

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN COOPERATIVE LEARNING AND SECOND
LANGUAGE ACQUISITION

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ABSTRACT

The problem presented in this paper was to identify the relationship between cooperative learning and second language acquisition. Another objective was to discover the role and advantage that cooperative learning exerts on the process of second language acquisition. A brief review of the literature on cooperative learning and its method was undertaken. A second review of literature relating to second language acquisition was conducted. Through these two reviews of the literature, it became evident that most research conducted on the relationship between cooperative learning and second language acquisition is incomplete at its best and unsubstantiated at its worst. The bulk of the research states that cooperative learning has a strong impact on second language acquisition. Through these two reviews of literature, it became evident that there is an important relationship between cooperative learning and Second Language Acquisition.

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INTRODUCTION

Over the past decade, cooperative learning methodology has been applied at more and more universities and is being proved very effective in improving student learning. Currently, second language learning, and especially the study of English as a foreign language, has gained a more important status worldwide.

In order to communicate, students talk with each other in class using the second language. This helps students improve their oral/speaking ability. In order to understand other's ideas and opinions, students must listen to their classmates carefully. This helps them to improve their listening ability when they make a final report of their learning and present it to their teachers, when students write a report or conclusion, it improves their writing ability. In order to understand the final report, other students must read the report carefully. This helps to improve their reading ability.

In assessing the standards of second language learning, four aspects are included: speaking, listening, writing and reading. That means cooperative learning improves the four aspects of Second Language Acquisition.

Statement of the Problem

The problem to be addressed is “What is the relationship between cooperative learning and second language acquisition?”

Purpose of the Research

The purpose of this research paper was to explore the function and importance of applying cooperative learning. It also seeks to understand the essence of second language acquisition and ways to improve second language acquisition. A final goal was to discover what the relationship between cooperative learning and second language acquisition is.

Significance of the Problem

With the economic development of China and its further opening up to the outside world, there comes a greater and greater need for English speakers. Therefore, how to teach English in China as a second language to students at the university is becoming more and more important. However, some teachers are still following the old teaching principle—grammar translation and text to students without allowing them to talk and communicate freely, and share their opinions in discussion. As a result, there is a strong need to explore the role cooperative learning could play in the process of second language learning in China.

Assumptions

For the purpose of this paper, it was assumed that all research and review of the current literature was accurately reported. It was also assumed that the literature will make recommendations on how best to apply the research available.

Delimitations of the Research

The research will be conducted in and through the Karrmann Library at the University of Wisconsin-Platteville over a 30-day period. Primary searches will be conducted via the Internet through EBSCO host with ERIC and Academic Search Elite as the primary sources. Key search topics will include “cooperative learning,” and “second language acquisition”.

Method of Approach

A brief review of the literature on cooperative learning and second language acquisition (1950s-present) will be conducted. A second review of literature relating to second language acquisition will be conducted. The findings will be summarized and recommendations made.

Definition of Terms

Cooperative learning: It is a set of processes which help people interact together in order to accomplish a specific goal or develop an end product which is usually content specific.

Language Acquisition: It is the process of learning a native or a second language. The acquisition of native languages is studied primarily by developmental psychologists and psycholinguists.

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

COOPERATIVE LEARNING

What Is Cooperative Learning?

Cooperative Learning (Lundgren, 2008) is a relationship in a group of students that requires positive interdependence, individual accountability, interpersonal skills, face-to-face positive interaction, and processing.

Cooperative Learning is a new approach in educational practice. The central idea underlying Cooperative Learning is involvement, which basically means that learners form a kind of mutual help group, and work interdependently to achieve a common goal of learning. "Cooperative learning" is one of the three major learning patterns (self-directed learning, cooperative learning and inquisitive learning), which are recommended by the present elementary educational reforms. (Deutach, 2001)

The essence of Cooperative Learning lies in the cooperation among learners inside the classroom; however, Cooperative Learning also includes the cooperation between the teacher and students. The major forms underlying this type of collaboration are the teacher's teaching, teacher-student discussions and group or pair discussion among the students under the teacher's guidance. Hence, in Cooperative Learning, the teacher's role is that of an organizer, moderator, helper, evaluator and information resource as opposed to the transmission model where the teacher serves as an information dominator, or knowledge provider. (Loertscher, 2007)

