

## Cooperative Learning in College English Class in Chinese Context

Yaomei Du \*

\*: Yaomei Du: *Beijing Institute of Technology, Beijing, China*

**Abstract:** Cooperative learning is a strategic system on teaching that emphasizes mutual interaction and promotes the development of students' awareness of cooperation and cooperative skills on the basis of heterogeneous groups. When this teaching approach is applied to the EFL classroom, the traditional teaching mode can be transformed in student-centered environment so that students can study with each other under relaxing circumstances. Cooperative learning is more effective than traditional teaching approach in terms of improving students reading competence, and cooperative learning can enhance learners study motivation, foster their self-esteem and develop their interpersonal skills.

**Key Words:** EFL classroom, cooperative learning, learners study motivation

Nowadays English has become one of the most important subjects in the curriculum in China. In fact, English has an even higher priority in the country's foreign language teaching, and one of the indications is that the government decides to extend the course of English nationwide to begin in the third grade of elementary school.

### The Present Situation of English Teaching and Learning in China

According to the College English Teaching Syllabus for non-English-major, the purpose of college English teaching is to help learners cultivate comparatively strong reading, writing, listening and speaking abilities and to develop their communicative competence. However, although foreign language teaching has gained wide concerns in universities and colleges in China and various teaching approaches have been introduced, the present situation is not quite satisfactory, and the following existing problems need to be solved immediately.

First, teachers don't pay enough attention to developing students integrated English proficiency. In traditional college English classes, teachers spend most of the class time in

analyzing texts by teaching new vocabulary, explaining difficult grammatical items and asking comprehension questions, so chances for students to practice their listening and speaking skills are very limited. As a result, although they have solid grammar knowledge, they cannot understand foreigners nor can they express themselves smoothly, hence they lose their confidence in their English learning.

Second, the tendency of examination-oriented teaching still exists. It is well known that in China students have to pass the College English Test Band 4 (CET-4) in order to get their Bachelor's Degree, and many employers still regard the CET-4 and CET-6 grades as major standards to evaluate candidates' English proficiency. As a result, many students have to focus on memorizing some grammar and language points from their textbooks and developing necessary examination skills such as how to write a well-organized composition in class in order to pass exams rather than develop their communicative skills, which could stimulate students learning interest in a better way. Also this exam-oriented learning approach is not helpful for students to develop their interpersonal skills.

Third, generally speaking Chinese teachers play an authoritative role in classroom teaching. Chinese students are supposed to be submissive in class because teachers are the authority. As a result, the teacher-centered instructional approach provides few opportunities for students to express themselves in public. When they are required to talk they usually feel very nervous. Hence this anxiety makes it difficult for students to concentrate on learning when they learn a second language and is not good for the cultivation of their self-esteem.

Fourth, students hold negative competitive attitude towards learning due to the National College Entrance Examination. To exceed others is the concept that is instilled in many Chinese students mind due to the fierce competition and the National College Entrance Examination. This attitude is formed even when they entered the primary schools. In order to get rewards or go to a good university students have to surpass others academically. As a result, students fail to build up good relationship and to cooperate with others effectively.

These are the current situations of college teaching and learning in China. In order to help students overcome these obstacles and improve their English interactive competence it is very challenging for teachers to think about how to promote learning outcome. Its a

pleasure to see that recently many universities are taking measures to reform college English teaching modes and methods to make them more rational and practical in language teaching.

