

APPLICATION OF COOPERATIVE LEARNING  
IN THE COLLEGE ENGLISH TEACHING  
IN CHINA

Approved by Ray Spoto

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## Abstract

### APPLICATION OF COOPERATIVE LEARNING IN THE COLLEGE ENGLISH TEACHING IN CHINA

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The question of how to improve language learning and teaching in an English classroom through education has always been a focus for teachers and learners. Teachers' expositive teaching and students' listening are the main forms of expression in the college English teaching. With the development of education in China, cooperative learning has not been embraced and used effectively, and is becoming a kind of formality. Some teachers are unable to deeply understand and grasp the theory and skill of cooperative learning. Additionally, most of the college English teachers are still using the traditional methods in the teaching process. As a result, using this kind of teaching method for a long time can lead to some problems, especially for students who have no chance to practice and communicate. Under the circumstances, it is the most important that English teachers should use cooperative learning methods proficiently and skillfully in an English classroom in China.

As far as we know, cooperative learning is a kind of effective strategy for teaching and learning English, which can promote positive attitudes for learning and developing, communicative and cooperative competence, achievement, and interpersonal relationship. As educators, knowing the definition and elements of cooperative learning is the first step. Secondly, we must strive for a deeper understanding of the advantages of cooperative learning. The last step is finding the

practical and effective methods of teaching and helping students to gain a lot from every class.

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## **CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION**

Cooperative learning has been advocated in some form since early in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. American educator, David Koonts, was an early advocate for the current forms of cooperative learning. Koonts viewed cooperative learning as a form of active learning, characterized by learners working together in small groups or teams to finish a common learning task or goal and providing a chance for students to work together (Huang, 2008). In a few words, cooperative learning is a structured and systematic method in which groups work together to a shared goal.

The elements of cooperative learning are proposed by world famous leaders from the University of Minnesota USA Johnson & Johnson. Johnson & Johnson (2004) who have visited China many times and considered that the basic elements of successful cooperative learning are positive interdependence, individual accountability, face-to-face interaction, interpersonal and small group skills and group processing.

During the past years, many researchers have done the research about the advantages of cooperative learning. For example, Chinese scholar Huang (2008) argues that cooperative learning has many favorable advantages including aiding the communication of emotions and the information between teachers and students. At the same time, it also can encourage students to observe and think over questions. So teachers and students in classroom can both benefit from cooperative learning.

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Actually, the teaching method of cooperative learning is not used widely in the college English classroom. It is well known that English teachers in Chinese college classrooms are still using traditional teaching methods and they are likely to teach students the rules of learning English, but do not cultivate a student's learning abilities consciously. Thus, cooperative learning, which is an effective and practical way to teach, is the better choice for English teachers in China.

### **Statement of the Problem**

The question is how to improve language learning and teaching in Chinese college English classroom through a cooperative learning methodology.

### **Definition of Terms**

*Cooperative Learning:* Cooperative learning is defined by a set of processes which help people interact together in order to accomplish a specific goal or to develop an end product which is usually content specific (Panitz, 1996).

*Positive interdependence:* Linking students together so one cannot succeed unless all group members succeed (Johnson & Johnson, 2004).

*Individual accountability:* The measurement of whether or not each group member has achieved the groups' goal (Johnson & Johnson, 2004).

*ESL:* Abbreviation for the term English as a second language.

*CL:* Abbreviation for the term cooperative learning.

### **Delimitations of Research**

This research will be conducted in and through the Karrmann Library at the University of Wisconsin-Platteville, over a period of eighty (80) days. Primary

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searches will be conducted via the Internet through CNKI and EBSCO host with ERIC, Academic Search Elite and Google/Google Scholar as the primary sources. Key search topics included “cooperative learning”, “cooperative learning element”, “cooperative teaching” and “ESL”.

### **Method of Approach**

A brief review of literature on the definition and elements of cooperative learning will be conducted. Also included is a second review of literature relating to the advantages of cooperative learning. Finally, a third review of literature which deals with the methods of doing cooperative Learning in the college English Classroom. The implications will be summarized and recommendations made.



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## CHAPTER 2

### REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

#### **Definition of cooperative learning**

Cooperative learning, which is the first advocated by American educator David Koonts, came from America at the beginning of the 20th century and this idea was developed into teaching classroom in the 1980s. In an online article Dyer (2009), the definition of cooperative learning points out that “Cooperative learning consists of instructional techniques that require positive interdependence between learners in order for learning to occur.” In brief, cooperative learning is working together to finish a shared goal by learners and refers to the instructional use of small group to maximize their own learning.

