passion to learn English? Can we make our students not only learn English but also acquire personal development as a secondary benefit? Lastly, can we make our students acquire language in a subconscious (indirect) environment?

For example, with regard to personal development, Chinese college students have already spent six years learning English before attending college and they have acquired a certain language competency. So, students have risen to a skill level where it seems that cooperative learning can be effectively applied as a communicative teaching method; this makes it seem possible that students have a chance to gain character improvement while improving academic comprehension. To support the contention that such a learning technique can aid personal development, we first have to explain the nature of cooperative learning as defined by the various experts on the topic. The essential questions to be answered are: (1) What is cooperative learning and what are its principles? (2) Is cooperative learning a good teaching and learning method for many college students to acquire a second language? (3) What are the advantages of cooperative learning over other language teaching methods?

The experts insist that the value of cooperative learning is obvious. Both its academic and social advantages are globally recognized (Ding Meixia, Li Xiaobao, & Kulm 2007). According to Matthews, Cooper, Davidson, & Hawkes (1995) as cited in Oxford (1997, p. 2),

Cooperative learning, as compared with collaborative learning, is considered more structured, more prescriptive to teachers concerned about classroom techniques, more directive regarding telling students about how to work together in groups, and more targeted (at least it was in its beginnings) at the public school population than toward postsecondary or adult education.

Collaborative learning, on the other hand, seems to stop far short of utilizing specific techniques to engage student learning. It is more of a general term that implies students can learn together and from each other, as well as from and with the teacher—that learning is a collective effort. This distinction is included because the two terms

cooperative and *collaborative* seem to sometimes be used interchangeably.

Cooperative learning has been adopted in education in western countries for many years. Oxford (1997) stated that in the last 10 or 15 years, cooperative learning has expanded into a rather complex set of activities and choices. It is now recognized as a potentially good teaching and learning method for students' second language acquisition also. It is necessary and useful both for teachers' teaching and students' learning. Therefore, this teaching method is worth researching to clarify which aspects of SLA are most complemented by it.

Statement of the Problem

The problem to be addressed is "What is the relationship between cooperative learning and second language acquisition of college students? In other words, what are the advantages of cooperative learning methodologies being adapted to college students' English learning?"

In this paper a brief review of Stephen Krashen's theory about second language acquisition will be presented. Then, the focus is on the advantages of cooperative learning as an effective methodology that can be used to apply Krashen's theory in the classroom.

Delimitations of the Research

The research will be conducted in and through the Karmann Library at the University of Wisconsin-Platteville, over sixty (60) days and Google as well. Primary searches will be conducted via the Internet through EBSCO host with ERIC and Academic Search Elite as the primary sources. Key search topics include “advantages of cooperative learning”, “cooperative learning”, “benefits of cooperative learning”, and “theory of cooperative learning”, and “Krashen SLA theory”.

Method of Approach

Background information on a theory of second language acquisition will be mentioned. A review of literature relating to the advantages of cooperative learning in a second language acquisition setting will also be conducted. The findings will be summarized and recommendations made.

Definition of Terms

. Cooperative learning—process of acquiring knowledge in small groups in a social environment requiring an accountable, information-exchange context

. Cooperative learning environment—small-group learning driven by common goals

.Concrete operation of cooperative learning—recognition of necessity for all group members to experience demonstrable successful learning

.Acquisition-Learning—reference to Krashen’s “acquired system” and “the learned system”

.Comprehensible input—acquisition that takes place when student is exposed to Krashen’s 'Comprehensible Input' (i + 1)

.Affective Filter—many 'affective variables' that play important roles in second language acquisition

Linkage to Theory

This paper will briefly examine Krashen’s theory of second language acquisition. The essence of Krashen’s theory is that subconscious acquisition is very important in students’ second language acquisition.

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Krashen's theory concerning second language acquisition

Krashen as re-stated in Schiitz:

Language acquisition does not require extensive use of conscious grammatical rules, and does not require tedious drill. The best methods are therefore those that supply 'comprehensible input' in low anxiety situations, containing messages that students really want to hear. These methods do not force early production in the second language, but allow students to produce when they are 'ready', recognizing that improvement comes from supplying communicative and comprehensible input, and not from forcing and correcting production. (Schiitz, 2007, p.1)

There are five main hypotheses of Krashen's theory of second language acquisition.

This review will focus only on the three most relevant to the purposes of this paper.

