

HOW TO BEST FACILITATE COOPERATIVE LEARNING
IN A COLLEGE ENGLISH CLASS

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HOW TO BEST FACILITATE COOPERATIVE LEARNING
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ABSTRACT

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The purpose of this paper was to find out the effectiveness of Cooperative Learning methods which are suitable for Chinese college non-major English teaching.

The first part of this paper introduces the current college English teaching situation which reflects the reasons why the new teaching methods should be used in the college English classes. The second part is mainly about the literature review of Cooperative Learning , Cooperative Learning can be considered one of most popular teaching methods which is widely implemented in primary school, middle school and colleges in the United States, China and other countries. At the same time, it explains several specific methods about Cooperative Learning. The third part is about the conclusions and recommendations which include the advantages and disadvantages of Cooperative Learning.

Cooperative Learning can promote students' learning interests, improve students' English techniques and enhance their learning ability. So, Cooperative Learning should be carried out widely in college English classes.

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CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

In recent years, with the rapid enrollment expansion in Chinese universities, the college English classes have become much larger as the number of students has increased quickly. Today, there are typically 60-90 students in a class. There is also a concern that English level-gap among students is widening. While English teaching is still mainly based on teacher-centered instruction, the students are very passive, they cannot get involved in the class, they are easy to feel bored and soon lose interest in learning English. As a result, a lot of students fail to pass their basic CET4 Examination, and most of the students who have passed their examinations cannot communicate with the English speakers in English. So, in order to change the teachers' dominant role and to motivate students' interests of learning English, it is very necessary to apply methods such as Cooperative Learning in the Chinese college non-major English classes. Cooperative Learning was first promoted and implemented by American Educator David Koonts, it became a creative and an effective teaching theory and strategy during the mid 1970s to the mid 1980s (Yin, 2006). Today, it is considered a very successful instructional innovation and wildly used in modern language teaching.

The focus of literature review is on theory of Cooperative Learning and the importance of applying Cooperative Learning in college English class. The best methods of Cooperative Learning will also mainly review in the context of the topic.

The implementation of Cooperative Learning is very important. Cooperative Learning can be considered an important method that changes in instructional core from what is being taught to what is being learned (Messier, 2005). In a Cooperative

Learning, students usually work together in groups which general include two to four members. Cooperative Learning is not just putting students together and giving them something to do. The principles and techniques of Cooperative Learning can help teachers encourage students to help each other and participate actively. Students finally realize when they help group members, it means helping themselves and their whole group, because everybody has to undertake equal responsibility in one group (Jacobs & Hall, 2002).The practices in Cooperative Learning can help the students to increase their academic achievement, can help them build up a positive relationships among students, and can help them lead to an efficient exchange of information (Johnson, Johnson & Smith 2000). Hardwick (2000) also points out that cooperative strategies such as considerable planning, inconspicuous observation and evaluation, and preplanned adjustments can help learners make progress greatly.

Statement of the Problem

The problem expressed as a question is, “What do researchers report regarding Cooperative Learning as a method in college non-major English classes?”

Definitions of Terms

Cooperative Learning. Cooperative Learning is an instructional method applying small groups in order to maximize the students’ learning through working together (Johnson & Johnson & Holubec 1994:p.9).

Delimitations of Research

The research was conducted in and through the Karrmann Library at the University of Wisconsin-Platteville, over ninety –five (95) days. Primary searches were

conducted via the Internet through EBSCO host with ERIC, Academic Search Elite and Google/Google Scholar as the primary sources. Key search topics include “Cooperative Learning”, “college English class”.

Method of Approach

A brief review of literature on the Cooperative Learning is provided. A second review of literature relating the importance and ways of Cooperative Learning in a college English class was also conducted. The findings are summarized and recommendations made.

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF COOPERATIVE LEARNING LITERATURE

This is a very important part about a total overview of the Cooperative Learning. It mainly introduces the definition and the different explanations on Cooperative Learning by different scholars. Also discusses the reasons and necessities for implementing the Cooperative Learning in Chinese college English classes. Finally, the specific Cooperative Learning methods are described in detail.

