

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN COOPERATIVE LEARNING
AND ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT IN ENGLISH

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Abstract

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Under the Supervision of Daniel Leitch, PhD

This paper is a report that provides an exploration of the relationship between cooperative learning (CL) and academic achievement in English classroom. An important part of the report is on the definitions of CL, second language acquisition (SLA) and relative literature by scholars or educators home and abroad, such as historical and contemporary views of CL, its development and application in different kinds of classrooms in China. In view of current problems in the application of CL, the paper argues that teachers are the decisive factor that affects the achievement of CL in China.

Finally, the paper includes recommendations that the Educational Departments at all levels in China prepare more highly-qualified CL teachers for language teaching as soon as possible.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Cooperative learning (CL) is an educational cooperative process in which such activities as speaking, listening, writing, and reflection take place. In this process, students are asked to use their social skills and to cooperate with peers, which, in the long run, contribute to the development of their cognitive and affective learning outcomes (Johnson & Johnson, 1991). Cooperative learning (CL) has become one of the most popular forms of active pedagogy employed in academic institutions throughout the world and it is based mainly upon the idea that students learn through social contexts (Adams and Hamm, 1994).

Scholars have contributed a lot to this subject. Prior to World War II, social theorists such as Allport, Watson, Shaw, and Mead began establishing cooperative learning theory after finding that group work was more effective and efficient in quantity, quality, and overall productivity when compared to working alone (Gilles & Adrian, 2003). However, it was not until 1937 when researchers May and Doob found that people who cooperate and work together to achieve shared goals, were more successful in attaining outcomes, than those who strived independently to complete the same goals (May & Doob, 1937). Since that time, CL strategies and models have been developed increasingly sophisticated and research based. Of special interest is the use of CL to promote English language acquisition. Identifying variables that affect learning is critical.

Statement of the Problem

The problem expressed as a question is as follows: “To what extent, can cooperative learning influence students’ academic achievement in English?”

Definition of Terms

Cooperative learning: a collection of skills that involve curriculum planning, creativity, facilitation, and persistence (Johnson et al., 1999).

Variable: a variable is a feature that must be varied from person to person or from object to object. It can be divided into independent variables, dependent variables, moderator variables, control variables and intervening variables with reference to the functions in a study (Wen Qiufang, 2004).

Second language acquisition (SLA) or second language learning (SLL): the process by which people of a language can learn a second language in addition to their native language(s).

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Introduction

This chapter is to review related literature of cooperative learning home and abroad, including historical and contemporary views. It also covers the application, systems, function mechanisms, and professional development of cooperative learning teachers in China.

Cooperative Learning: Historical and Contemporary View

Cooperative learning has long been of interest to practitioners of communicative language teaching since it offers a body of widely tested classroom procedures for implementing group-based activities in the language classroom (Richard, 2006). Related to the paper topic, cooperative learning in ESL/ EFL classrooms was rooted in social psychology, developmental psychology, and cognitive psychology and it was linked to motivational theory and humanist education. Group-based learning lies at the heart of cooperative learning. Cooperative learning stands for the product of ongoing investigation based on theory, research, and practice as to how to maximize the benefits of student-student interaction (Richard, 2006).

Early thinking by scholars about what came to be recognized as cooperative learning is important. Alport (1954) thought there were three conditions essential for interaction to result in greater harmony and more productive relations: 1) interactors must be of equal status, 2) they must have common goals, and 3) their collaboration should be officially sanctioned. In the 1970s, Aronson et al. (1978) applied the three conditions to the classroom and created the

well-known “Jigsaw”. In Jigsaw, each member of the group has special information that they must share with peers in the group to achieve its common goal. George et al. (2006) thought Jigsaw takes place with the teacher’s official sanction. Jigsaw has been used in second language teaching using print (Johnson, 1981). In Jigsaw, each student leaves the quad and joins a different expert team. In expert team the students master the material and must develop in the expert team ways to teach the material. It rejoins quad and each member must teach what they have learned to the other members of their quad.