The first one is the **Acquisition-Learning** hypothesis. According to Schiitz (2007), Acquisition-Learning hypothesis is the most basic and widely known by scholars and researchers. When we learn a language, there are two independent systems of second language performance: 'the acquired system' and 'the learned system'. These two systems are different from each other. The 'acquired system' is assigned to the subconscious process. When a person acquires language in a subconscious process, it is

very similar to the process children experience when they acquire their native language. We all know that children can acquire language more quickly than adults. If a person (especially an adult) wants to acquire a language in a subconscious process, it requires meaningful interaction, of course using the target language. Here, speakers are not concentrating on grammar correctness, but on the communicative act. The second term mentioned above, the 'learned system' or 'learning', comes from formal instruction (such as grammar-translation teaching method), and it is a conscious process, including things such as gaining knowledge of grammar rules or points. According to Krashen, acquisition is more important than learning.

The second theory is the **Input** hypothesis. According to Schiitz (2007), in this hypothesis, Krashen tries to explain how a learner acquires a second language. In accordance with this hypothesis, when a learner receives second language 'input' that is one stage beyond his/her current stage of language ability/level, the learner will advance and progress along the natural order (which is called language acquisition order). For example, if a learner is at a stage 'i', then acquisition takes place when he/she is exposed to 'Comprehensible Input' that belongs to level 'i + 1'. It is very important for teacher to give students material which is higher than their current language ability, but not too far above.

This will encourage students' passions to solve the problems; students want to take part in the discussion (the language question, through discussion, can be solved); students are more likely to exchange opinions with each other to solve the problem.

However, if a teacher gives a material or content which is far beyond most students' ability to learn, they will feel disappointed, frustrated, and, sometimes, even give up. It is because not all of the learners can be at the same language level at the same time. Krashen suggests that *natural communicative input* is the key to designing a syllabus, making certain that each learner will receive some 'i + 1' input that is appropriate for his/her current stage of linguistic competence. The way the students will get input at their own level is that they will ask other students or the teacher how to say something, or what something means, if the classroom environment encourages communication.

The third Krashen SSL theory is the **Affective Filter** hypothesis, emphasized by Schiitz (2007). This hypothesis includes Krashen's view that many 'affective variables' play an important role in second language acquisition. These 'affective variables' are what act as the stimulus for SL students and include: degrees of positive motivation, self-confidence, self-image and limited anxiety. Krashen claims that if learners have a high motivation, good self-confidence, a good self-image, and a low level of anxiety, they are more likely to have success in second language acquisition. It is very easy to understand that, if a learner has a confident manner, and is in a peaceful state of mind, he/she can learn better. However, if a learner feels nervous or under pressure, he or she cannot exert ability well. Low motivation, low self-esteem, and too much anxiety can combine to 'raise' the affective filter and form a 'mental block' that prevents comprehensible input from being used for acquisition. On the other hand, positive affect is necessary, but it is not enough on its own, for acquisition to take place.

As Stephen Krashen (1976) stated, “the question of the optimal linguistic environment for the adult second language student has been approached empirically in the last few years in a number of studies”(p.157). It is a question of importance to the teacher and language student and also to the psycholinguist interested in the characteristics of primary linguistic data, as to what linguistic input is necessary before language acquisition can occur.

In these studies designed to determine how people learn a second language, two kinds of linguistic environments are contrasted: artificial, or formal environments, which generally mean the classroom, as compared to natural or informal environments. Mayo & Pica (2000) stated that lots of studies were carried out in Basque Country, Spain, among the university students who were studying English as a foreign language or as a third language. These studies showed that there is a growing interest among language teachers at University levels and also in other contexts to use communicative activities to increase language input and promote second language learner ability to speak in English. Besides the above studies, EFL teachers have used group and pair work in class, and this pair work has been studied under theoretical conditions. It is now widely acknowledged that students’ second language input comes best through face-to-face communication, which is a natural condition of cooperative learning.

According to Krashen, it was noted that all language teaching systems utilized for the adults used activities in which linguistic rules are presented one at a time and in which some sort of feedback (error correction and/or error detection) is present. Other features of formal instruction (e.g. deductive and inductive presentation of rules) are not

common to all teaching methods and while their presence may sometimes be catalytic, they are not necessary for learning to take place says Krashen. Again, as mentioned before, Krashen noted that these features (rule isolation and feedback) do not seem to be present in informal environments. Therefore, while Krashen does not see feedback and rule learning as essential to language acquisition, other ESL theorists believe these activities are necessary for gaining appropriate academic second language use. So, cooperative learning techniques must be seen as addressing these needs, as well as the informal communicative needs Krashen's theory addresses, in order to create a good affluent classroom environment. In Krashen's theory he mentioned that a learner acquires language quickly when he is in a lower pressure environment and when he is offered the appropriate "input". As mentioned earlier, cooperative learning is now recognized as a good teaching method for second language acquisition. However, one of the issues which need our concern is whether we should pay attention to form in communicative ESL. It is the area which Krashen ignored and it is the area we need to focus on, because Chinese students are under pressure to pass examinations (Chinese examination-oriented system).