### **Brief Introduction to Cooperative Learning (CL) Approach**

Savignon suggests that the most successful second language teaching programs should involve the whole learner in the experience of language as a network of relations between people, things and events (Savignon, 1987). Johnson and Johnson (1999) also advocate that the me classroom with its competitive, individual focus needs to be replaced by the we classroom where students interact with and help each other. This approach, which advocates the benefits of applying a learner-centered curriculum instead of a teacher-centered one requires students to memorize vocabulary and grammar rules, and translate target language into their native language, and vice versa (Brown, 2000; Richards & Rodgers, 2003; Nunan, 2001). What's more, students in the cooperative learning situations are not only required to learn how to communicate but also how to interact with others effectively. In cooperative learning models, students generally work together in face-to-face groups, and they spend much time engaging in group discussions and assisting one another in understanding. It turns out to be very effective in class instruction. According to Slavin (1995), cooperative learning enhances learning because cooperative aims not only increase students motivation to learn but also make learning more effective through cognitive collaboration. In addition to improved motivation and higher academic achievement, D.W. Johnson and R. T. Johnson claimed that cooperative activities build greater learner confidence and self-esteem than is likely in a competitive environment, where self-validation is dependent upon a continuing need to demonstrate success (1998, p.4).

### **Objectives of This Study**

Many researchers have been conducted cooperative learning approach in elementary and middle school classrooms and have proved it to be effective. However, there are few empirical evidences on its effectiveness at college level. Besides, many researchers study the effect of cooperative learning on students Geography and Mathematics learning, while few

researchers have investigated how to apply cooperative learning to English as Foreign Language (EFL) extensive English classes. What's more, even though some researchers have studied how to use cooperative learning in EFL classes, they seldom give specific examples to illustrate how to adopt this teaching strategy in class. Thus the author would illustrate how to incorporate cooperative learning with EFL extensive English instruction.

### **Research Procedure and the Method to Use**

Cooperative learning classroom management differs radically from that of a traditional classroom. Cooperative learning classroom management concerns problems such as seating arrangement, methods of having lessons, etc. The following is the detailed set of CL classroom management designed by the author.

#### ***Step One Group Formation***

Groups were formed according to their English scores in the College Entrance Exam. The study used a group size of six. There were 60 students altogether in the cooperative learning experiment groups. When the author organized the groups, she considered individual learner differences so that students are mixed as heterogeneous as possible.

#### ***Step Two Role Assignment***

According to Johnson, Johnson, and Smith (1991a, 1991b), a number of group roles could create social interdependence among students. Here the author contains the roles used in the class.

(1) Team leader--the team leader needs to manage the whole team.

(2) Recorder--the recorder is responsible for taking notes during the group discussion and for compiling a presentation for the whole class.

(3) Reporter-- this student will orally summarize the groups' activities or conclusions. They also routinely assist the Group Recorder in the preparation of group reports.

(4) Checker-- the checker monitors the group members understanding of the topic under discussion and stops group work for clarification when someone is confused.

(5) Timer-- the time keeper is responsible for keeping the groups awareness of time constraints for any activity.

(6) Facilitator—this person is responsible for moderating all team discussions, keeping the group on track for each assignment.

### ***Step Three Some Rules for Group Behaviour***

In order to make the class more effectively and efficiently, it is very necessary to establish some rules for group behaviour so to promote equal exchanges among members. The following is a list of the rules that the author developed together with the students and announced to the class at the very beginning of the experiment.

First, contribute your ideas to group discussion and learning because they may be the key to the questions.

Second, listen to each other's ideas because people can learn a lot from their peers and it is also a way to show respect to others.

Third, give each member a chance to speak.

Students choose roles among themselves but are encouraged to take turns to act all the roles throughout the experiment.

### ***Step Four Seating Arrangements***

Physical seating arrangement seems not to be important and can be easily overlooked. Actually good seating arrangement makes big difference in CL class activities. Generally speaking, it is ideal to have movable desks and chairs, however most of the classrooms in Chinese schools are equipped with fixed desks and chairs, which makes it difficult to carry out cooperative activities. So the author had to allow students to turn back so that the group members can communicate with each other conveniently and effectively.

In cooperative learning class students and teachers roles are quite different from traditional classes, so both the teachers and students need to adjust their roles to meet the following requirements in order to apply cooperative learning to class instruction effectively.