Introduction of Cooperative Learning

Cooperative Learning (also known as collaborative learning) is defined as the instructional use of small groups so that students work together to maximize their own and each other's learning (Johnson & Johnson 1999 :p.9). Cooperative Learning usually refers to students working together to achieve their same learning goals and the whole instructional procedures aim to foster the students' collaborative efforts, many EFL educators realize the benefits of Cooperative Learning and tempt to apply the method in their class, cooperation usually involves small groups working on specific tasks, which are best completed through a highly structured process of team work , if successful, Cooperative Learning results in many well-recognized outcomes, including higher academic achievement, because learners can benefit from peer tutoring and from the positive atmosphere of mutual support in the classroom (Soubotina, 2006). Cooperative Learning is based on student-centered learning and has been implemented

widely and successfully in ELT (Deen, 1991). In recent years, the student-centered teaching method make the scholars and teachers give their attention to the method of Cooperative Learning which has become to be regarded as one of effective teaching methods in modern language teaching and activities (Wilcock, 2005).

Although Cooperative Learning is defined and explained by different scholars from different viewpoints, it is clear that it can be considered a practical and an effective teaching approach that different level students can work together in small groups. If one teacher provides a variety of learning activities in order to improve students' learning ability and all the classmates try their best to work hard, to help each other to maximize learning efforts. Johnson & Johnson (1999) mentioned that students should learn to be absorbed in their Cooperative Learning together. Finally, students can achieve their common goal and create a positive atmosphere includes the establishment of a good collaborative relationship among participants , they can also realize the important role playing in the activities, and try to take responsibility for the group to gain their achievements. The whole collaborative learning procedure can help the students complete their assignment successfully when they cooperate very well to understand and master the main meaning of their assignments.

Research Findings for Cooperative Learning

According to the study made by Suh Jae (2009), Forty-eight students study in groups of four in a college reading course in a whole semester, they help each other to discuss L2 texts on different topics. The main method of the research is interview and

attitude scale, the result of the study is that the Cooperative Learning used in EFL reading class can produce a lot of benefits, such as creating more positive reading attitude and promoting higher reading fluency in a L2 class. Another study involving 52 third graders in a Taiwanese elementary school who work in cooperative reading groups for ten weeks, the research findings imply that cooperative works play a very important role in four major types of interactive behavior such as scaffolding, modeling and direct instruction, and peer-assisted learning, (Lan, Chang, & Sung, 2006).

The positive role of group work in EFL reading is also reported by Choi Kyung-Hee (2003), in the study, 50 Korean college students are divided into different collaborative groups on their reading courses as an experimental group, there is also a control group which students are having their reading class by traditional grammar-translation method. As a result, the author finds that the contents in the experimental group are learned and used more flexible during reading, and students can understand and translate complex sentence structures better than those students who are in the control group.

It is reported by Im Byung-Bin & Huh Jin-Hee (2005) that cooperative multimedia-assisted language learning in EFL reading classes in middle school that students who are working together in a various computer-based, interactive activities in the experimental group have higher motivation and more positive attitude for L2 reading than those students with no any creative activities under teacher-centered teaching.

The students' positive attitude towards Cooperative Learning teaching was explored by Littlewoods (2001) on English learning in three European and eight Eastern Asian countries. As a result of the research, the author concludes that most of the students from all represented countries question the traditional authority-based, transmission mode of learning. At the same time, the students are eager to participate in their class actively, they hold positive attitudes towards group work and can work very hard together for their same goal, so the positive benefits that get from effective Cooperative Learning strategies in the English language classroom can be further supported.