In addition, there are many researchers who share their ideas about cooperative learning. According to Huang (2008), cooperative learning is a kind of active learning and is also a form of active learning. Moreover, it can let learners work together in small groups or teams to finish a common learning task or goal and provide a chance for students to work together. Meng (2005) also proposed “cooperative learning acts as a fraction of cooperative, which is a group learning process, built on the belief that students may learn well when they learn in a property structured group (p.80). In their article, Felder and Brent said “cooperative learning is an approach to group work that minimizes the occurrence of those unpleasant situations and maximizes the learning and satisfaction that result from working on a high-performance team (p.1).

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Huang (2007) holds that cooperative learning is a form of active learning where students work together to perform specific tasks in a small group. Mi (2009) argues that “cooperative learning is a term for various small group interactive instructional procedures. Students, who work together on academic tasks in small groups, are able to help themselves and their teammates learn together” (p.95). Zhou (2007) thinks that “Cooperative learning, a particular kind of active learning, is a formal instructional approach in which students work together in a small teams to accomplish a common goal” (p.121). At the same time, Panitz (1996) argues that the definition of Cooperative learning is “defined by 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. Moreover, Panitz states that “Cooperative Learning is an instructional strategy that employs a variety of motivational techniques to make instruction more relevant and students more responsible. This chapter outlines the benefits of CL in terms of its motivational impact.”

The above definitions by different researchers and educators reflect the common ideas of cooperative learning, that is, cooperative leaning is a structured and systematic method in which groups work together to achieve a shared goal.

### **Essential Factors for Successful Cooperative learning**

There are five basic elements of cooperative learning proposed by Johnson & Johnson (2004). Johnson & Johnson (2004) considers that positive interdependence, individual accountability, face-to-face interaction, interpersonal and small group

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skills, and group processing are the basic elements of successful cooperative learning. These five elements are also the essential factors for successful cooperative learning. Positive interdependence is the perception that every member in a group is closely connected together in order to achieve their goals. It is the most important that group members must realize they need each other in order to achieve success. Mi (2009) holds that students should realize that they are not only responsible for their learning, but also for their group mates. Dahley (1994) states that each group member needs to achieve a shared goal or task. Each member needs the help of group members. The desired goal is not able to reach without their help. Actually, in the learning process, everyone should try their best to make a contribution to their group work. As the name implies, positive interdependence is to create dependence, because group work can not be successful without anyone's efforts. They help and communicate with each other all the time in order to achieve the common goal on a time. In Wang's article "positive interdependence-pair/group members depend on one another for mutual progress and development. This is the most important feature of cooperative learning and also what encourage group members to care about and support one another in the learning process (p.2). With respect to positive interdependence, Stahl and Robert (1994) gives a clear explanation that "Teachers must structure learning tasks so that students come to believe that they sink or swim together. That is, their access to rewards is as a member of an academic team wherein all members receive a reward or no member does. Essentially, tasks are structured so that students must depend upon one another for their personal, teammates, and that group with regard to completing

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the assigned tasks and mastering the targeted content and skills.” In other words, whether the group’s work will be successful or not depend upon every member’s exertion. At the same time, teachers can use many ways to strengthen positive interdependence, such as joint rewards, divided resource, designated roles, jigsaw, and so on.

Individual accountability refers to every member having to do their own task and each individual is accountable for the success of other group members. Dahley (1994) thinks that each member of a group has the ability to do his or her work. Individual accountability helps them avoid members from "hitchhiking" on other group members' accomplishments. Mi (2009) argues that individual accountability demands every member of every group to undertake the different tasks in the learning process. Individual accountability means each member should be accountable for doing his or her group tasks. Stahl and Robert (1994) states the reasons why students can achieve higher academic success in cooperative learning groups individually rather than if they were to study alone. As a result, he holds that “each must be held individually responsible and accountable for doing his or her own share of the work and for learning what has been targeted to be learned. Therefore, each student must be formally and individually tested to determine the extent to which he or she has mastered and retained the targeted academic content and abilities.” Wang states “this principle mainly emphasizes that in each group each member should not only receive help from others but also help others. It can be encouraged either by each member

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taking an individual quiz or by the teacher randomly selecting a group member to report and explain what their group did or thought (p.3).