After examining what studies have shown about learning environments and how they influence language learning, as well as examining the SL theory of Stephen Krashen, the cooperative methodology can be used to learn the rules of grammar, with group activities to learn them. By using deductive, teacher-centered presentations with group work to reinforce grammar points or inductive, problem-solving approaches, along with offering input slightly above existing capability, cooperative learning strategies

seem to offer ways to address all these matters. According to Matthew,

Cooperative learning techniques are designed to increase the amount of comprehensible input as well as to encourage motivation and self-confidence through social interaction between nonnative speaker peers. Students can learn how to effectively teach each other, along the way becoming more capable of clarifying their own knowledge by verbally communicating and monitoring their language use (Matthew, 2006, p.12).

After addressing Krashen's theory, the following material is a summary of cooperative leaning methodology and its thoughts.

A good teaching method—Cooperative learning

What is cooperative learning? What happens when we switch from the traditional classroom method to cooperative method? Can cooperative learning benefit students' second language acquisition? So, in this part, we are now beginning to deal with some important classroom issues.

As Jacobs & Ward (2000) stated, cooperative learning is a set of principles and strategies for enhancing learner to learner communication for a common cause. "Thus, cooperative learning has taken on the connotation of a set of highly structured, psychologically and sociologically based techniques that help students work together to reach learning goals."(Oxford, 1997, p. 3).

.Principles of cooperative learning

In a cooperative learning environment, learners are encouraged to be in the center of learning and learn together. Learners will not enjoy learning if it happens in isolation, both from other people as well as a limited academic context (Bruner 1996). As such, learners improve their critical thinking and intellectual skills by learning from one another.

Jacobs & Ward (2000) added that there are five important value-added principles of cooperative learning.

1. Interdependency/positive interdependence

They learn together and learning is accomplished only because they are working together; they work in a small group and make plans in order to finish a project together. “Positive interdependence indicates that students must perceive that their success is linked to the success of the others in their group”(Jacob, Rottenberg, Patrick, & Wheeler, 1996, p.8). In other words, they benefit from each other’s knowledge and contribution. Or, we can say gains for one person are associated with gains for others; this can be attained only through properly structuring the goals, rewards, roles, materials, or rules (Oxford, 1997).

2. Accountability.

Each member of the group is accountable for sharing his/her knowledge with the rest of the group. “Individual accountability means that each student is held responsible for learning the material”(Jacob, Rottenberg, et al. 1996, p.8-9). Every person is accountable through individual grading and testing (done by the teacher); also, the group is accountable through a group grade as well; improvement scores are

possible (Oxford, 1997).

3. *Collaborative Skills*

Using their *collaborative skills* to help each other to learn encourages each student to participate in problem solving and cooperative learning. According to Jacob, Rottenberg, et al. (1996), group members must learn appropriate skills (these skills include not only collaborative skills but also communicative skills; that is why cooperative learning can be adopted as a teaching method for college students—they have already acquired a basic level of language ability allowing them to speak with each other in the target language. Therefore, creating a productive group can make each member achieve successful individual performance.

4. *Equal Opportunities*

As a team, each member is responsible for taking part in the group building activity and striving for its collective success.

5. *Face-to-Face Interaction*

They all learn together, interacting with each other, and transferring knowledge among each other.

Besides these five principles, Oxford (1997) added another four principles reflecting the importance of creating appropriate groups to maximize student learning.

1. *Team formation*

A number of cooperative learning researches outside the L2 field indicate that although heterogeneous grouping involves increased thought, effort, and energy on the part of the teacher, this kind of grouping can best promote relations among classmates,

enhance learner-to-learner tutoring, increase tolerance, decrease prejudices, and promote cross-cultural understanding. This grouping can be established on the basis of language proficiency, language background, ethnicity, gender, or other factors. Random grouping or interest-based grouping can provide a perception of fairness, but it can also create possible incompatibilities and loser teams. However, homogeneous grouping, such as grouping students according to the language ability, can ease classroom management but can also create group labeling problems and prevent learner-to-learner tutoring opportunities. So, determining the best way to build groups is very important.