Method of Cooperative Learning

Group Investigation is the most frequently employed method of Cooperative Learning and is considered the most suitable approach in finding out background information. It is a highly structured method, where members in each group sit together to learn their part. Different groups get different tasks under a general topic. Therefore there are some basic characteristics underlying the method. First, the class is divided into several cooperative groups, each of which takes the responsibility of investigating its assigned subtopics. Each group presents its findings in front of the whole class. Second, the division of the labor must be reasonable and meaningful to ensure the interdependence of group members. Third, students communicate with each other in their team when gathering information, planning analyzing and evaluating. Finally, in terms of the teacher's role, he or she is a resource person and an indirect leader, ready to provide direction, explanation and to motivate students during the learning process.

How to Realize Cooperative Learning

In the Cooperative Learning method, the authority remains with the instructor, who retains ownership of the task, which involves either a closed or a closable (that is to say foundational) problem (the instructor knows or can predict the answer).

Seen from this perspective, Cooperative Learning does not empower students. It employs them to serve the instructor's ends and produce a "right" or acceptable answer. Every person, Brufee (1999) holds, belongs to several "interpretative or knowledge communities" that share vocabularies, points of view, histories, values,

conventions and interests. The job of the instructor is to help students learn to negotiate the boundaries between the communities they already belong to and the community represented by the teacher's academic discipline. Every knowledge community has a core of foundational knowledge that its members consider as given (but not necessarily absolute). To function independently within a knowledge community, the fledgling scholar must master enough material to become conversant with the community (Deutach, 1949). Cooperative learning represents the best means to approach mastery of foundational knowledge. Once students become reasonably conversant, they are ready for collaboration, ready to discuss and assess...

Cooperative Learning Requires Structures that Ensure the Active Participation of All Students Cooperative Learning Function

Equally important to establishing supportive heterogeneous groups is ensuring the active participation of all students within inclusive cooperative learning lessons. All too often students are placed into groups and given a task to complete without the provision of structures that will promote the active, equitable participation of all members. Key components of participation include the division of labor and materials, flexible interpretation of roles, and individualized student responsibilities.

The participation of all group members is more likely when teachers carefully structure the cooperative group task. Through the division of labor and materials, the

students are given a clear message that each student has an important contribution to make toward the completion of the group's task. (Johnson, 1999) In the beginning, or when new groups have formed, it is important that teachers structure this interdependence among the group members. Planning for equitable participation becomes especially important in inclusive classrooms where the participation of some students may be dependent on the structure that is provided. For example, with a student who is reserved and responds more slowly than her classmates due to a physical disability, if labor and materials are not divided, it is possible that group members will do the task for her (Deutch, 1949). It is also important for teachers to talk with students about the goals of working together and the importance of everyone contributing (J. Thousand, 1994)

Cooperative Learning Function

Speaking in small groups is more natural, because in real life, students spend most of their time talking to one other person or to a few other people. If they speak to a large group of people, it is usually a more formal situation where they have spent time preparing what they are going to say (Wang Qiang, 2007, p100). Small group work helps students learn to work cooperatively and it helps them develop interpersonal skills. When students work with other students who are not their friends, they learn how to work with a wider variety of people and this fosters development of tolerance, mutual respect and harmony. If students cooperate in harmony and with joy, anxiety will surely be forgotten.

The second characteristic of a successful speaking task is that students talk a lot in the foreign language. This is the strongest argument for using small group work because it increases the time for each student to practice speaking in one lesson. The only way to become good at a skill is to practice it. Nobody expects to be good at playing ping pong the first time they try even if they already know all the rules very well and have watched others play many times. The same is true of speaking a foreign language. (Wang Qiang, 2007, p100) It is self-evident that the more opportunities students get to practice speaking, the less anxiety they feel.