In the learning process, teachers create more chances for students to promote each learner's learning by supporting, helping, encouraging and praising. With regard to face-to-face interaction, Mi (2009) emphasizes that the learning process needs understanding and cooperation among group members. This element means that every group member needs to help and encourage each other. Felder and Brent's perspective on this point is " although some of the group work may be parceled out and done individually, some must be done interactively, with group members providing one another with feedback, challenge reasoning and conclusions, and perhaps most importantly, teaching and encouraging one another"(p.2). In short, just like Dahley (1994) states, "Promote success of group members by praising, encouraging, supporting, or assisting each other."

The meaning of interpersonal and small group skills is to communicate each other and to enjoy the trust of every member. Students should practice the skills of negotiating, expressing and resolving. Concerning interpersonal and small group skills, Dahley (1994) said that cooperative learning can provide students the chance to learn social skills. These skills can let students help to build stronger cooperation among group members. Leadership, decision-making, trust-building, and communication are different skills that are developed in cooperative learning. If a cooperative group wants to be successful, each member will not only need language

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knowledge, but also social skills, such as leadership, teamwork spirit, trust-building, communication and so on.

With respect to group processing, Dahley (1994) argues “Group processing is an assessment of how groups are functioning to achieve their goals or tasks. According to Mi (2009), she thinks group processing is a key part in learning and it can provide a favorable feedback for group learning. After the activity, students should spend sometime talking about how he or she performed in the group. Actually, group processing is used for teachers and students to know how well every group is working. From the group processing, learners can share their own idea, learn from others and so on. So group processing is very important for students to conduct cooperative learning.

### **Research Support for Cooperative Learning and the Teaching of English as a Second Language**

During the past years, many researchers have done the research about the advantages of the cooperative learning. Firstly, Huang (2008) argues that cooperative learning can reflect the position of students firstly. Doing group work can help the communication of emotion and information between teachers and students. In addition, it can encourage students to observe and think over questions. At the same time, it can promote students’ English learning motivation and improve their attitude to learning English. Secondly, cooperative learning is able to help students to improve their learning efficiency. In the learning process of group work, each member must participate in the learning activity with the enthusiasm and different tasks. In this way,

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the problems can be solved easily. Thirdly, cooperative learning can cultivate students' organizational capabilities. Group members should distribute assignments according to the circumstances in the group work. So, the students can improve their organizational abilities in the learning process. Fourthly, cooperative learning can enhance students' sense of responsibility and the concept of collectivism. Everyone should communicate with each other and help each other in the learning process. Thus, they can learn how to care and help others and take advices from others.

In their article, Attle and Baker (2007) states "it is imperative that professional preparation programs afford students opportunities to maximize their professional development. There are many benefits to engaging students in a cooperative learning group activity organized within a competitive setting. The most significant benefits are to the students whose outcomes often exceed content-driven and application-based objectives" (p.82).

It can be inferred from Wang's article that "cooperative learning can increase language practice opportunities, improve the verbal facilities of students, promote students' intrinsic motivation, promote a positive affective climate, lower anxiety and prejudice, heighten self-esteem, and create caring and altruistic relationships among students (p.5).

Zhang and Sun (2000) acknowledges that traditional teaching has many deficiencies. So doing cooperative learning is very useful and preponderant in the English classroom. At the same time, Panitz said "Cooperative Learning (CL) is an instructional strategy that employs a variety of motivational techniques to make

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instruction more relevant and students more responsible. CL provides many advantages to teachers and learners. Many of these advantages arise from the intrinsic motivational strengths of CL and the extent to which CL fosters student interest, behavioral and attitudinal change, and opportunities for success.” Zhang (2009) said cooperation can enhance the vitality of teaching and cultivate students’ cooperative spirits. It is the most important that cooperative learning is able to motivate students’ interests to learn English.

Many researchers provide supportive data that cooperative learning has many favorable aspects. It can help students develop leadership skills and promote the communicative and cooperative abilities. All of us should make full use of the advantages that will help student make great progress.

