

# On the Application of Cooperative Learning in College English Teaching

Guoqiao Wang<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> English Department, North China Electric Power University, Baoding City, Hebei Province, China

Correspondence: Guoqiao Wang, English Department, North China Electric Power University, Baoding City, Hebei Province, China.

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## Abstract

Cooperative learning is a kind of teaching theory and strategy system based on group. The theory of cooperative learning has been applied in college English teaching and has proved to be fruitful and beneficial. Cooperative learning as a breakthrough and complement against traditional classroom instruction is an efficient teaching approach, which can promote learners' cognitive ability and improve their competence to use language. This paper intends to discuss the significance of cooperative learning and how to apply this approach in college English teaching to improve students' overall language competence. Problems faced with the application of cooperative learning are also analyzed and proper solutions are suggested to tackle the problems.

**Keywords:** cooperative learning, language competence, significance, strategies, problems, college English teaching

## 1. Introduction

Under the new situation of social and economic development, the communication within the world is deepening, and increasing. Thus the English level of graduates is required to be higher among different industries companies. Students' linguistic competence should be cultivated and developed by applying effective approaches and strategies (Li, 2019). Nowadays, cooperative Learning has been regarded as a creative and effective teaching theory and strategy. As a new organizational form of teaching mode, cooperative Learning has been more and more widely applied in English language teaching. It has broken the traditional teacher-centered teaching mode. It has been regarded as a creative and effective teaching theory and strategy (Liang, 2015). Cooperative learning is the instructional use of small groups so that students work together to maximize their own and each other's learning. Within cooperative situations, individual students seek outcomes that are beneficial not only to themselves but also to all other group members. In the mid-1960s, cooperative learning was relatively unknown and largely ignored by educators. Elementary, secondary, and university teaching was dominated by competitive and individualistic learning. Educational practices and theories, however, have greatly changed and improved in the recent decades. Cooperative learning is now an accepted and highly recommended educational practice at all levels of education.

In college English teaching, while applying cooperative learning, teachers need to design some effective group activities according to the teaching objective and divide the students into groups of 4 to 5 members each. Teachers need to provide sufficient opportunities for the students to have group discussions and guide them to cooperate with each other and with the teacher. Free and lively atmosphere need to be created where the students and the teacher work together to explore problems. All the students are motivated to get actively involved in the learning process. Each is inspired to contribute to the objective of the group. They are expected to present their opinions freely and cooperate with other group members. Through such learning experience, students can reap the benefits of cooperative learning. Students' enthusiasm in English learning can be highly motivated, which will considerably enhance their language competence.

## 2. Basic Elements of Cooperative Learning

Cooperative learning theory emerged in the United States in the early 1970s. It was put forward by American educationalists Robert E. Salvin, David W. Johnson and Cathy N. Davidsonson (Slavin, 2001). This theory had substantial progress in the middle of the 1970s to the middle of the 1980s, and has attracted extensive attention due

to the significant effects obtained in the aspects of improving the classroom atmosphere, improving student achievements, promoting cultivation of students' quality, etc. China has discussed cooperative learning since the late 1980s and the early 1990s. A lot of practical experiences have been accumulated.

Cooperative learning is mainly based on the subjects such as sociology and psychology, which has very solid theoretical foundations, such as social interdependence theory, choice theory (formerly known as control theory), classroom instructional technology theory, motivation theory, cohesion theory, developmental theory, cognitive elaboration theory and contact theory (Slavin, 2001).

Cooperative learning is a type of learning model which helps to facilitate group members' learning through the form of group cooperation (Zhang, 2018). Cooperative Learning is a relationship in a group of students that requires positive interdependence, individual accountability, interpersonal skills, face-to-face promotive interaction, and processing. They are also called the five basic elements of cooperative learning. During the cooperative learning process, each of the students has to contribute to the learning group and thus learn from each other. Through cooperative learning, students' interpersonal skills can be cultivated and developed, including such aspects as trust, leadership, decision making, and conflict resolution. While interacting with other, they reflect on how well the team is functioning and how to function even better.