If the weak students are asked to work with more advanced students, they may also feel anxiety. So, the last reason for using group work is that different small groups can work at different levels if the teacher groups them according to language proficiency level. It is inevitable that some students in a class will be more advanced than other students. Qiang argues that the teacher should modify a given task to make it easier for slower students and more challenging for more advanced students, then all students will continue learning and remain more motivated. (Wang Qiang, 2007, p99)

When teachers organize group work, they should try to make oral English class activities task-oriented and student-centered and they should focus their attention on how to encourage the students to speak more often and more fluently. Moreover, it is necessary to change the activities of pair works or group activities so that the students do not get bored. Sometimes, a drama, a game, or simply an English song may cheer up the students and make them work more efficiently.

SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION

What Is Second Language Acquisition?

Second Language Acquisition means learning a foreign or subsequent language (a third or fourth language). SLA is primarily the study of how learners acquire or learn an additional language after they have acquired their first language (L1). SLA researchers are particularly interested in the causes of the difficulties that adult learners encounter and the methods that may be used to facilitate the acquisition of a second language. (Krashen, 1982)

Second Language Acquisition is the process by which people learn languages in addition to their native language(s). The term second language is used to describe any language whose acquisition starts after early childhood around 3 to 5 years old (including what may be the third or subsequent language learned). The language to be learned is often referred to as the "target language" or "L2", compared to the first language, "L1". Second Language Acquisition may be abbreviated "SLA", or L2A, for "L2 acquisition".

The term "language acquisition" became commonly used after Krashen (1982) contrasted it with formal and non-constructive "learning." Today, most scholars use "language learning" and "language acquisition" interchangeably, unless they are directly addressing Krashen's work. However, "Second Language Acquisition" or "SLA" has become established as the preferred term for this academic discipline.

Though SLA is often viewed as part of applied linguistics, it is typically

concerned with the language system and learning processes, whereas applied linguistics may focus more on the experiences of the learner, particularly in the classroom. Additionally, SLA has mostly examined naturalistic acquisition, where learners acquire a language with little formal training or teaching. (January 24, 2008)

Second Language Acquisition means the process of learning a second language when the learner has mastered a certain mother tongue system, in most cases far away from the social environment of the target language. The language acquisition process must be achieved in a language environment and through language input. Therefore, the creation of the language environment and language input become an extremely important condition for Second Language Acquisition.

Krashen (1982) argues that simple language importation or language input is not enough, and what the learners need is "understandable importation", which is a necessary condition for language acquisition. The so-called "comprehensible input" is the understandable language material heard or read by the language learner. Comprehensible input means the importation materials must be understood by language learners. Otherwise, the importation materials are useless for learners, just noise. Importation should also be interesting or relevant, so learners can easily and unknowingly achieve language acquisition. Thus, the understandable importation language material is the key to language acquisition. Violating the above laws will inevitably lead to inefficient or ineffective language learning.

An important aspect of effective and efficient language learning involves the awareness of effective factors in language teaching. One phenomenon that exists in

Second Language Acquisition is that various learners are at different levels of speed and efficiency. This affects their ability to complete learning tasks and gain the same quality of comprehensible input. Only when the input is processed as intake, does the acquisition occur. In the process from inputting to intake, the students' learning motivation for learning, their attitude, self-confidence and anxiety are playing their roles as well. Krashen calls these factors "emotional factors". They play a role of filter in the process of language input, which determines the amount of language input taken up by the learners. Specifically, when the "emotional filter" is low means, it means learner's purpose is clear, dynamic, strong self-confident with the appropriate anxiety. They should have a positive attitude toward foreign language learning, and the received language input is more; on the contrary, the role of the filter is more and the received input is less. In the cooperative learning environment, learners can naturally feel relaxed and free and enjoy themselves in the language acquisition process. (Kryszewska, 2007)

The Role of Cooperative Learning in the Second Language Acquisition Environment

The literature on cooperative learning in classroom L2 instruction does not always distinguish between cooperative learning and other types of group work. Cohen (1986) defined group work as "students working together in a group small enough so that everyone can participate on a task that has been clearly assigned" (p. 1). Dörnyei (1997) pointed out that not all group work necessarily engages students in

cooperative learning (CL).

