

Engaging Elementary School Students in English Language Learning Classes

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Abstract

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This study examines the evidence of engaging elementary school students to learn English effectively through the strategies of cooperative learning in class and active learning after class. These two strategies can help to motivate students learning English by sparking their interest, especially for the lower grade elementary students.

Key words: cooperative learning, active learning, motivation, elementary students

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
APPROVAL PAGE	i
TITLE PAGE	ii
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	iii
ABSTRACT	iv
TABLE OF CONTENTS	v
CHAPTER	
I. INTRODUCTION	1
Statement of the Problem	
Definition of Terms	
Purpose of the Study	
Significance of the Study	
Methodology	
II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE	6
Motivation of young children	
Cooperative learning strategies in English class	
Active learning of English language after class	
Summary	
III. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS	15
REFERENCES	17

## Chapter I Introduction

There is a phenomenon in Chinese primary school English classes described in research by Xin yu Zhao (2016); pupils do not pay enough attention to the English learning. Teachers in primary school are using teaching methods that are boring, which makes students lack interest with English learning. In China, this phenomenon is very common, especially for the very beginning English learners. Their nature is active. Teachers should use effective teaching methods to motivate students learning interest. However, some teachers' prefer traditional exam oriented education methods. In these teachers and some parents' mind, their evaluation and standard is the school exam record, accepting that the record will judge whether the students are good or bad. It seriously hinders the formation of pupils' English ability and reduces students' interest in learning English.

According to this phenomenon, the topic which in an research article, "Education must be fun" (Li, 2015) has appeared. Actually, it should avoid the word "fun" for education, but here the fun means using effective strategies and methods to encourage the English as a foreign language (EFL) low beginners to learn English with high interest. The New English Curriculum Standard (2012) recommends considering the physical and psychological characteristics of the pupils and designing English instruction to stimulate students' interest. It is also important that teachers help students in to develop a positive attitude towards their English learning. The goal is to build up students' initial confidence about their language learning and to promote good pronunciation and intonation and enable them to develop the ability to communicate in English in daily life and lay the foundation for further study. This paper will address how to engage primary school students to learn English well in English language class by using some effective strategies.

Nowadays, English is becoming universal in this world. As a country with a peaceful development, China grew up as an international country. Learning and using English plays an important role in our education. We are learning from foreign advanced science and technology and enhancing the mutual understanding between China and the world. English courses are valued in China because “today is an era of globalization, the increasingly frequent international exchanges, English as a universal language, more and more attention, English has become an important tool of international communication.”(Zeng, W., & Xiong, S. 2016).

With the government decision to introduce English in primary school in China and with the issuing of the Basic Requirement for Primary School English, English teaching in the primary school will move gradually from the current ‘chaotic’ situation towards standardization in terms of its teaching objectives, the beginning age, and time allocations (Wang, 2002). Setting up English courses in compulsory education is significant to the future development of teenagers. Research suggests that students who receive second language instruction are more creative and better at solving complex problems than those who do not (Bamford & Mizokawa, 1991).

English education is highly valued in China. However, the traditional English teaching methods used are not motivating children. In a Chinese study by Xia Bu (2011), the disadvantages of traditional English teaching were revealed. First, traditional English teaching neglects the expressive function of language. As we all know, language has two systems of expression: form and function. Traditional English teaching generally follows the teaching procedure of “new words-text-grammar-practice”. This procedure can help students lay a solid language foundation, but our students memorize many rules and words and do not know how to use them. Students who have studied English for several years are often not able to engage in

simple conversations. Secondly, traditional English teaching neglects the main role of students. For a long time, English teaching has followed the principle of "teacher-oriented" in China. Due to the teachers' careful preparation of lessons and the rich and organized contents of the lectures as the measure of teaching quality, the teachers take up most of the time in the classroom, and the students have few practical opportunities, which makes the students passive receivers of language knowledge. Third, traditional English teaching ignores the differences between Chinese and Western cultures. Language is the carrier of culture and it is full of cultural connotations. The process of learning a language is also the process of learning its culture. As a prerequisite for the appropriate use of a foreign language, a learner's knowledge and understanding of the related foreign culture directly affects his command of the language learned. Therefore, learning a language and learning its culture are closely connected (Zhao, 2007). Last but not the least, one of the basic goals of the traditional English teaching model is examination-oriented education. The focus of the English class in primary school is on students' tests scores, rather than on supporting students to use the language in their real life.