Since 1954 there have been developments in our understanding of each of Alport’s three original conditions (George et al., 2006). On one side, how they are treated by other class members is bound to differ though they are in the same classroom and follow the same behavioral guidelines. On the other side, how goals and sub-goals are formed and how they change in relation to working with particular people in particular circumstances has become a primary area of focus within the study of classroom interactions.

It is necessary to mention Jean Piaget and Lev S. Vygotsky, the two great developmental psychologists of the 20th century. Piaget’s basic assumption is that development is children’s attempts to make sense of the world. He believed that development was orderly, adaptive, qualitative changes in four areas: physical changes, personal, social, and cognitive. “Physical” means changes in body structure, i.e. puberty, “Personal” means changes in personality, “Social” means changes in the ways we relate to others, i.e. playing as a baby we play next to another kid but not with, “Cognitive” means that mental processes become more complex and sophisticated, i.e. clay conservation, hypothetical reasoning, and “Qualitatively” means different ways of thinking. He also believed that three factors influence development or changes in thinking. They are “Maturation”, “Activity” and “Social transmission.”

And he believed that there were four principle tendencies in thinking as follows:

The first is “organization” that means tendency to organize thinking processes into psychological structures or schemes. The second is “equilibration” that means a search for balance between cognitive schemes and information from the environment. The third is “disequilibration” that current ways of thinking are not working, so must change through assimilation or accommodation. The last tendency is “adaptation”, the tendency to adapt to the environment through complementary processes of assimilation and accommodation.

Through observing his own children and others, Piaget decided on four stages of development, namely, “sensorimotor”, “preoperational”, “concrete preoperational” and “formal operational” stages. His theory underestimated children’s abilities, set fixed stages, and did not take role of culture or social context into account.

Vygotsky thought that a child is at once surrounded by social-cultural contexts that exert an immediate influence on development through interaction, or learning leads development. For Vygotsky, there is a very definite role to be played by actively directed learning. He called it the *Zone of proximal development (ZPD)*. The ZPD is a key concept for Vygotskyian theory.

Others developed supporting concepts. Wood et al. (1976) introduced the notion of *scaffolding*, in which an analogy is drawn to the process of building an architectural structure. Cognitive psychologists, such as Craik and Lockhart (1972) developed the *depth of processing* concept.

More recently theorists have sophisticated the concept of cooperative learning. For example, Slavin (1995) and his colleagues at Johns Hopkins University have contributed much to motivational theories in psychology. They generated and tested techniques such as Teams-Achievement Divisions (STAD) to create a model of practice for theory related to

motivation.

Maslow (1968), a leading humanist psychologist, proposed a hierarchy of needs that humans strive to satisfy. He thought the needs are maintenance needs and growth needs. Among the maintenance needs is the need for interpersonal closeness. Growth needs include the need to know and understand aesthetic needs, the need to realize one's potential, and the need to connect with something beyond oneself. Rogers (1979) also emphasized the role of positive interpersonal relations and empathetic understanding, arguing that the support is essential for students' psychological growth.

Today, educators contend that students should grow into active citizens of their school, country, and of the world. They have come to realize that they should help the students to be the ones with global view in some area. It is high time they reformed the traditional classroom activities. Cooperative learning is one of the most efficient methods in classroom.

Cooperative Learning in China

Since the late 1970s, experts and teachers in the field of second language teaching and learning have witnessed the invention of many new terms such as "learner-centered", "cooperative", "interactive", "communicative", as well as other related terms. Though these terms are a little confusing, they all refer to more or less the same thing within the framework of communicative language teaching, an approach of second language teaching and learning that is currently recognized as a generally accepted teaching strategy.

With the rapid development of information technology, interpersonal communication is becoming more and more important in China. And there is much demand of the awareness and capabilities of cooperation among people. The government at all levels and educators have noticed it and have begun to apply cooperative learning in the process of modern education

throughout China. Some people still have doubts about its function and even criticize it.