Research and Practice in China

Cooperative Learning has been used in the western since the 1940's and it began to be widely used in the 1980s. Cooperative learning trainers such as Johnson came to China in the 1990s. Since then, Chinese teachers and scholars have been interested in implementing this instructional method in their practical classes, some of them realized the importance of Cooperative Learning and tried to introduce it to Chinese language learners and scholars. Some masterworks and Chinese versions of foreign works have been published. For example, the book named the *Theory of Cooperative Learning* was published by Wang Tan (1994); the book named *The Concept of Cooperative Learning and Its Practice* was also written by Wang Tan (2002,a); Wang Tan (2002) published the book named *The Basic Theory of Cooperative Learning and the Education Research*. Ma Lan (2005) published the book *Cooperative Learning*. Articles about

theoretical basis, techniques, and advantages of Cooperative Learning are also published. In the article *On the Theory and Skills of Cooperative Learning and the Reform of EFL Teaching*, Guo Shiming (1999) described the detail theories based on which different skills and techniques of Cooperative Learning were formed. Yuan Ximing (2003) summarized six merits in using Cooperative Learning methods according to its characteristics. Then, many language teachers and scholars tried to introduce and apply group learning in their practical classes. Zhou Haiqian & Fu Xizeng (2002) made an account of how to practice Cooperative Learning in English class elaborated cooperation among learners and introduced some specific examples of Cooperative Learning to show the efficient classroom instruction. Some other educators put their attempts to a further step. They made investigations to see what types of group task, what kind of group formation could produce more interaction among learners so as to promote learning efficiency, and concluded that Cooperative Learning was a very good way to organize groups.

Rationale for Cooperative Learning in the College Classroom

In the traditional English class, most teachers dominate a lot of class time in their lecturing. The students give their attention to watching the blackboard , listening to the teacher carefully, they are very busy to write down everything the teacher says, and they have little chances to discuss, debate, explain and solve problems by themselves. they can remember the knowledge that the teacher explains in a short time, but most of them can not remember what the teacher teaches for a long time, even can not use the knowledge in their practical problem - solutions. So, the traditional English instruction

method has not followed the new Chinese college enrolment situation which class-size becomes larger. Indeed , there are more than 60 students in most of the non-English major classes, it becomes very difficult for a teacher to control such a large class and to reach the teaching objective by using the traditional teaching methods. However, in a certain degree, Cooperative Learning is able to assure students working in groups on their problems and assignments, more importantly; it can cultivate students' positive interdependence and individual accountability. During the whole process of cooperative working, it helps students form a kind of ability of critical thinking and practice their creative problem-solving skills, thus, students can have positive attitudes toward the classes being taught, their confidence in knowledge learning and comprehensive learning skills will be set up.

The Ways to Implement Cooperative Learning in College Class

If one teacher wants to facilitate Cooperative Learning method in a class successfully, several details have to be taken into consideration. For instance, what does a concrete method suit for a lesson to facilitate learning activities? What are both teachers' and learners' role in the Cooperative Learning? How does the teacher design the tasks in a class? And how to divide the students into different groups? Each of these components plays a decisive role whether the Cooperative Learning is carried out in college classes successfully or not.

Methods

As mentioned above, many scholars give Cooperative Learning different definitions and most of them have offered some approaches and methods which are popular in practical class activities. For example, the followings are the ones widely implemented by many Cooperative Learning proponents.

Jigsaw II

Jigsaw II was developed by Slavin (1986) by modifying Jigsaw of Elliot Aronson (1978). In Jigsaw II, one teacher can divide students into heterogeneous groups according to their different English level , assign them to read academic materials or texts individually. Then, group members are randomly arranged to join in a particular group to discuss their own reading assignment. According to the reading assignment, particular group members should study very carefully so that they can return to their original groups to teach other group members. Each member has to act as a teacher to teach the original group, at last, students will take a small quiz, groups that gain improved scores than that before can earn group rewards (Slavin, 2010). This method is very useful in teaching a second language especially for a reading selection, because the Cooperative Learning activities among students exist not only within each Jigsaw group but also within the counterpart groups. Cooperative techniques are used and emphasized directly when Jigsaw method is applied, and the students are able to work hard and take individual accountability during the Jigsaw learning process.