English education for young children should be interesting and engaging for them. This paper aims to recommend strategies to encourage primary school learners to learn English effectively.

### **Statement of the Problem**

The primary research question is, "how can educators make English education engaging for primary school children?" The paper will address primary school English teaching, In addition

to this question, the research will also explore the following questions: a) what methods should be used? and b) what materials should be used?

### **Definition of Terms**

*The engagement* model of reading comprehension development proposes that engagement in reading is the joint functioning of motivational processes and cognitive strategies during reading comprehension (Guthrie & Wigfield, 2000). For the teacher, reading motivation is a high priority for each child's development and a tool for learning in the classroom (Guthrie, & Cox, 2001).

*Cooperative learning* refers to classroom techniques in which students work on learning activities in small groups and receive rewards or recognition based on their group's performance (Slavin,1980).Cooperative learning can make students to “discuss material with each other, help one another understand it, and encourage each other to work hard”(Johnson & Johnson, 1999. p.68)

*Active learning* is generally defined as any instructional method that engages students in the learning process. In short, active learning requires students to do meaningful learning activities and think about what they are doing (Bonwell & Eison, 1991, as cited in Prince, 2004).While this definition could include traditional activities such as homework, in practice active learning refers to activities that are introduced into the classroom. The core elements of active learning are student activity and engagement in the learning process. Active learning is often contrasted to the traditional lecture where students passively receive information from the instructor (Prince, 2004).

### **Purpose of the Study**

This study will research and recommend engaging methods to teach English to children in Chinese primary schools. The study has implications for teachers who teach English for primary

school students to support them in making English teaching more in line with the Chinese curriculum standards for quality education, rather than examination-oriented education. While, for the Chinese primary school students, this study will try to figure out how to improve their interest and build higher confidence with learning English and lead them to use language in their real life through some effective strategies.

### **Significance of the Study**

Looking at the development of English in the world, it is very necessary to learn English in primary schools. This study calls for an abandonment of traditional English teaching methods in favor of English teaching that promotes the cultivation of comprehensive ability of language use. Therefore, this paper will describe methods to motivate students in English learning and to encourage them to learn English in order to communicate with others. The paper will encourage teachers to reflect on their instructional approaches and to choose teaching methods that promote active learning. The goal of this study is to recommend some useful teaching strategies for teachers in Chinese primary school English education classes.

### **Methodology**

This project will be conducted through library research. This paper will search relevant journals from JSTOR and other academic websites. Target articles will include information about instructional methods, strategies and activities to promote active learning of the English language, thus answering the research questions.

## **Chapter II Review of Literature**

In this chapter, three topics will be explored in order to determine how educators can make English education engaging for young children. These topics include: a) motivation of young children; b) cooperative learning strategies in English class; and c) active learning of English language after class. A review of the literature suggests that the methods of cooperative learning and active learning should be used to motivate young Chinese learners to speak English (Prince, 2004). Additionally, this chapter will introduce some materials teachers can use for motivating young learners to learn English.

### **Motivation of young children**

For several decades, motivation has been considered an important factor in learners' successful acquisition of their second language (Chang, 2010). Wang Qiang (2002), a professor in Beijing Normal University, analyzed primary school English teaching in China. She mentioned that English teaching should develop pupils' interests, self confidence and positive attitude towards learning English, and also cultivate the pupils' language sense and enable good pronunciation and intonation, at the same time, to develop the pupils' preliminary ability to use English in daily exchanges and lay a good basis for further study. These are the basic requirement for primary school English teaching.