To promote cooperative teaching and learning in China, it is very necessary to answer the some questions about the concept system, the goal system, function mechanisms, the behavior characteristics of teachers and students and teacher-cultivation.

The Concept System of Cooperative Learning in China

What is cooperative learning? What is the basic condition or requirement for the application of this strategy in China? What are the differences and similarities among cooperative learning and other strategies? The researches of building up the concept system of cooperative learning should find the answers to the questions above based upon specific national conditions of China. These researches are not only the base of further studies of cooperative learning but also the guarantee of the efficiency of this strategy. Thus, teachers may have developed a superficial knowledge of this strategy in real teaching practice because their lack of the standing of the concept system, so-called “forged cooperative learning”. It is impossible to achieve much with this forged strategy tendency.

Here are some misunderstandings that the “forged cooperative learning” have caused or may cause as follow:

First, some think cooperative learning and traditional teaching just differ in the form of the classroom activities. Many teachers believe that cooperative learning means reset the tables or desks, divide the class into small groups, and change the whole class activities into group activities. They prepare their “cooperative learning” class in the way they have usually done. That is one of the most important reasons why this misunderstanding appeared.

Second, some teachers think cooperative learning just means more class discussions in classroom activities. Many believe that cooperative learning is just the application of more

discussions in class. In the class, the students may share their own ideas or solutions to some problems with peers in the same group. Then the group reports their results to the teacher. The members seem to have gained much in the noisy “cooperative learning” activities. This is another major reason why this misunderstanding exists. Educators find that there is always a person in authority or leading person who usually act as an all-round role, that is to say, group work, group report, group presentation, etc., are always done by the single person. This is not real cooperative learning. During the course, most group members are not really involved in the group activities and they benefit nothing from it. They will lose interest in this teaching strategy gradually. Sometimes, academically poor students refuse to cooperate with peers if they are not given gifts. The primary cause is that not each member knows his or her own responsibility. Cooperative learning is not the equalitarianism “big pot”, but a teaching process full of the sense of responsibility, which is often neglected by some teachers.

Third, some teachers think that cooperative learning needs imitation instead of creativity.

Since cooperative learning has widespread home and abroad for a long time and proved to be a good strategy, some teachers just imitate what others do in their own teaching. In fact, cooperative learning has good vitality just because it is first an educational thought, not a teaching mode. It varies according to different students, subjects, teachers, leaning tasks, etc. Sometimes, the class will be divided in to groups of two or four based on different learning tasks. The whole process may be full of creativity.

Fourth, cooperative learning is just a classroom learning form. Some people think that cooperative learning is just a classroom learning form. Its extension into extracurricular activities and special affectivity are often neglected. For example, the group members have not known each others’ telephone numbers or e-mail addresses even though the group have cooperated in a

class for almost half a year. They seldom get in touch or exchange ideas. They are still strangers. Thus, the formalization of peer assessment and group assessment can not be avoided.

Moreover, some teachers applied cooperative teaching strategy unnecessarily in their classroom just to cater for inspection assessment or for higher organizations. So the class became flashy without substance. It was not good for students' learning at all.

Building up the concept system of cooperative learning in China will help teachers understand better when and how to organize classroom activities based on specific teaching targets and contents.

The Goal System of Cooperative Learning in China

What teaching goal can we reach in cooperative learning? What are the real functions of cooperative learning in teaching practice? What can it help students develop? It is very necessary to find the answers to the questions above in China.

Chinese educators propose the goal of cooperative learning is to achieve students' subjectivity of development after they have done systemic researches of relevant educational theories of foreign educators. In their theories, cooperative learning, subjective participation, difference development, and feeling of success are regarded as the four principal teaching strategies. These theories have digested, assimilated and spread that introduced from other countries. The goal of cooperative learning is not to achieve single target such as improving academic grades but to help the all-round development of students. But in China, there are just some assumptions of the theories from the point of philosophy and psychology. Chinese educators need more detailed researches on the goal system of cooperative learning. So it is difficult to tell the teachers how to promote the subjective development of students. For example, what are the specific policies and principles providing that cooperative learning can promote

man's social development through cooperation and exchanges? Is there a transfer mechanism that helps teachers employ cooperative learning strategy in their classroom activities based on specific subjects flexibly? The mechanism is not very clear yet. Some many Chinese teachers always ask, "What is real cooperative learning in the point of developmental teaching?"

