

COOPERATIVE LEARNING IN COLLEGE ENGLISH TEACHING IN CHINA

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Abstract

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Under the Supervision of Dr. David Gillota

Cooperative learning is a teaching method, which includes the use of small groups so that students can improve teammates' ability with working together. The method attracts researchers and teachers' attention because of its efficiency of learning. In this paper, the foundation will be covered as well as several issues of Cooperative Learning. Four techniques of Cooperative Learning will be discussed in detail. Lastly, English is a compulsory class in China throughout the whole education system, application can also be applied in China. Although Cooperative Learning is of great efficiency, there are some limitations when using it in class. If teachers do not use this teaching method properly, some students' motivation of taking part in class will weaken. Students may develop group hate, and loafing will start to appear with the improper use of the Cooperative Learning method. In order to prevent these things from happening, teachers should pay attention to the frequency of Cooperative Learning, good assessment of team work, fairness, etc.

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Chapter I Introduction

Since reform and opening-up, English education has gained great importance in China. Cooperative learning, which emerges as a great teaching method, has attracted worldwide attention in the field of education. Cooperative learning is the instructional use of small groups so that students work together to maximize their own and each other's learning (Johnson, Johnson, & Holubec, 1998). Instead of receiving knowledge from a teacher passively, Cooperative learning allows every student to participate in the learning process together. Every student wins when the group achieves goals.

To meet the needs of society, Cooperative learning not only improves students' learning efficiency in class, but also develops their knowledge and social skills that can be used outside of class. According to Sharan (2010), "there is much more to cooperative learning than merely arrange students into group." Students must work together to solve the same tasks. Different from individual work, which may be competitive, students can take advantage of others' idea and skills, which includes asking other students for information, assess others' ideas, instruct one others' work, etc. Ross and Smyth (1995) describe successful cooperative learning tasks as intellectually demanding, creative, open-ended, and involve higher order thinking tasks.②

Statement of the Problem

As an English teacher in China, I like doing Cooperative learning in my own classroom. But sometime, I observed a problem that some of my college students are unwilling to participate in CL activities in my class. Some students with high English level tend to finish tasks alone, while some students, for some reason, just do nothing and wait for answers. Due to the result from

students' low level of participation, such kind of "cooperative learning" cannot make students effective in learning. Therefore, the paper focus on the following questions:

1. What is the foundation of CL?
2. Are there any cooperative learning techniques?
3. What are the potential causes and solutions of low level of participation when CL is used as a teaching method in class?
4. Can CL be applied efficiently in China?

Definition of Terms

Cooperative Learning: or CL, is the instructional use of small groups so that students work together to maximize their own and each other's learning (Johnson, Johnson, & Holubec, 1998).

Group hate: a feeling of dread that arises when facing the possibility of having to work in a group (Sorensen, 1981).

Loafing: students who don't take responsibility for their own role, even if it is the smallest role in the group (Megon, 2012).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to explore a better teaching method so as to inspire students' interests and improve CL efficiency. Knowing the reasons behind their low-level participation is the key to make a change in CL. The traditional and improper teaching model in CL have the possibility of decreasing the time utilization. And sometimes, it can even tend to form a vicious

circle between teachers and students. Students sometimes feel resisted and tired when they are group work, meanwhile teachers feel exhausted and upset in the class without the achievement of teaching target. We have to admit the fact that CL is of great importance in teaching, but the key is how to use this method efficiently. Therefore, studying the potential reason behind students' motivation and finding out the answer to it is very important. After finding out what is the real reason behind low level of participation, some characteristics of interesting CL activities can be used in CL activity design in order to improve class efficiency.

Significance of the Study

The significance of the study is to search a new teaching method to take the place of the traditional one. The traditional teaching method in China is for teachers to speak and students to listen to them. That is to say, passive learning leads the traditional way of learning. As we know, it is bad for the CL atmosphere and efficiency. In such kind of conditions, students' inspiration and creation will be covered heavily, and naturally, their score can hardly be improved without motivation of learning. Finding an effective teaching method, can rebuild both teachers and students confidence. Cooperative learning can provide an active way of learning, which can improve the efficiency of learning. However, some problem are detected with the use of CL. Because of improper way of using this teaching technique, students are reluctant to participate in the group work, so the teaching target can hardly be achieved. In this situation, to uncover the real reason behind students' low level of participation can bring us some idea and guideline when teachers prepare their class using CL. And of course, with high level of participation and full of interest, students can achieve their academic mission more easily. And at the same time, the teaching target and teaching purpose can be more easily achieved for the teacher.