Typical group work activities associated with communicative language teaching are not equivalent to CL, because the small group format is not the essence of CL. Small group activities in L2 classes often are not cooperative in nature, nor do they underutilize CL principles. (Dornyei, 1997, p. 483) Johnson, Johnson, and Smith (1995) agreed that "simply placing students in groups and telling them to work together does not in and of itself promote higher achievement" (p. 30). They maintained that in order for students to reap the benefits provided through cooperative learning, two conditions must be met. The first condition is clearly perceived positive interdependence. It exists "when one perceives that one is linked with others in a way so that one cannot succeed unless they do (and vice versa) and/or that one must coordinate one's efforts with the efforts of others to complete a task" (p. 31). When students work together without experiencing the feeling that everyone in their group either sinks or swims together, the learning situation is not cooperative. Krashen's view for beginning language learners is that it is not so good to be exposed to alien language, the normal speed, and the normal conversation. For even if the importation of language is not very much, they always fail to understand the meaning, easily lose confidence and experience psychological fear, which are not conducive to their language acquisition. This is in fact affirming that pedagogy is very important to foreign language learners. According to Krashen's perspective, the ideal foreign language teacher should be able to provide students with such a learning environment. This environment enables students to obtain more direct use of the target language

and provides them with opportunities to immerse themselves in the use of language. This approach results in meaningful communication and encourages students to participate in problem-solving and communication activities that accomplish their tasks. (Loertscher, 2007) In other words, the Foreign Language Acquisition teaching environment, which is conducive to the students, should have the following: direct participation of the students in the communication, and content that students can value, comprehend and imitate.

Researchers have argued that cooperative learning methods are beneficial in learning a second language (L2) because, among other justifications, they provide opportunities for increased language production and allow learners to negotiate meaning in natural, low-anxiety environments (Bailey, Daley, & Onwuegbuzie, 1999; Ford, 1991; Long & Porter, 1985). McGroarty (1993) maintained that cooperative learning "provides a powerful tool for language acquisition because it establishes an instructional context that supports many of the aspects of language development taken as central by [recent L2 acquisition] theories" (p. 20).

It is important for teachers to create a harmonious and relaxed classroom environment, and reduce affective disorder. The classroom is the main place where learning occurs, and a good classroom-learning environment will greatly improve the language acquisition effect. According to the "input hypothesis", the class should not only provide students with adequate comprehensible input, but also have a low affective filter atmosphere. We should therefore strive to create a harmonious and comfortable classroom environment. This involves changing the traditional mode of

instruction, and creating a pleasant, decent learning environment for students of English. (Robinson, 2007)

CONCLUSIONS

Cooperative Learning is a successful strategy that is recognized in today's pedagogy. This refers to a variety of teaching methods characterized by positive interdependence and individual accountability among students working together to achieve a common goal. It is, according to Slavin (1996), "one of the greatest success stories in the history of educational research" (p. 43). Compared to competitive and individual learning, cooperative learning results in greater student achievement (Johnson & Johnson, 1999). Moreover, students engaged in cooperative learning develop higher level thinking skills, improved interpersonal skills, greater intrinsic motivation, heightened self-esteem, and positive attitudes toward learning (Slavin, 1995). There are many benefits to learning when students work together to understand and improve their learning. Cooperative Learning advocates teaching speaking through interactive tasks and in practical terms this leads to the use of pair-work and group work activities.

Cooperative Learning often creates a student-centered climate in the classroom. Students in such classrooms will feel more relaxed and find it easier to perform, either learning or speaking. Many students are afraid of speaking in front of a whole class because they are worried about criticism and losing face or they simply feel shy. If the speaking tasks are, however, designed to be completed in small groups, this anxiety is less likely to happen.

Students can learn much faster and easier when they are learning in a cooperative learning atmosphere. Through cooperative learning, they enhance their

talking, listening, reading and writing abilities, Cooperative Learning plays an important role in Second Language Acquisition.

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