Compared with the roles of teachers from traditional teacher-centered classes, the role of teachers in student-centered class is more challenging because it is a more complex form of instruction. Generally speaking, in cooperative learning class, the teacher should be a designer, advisor and facilitator and monitor. As a designer, his/her main duty is to do course plan, find the appropriate topics that can stimulate students' motivation and create an authentic language situation. As an advisor, his main duty is to answer students' questions and give proper and valuable guidance when necessary. As a facilitator, it requires that the teacher steps away from the directive role and allows students to find their own way to succeed. As a monitor, the teacher monitors group behaviour and learning by moving from group to group to see how everything is going on when teams complete cooperative tasks, e.g., the teacher monitors students to ensure that they all speak English in the class. All these efforts aim to help students realize the importance of forming objective viewpoint, the benefits of mutual respect and most of all, the power of cooperation.

Learners have the following responsibilities in the cooperative learning classroom

First, students need to establish a good rapport with other group members and be ready to devote to group assignment actively at any time.

Second, students need to solve specific problems carefully and provide good ideas and valuable suggestions.

Third, learners should engage in group activities actively; and each individual is responsible for the part he/she plays.

Fourth, learners should listen carefully what other members say and learn to respect each other when they cannot understand the points that their team members proposed, they should request clarification and then discuss them with their group mates.

Fifth, learners should rotate their roles to present the group tasks to the whole class.

Slavin(1990) indicated that the experimental studies have shown that group investigation and Jigsaw II are activities that can help students set up interpersonal relations with their classmates and these two are the most commonly used methods.

### *Jigsaw II and Reading*

Jigsaw is the most widely known language learning method suitable for reading, Jigsaw II is an adaptation of the Jigsaw technique. In this activity each member will be responsible for a particular aspect of a reading assignment. The basic procedure for Jigsaw II is to let students read the text, talk about what they have read and answer some questions together or write a group report. In this activity, the teacher starts with introducing the lesson and teaching objectives, then the students are assigned the materials they need to read. After that, each group member is responsible for explaining the part he/she is reading to other members within the team so that they can answer teacher's questions correctly and quickly. This cooperative learning model emphasizes students' accountability and interdependence with their teams and involves some individual work as well. The procedures followed which the author adopted this teaching model are as follows:

#### (1) Task distribution and group discussion

Before the class the author prepared an article which relates to the test. Then she wrote down some questions that were related to that article on the blackboard. Students were instructed to answer the questions within set time (on average, the reading rate is approximately 100 words/minute). After that limited time, students must hand in their answer sheets, which the teacher would give back to students in the next class. Within the limited time group members have to work cooperatively, otherwise, they could not finish their tasks on time. Meanwhile some of the questions raised by her cannot be answered until each member summarizes the passage he/she is responsible for, therefore, group members need to work together in this learning process.

#### (2) Evaluation

According to Salvin, group investigation challenges teachers to employ innovative approaches in assessing what pupils have learned (1995, p.117). In cooperative learning activities, she was responsible for the evaluation of the quiz after class and writing down the mistakes that most groups make and choosing the first three The Best Group.

#### (3) Rewards

In the next class the teacher summarized and announced the quiz results. The three groups who gained the most scores would receive some rewards as encouragement.

#### (4) Group processing

Group processing is defined as reflecting on a group session to describe whether the members action is helpful or not and making decisions about what actions to continue or change. The author encouraged students to take advantage of some spare time to process their group performances. Through this, students found where their problems lied in and how to improve their performance in the future.

#### *Group Investigation and Reading*

As we know, group investigation is an activity that students work in small groups using cooperative inquiry in group discussion. It is an effective measure of instruction because it encourages students' involvement and increases their interest in learning. By initiating communication plan and investigating their topic each student devotes his/her effort to the group and makes contribution to the activity. Besides it is intellectually richer than work done individually by the same students. In this activity students need to present what he or she has learnt to the rest of the group members. It creates students positive interdependence which is the key element in successful cooperative effort. The more students realize how important the learning goals are the more motivated they will be.