She shares, "children are required to do things with English and the learning process is expected to be a playful and happy experience" (Wang, 2002, p.101). Another researcher also mentioned that "Interest is to learn a lesson, the foundation and the key of a language, arouse students' interest in learning English in primary school English teaching is also an important task"(Li, 2015,p.131). So interest and motivation should be central for young children who are learning English.

Li emphasizes that games can motivate children's English learning. She recommends that teachers can use games to teach English to young children in primary school. Games such as "brain storm" or the "bomb game" are designed to engage students to memorize the vocabulary words that they have learned. The "ask and swap game" can be used to engage students to practice structure sentences in the textbook. In another research article, it describes game-based learning (GBL). GBL has been found to promote a positive attitude towards learning and develop memory skills, along with its potential to connect learners and help them build self-constructed learning (Cojocariu, & Boghian, 2014). The advantages of GBL are that students can develop several skills in a shorter time. Because GBL can help shy students to build their confidence and can train the students to engage in creative and critical thinking.

However, there are some challenges of GBL including are time and management. For the least experienced teachers, it is difficult for them to manage and control the active time in class. Commonly, there are 40 minutes per class. If the teacher lose control of the time, it is difficult to touch the goal of GBL. For the low level English learners, such as grade one and two students, their nature is so active. They like to move around, jump or dance. And they like to play games so much. If teachers wants to use GBL method to motivate students to learning English, good management is necessary. Without procedures and routines, teachers may lose control of the class (Cojocariu & Boghian, 2014). Although GBL has some disadvantages for class, it can motivate young learners' interest of learning English. Teachers are encouraged to design the activities suitably before the class, teach the students to play the games through repeated practice, and reflect on the learning opportunities when they finish the games. At the same time, teachers should add evaluation rules into games. When they are playing, the evaluation rules will help the teacher control the whole activity move effectively.

## **Cooperative learning strategies in English class**

Research shows cooperative learning (CL) is one of the most popular and important strategies of active pedagogy. Cooperative learning has been at the forefront of educational research and is a frequent topic in methodology textbooks, teacher education programs, and in-service coursework (Dellicarpini, 2008). It also has become a popular form of active pedagogy employed in academic institutions (Tsay, M. & Brady, M. 2010). Moreover, CL is one of the most widespread and fruitful areas of theory, research, and practice in education (Johnson & Stanne, 2000).

There are five essential components of cooperative learning activities. They are positive interdependence, individual accountability, face to face promotive interaction, social skills and group processing (Johnson, 1999). In Johnson (1994)'s another research, he explained clearly about the five elements. In his opinion, students must recognize their positive interdependence. That means students should believe that their relationship is "sink or swim together." And in the situation of cooperative learning, students should realize that they have two responsibilities, which are "learn the assigned material" and "ensure that all members of the group learn the assigned material".

For the second element of CL, face to face, just as the name implies, the students should truly work together to solve problems, assist, praise and encourage each other (Dellicarpini, 2008). Johnson point that positive interdependence can lead promotive interaction. The benefits of promotive interaction are "characterized by individuals providing each other with efficient and effective help and assistance", "exchanging needed resources", and "providing each other with feedback in order to improve their subsequent performance" (Johnson, 1994).

Third, CL needs clearly individual accountability and personal responsibility move toward to the group's goals. It means that every member of the group should have his own work to do. Maybe the level is difference between the members, but individual accountability can engage every group member to do their own job which related their level and motivate them to challenge themselves beyond their level.

The fourth elements of CL is social skills. For this element, students should handle the skills just like leadership, membership trust, and group decision making. They also should know how do they communicate clearly and fluently with each member if they have different ideas.