In my experience, learners like to choose their friends to form a group. However, if they know each other well, they are likely to be dependent on what they believe to be the top students of their group and sometimes some of the learners do no discussion at all.

2. Team Size: Groups of smaller than 7 members

The team size should consider the total number of the students in each group. The maximum number of each group is seven. In this case, teacher can more easily maintain control and it is easier to assign group monitoring jobs to each member.

3. Cognitive Development

This is often viewed as the main goal of cooperative learning. Therefore, the tasks the teacher assigns must support this need, as well as determining a way to assess how successful his/her students have been in adding to cognitive development.

4. Social Development

Development of social skills such as turn taking, active listening, and so forth can

be as important as cognitive development, though these skills are often a by-product rather than the main, stated goal of cooperative learning.

.The reasons why cooperative learning is effective in teaching English

Cooperative learning is a very popular teaching method in the western world. However, this method is not used commonly in Chinese classes for SLA. Compared with traditional teaching methods, cooperative learning requires the teacher to be the facilitator in a class and assign students responsibilities to fulfill assignments. This teaching method should be placed at the core of the teacher's education curriculum for three major reasons:

1. Research offers convincing evidence of cooperative learning's positive effects on academic achievement as well as social skill development;
2. Cooperative learning experiences are effective and motivating for both undergraduate and graduate students;
3. Cooperative learning encourages the development and improvement of interpersonal skills (Hillkirk, 1991).

.Academic advantages of cooperative learning

Cooperative learning has received a great deal of recent attention in the educational field. Through the efforts of well-known researchers and writers such as Johnson(1989a)

and Slavin(1990) who were cited in Hillkirk's paper, research findings further affirm the relationship between cooperative learning and academic achievement, as well as the enhancement of interpersonal skills (Hillkirk, 1991). According to Sumru (2000), three proponents (Johnson & Johnson, Kagan and Slavin as mentioned in Sumru's paper) of cooperative learning, state that this teaching method can maximize students' use of the target language in ESL/EFL classrooms. In a cooperative group, students are likely to encourage and help one another to learn; therefore, in this way, positive effects on achievement have been anticipated (Slavin, 1985).

Before we move to the academic advantages of cooperative learning, first, we are going to overview the concrete environment of cooperative learning.

In cooperative settings, small groups of students work on a specified assignment to eliminate their collective weaknesses, build on their strengths and share their experiences with one another to gain knowledge. In this environment there is a concept called sharing knowledge and authority among the students and teachers (McGrath, 2004). A cooperative environment is a non-threatening learning environment where students freely mix with each other without any racial discrimination, share, and exchange useful thoughts. This condition is based on a mutual support, with respect for one another in order to benefit one another in a friendly and professional manner (Millis, 2002).

Now, let us examine the academic advantages. The promise of cooperative learning is that it encourages students to learn actively and constructively. In a cooperative atmosphere the role of the teacher is different. Teachers do not act as the only deliverer

of knowledge, but a friend and a helper in time of need. They assist learners to give birth to their own healthy ideas and constructive thoughts.

Cooperative learning naturally integrates four modes of literacy—listening, speaking, reading and writing together. These four modes support one another and eventually promote understanding of academic material. Also, cooperative learning promotes increased opportunities for second language learners to develop their opinions and ideas, together with their language proficiency, while in a safe informal setting (Mason, 2006).

The study by Jacobs & Ward (2000) illustrates that cooperative learning assists students to achieve success in their studies. Jacob, Rottenberg, et al. (1996) explained that cooperative learning plays an important role in developing proficiency in academic English. This teaching method has been promoted as an efficient way to reach this goal. Theorists consider cooperative learning as beneficial to second language learners because it offers opportunities for pre-modified input that focuses on meaning, and does this in a low-anxiety environment, with student-modified input and comprehensible output. Both input and output benefit students' second language acquisition.

Jacob, Rottenberg, et al. (1996) further explained that cooperative learning also provided second language learners with a good reason for interacting with each other effectively—either the cooperative solving of a language problem that the teacher has assigned, or one the social or work environment they find themselves in, requires. The context not only helps them to acquire language but also encourages their peers and

invites them to do more in such a context. This beneficial context consists of self-help. Cooperative learning groups provide second language learners with a context in which they can talk aloud to themselves—that is, produce "private speech"—as a way of helping them reach goals. The other beneficial context is: being invited to do more. This happens when peers asked second language learners to speak more language, to express more opinions and to think more. Compared to the teacher-fronted environment, in the cooperative setting, even the most silent students are invited and like to contribute to their team projects.