For after-class reading activities, group investigation model is recommended and encouraged. The teacher assigns to the students some after-class group homework to improve their reading abilities. The teacher then specifies one topic for each group, the team leader takes the responsibility for dividing the topic into several sub-topics for each individual member to research on. Then each group will present their research result in front of the whole class. Now the author would like to illustrate how she adopted this model in the class.

#### (1) Task distribution and group report

Before the class she prepared the topic for students to do the research which she assumed that students would be interested in. For example, one unit is Olympic volunteers,

and there was some background knowledge that students needed to know. So she divided it into several sub-topics, like the history of Olympic Games, the Sports events in the Olympic Games, the host city for each Olympic Games, the mascots of Olympic Games, the theme of each Olympic Games, etc. Then the students were asked produce a report on Olympic Games by searching for relevant information on the internet or in the library. They were also given a period of time to finish this report. The teacher is handy to help if the students came across any difficulty.

In this way, students can have better understanding about Olympic Games and build up correct schemata about this topic. Meanwhile students can practice and improve their reading skills, such as how to scan for useful information and how to abstract main ideas from a text.

#### (2) Evaluation:

In group investigation, teachers should evaluate students high-level thinking about the subject they studied--how they investigated certain aspects of the subject, how they applied their knowledge to the solution of new problems, how they used inferences from what they learned in discussing questions, and how they reached conclusions from sets of data. (Slavin, 1995:117) So after she finished reading students reports, she commented on the reports to guide students' future study. The evaluation included the strengths and areas for improvements, etc.

#### (3) Rewards

Based on her valuation, the author selected top three Best Groups, and rewarded the members of these groups with notebooks and boxes of chocolate as encouragement.

#### (4) Group Processing

Through group processing students could find where their problems were and how to improve them in the future.

## Data Analysis and Discussions

The purpose of this experimental study is to examine whether cooperative learning can improve students reading competence. Data of the questionnaires shows subjects feedback on cooperative learning in terms of whether cooperative learning can enhance students learning motivation, or foster their self-esteem and develop their interpersonal skills.

### *Data Collection of Questionnaires*

Two questionnaires were employed in this study. The first questionnaire was designed to know learners previous learning experience, learning habit, their attitude towards English learning and their expectation of the English classes. It was distributed to both the experimental and control classes at the beginning of the experiment. The second questionnaire was only given to the experimental class to collect information on students evaluation about cooperative learning approach.

The result of the first questionnaire shows that most subjects interest in English learning is not very strong. More than half (50.79%) of the students expressed their interest towards English as OK, while part of the subjects (19.05%) dislike English to some extent. A big group of the students (49.21%) English classes are mainly dominated by teachers' instruction. As a result, almost half of the students (46.03%) say they easily go absent-minded in class. Meanwhile, other group of students (44.44%) feel that they have a lot of pressure. Most students (65.08%) choose not to answer their teachers' questions until their teachers ask them to. Many (47.21%) students are not interested in English learning. For these students the purpose for learning English is to gain a high score in the National College Entrance Examination. They would make great effort in learning English just before taking the exam, at present they are content as long as they pass all kinds of exams. Meanwhile, students hope that instructional teaching mode can be changed in the future. 80.95% ( 46.03% + 34.92% ) of the subjects expect their teachers to integrate both the teacher teaching and student discussion in class because 82.54% ( 55.56% + 26.98% ) of the subjects think relaxing environment could help their English learning where they can learn more efficiently.

The questionnaire data confirms the former illustration about the current situation of ESL learning in China, that is, the traditional teaching mode, dominated by teachers, is not

good for the improvement of students learning motivation. As a result, students are easily distracted in classes and feel very anxious in the class. Besides, just as some professors assumed, students hope that instructional mode could be improved by integrating the teachers instruction and students discussion in the English class.

### ***Data Analysis of the Second Questionnaire***

The second questionnaire was specifically designed for the experimental group. 60 students from the experimental class answered it. The questions were intended to investigate whether cooperative learning can enhance the subjects' self-esteem, social skills and study motivation.