The last element of CL that Johnson (1994) explained in his research is frequent and regular group processing of current functioning to improve the group's future effectiveness. According to the purpose of group processing, teachers in primary school should manage the group to do the group processing. The format can be processing in small groups, group member can evaluate something their group did successful and something their group need to most work. And also can processing in the whole class, one group can provide their evaluation about another group, and the teacher can summarize their advantages and disadvantages. Through an effective processing, everyone will engage to learn more from their work reflection.

After the five necessary elements of CL, teachers should also figure out the three types of cooperative learning that Johnson (1999) mentions in the research, *Making Cooperative Learning Work*. They are formal cooperative learning, informal cooperative learning and cooperative base groups. Formal cooperative learning means the group members are stable, they will work together maybe for a long time. By Johnson's idea, for the formal cooperative learning groups, teachers should make decisions before the class. That means teachers should arrange

everything well including making decisions about how many groups should be formed, who is the group leader, and even the activity's rules. And also, teachers should explain the task and the positive interdependence. At the same time, teachers should keep an eye on students' learning in groups and communicate with groups to provide some help for their assignment or to enhance students' communication skills. By Johnson's idea, the last piece of formal cooperative learning is that teachers should "assess students' learning and help students process how well their groups functioned". This is related to the fifth element of CL. It also point out evaluation in groups or in class is very necessary for the students improve for the next step English learning in groups.

Informal cooperative learning means the group members are not stable. In primary school English class, pair-work and role-play are the informal cooperative learning. Johnson points out informal cooperative learning can be "used to focus student attention on the material to be learned, set a mood conducive to learning, help set expectations as to what will be covered in a class session, ensure that students cognitively process the material being taught, and provide closure to an instructional session" (Johnson, 1999, p.69).

For cooperative base groups, the relationship of this kind of group members are longer than formal cooperative learning. Base groups, for elementary school English class, can help students to cultivate their relationship and create a great sense of community by encouraging to each other and make good progress together.

A review of the research suggests how teachers can use cooperative learning strategies in primary school classrooms. The research by Matthew (2006) shows some examples of cooperative learning activities, such as the basic pattern, write-pair-switch, numbered heads together-traveling heads, jigsaw and so on. Teachers can choose one or two techniques to use,

just like jigsaw, teacher divides one task to different theme part, every group member has one theme part, then they make up an “expert group” to discuss about the same topic, after that they go back to their own group and share the ideas to the group members (Slavin, R. E. 2015). For group work, teachers can ask students to make groups or pairs and ask students to name their group with a lovely or powerful team name in order to build community. In cooperative learning, it is important that every group member has their own role in this group, such as group leader, time-keeper, group reporter and so on. It is important that teachers help their students to clearly understand the rules of cooperative learning and how to be an active learner in a group.

By using cooperative learning in an English class, teachers emphasize cooperation and teamwork. Students learn skills in interpersonal communication, conflict resolution, group problem solving, and group decision making. Cooperative learning is designed to supplement rather than replace direct instruction. The cooperative learning philosophy recognizes that students come from a wide variety of backgrounds and experiences and this allows for all students to share their talents and be heard. Moreover, small groups offer an opportunity for students to explain, justify, and elaborate on their rationale for reaching their conclusions, approach problems from different perspectives, and create break through ideas.

### **Active learning of English language after class**

Of the many changes in recent years, a welcome development has been an increase in the use of active learning techniques in instruction sessions (Keyser, 2000). The definition of active learning could include traditional activities such as homework. In practice active learning refers to activities that are introduced into the classroom. The core elements of active learning are student activity and engagement in the learning process. Active learning is often contrasted to the

traditional lecture where students passively receive information from the instructor (Prince, 2004).

In Beijing, some of schools have only two English classes per week. This does not provide enough time for students to learn English effectively. To promote further practice with the English language, teachers should cultivate students' active learning ability and provide them with a platform for active learning .In this situation, students' after class or out of school active learning of English language is important.