One way is to subdivide the goal of subjective development into two sub-goals—group subjective development and individual subjective development. Cooperative learning promotes the subjective development of students at both levels.

The two sub-goals need to be studied systematically with the characteristics of cooperative learning process.

Function Mechanisms of Cooperative Learning in China

How will cooperative learning achieve its goals? What are the outer and inner function mechanisms? Is there any model or pattern that teachers and students need to follow?

To find the answers to these questions will help teachers to employ this teaching strategy more flexibly in their classroom activities. It will also inspire Chinese educators who are engaged in the researches of other teaching strategies. It is good to deepen the whole developmental teaching theories in China, too.

Some organizations and scholars have contributed a lot in function mechanisms of cooperative learning home and abroad. They have found or created more than one hundred activities in cooperative learning class; however, the activities can not be treated as the function mechanisms of cooperative learning. The teaching strategy itself will become rigid if the characteristics of students are neglected.

Chinese educators employed much deductive reasoning to try to find the mechanism of cooperative learning, that's to say, they first borrowed the theoretical expressions of Marxism,

and the research achievements in the fields of sociology, psychology, etc., and then proposed a so-called “natural mechanism.” It seems to be very attractive but a little mysterious for most Chinese teachers because it is very difficult for them to follow. So the “natural mechanism” is not very practical.

The mechanism of cooperative learning with Chinese characteristics should be based upon the previous researches done by educators home and abroad. Formal school education, family background, cultural environment, etc. will be taken consideration. Chinese educators should trace teaching practice, summarize, extract from the process and form their own special theories of cooperative learning.

The Behavioral Study of Cooperative Learning in China

What characteristics do teachers and students exhibit in the efficient cooperative learning process? What laws of cognition are there in it? And what are their functions respectively? These issues have not been explored systematically as expected in China.

For the behavior study, both common variables, like participation, the way of participation, mutual help, cognition conflicts, the sense of competition, communication skills, and behavior differences in cooperative learning, such as the elements of sex, cultural background, family structure, individual personalities, etc., should not be neglected anyway.

Some micro experiments have been done abroad, e.g., the students in one class are divide into groups of four (three boys and one girl, two boys and two girls, three girls and one boy, all four boys, or all four girls) based on different genders in the experiment. People found some primary results through observing different groups of students (Web N M, 1984).

It will be an important theoretic base for the study of the mechanism of cooperative learning in China. It is a long way to go since it lacks of systematic study of behaviors of students in

class.

The Professional Development of Language Teachers in China

In China, educational reforms always start from the Administration Departments at all levels. Cooperative learning now is a hot issue in national educational reform of China. It is guided principally by National Educational Committee of China without exceptions.

How should the teachers be trained so that they can meet the professional requirements of cooperation learning? This will decide whether this strategy is welcomed or not in the class. The qualifications of cooperative learning teachers even decide whether all goals of this strategy will be achieved or not.

Although the Ministry of Education has given support to cooperative learning and there is evidence that cooperative learning is practiced, mainly in costal institutions, as of today in China, there is no any training school or seminars for cooperative learning teachers. It is time that China started to attach much importance to the training of professional teachers for cooperative learning.