In this questionnaire there are 20 items, each item has five scales for responding: A=strongly agree, B=agree, C=undecided, D=disagree and E=strongly disagree. The results are as follows, and the author will analyze them in detail.

### ***Data Analysis on Motivation and Self-Confidence***

In the second questionnaire, items 1, 2, 3, 14, 15, 16 study students motivation and self-confidence in English learning, and the contents for each item are as follows:

Item1. Through CL I am more interested in English than before.

Item 2. Through CL, I have more confidence in English learning than before.

Item 3. Through CL, I have more passion for English learning than before.

Item 14. I try to learn English not only in the classroom but also from other sources, such as radio, English programs, newspapers, magazines and movies.

Item 15. I seize every possible opportunity to practise my English, e.g. attending English corners and English salons.

Item 16. I try to use English in my daily life.

The answers to each item from students are shown in Table 1 as following:

**Table 1. Results of the Items on Motivation and Self-Confidence**

Percentage Item	A%	B%	C%	D%	E%
1	28.33	41.67	13.33	10.00	6.67
2	36.67	36.67	11.67	6.67	8.33
3	28.33	30.00	16.67	8.33	10.00
14	46.67	30.00	15.00	6.67	1.67
15	50.00	30.00	10.00	5.00	5.00
16	28.33	30.00	16.67	15.00	10.00

Analysis of questionnaires of items shown in Table 1 indicates that 70% (28.33%+ 41.67%) of the students agree that their interest in learning English is stronger than before. 73.34% (36.67%+ 36.67%) of the subjects think that their confidence in learning English increase as well through one semesters cooperative learning. 65% (28.33%+ 36.67%) of the subjects agreed that cooperative learning stimulated their passion for English learning. Apart from attending English lessons, 76.67% (46.67%+ 30.00% ) of the students learn English through other ways, such as reading magazines, newspaper and watching English movies, etc. 80% (50.00%+ 30.00% ) of the students would seek various opportunities to practice their English, like attending English corner frequently. 58.33% (28.33%+30%) of the students even try to use English in their daily life. The analysis shows that cooperative learning is of great help in motivating students' interest and building confidence in their English learning.

From the above analysis, it is concluded that cooperative learning can motivate learners learning interests and cultivate their self-confidence to a great extent.

#### ***Data Analysis on Study***

Items 4, 5, 6 and 9 study the effect of cooperative learning on students' academic ability as illustrated in Table 2.

**Table 2. Effect of Cooperative Learning on Students Academic Capability**

Percentage Item	A%	B%	C%	D%	E%
4	16.67	25.00	33.33	20.00	5.00
5	26.67	46.67	21.67	5.00	0.00
6	33.33	55.00	18.33	1.67	1.67
9	16.67	25.00	8.33	30.00	20.00

Item 4. CL is very effective in English learning.

Item 5. CL is very beneficial to my English improvement.

Item 6. Through CL I have more opportunity to communicate with others in English.

Item 9. Through CL, English class becomes more relaxing, which is beneficial to our study.

Items 4, 5, 6 and 9 study the effect of cooperative learning on students academic ability. As for item 4, 41.67% (16.67%+ 25.00% ) of the subjects think that cooperative learning is very effective in English learning, while 33.33% of the students are not sure. 20% of the students chose 'disagree', so this item is a little bit controversial. For question 5, 74.34% (26.67%+ 46.67%) of the students agree that cooperative learning is very beneficial to their English learning, while 21.67% of the students respond 'undecided'. For item 6, 88.33% (33.33%+ 55.00) agree that they have more opportunities to communicate with each other in English after the teacher adopts cooperative learning in class than the teacher-centered teaching mode. For item 9, 41.67% (16.67%+25.00%) agree that through CL, English lessons become more relaxing, which is beneficial to their study, while 30% disagree with this statement.