The New English Curriculum Standard (2012) in China advocates for both active learning and lifelong learning. It also requires teachers to design rich content and various forms of interesting homework, such as making word cards or using handwriting paper to help students to increase their knowledge, broaden their horizons, develop their intelligence and personality according to their age characteristics and interests. The content of homework is derived from the textbook but should not be confined to the textbook. Students should be encouraged to use what they have learned in the classroom in real life so as to improve their ability to use the language in practice.

In Chen's (2014)'s essay, she mentioned that the current problems of primary school English homework are single form and strict evaluation. She emphasizes that if teachers keep on designing the homework with the single form just like writing letters and vocabulary or reading textbook again and again, it may annoy the students, even become the burden for the students. Then she refers the basic requirements of primary school English homework are to arouse interest and show individuality.

According to the recommendation of the Curriculum Standard (2012), teachers in primary school can set up some simple or easy-to-operate English listening, speaking and reading assignments and create a home learning environment. According to Chen's (2014) study, the application of homework design in primary school English classes can be drawing, exploring and interviewing. So teachers can design interesting practical assignments based on students' interests. As mentioned before, making colorful vocabulary cards, making English hand-written paper can motivate students' interest of active learning in memorize the vocabulary rather than boring copy form textbook. Or ask students to collect the English information on the way they back home while travelling or taking subway. Even they can try to communicate with a foreigner and to be a little reporter that will train their confidence to speak English in daily life.

In recent years, there are two mobile applications named 17Homework and Fun Dubbing. They are very popular in Beijing. They are full of rich English learning resources including original English picture books and original English animated films. Teachers can use them for homework which will motivate students to practice English at home. Moreover, teachers should respect students' individual differences and assign different levels of homework.

## **Summary**

Above all, teachers can know and use cooperative learning and active learning. The five elements and the three types of cooperative learning can lead teachers to better apply cooperative learning in English class. This is especially true in the elementary school for the grade one and grade two students. Teachers can train their team spirit through learning in groups. In class teaching, teachers can use game-based learning and cooperative learning to motivate students

learning English with high interest. And by designing some creative and funny homework after class, teachers can motivate their students learning English actively.

Active learning is any teaching method that gets students actively involved. Cooperative learning is one variety of active learning which organizes students into groups with defined roles for each student and a task for the group to accomplish (Keyser, 2000). Keyser also states that active learning strategies are easier to apply and take less time, while cooperative learning strategies require more advance planning and may take an entire class period. Whether these strategies are used in class or after class, teachers must plan these experiences carefully to make sure that they align with the goals of the class session.

### **Chapter III Conclusions and Recommendations**

Through extensive access to information and literature, the author has developed an understanding of how to engage elementary students to learn English language effectively.

Through the process of looking up research and through comparing the present English teaching with the traditional English teaching, the author determined that instruction in class or out of class should focus on the English language learners, not the teachers or parents. The educators should think deeply about how design English education, and how to engage English learners in primary school to learn English with high interest.

There are a lot of strategies that former educators found and practiced. In this paper, cooperative learning and active learning strategies are described. If the teachers set up a class or homework by using these two strategies, the students will be motivated to learn English with interest and learn more effectively. One author reminds teachers, “Whether you prefer active, cooperative, or even the modified lecture approach in your instruction, review your goals and the needs of your students periodically. Do not get so caught up in the teaching techniques that you forget your goal” (Keyser, M. W. 2000, p.43). The goals of using these two strategies is to engage students in learning English with high interest in class and to promote further practice outside of class.

Furthermore, there is not enough studies about how primary school teachers apply the relevant teaching methods to the actual primary school English classroom. For this limitation, this paper just mentioned a few techniques, for example the jigsaw. For the primary school teachers, they just understand the relevant concepts about cooperative learning and active learning from this paper, but there is not any practical case they can consult. For future research, maybe the educators can pay more attention to do some primary research, collect the application of comparative data in practical teaching methods, and discover some new useful strategies or techniques that really helpful for the elementary educators.



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