### **Methods of Doing Cooperative Learning in the Classroom**

It is well known that English teaching in China is still using the traditional teaching methods, so using cooperative learning methods is advisable to improve the quality of teaching for English teachers in China. Zhang (2009) holds that cooperative learning is not only a teaching method, but also a learning method. It demands teachers should control the teaching process and pays more attention to interactive and communicative competence among students. Meng (2005) said that “when we discuss the appliance of cooperative learning in china, two professional words should be raised: individualism & collectivism and Chinese culture” (pp.80-81). These two elements have also influenced the development of teaching. Actually, teachers are likely to put emphasis on the grammatical rules and language forms but not to pay



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much more attention to language abilities and communicative competence. As a result, students can not use the languages in the real communicative situations. For example, teachers often use the common methods to practice in the oral class. Teachers ask students questions, and then students answer them. In fact, students have no chance to practice their oral English and understand language. Actually, traditional teaching methods in china have some deficiencies. These deficiencies also lead to some problems in the English teaching process. In order to solve these problems and make up for these deficiencies, we should try our best to change current situation. Cooperative leaning is an effective and practical way to teach students in China.

If cooperative learning is to be successful, it needs teachers and students to make efforts together. Cooperative learning is a creative, systematic and comprehensive teaching approach. So teachers are playing a key role in the teaching process. Zhou (2007), states how English teachers are able to use the cooperative leaning method in the teaching process. Firstly, let students do some preview work. Teachers should give students some assignment for discussion. These learning tasks can be discussed by group members before the class. For example, this unit, we will learn “food and drink”. Teachers should allocate the task to students: students of every group should know the new words of this lesson; everyone should collect the advertisement concerned with food and drink. Secondly, it is important to cultivate the students’ habits of cooperative learning and autonomic learning. Teachers can avoid using the traditional questions and answers; they should put questions to students flexibly and allow students to cooperatively discuss. Thirdly, it is necessary to know the proper

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usage of cooperative learning in the teaching classroom. Teachers can adopt different methods to teach, such as reading by different roles; performing by different roles and so on. Furthermore, there should be more focus on learning, reading and remembering words by cooperative learning among group learners. Last but not least is the implementation of cooperative learning in writing subjects.

Some researchers propose suggestions of how to implement cooperative learning in the classroom. Mi (2009) states that five steps are necessary for effective cooperative learning, which include creating good learning circumstances, setting learning situation, and organizing cooperative learning and doing group evaluation. Huang (2007) argues that the content of cooperative learning includes cooperative learning words, cooperatively practicing oral English, and cooperatively performing the roles and playing games. Teachers should use these methods in the teaching process. Chen (2004), states that the English teacher is the students' spirit for cooperative learning activities. Teachers should try their best to do the coordinate work, guiding work and supervisory work. At the same time, doing the effective activities can arouse learners' interests, such as group conversation, situational dialogues, competition and so on. Felder and Brent give English teachers some concrete methods of doing cooperative learning. For example, Jigsaw, problem set, laboratories and projects, peer-led team learning and so on. These methods are very necessary and useful for English teaching.

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The strategies for improving cooperative learning include the following aspects; setting up a positive group dynamic in class, offer students task interaction, encourage students to do self-assessment and so on. Lu (2009) thinks that the strategies for cooperative learning available in the teaching process are numerous. At first, let students build group and do shared work by every member. For example, we can divide our class into several groups to discuss a theme of the text books' article, and then every member should make personal remarks in their group. Secondly, create the problem situation and cultivate students' active learning ability. Teachers should give some difficult questions to students and get them to answer and discuss them. It is the most important that students can understand the article and key points better and easily. Thirdly, teachers are able to enhance students' cooperative skills and the quality of the cooperative learning. Fourthly, set up evaluation system and promote common progress. Evaluation and encouragement plays an important role in the teaching process. So, students can be inspired, broaden their interest in English and gain a lot from their class.

Actually, there are so many methods by which we can use cooperative learning in the classroom, such as student teams and achievement divisions, discussion group, jigsaw, group investigation and so on. Teachers should select the best choice to use in the classroom.

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## CHAPTER 3

### CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

To put simply, cooperative learning means working together to accomplish shared goals, which can offer students incentive and a positive affect towards learning a language. From the information available, it is important to recognize that cooperative learning is obviously superior to the traditional methods in China.

In recently years, with the development of china, education in the English teaching field has also been gradually reformed. Cooperative learning as a new teaching method has been used in the English teaching classroom in China gradually.

Actually, cooperative learning has many favorable aspects, for example, developing students' communication skills and interaction skills, encouraging students' responsibility for learning and for each other, increasing motivation for learning and so on. It is widely acknowledged that the English teacher plays an important role in the cooperative learning process. So, as English teachers, using cooperative learning methods is an effective way to teach students in the classroom. Teachers should try their best to use various methods to implement cooperative learning in their teaching, especially, in china. Students can learn and gain a lot from teaching in the classroom.

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