Bejarano as cited in McGuire (1992), produced a study in which the findings emphasize that in an EFL environment, students can achieve a significant improvement on listening, speaking and reading comprehension skills through cooperative learning.

According to Long, Adam etc. as cited in Jacob, Rottenberg, et al. (1996), there are many early studies of cooperative learning in L2 classrooms comparing teacher-fronted classes to small-group or pair work. These studies found that L2 learners had more language practice opportunities and displayed a wider range of language functions in group or pair work than in teacher-fronted classes. Unlike the traditional teacher-oriented instruction, they were more free to exchange opinions, had more opportunity to talk, and were more likely to talk (students were more easily able to command language in this lower anxiety situation).

Lightbown (2003) reported that learners are able to give each other language input and opportunities for communication. Learners can offer each other feedback which can be in the form of a request or to discuss a meaning. Learners can get more benefits

from more one-to-one conversation than from a teacher-centered classroom. Lightbown added that students who have more opportunities to join reading activities learn more second language than students in audio-lingual instruction. Learners can benefit more if the materials (reading) are complemented by interaction with the teacher.

Other than increasing communicative ability and listening ability, what do students need to learn in a communicative classroom? Is cooperative learning a method which can be used to teach rules (grammar points)? Can we combine communicative instruction with learning grammar? Lightbown and Spada (2003) examined the differences in instruction and the following effects on English language proficiency. There were 48 adult learners who joined in a six-week intensive course. These 48 students were separated into three classes. In class A, the teacher spent more time on teaching grammar, while in class B, students' attention was focused on the linguistics features but learning grammar was done through communicative activities rather than only in teacher-fronted instruction. In class C, the teacher rarely focused on specific language rules. After a series of proficiency tests (These included: listening comprehension tests; reading comprehension tests; oral interview/interaction tasks; multiple choice and a sociolinguistic test.), the results show that class A performed a little better on the grammar test than B and C. However, in class B, students performed the best both on the language ability and language accuracy. In this class, students were encouraged to learn the linguistic features in their speech and at the same time, they also engaged in communicative practice. Lightbown and Spada concluded that if

learners are to acquire language for academic use, the combination of formal aspects in a meaningful environment works best. Lightbown and Spada added that students were successful in providing each other with information about language rules and gave each other corrective feedback while they engaged in a communicative task (cooperative learning and collaborative interaction).

To summarize, Johnson, Johnson, and Holubec as cited in Oxford (1997), say that effective instruction indicates that cooperative learning should be used when we want students to learn more (exchange ideas, share opinions), like school better (and hence more easily acquire language in a low anxiety environment), like each other better (talk freely), like themselves better (responsibility), and learn more effective social skills (exchange ideas, personal development). Oxford (1997) stated that compared to competitive or individualistic learning experiences, numerous studies indicate that cooperative learning is more effective in promoting internal motivation (where a student does something because s/he wants to rather than because s/he fears the teacher) and task achievement, generating higher-order thinking skills, improving attitudes toward the subject, developing academic peer norms, heightening self-esteem, increasing time on task, creating caring and altruistic relationships, and lowering anxiety and prejudice.

.Cooperative learning has great impact on personal development

Positive effects of cooperative learning have been studied in two areas. The first area emphasizes student achievement and another area focuses on personal development. In

a cooperative learning environment, positive effects can be observed on social relationships, such as improved race relations and attitudes towards lower achieving classmates being expected to achieve. This happens because cooperative learning creates the conditions for a nonsuperficial, harmonious environment (Slavin, 1985).

1. Independence

Cooper (1990) illustrated that cooperative learning increases student independence. Students realize that they can work independently of the teacher. Oxford (1997) added that research on cooperative learning outside the L2 field shows that positive interdependence can be promoted by cooperative learning in many respects. As I mentioned earlier, the maximum desired number of a cooperative learning group is seven. It because this number can guarantee everyone takes one part in the whole project and shares responsibilities. Through giving individuals specific role assignments within the group, such as gatekeeper, encourager, recorder, and explainer, it can improve self-esteem for low-status learners. Through determining a group goal to which each person must contribute, positive interdependence is also increased. Moreover, through structuring the materials (e.g., one pencil per group, one computer terminal per group, division of a given reading for the group to share), positive interdependence can be encouraged sometimes. Through obvious defined rules and assessment both of the group and the individual, positive interdependence can be promoted.