Cooperative Learning in Different Kinds of Classrooms in China

Jacobs and Macafferty (2006) studied the connections from the point of the input hypothesis, the interaction hypothesis, the output hypothesis, sociocultural theory, content-based instruction, individual differences, learning autonomy, and affective factors. How can the cooperative strategy be applied in reading, vocabulary development, writing, grammar, listening, and speaking courses? The following is to exhibit how cooperative learning is applied in different kinds of classrooms in China. Examples of cooperative learning techniques are illustrated for each skill

Reading and Vocabulary Development

Reading helps learners to gain meaning from the written word. Most Chinese students believe it very boring to enlarge their vocabulary in English reading classes because they are taught just to repeat the memorizing process of new words. They are afraid when asked to memorize “abstract vocal signals” every time in traditional EFL reading classes. In contrast a cooperative learning teaching technique can make the subject interesting. Before a word contest, students, in pairs, prepare ten questions for a multiple-choice test based on selected vocabulary. The students prepared flash cards and give a test of the usage of words to each other. This is called “Reciprocal Peer Tutoring”. It will help the contestants prepare the contest more efficiently. Within the quad, students pair to work on a crossword game similar to the puzzles in USA TODAY. This is called “With-in Team Jigsaw”.

Today students are living in a “print” environment or having “reading resources” (Krashen, 1985). Reading is one of the most efficient methods and activities in second language acquisition. Students may read stories to each other in pairs or groups. For example, to help the students understand the passage better and get in touch campus culture in American universities, teachers may ask students to read the passage entitled “Bigots in Ivory Tower”; students use a set of generic questions and write two or three questions from the material; in quads, students ask each other these questions.

Another example may be illustrative. To help the students majoring in education science to develop their teaching skills, teachers may employ “Team Learning” in the classroom. Each student is assigned to analyze a single paragraph of a text independently; then work in teams; finally, each student shares their analysis with the class.

Writing

Writing is the highest level of language which integrates learners' skills of listening, speaking, and reading. In second language acquisition, teachers always try to foster students' writing abilities. Writing is one of the main outputs of language learning in China.

To help the students share their different perspectives on the same topic, the teacher may use "Peer Editing" in the writing class. The instructor of seminar papers may use "Team Anthologies" in the class to help students prepare a bibliography and annotations of most valuable articles or chapters. For example, quads select "Cooperative Learning" to research; each member working individually identifies most important sources on it; the bibliography is submitted independently to the D2L; and the team compiles a team bibliography from work of all four members.

Grammar

Most Chinese students think that English grammar is one of the most boring courses. Usually, to help the students find the answer to the problem on their own and understand grammatical rules better, some Chinese teachers may strongly recommend "Problem-based Learning" in Grammar. For example, students choose the question: "Can we spell as 'Englises' in our paper?"; they identify relevant knowledge they can apply and what they must learn; students set goals and objectives and formulate a plan; students review plural rules of English independently; students come together and pool their knowledge; finally, students assess their team skills and their success in solving the puzzling question. The answer to the question is "yes" in the textbook for English majors in China.

Listening

Listening helps learners to build receptive vocabulary, knowledge of sentence structure and context. The ability of listening comprehension is an essential element for any second language

learner. In China's traditional listening classes, a teacher used to play the tape first and then question-answer activities followed. This kind of passive teaching strategy made students passive listeners. Actually, learning process is also an interaction between the teacher and students in cooperative learning. Students should be active participants.

Speaking

Speaking helps learners to use language meaningfully, express the vocabulary they know, and practice sentence structure.

Language learning aims at communicating with others. Every second language learner is expecting to speak it fluently and accurately.

In a speaking class, the teacher may ask the students to make sentences with what they have learned if they are beginners. Story-telling is another important method frequently used in speaking classes.

CHAPTER 3

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Can cooperative learning influence students' academic achievement in English?" The answer is "yes" definitely. Actually, English teaching and learning has become exam-centered at different levels throughout China for a long time. Both teachers and students are less interested in English; some even hate it now. Both of them are expecting the reform in English education, esp., the introduction and employment of the new methodology, such CL. In CL English classes, more motivation and participation of students and teachers will be encouraged.

CL has been widely used in foreign language classes in for a long time home and abroad. It seems to be warmly welcomed by Chinese SLA teachers. But there are still some misunderstandings of this strategy. It is highly recommended that Chinese Educational Departments at all levels attach more importance to the professional development of CL teachers, the decisive factor in the efficient strategy.

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