Group Investigation

Sharan (1988) adopted Group Investigation method from earlier work done with group investigation that was not based on Cooperative Learning theory. Sharan (1994) pointed out that student's work in different groups; each student in a group could become an investigator to coordinate an inquiry with same purpose of the class. In this method, one teacher can divide the whole class into several groups which can study different aspects of a subject; The materials offering for students should be meaningful and interesting, in order to make students become interdependent among group members; The students have a lot of chances to communicate among them, such as gathering information, make a plan, coordinate, evaluate, analyse, and work with other students; The teacher lead the whole class indirectly, organizing the whole class orderly, providing resources, directions and clarification if needed, and the teacher can help the students create an active learning environment.

Student Teams Achievement Divisions (STAD)

Student Teams Achievement Divisions was created by Slavin (1986). In this method, Students can be divided into heterogeneous groups of four or six. When the teacher's lecture is finished, students work in groups to discuss and help each other to finish their target tasks, all group members should be sure to grasp the contents that the teacher has explained and offered. Then, the teacher will do a quiz to find out how about the students master their knowledge, comparing to the students' past performances, from the quiz scores, the teacher is able to find out the students who get

improvement in their learning, he can offer them certificates and other rewards if the Points meet certain criteria according to the degree of their improvement. This type of Cooperative Learning activity not only can help students learn specific reading contents but also can practice their oral abilities, students have a lot of opportunities to communicate with other members by using a target language, it is also a meaningful way for those foreign language learners to learn a second language. Slavin (2010) points out that STAD is one of the best well-defined objectives teaching including mathematical computations, language usage and mechanics, geography and map skills, and concepts.

Learning Together/ Learning Circles

Learning together method was first developed by Johnson & Johnson (1979). It is a quite popular approach in application Cooperative Learning. the main characteristic applying this method is that students work in groups to share ideas and help each other answering questions in order to complete their assigned group tasks, they can ask for help from other members before asking their teacher, in the end, the teacher will give praises and rewards to the group which performs better. Students who are heterogeneous can form stable relationships with their group mates in the long—term Cooperative Learning. The main purpose of this method is to make sure that all students can be involved in the activities and can understand all of the questions. Of course, this method can provide many opportunities for students to support and encourage each other. Finally, all students can make their academic great progress.

Teams-Games-Tournaments (TGT)

Slavin (2010) explains that TGT is firstly developed by David De Vries and Keith Edwards at Johns Hopkins University in 1978 and it is similar to STAD except in the method of competition among teams and the resulting accountability to teams. This method can be understood that students take part in weekly tournaments to do their tasks and assignments with others who have similar skill levels at three—person tournament tables, students at the tournament tables should be homogeneous in their performance levels in order to give them equal opportunities to be successful. Ma Tie Wei (2005) describes TGT as a bumping system to rearrange students to tournament tables after each game round. In each round, the highest scorers from each table are resettled to sit at a higher performance level table, the poorest performers change to a same low performance level table, and the median performers are gathered to other tables at the same level. At last, the highest score teams earn team rewards. However, students' tournament achievements or team rewards are only a small part of their total grades. Students' grades are mainly decided on their quiz scores or other individual assessments.

In a whole, during the process of implementing a Cooperative Learning, the above methods are very popular and meaningful in the teaching activities. From the introduction of each method, it can be found that most of them are very practical in English classes. Particularly, students can reach much progress in interactive competence including oral English expression ability, individual interdependence and

individual accountability, such as students help each other to solve difficult problems, to take responsibilities to finish their assigned tasks.

Strategies of Cooperative Learning

As the discussions above, the basic ideas about Cooperative Learning and its common methods have been introduced. But whether it can be applied effectively or not, it depends on the teacher's organizational strategies. The following part will introduce the Task Design, Ways of Group Division, The Roles of Students and Teachers.

Task design

Successful cooperative activities depend on how the teachers design tasks , it means that task design plays an essential role in applying Cooperative Learning. It is pointed out by Shavelson & Stern (1981) that the content of a subject, materials for learners, activities in the class and the teacher's teaching aim are the primary elements in teacher' task designing. So if the teacher can design some meaningful and challenging tasks, choose interesting materials for the different-level students, especially carry out variety activities according to the subjects and contents of the class, the teacher will be successful in the language teaching.