2. Responsibility

Cooper further stated that cooperative learning promotes individual and group

responsibility. Students see their worth within the group, which causes him/her to develop self confidence and self respect.

3. Acceptance and Understanding

Furthermore, cooperative learning creates peer acceptance and understanding. Students have an opportunity to interact with each other.

4. Social Skills

Above all, cooperative learning develops social skills such as: a. turn-taking, b. politeness, c. cooperation, d. mutual interdependence, e. encouragement, and f. moral support.

. How to make cooperative learning more effective

Millis (2002) states the first condition underlying cooperative learning is respect for students regardless of their ethnic, intellectual, educational, or social backgrounds and belief in their potential for academic success. Attaining such mutual respect is a big challenge both for the teacher and students. All students need to learn and work in environments where their individual strengths are recognized and individual needs are addressed. All students need to learn within a supportive community in order to feel safe enough to take risks. The teacher, in this kind of situation, is the facilitator, which is even a more important role in class. He or she is the person responsible for helping students to see the reason and value for establishing such a community.

Besides the mutual understanding and respect between teacher and student, cooperative learning with computer tools makes the group learning more efficient and

enjoyable. Technology can be integrated in the cooperative learning environment and can be helpful in achieving a common goal of group learners if it can be made available (Steelman, 2005).

Chapter 3

Conclusion and Recommendations

Cooperative learning is a new approach in Chinese education practice. The central idea underlying cooperative learning is involvement, which basically means that learners agree to form a kind of mutual help and interdependence so as to work together to achieve a common goal of learning. Cooperative learning has a great impact not only on a student's academic learning but also on personal development.

The real meaning behind cooperative learning lies in the cooperation established among learners inside the classroom; however, cooperative learning also includes the cooperation between the teacher and students, and the major forms underlying this type of collaboration are the teacher's teaching, teacher-students' discussion, and students' group or pair discussion under the teacher's guidance. Therefore, in cooperative learning, the teacher's roles are that of an organizer, a moderator, a helper, a facilitator, an evaluator and the source for information resources, as opposed to the transmission model of dominator and information or knowledge provider.

Every teaching method has its own limitations. Cooperative learning is a potentially powerful instructional technique that requires careful attention. As Jacob, Rottenberg, et al. state, although cooperative learning provides positive opportunities that support

the acquisition of academic language, it has not seemed to reach its full potential. One reason for the failure of cooperative learning is that teachers or educators do not fully appreciate the classroom context. So, when a teacher adopts cooperative learning methods, he/she should take local contexts into account, such as a student's language ability/level/understanding, students' definitions of the task, features of the task and participant structures, the instructional goals, the instructional material or content, and so on. The findings suggest that developers and educators need to take context into account and teachers who want to maximize the benefits of cooperative learning in support of second language acquisition (SLA) need to have a broad understanding of academic language, to include SLA in their instructional goals, to offer structured classroom tasks to support the desired opportunities (communicative acquisition as well as learned academic structure) for L2 learners, to monitor what is happening in the groups, and to adapt their cooperative methods and strategies if they are not getting what they want from students.

Another SLA issue that needs to be acknowledged is how to keep students communicating in the target language in a cooperative learning environment. Too often, students may think accomplishing the task or project is the sole goal, not realizing that informal language practice among themselves is a critical part of small group activities. This occurs less if the target language is being learned by non-native speakers coming from multiple language backgrounds, or if the SL learners are living in the target language culture as immigrants. It is another matter, however, if the learners are trying to learn the language as a foreign language. It is far too easy to speak the native

language when trying to problem solve, rather than using the target language. So, one of the suggestions for dealing with this problem is that, before giving assignments, teachers assign different roles in a group, such as gatekeeper, recorder, encourager and explainer. The encourager in the group is to take the responsibility for keeping students using the target language during discussion. The recorder or encourager, or both, may be asked to note how many times individuals are able to do so—or not do so. Such scores may be part of the group grade, or any group achieving target-language communication only in completing a task may receive special recognition in front of the class. The teacher has to be inventive or creative about how such score-keeping is best handled with different age and ability groups.

Cooperative learning has been adopted in education in western countries for many years. It can also be a good teaching and learning method for Chinese students' second language acquisition. Implementation of cooperative learning can promote students' second language acquisition, personal development, student-student interaction and so on. This is not to suggest that cooperative learning should replace all the other teaching methods, rather, this approach can be used as a complement to the current second language teaching methods and make teaching methods more diversified and relevant to the language learning tasks.

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