Methodology

I choose to write a library research seminar paper. Here is my library research plan:

- Use some academic searching engine such as Google, Baidu and Wikipedia to know the basic information of CL, and then identify the key words or topics for later search.
- Borrow the relevant books or find the relevant literature in the nearby library.
- Use e-library in UW-Platteville, CNKI and so on to search papers, articles and books that are relevant with CL.
- When finding relevant papers for my own research, main focus is on the abstract of each paper. If the abstract is highly related with CL and the question I am focusing on, read the text under the subtitle that is most relevant.
- Look at references closely. If the majority of the references are not recently published, they may have little value to the research.
- Pay attention to the introduction, the research ideas and research procedures. They can help understanding of the paper.
- Scan the paper or book until I find text that is highly relevant to my topic, I will read them carefully.
- Take notes when reading relevant books or papers.
- After reading a piece of literature, summarize the main idea and think about the inspiration it provides to put me further on the research.

Chapter II Review of Literature

Introduction

Different from the traditional Chinese way of teaching, Cooperative Learning enables students to work each other towards the same academic mission, in which students tend to be more active and motivated. Cooperative Learning theory are found before World War II, and is studied by so many scholars and researchers. Knowing the foundation of CL can help us to understand more of this efficient teaching method. Likewise, studying typical CL techniques can help teachers to master this teaching method and even change the original techniques and make them better to use in classroom.

Though CL can promote students' learning motivation and efficiency, there are some issues and limitations. When teachers use CL in the classroom, some time we can find that students are reluctant to join the group work, which indicates the low level of willingness to participate in class activity. The issues and limitations of CL can be the potential cause of it. After finding the potential causes, we can work out some solution for it to better out class efficiency and improve the motivation of students.

In China, English as a second language class is compulsory throughout the whole education system, ranging from primary school to university. Because English teaching is exam-oriented or grade-oriented, the typical traditional way of teaching is passive learning: teachers illustrate the knowledge of courses, and students learn from it without much autonomic learning. Using CL, teaching efficiency can be improved. In fact, CL has been used in tertiary education in China. Using CL properly in English class in compulsory education, from primary school to high middle

school, is also very promising. This literature review describes CL by responding to the following questions:

1. What is the foundation of CL?
2. Are there any cooperative learning techniques?
3. What are the potential causes and solutions of low level of participation when CL is used as a teaching method in class?
4. Can CL be applied efficiently in China?

Understanding these question can help teachers to understand CL and using CL in the classroom properly. Some problems can be avoided in the classroom, such as the low level of participation or group hate. And the relationship between teachers and students can be very good.

Foundation of Cooperative Learning

Before World War II, social theorists began to establish cooperative learning theory. They found that group work was more effective and efficient compared to working alone. However, it was in 1937 when researchers May and Doob found that people who cooperate with others to achieve mutual goals were more successful than those who achieve the same goals independently. Besides, they found that display competitive behaviors are more likely to be found in independent achievers.

When it comes to cooperative learning, there are three people whose contribution can't not be ignored, namely Dewey, Lewin, and Deutsch. The first one is John Dewey who is renowned for "progressive education" in 1930s and 40s. Dewey looked for teaching methods determining to

make students active and avoid to teach dead knowledge. He believe that students should fully integrate the skills and knowledge that they learn in school into their lives. His idea led to the development of cooperative learning. These procedure can be applied to all kinds of subjects in cooperative learning. It is an efficient way to learn new knowledge and this method can help students to be prepared for future career.

Kurt Lewin laid the foundation of group dynamics movements and organizational psychology, which is useful for cooperative learning. Like Dewey, Lewin also attached great importance to active learning rather than passive textbooks-teaching. The correlation between the theories and its application of Dewey and Lewin was uncovered by Herbert Thelen. He worked out a systematic inquiry strategy for student to learn together in team which combined the view of learning as the conduct of inquiry by cooperative small groups with the principles of effective group management, so that groups would successfully solve problems and make decisions based on all teammates' contributions and idea (Thelen, 1981).

The third one is Morton Deutsch who studied cooperation and conflict. He believed that cooperation can help to establish a trust between people and maintain a stable relationship among individual and groups. He found that positive social interdependence which promotes a situation in which each student in the group is responsible for contributing to the learning of all members, and is in turn enriched by others (Deutsch, 2001).