Positive interdependence creates a commitment to other people's success as well as one's own. Therefore, it is the basis of cooperative learning. Group members perceive that they are linked with each other in such a way that one cannot succeed unless everyone succeeds. Group members realize, therefore, that each person's efforts benefit not only him- or herself, but all other group members as well. Positive interdependence is fostered when they work and cooperate together.

The second basic element is individual and group accountability. The group has to be clear about its goals and be able to measure the individual efforts of its members. The group must be accountable for achieving its goals while each member must be accountable for contributing his or her share of the work. When designing cooperative learning tasks and reward structures, individual responsibility and accountability must be identified. Individuals must know exactly what their responsibilities are and that they are accountable to the group in order to reach their goal.

Another basic element is interpersonal and teamwork skills. In cooperative learning groups, students are required to learn academic knowledge as well as the interpersonal and teamwork. Group members must learn to possess such interpersonal skills as effective leadership, decision-making, trust-building, communication, and conflict-management skills. Teachers are expected to cultivate teamwork skills in students. Face-to-face promotive interaction occurs when members share resources and help, support, encourage, and praise each other's efforts to learn. Promotive interaction includes activities and interpersonal dynamics that can only occur when students promote each other's learning by explaining how to solve problems, discussing concepts, and sharing one's knowledge with classmates. When group members discuss how well they are achieving their goals and maintaining effective working relationships, they are doing group processing. Groups need to describe what member actions are helpful and unhelpful and make decisions about what behaviors to continue or change. In working cooperatively, students realize that they are mutually responsible for each other's learning and have a stake in each other's success.

Teachers are organizers and supervisors in cooperative learning class. Teachers should guide students in cooperative learning activities, help students to independently, voluntarily, positively and happily participate in various activities, treat every student patiently and kindly, and attach importance to each student's particular need, respect and encourage them, so as to build a positive, favourable, cooperative and sincere relationship between teachers and students.

### **3. The Significance of Cooperative Learning in College English Teaching**

Cooperative learning embodies modern educational concepts. Students' cognitive levels are improved through cooperative learning. Meanwhile their cognitive development can be promoted in the process of group cooperative learning. Students are divided into several groups, with four or five students in a group, discussing a topic, doing a role-play, debating on an issue or solving a problem. In groups, the students tend to participate actively and enthusiastically. And they are more likely to take the initiative to practice the language. Therefore, these activities can help students to develop a good habit of cooperative learning and overcome their reticence. Thus their language competence can be considerably enhanced (Luo, 2018). Their knowledge is enabled to be constructed actively by the learners instead of being received passively. It can be concluded that the cognitive development theory and the social constructivism constitute the theoretical foundation of cooperative learning.

Large amount of research indicated that cooperative learning in college English classroom can provide students with more opportunities to use the language in meaningful and real-life situations, thus facilitating their language competence. A large number of studies have been conducted in the last decade to further investigate the profound effects of cooperative learning on second language acquisition. Based on the research, the experts came to a conclusion that cooperative learning encourages and improves the performance of all students (Luo, 2018). The use of cooperative learning reduced the students' anxiety and improved their language proficiency. The implementation of cooperative learning has proven to be feasible in both small and large classes.

What's more, cooperative learning promotes acquisition of second language skills through an increased amount and variety of English input and output. Ghaith and Yaghi (1998) conducted an experimental investigation of the effect of cooperative learning on the acquisition of English as a second language. The experimental classes received instruction according to the cooperative learning method. The results of the experiment indicated that low achievers in the experimental classes made more relative gains and progress than their high-achieving counterparts in the same classes. By applying cooperative learning, various activities can be carried out in small groups. Therefore, students will have more opportunities to communicate and learn from each other. It's recommended that teachers design and organize abundant and various cooperative activities that suit the students. Students are required to use the language to express their ideas clearly and appropriately. Teachers should also guide and encourage the students to actively participate in the group activities. Students' active involvement in the group activities will be able to enhance their language competence. It may also add to students' self-confidence, which will spur students' enthusiasm for English learning. Thus a favorable recycle is formed.