A teacher should always remember that the teaching goal is to inspire the students' interests and improve their learning efficiency. It has been recognized that the structure and theme of the task can inspire the learner's mental processing activity (Schellens & Valcke, 2005). If the students enjoy taking part in meaningful

communications on their tasks, the teacher can create optimal conditions for second language learners in a classroom, a cooperative work can also be successfully accomplished (Deng, 2010). Joyce, Weil and Calhoun (2000) state that cooperative strategies are playing a very important role in social and intellectual aspects of learning for students. So tasks designed to promote social interactions would also enhance learners' academic learning.

Groups division

Group work is primarily popular in Cooperative Learning. So, it is very important for a teacher to divide groups scientifically. Firstly, perhaps it is the easiest way that teachers can randomly arrange two or three students to form a group. Secondly, the teacher can set up heterogeneous groups because it can result in effective learning when students come from different places with colourful backgrounds. Thirdly, the teacher can make the students choose group members freely, then rearrange the groups according to several certain features, such as, age(elder or younger), gender(male or female), characteristics (extroverted or introverted), English level (higher or slower). Fourthly, the teacher allows students to choose their own group members or divide them according to their English levels, their similar learning styles or their personal interests. In this way, the groups will be more homogeneous because students can choose those members who are something similar to prefer to work with. The ideal size of one group is decided by tasks being performed (Johnson & Johnson, 1998), such as it is suitable for many oral- practice tasks involving conversations to make students work

in pairs, and for those tasks involving discussion and problem solving, group size of 5 or 6 can be used.

Any way of group division teachers use should be based on one principle: it will motivate students to participate in the process of learning, students can cooperate with each other conveniently, and they can reach the goals of improving the individual and group study.

The seat arrangement of students is also important in the group learning, usually, the two students working in pairs should share a same table; If there are four students working together, they can sit face to face to form group work; If there are five, six or more, it is better to use teamwork which is more suitable to carry out interview or task activities. Anyway, there are many methods for the seating arrangement; one teacher can make a better choice according to the certain purposes and situation in the class.

Teacher's roles

It is obvious that Cooperative Learning is very different from traditional teaching approach, so the teachers' roles should be changed. Effective language learning is based on a teacher's good designing and planning, the teacher can become a good designer and planner. Before the start of a class, one teacher has to prepare each unit and each material very carefully, it is known that knowledge are connecting each other logically, so the teacher should also plan teaching procedure carefully, make sure how to divide the whole class into suitable groups; What is kind of form of class activity will be carried out; Which contents should be emphasized; How spend specific time on each

part of class; Which tools and material will be taken into consideration and so on. Teachers should make a very good preparation in their teaching plan so that the class can be carried out effectively, and teachers are able to reach the teaching aim.

It is important that the teacher acts as a learning partner rather than a knowledge transmitter, when the students find that the teacher is not authentic, they will feel relax and like to work with each other and with the teacher, this is very helpful for developing students communicative ability. In order to make sure that the students try their best to do their tasks and find new ideas, the teacher should walk around from one group to another group in order to answer students' questions and try to help them if it is necessary. Scholars suggest that during the process of monitoring, it is better for teachers to speak less, but provide students much more questions to challenge their problem-solving ability for their assigned tasks (Richard & Rodgers, 2003; Peterson & Miller, 2004).

Learner's roles

Cooperative Learning class is mainly focus on students-centred activities, so the roles of students are very important, in order to create a positive Cooperative Learning environment, students have to take many responsibilities in the implementation of Cooperative Learning. Firstly, students should know the rules of group work when they are cooperating, it is impossible for a single student to finish a group work, so students should set up a good relationship with their group members, participate their group works actively, they should realize the duty to learn well is not for their teachers, but for

themselves and their group members, they have to help each other to understand their assigned materials in order to complete their group assignments. Secondly, Students should improve their listening skills and listening patience, students who are not good listening are easy to lose patience when they fail to communicate with other members, in such a situation, it is very difficult to gain a successful Cooperative Learning. Thirdly, students should discuss their specific problems and try to deal with difficulties by themselves, they should get consistent ideas and suggestions, then, decide how to present their group project or oral report in front of the class.