Classroom Cooperative Learning Techniques

With the development and application of CL, there are hundreds of classroom cooperative learning techniques put forward. In fact, Dr. Spencer Kagan (1994) lists over a hundred different

cooperative learning techniques in his list of structure. Furthermore, there are even more approaches that can be used in class. In this paper, we will discuss several techniques which are easy to implement and popular: Teams-Games-Tournament (DeVries&Slavin,1978); Student Teams-Achievement Divisions (Slavin, 1978); Jigsaw (Aronson, 1978); Think-pair-share (Frank T. Lyman, 1981) and Small-Group Teaching (Sharan & Sharan, 1976). These techniques have been well-researched.

Teams-Games-Tournament. The technique of Team-Games-Tournament (TGT) has two main parts: student teams of 4-5 members, and instructional tournaments. At the first stage, students are divided into groups which are usually composed by 4 to 5 individuals. The determination of group is to make the group ability to reach its peak, regarding group member's advantages, gender, and race. After the formation of each group, groups will be given academic material which is involved in later tournament. Every group member should not only prepare the material themselves but also help other member in the same group to be prepared. Students should study together and quiz each other in order to ensure that every member is fully prepared.

At the second stage, students are tested in groups and the grade are given on the basis of group every week. For the tournament, students are assigned to three person "tournament tables". The students who compete on the same table will be tested to ensure that they are in the same level-the highest three students in past performance are assigned to Table 1, the next three to Table 2, and so on.(Slavin, 1978) Therefore, the tournament is comparatively fair. At the tables, there are games based on academic material that has been already studied before. Because students on each tables are on the same level so that they all have equal chance to make contribution for groups that is getting scores. Groups are remain the same, while the games can be changed based on the

performance of students.

Student Teams-Achievement Divisions or STAD. STAD has the same 4-to-5-member group as Teams-Games-Tournament, but its tournaments are replaced with easier, 15-minute quizzes after students' preparation. The thing that make this technique unique is the score system, called "achievement division". In achievement division, the quizzes score is changed into group score. The quiz scores of the highest six students are compared, and the student with highest point in this group (the achievement division) earns eight points for his or her team. The second scorer earns six points, and so forth. After that, the quiz point of the next highest six students are compared, and so on. In this way, student scores are compared only with those of an ability-homogeneous reference group instead of the entire class (Slavin R. E., 2015). This kind of technique concentrates on the equality of each students' opportunity to make contributions for their teams. By the way, every student only knows their own assignment but does not share it with other members even in the same team, which is also the method to ensure equality. A complete description of STAD appears in Slavin (1978).

Jigsaw. In jigsaw, which is introduced by Aronson in 1978, students are assigned in groups. Academic material are separated into different sections before they are assigned to students. The students who have the same section come together to discuss the material, and then, they come back to their own group and teach the section to their teammates. Finally, every members are tested the whole materials. The key to get high score is discussion and teaching the divided section to others, thus the essential dynamic of cooperative learning are presented.

Small-Group Teaching. Small-Group Teaching is a popular classroom technique. In Small-Group Teaching, students study through group inquiry, data gathering, and discussion. After

general areas are chosen by the teacher, students can select subtopics and form small groups of 2 to 6 members. These groups further subdivide their topics. After that, students can do individual tasks and prepare for a group presentation to the total class. This group presentation is then evaluated by the other groups and teachers.

Apart from the four well-known learning techniques above, there are many other teaching techniques that we can learn from. These techniques can invoke interdependence among individuals and improve the efficiency of learning. Besides, it allows students to search for the content needed in groups themselves rather than their teacher has prepared the content for students. While cooperative strategies may vary in structure, form, and effect, a common thread of enhancing the social development of the individual student runs through them all (James, 2011).

Issues and Limitations in CL

There are some issues in cooperative learning. The first is whether cooperative learning can really produce ideal social interactions. Some studies have indicated that group contingencies can lead to undesirable social interactions (Axelrod, 1973). However, it has not been quantitatively researched. The second issue is whether it is appropriate to use group contingencies to increase academic achievement. It is one matter to use group contingencies to deal with classroom disruptions (Sulzbacher & Houser, 1968). In this situation, the aim is that students can be motivated but sometimes skills of students are ignored. It is another problem to apply group contingencies to academic behaviors, especially when students have the lack of the skills to perform the necessary behaviors. In such cases, a teaching step or illustration step should be added to it, and it is necessary to achieve educational goals. If cooperative learning has some negative influence on group cohesiveness, it is likely that the one student's failure to meet their individual goals would have

bad effect on social interaction.

Besides, there are some limitations in CL. Sharan (2010) describes the constant evolution of cooperative learning as a threat. Teachers tend to use the same teaching method while CL is constantly changing. Therefore, if teachers do not have a very good understanding of CL and do not change their teaching techniques with the time, teaching targets are hard to achieve. CL includes small groups and communication within groups, so it cost more time when teachers use CL.