A large and rapidly growing body of research confirms the effectiveness of cooperative learning in higher education. Relative to students taught traditionally—i.e., with instructor-centered lectures, individual assignments, and competitive grading—cooperatively taught students tend to exhibit higher academic achievement, greater persistence through graduation, better high-level reasoning and critical thinking skills, deeper understanding of learned material, more on-task and less disruptive behavior in class, lower levels of anxiety and stress, greater intrinsic motivation to learn and achieve, greater ability to view situations from others' perspectives, more positive and supportive relationships with peers, more positive attitudes toward subject areas, and higher self-esteem. Another nontrivial benefit for instructors is that when assignments are done cooperatively, the number of papers to grade decreases by a factor of three or four.

#### **4. Strategies for Implementing Cooperative Learning**

While implementing cooperative learning, teachers had better exert efforts to explore effective strategies to maximize the positive learning effects of cooperative learning. Teachers should be able to recognize their role as a facilitator that can skillfully utilize teaching methods and help students get familiar with this new approach.

The teaching strategy of cooperative learning advocates the student-centered idea, emphasizes to give full play to students' autonomy and initiative, strengthens mutual support and cooperation between students, attaches importance to giving play to each student's enthusiasm, cultivates students' leading role, independent learning ability and team cooperation spirit, provides opportunities for students of different levels to actively participate in learning and experience success, promotes communication and exchange between students, and deeply motivates students' individual potentials, so as to greatly meet their spontaneous learning needs.

Cooperative learning is not simply a synonym for students working in groups. Cooperative learning may occur in or out of class. In-class exercises, which may take anywhere from 30 seconds to an entire class period, may involve answering or generating questions, explaining observations, working through derivations, solving problems, summarizing lecture material, trouble-shooting, and brainstorming. Out-of-class activities include carrying out experiments or research studies, completing problem sets or design projects, writing reports, and preparing class presentations. Modern technologies provide various convenient means for students to communicate and present. For example, teachers can set up a Blue Ink Cloud Class which can offer students sufficient opportunities to practice. This new platform is a beneficial and effective way of cooperative learning and enables students to have group activities (Yan, 2019).

During the whole process of cooperative learning, the first step is to design the teaching procedures scientifically. Based on the theories of cooperative learning, teachers should carefully design teaching objectives, lead-in, teaching methods, teaching focus in order that students can carry out cooperative learning effectively. Scientific designation of the teaching procedures is the initial factor for the success of cooperative learning. Moreover, teachers are expected to be flexible and respond creatively to what happens in the classroom.

The basic organizational form of cooperative learning is learning groups. How to cultivate and improve students'

comprehensive application of cooperative learning strategies should be carefully designed by teachers. In class teaching, teachers can divide the students into heterogeneous groups with three or four members in each group to keep the group balanced in gender, proficiency, personality, interests, etc. Reasonable grouping is a prerequisite for the success of cooperative learning (Zhang, 2018). The teacher is a supervisor, monitor, participant and problem-counselor, who provided help for the students at any time. In each group, a leader was assigned by the teacher to coordinate activities of the group.

When organizing cooperative activities, teachers need to assign students with more specific, well-planned and meaningful tasks within sufficient time so that students are willing and enthusiastic to participate with highly motivation. When dividing students into groups, teachers should consider their different interests, hobbies, personalities as well as English proficiency. The use of heterogeneous groups according to academic proficiency is well recommended. Less proficient students need more attention from teachers' instruction than their peer feedback. After group activities, teachers should give a proper assessment, giving more praise and encouragement.

During the group discussion, every group member can express their views freely. When the reporter of the group makes a presentation to the whole class, other members in the group can add. Meanwhile, members of other groups can ask questions and put forward their different opinions. Through the discussion, the students are encouraged to raise questions and have a heated discussion, which can inspire the students to think about problems deeply and views things from a new and different perspective.