CHAPTER 3

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

From the above literature review and related discussions, it is not difficult to distil the advantages and disadvantage of Cooperative Learning in a college class.

The Advantages of the Cooperative Learning

Students' Learning Motivation and Positive Interest Can Be Increased. In the form of group works of Cooperative Learning, students have to work very hard and complete their common goal, that is, all the assignments that the teacher gives. In one group working, everyone is equal to catch chances to study, to discuss, and to report in front of all of the group members. Of course, if someone in a group cannot follow up, one need not to worry, other members are pleasure to offer help. How well the group's performance depends on degree of everyone' devotion, so each member is naturally motivated to devote into their Cooperative Learning, when there is no frustration in a group learning, they are very interested in their class.

The Communicative Ability of Students Can Be Improved. Cooperative Learning can stimulate students learning how to listen to other classmates carefully, how to communicate with other members in a respectful way, especially, when they discuss problems and answer questions. Each one has chances to speak and give a report in front of the class, and everybody can speak freely and bravely when they are discussing problems with their group members. Students are involved in such an active learning atmosphere; their communicative ability can be improved step by step.

A Relax Learning Environment Is Easier to Create. In the traditional classes, the teacher who occupies most of the class time is authentic, students stand up to answer questions only when the teacher calls up, the students are easier to feel very nervous to answer questions for lacking of enough experiences, or they are afraid of losing faces in front of the whole class, so some students dare not open mouth. On the contrary, in Cooperative Learning, students can gain a lot of time and chances to practice oral English freely in front of group members, the student who represents the group to answer questions or to do a report will be encouraged and appreciated by the group members, so the students find that the less anxiety in such a relax environment, the better they will learn.

Students' Creativity Can Be Enhanced. In a same group, everybody must share ideas with others, one group members can also have many chances to share ideas with other group members, while the cooperative relationship still exist great competition. Most students are easily inspired by other group members' opinions and expressions,

and they will try to find new and much better ideas to solve their problems in a creative way because they really want to perform better than other group members. So, the better Cooperative Learning carried out, the more creative students will become.

The Disadvantages of the Cooperative Learning

Students Are Not Easy to Manage. Cooperative Learning is more suitable for smaller class teaching, it is a good way to stimulate the students' learning interests through small group works. However, the current college Non-English major classes are too large, the numbers of students in some classes are more than 90, for a teacher, it is very difficult to divide groups in such a huge class. When Cooperative Learning is implementing in such cases, it is not easy to control the whole class, because students will talk loudly and walk around among the groups, the whole class will be very noisy that most students cannot hear what the teacher says, as well as the teacher cannot hear what the students are discussing clearly. Especially those teachers who lack of Cooperative Learning teaching experiences cannot control the whole class. So if teachers want to carry out Cooperative Learning in a very large class successfully, they have to rearrange their class, divide the whole class into suitable different small groups, and try to use cooperative strategies in their practical lectures creatively.

Consumes Much More Time. As is known, there are many benefits of the cooperative learning, but many teachers do not want to use cooperative activities because they find it cost too much time on lesson preparations; Furthermore, "teachers may experience a sense of having lost control of what students learn during their

interactions”(McCafferty, Jacobs & Iddings, 2006: p.179). Especially in a very large class, one teacher will have to spend much more time to design the class activities and tasks, but for the limited energy and time, it is impossible for a teacher to complete reading the students’ after-class assignments such as students’ journals and papers in time. So, it is very difficult for a teacher to survey the students’ learning efficiency if the Cooperative Learning is not carried out successfully.

Summary

After discussing so much about Cooperative Learning, it is not difficult to find out that if one teacher can fully utilize and take the advantages of the specific Cooperative Learning methods in a creative way, the Cooperative Learning will be successfully facilitated in the Chinese college English classes.

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