And when we use CL, some students with high English level tend to finish tasks alone, while some students, for some reason, just do nothing and wait for answers. This may be caused by group hate. Group hate is defined as "a feeling of dread that arises when facing the possibility of having to work in a group" (Sorensen, 1981). And some factors of group hate include a past bad experience of CL, teachers' overuse of CL, and willingness to work alone.

The low level of participation in CL sometimes happens, and it is like loafing. Megon describes loafing as "students who don't take responsibility for their own role, even if it is the smallest role in the group" (2012). Teacher should have a good assessment for the performance of students to avoid this.

Teachers often ask students to assess other groups' performance. According to Sampson (2001), "Assessment can be the Achilles heel of cooperative learning." Students may give high points to other groups and think others would do the same. So this kind of assessment is always inaccurate.

The Application of CL in China

In China, English as a second language class is compulsory throughout the whole education system, ranging from primary school to university. While the Chinese attach great importance to English learning, the English class is exam-oriented. Most students spend large amounts of time on English not for acquisition of a second language but for getting high scores on various exams, especially in College Entrance Exam, which is well-known as “Gao Kao”. Owing to the exam is in written form, students pay so much effort in English Reading and English Grammar while most of them ignore the vital importance of oral English, which is necessary in daily communication. Consequently, after passing College Entrance Exam, they step into University and have more opportunities to have conversation with native English speaker face-to-face. However, most of them only find that they lack the ability to communicate with foreigners orally. English is usually taught in large classes, and widely used English teaching methods are characterized by teacher-fronted direct lecturing, which mainly involves text explanation, vocabulary illustration, grammar instruction, and intensive drills on language forms (Jin and Cortazzi, 2004). In the method, teacher illustrate and teach knowledge and students passively receive it. In 2007, the Ministry of Education announced that the objective of tertiary education is “to develop students’ ability to use English in a well-rounded way, especially in listening and speaking” (Ministry of Education, 2007). In this sense, cooperative learning can be applied perfectly in university English education and as a matter of fact, it has been used in tertiary education already. The application and outcome of CL in tertiary English teaching was assessed by Huiping Ning and Garry Hornby. According to their research, The major finding on the LLOS is that the intervention group, which was taught using the CL approach, improved on intrinsic motivation more than the comparison group instructed by traditional methods, although the difference was only marginally statistically significant (Huiping, N. & Hornby, G, 2013).

To meet the needs of 21-century, students must learn to cooperate with others, and CL enables them to acquire this particular ability. CL is very excellent and useful techniques among thousands of others, while teacher can't overuse it either.

Summary

To sum up, there are some problems in traditional English teaching in China. Traditional English classes are exam-oriented, and most of class focus on teachers instead of students. The efficiency of passive learning in this kind of teaching is low. How to deal with the problems is an urgent task. CL provides teachers a great teaching method. There are several typical teaching techniques that teachers can learn from and look into. While CL is efficient, it has some issues and limitations. We teacher should constantly develop teaching techniques and focus on every student need, in order to have a better teaching outcome. In China, CL have been used in tertiary English teaching. The application of CL in China classroom is very promising.

Chapter III Conclusions and Recommendations

Cooperative Learning is very efficient. By using CL, teachers divided students into different groups, so students can work with each other to achieve the same goal. Students share ideas with teammates, communicate with teammates, and support teammates for mutual targets. It is very different from the traditional way of teaching in English class of China. It is very promising. However, sometimes we can find that some students are not willing to participate into group work.

Based on the above analysis, we can conclude the potential causes of this phenomenon. The causes are from both teachers and students.

In teachers' point of view, they design logical teaching steps and assign group task from students. But the problem is teachers do not get involved in the any group activity. So when teacher design some teaching techniques, they should put themselves into students' shoes. Besides, some teachers tend to use the same techniques that they used before, while CL is constantly changing. The group with same teammates for a long period of time would also decrease students' willingness to participate into group works. So teachers should constantly change and develop their teaching techniques. Another important factor is assessment. A fair assessment is the key to the success of CL. Last but not least, overuse of CL should be avoided.

As for students, the difficulty of group work should be appropriate. Some students is outgoing while some others are introvert. Therefore, teacher should pay attention to every students' need and design teaching techniques suitable for most students. When group assessment are needed, teacher should guide students or assessment between students would not be accurate.

In English class in China, CL is very promising and will achieve more development in the future.

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