During the evaluation and reflection stage, teachers should adopt appropriate and fair evaluation methods to check students' task accomplishment situation. Proper test methods and evaluation standards should be applied to evaluate and assess the group cooperation achievements and contribution of each group member. What's more, a method combining self-evaluation of a group, mutual evaluation of groups and teacher evaluation is recommended to be applied. Teachers can help students to analyze what they have learned, reflect on students' harvests and problems existing in the process of cooperative learning, and put forward constructive suggestions for improvement. Teachers can help each group to establish a record file of their cooperation results for examination and improvement in the future. The success of cooperative learning is based on the mutual efforts of the group members; therefore, every group member must bring their potential into full play. Teachers need to combine the evaluation of the learning process with the evaluation of the learning outcomes.

### **5. Problems Confronted in the Application of Cooperative Learning**

In order to better understand the phenomenon of cooperative learning, it is crucial that it should be looked at through the students' perspective. It is important to understand what makes cooperative learning successful for some students and unsuccessful for others. Therefore, the problems that teachers may be confronted with need to be analyzed thoroughly. In the course of cooperative learning, the problems may have arisen as follows.

Under the influence of the traditional teacher-centered teaching model, some students are used to obtaining knowledge and writing down the language points passively. They are not accustomed to tasked-based group discussion. Thus they tend to keep silent, listen passively and seldom express their ideas. Or even, they don't know what to say. The lack of communication abilities hinders them from expressing them freely. In regard to such students, teachers need to show more care and concern for them, giving them more encouragement and inspiration. Gradually, these students will be willing to speak more and share their opinions with others. What's more, students tend to regard teachers as more experienced and intelligent authorities while ignoring peers' suggestions and comments on their group work. Thus group interaction may appear to be chaos unless students are clearly aware of this beneficial learning and teaching pattern.

Different students possess different personalities. Some are extrovert, while others are introvert; some are bold and talkative, while others are rather timid and quiet. These affective factors largely influence their performance in the group cooperative learning. From the viewpoint of instructors, we have always viewed cooperative learning as an added advantage for the students—an opportunity to receive additional support while working closely with their peers. We never really considered what a disastrous experience some frustrated students must endure, or why some students reported only positive experiences from classes utilizing group learning techniques. The extrovert students are easy to grasp the guidance of the group discussion unconsciously. They tend to neglect others' opinions and suggestions. Their conduct goes against the principles of group discussion and spoils the free and relaxing class atmosphere. While the introvert students don't want to discuss with others in a loud voice. Because of their anxiety, they are afraid of being teased. Thus they choose to remain silent and passive during the discussion, unwilling to participate in the group activities. As for this imbalanced situation, teachers are supposed to offer guidance to both of the two types of students. Introvert students need to be encouraged and motivated. Extrovert students should be regulated and be advised to have more self-control and be modest to listen to others'

ideas.

Another apparent problem is the non-cooperation of some group members. The main reasons of this non-cooperation lie in the imbalance of the group members' language abilities. Some students who have a good and solid language foundation have a strong desire to present themselves in front of their classmates. However, the students who have good language abilities usually don't want to cooperate with others with others, especially those have poor language abilities. To some degree, this will lead to worse cooperation. Besides, this inharmonious atmosphere in group discussion is likely to result in fruitless and inadequate discussion. In response to such a problem, teachers need to stress the significance of cooperation and clarify the necessity of modesty and the virtue of learning from others. High-level students should be disciplined to listen to other group members attentively to show necessary respect for others. Students of ordinary level should be inspired to have more self-confidence and present their views more freely. Adequate help can be rendered to them to improve their language abilities so that they can express their thoughts more appropriately instead of feeling at a loss what to say.

## 6. Conclusion

Abundant literature on cooperative learning illustrates and proves its significance and feasibility in college English teaching. Cooperative learning provides the students with opportunities to express their views, feelings, needs, difficulties and motivations in a free and relaxing learning atmosphere. Students take active part in the cooperative activities, because they are responsible for the roles they act in the whole group. By means of this approach, the students learn to cooperate with each other, to learn from each other, to help each other in the learning process. In brief, cooperative learning is valuable and feasible in college English teaching and it's a systematic method to help improve students' overall language competence.

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