Through this analysis, it is inferred that cooperative learning offers more opportunities for students to practice their English. However, although many students think cooperative

learning is effective, there are quite a few of the subjects disagree on this, so the author needs to analyze the reason and improve her teaching in the future.

### *Data Analysis on Interpersonal Relationship*

Question 7, 8, 10, 11, 12, 13 test whether cooperative learning can enhance students interpersonal skills as shown in Table 3.

Item 7. CL can enhance my communication with my classmates.

Item 8. I can listen to my group members' contribution carefully during group discussion.

Item 10. Through CL, I am better at justifying my ideas than before.

Item 11. When my group mates disagree with me, I am able to communicate with them actively.

Item 12. Through CL, I am better at overcoming anxiety during communicating with my group mates.

Item 13. Through CL, I am better at bringing up ideas at the right time than before.

**Table 3. Effect of Cooperative Learning on Students Interpersonal Skills**

Percentage Item	A%	B%	C%	D%	E%
7	33.33	28.33	20.00	13.33	5.00
8	30.00	46.67	16.67	1.67	5.00
10	31.67	31.67	20.00	11.67	5.00
11	43.33	35.00	16.67	1.67	3.33
12	23.33	40.00	25.00	1.67	10.00
13	28.33	30.00	16.67	10.00	15.00

Results show that 61.66% (33.33%+28.33%) of the subjects think that cooperative learning approach could enhance communication among students. Most students 76.67% (30.00%+46.67%) think they have learnt to listen to the other students carefully when they speak. Also, 63.34% (31.67%+31.67%) learn how to clarify themselves during group discussion. When they don't agree with each other, 78.33 (43.33%+35.00%) of the students manage to communicate with their group members actively and express themselves. 63.33% (23.33%+40.00%) succeed to overcome anxiety when they talk with their peers. More than half (58.33%) of the subjects agree that they are able to bring up ideas at the right time.

From the analysis of the questionnaire, it can be concluded that the implementation of cooperative learning can enhance student's social skills.

**Self-esteem**

Question 17, 18, 19, 20 test whether cooperative learning can enhance students' self-esteem as shown in Table 4.

The answers to each item from students are shown as following:

**Table 4. Effect of Cooperative Learning on Students Self-esteem**

Percentage Item	A%	B%	C%	D%	E%
17	35.00	35.00	13.33	11.67	5.00
18	40.00	33.33	16.67	8.33	1.67
19	46.67	38.33	8.33	1.67	5.00
20	36.67	36.67	13.33	8.33	5.00

Item 17.I am playing the role that I am supposed to play in my team.

Item 18.I am a very important person in my team.

Item 19.I can make friends with others easily.

Item 20. I am very popular in my group and my class.

Question 17, 18, 19, 20 are designed to investigate whether cooperative learning can foster students' self-esteem. Results show that 70% (35%+35%) of the students think that they have played the role they are supposed to play in the team. 73.33% (40.00%+33.33%) of the subjects believe that they are very important people in their team. 85% (46.67%+38.33%) also think they can easily become friends with other people, and 73.34% (36.67%+36.67%) think that they are very popular among the team and even the whole class.

From the analyses, conclusion could be drawn that cooperative learning is beneficial to the development of students' self-esteem.

## Conclusion

Cooperative learning is more effective than traditional teaching approach in terms of improving students reading competence. CL can also greatly enhance learners study motivation, foster their self-esteem and develop their interpersonal skills.

In accordance with the research results and the authors teaching experience, the author would like to give some recommendations on how to apply this teaching approach to class instruction. Now the author will illustrate them in detail.

(1) It is very important to guide students to focus on the systematic study of English within cooperative learning context. The teacher needs to bear in mind that cooperative learning could not replace direct instruction in the EFL classes. As we know, Chinese college students have accepted the conventional teaching for more than 12 years, and they have been used to this teaching model. Consequently, students are not very good at autonomous learning. So in the cooperative teaching classes, it is therefore wise for the teacher to integrate direct instruction and cooperative learning when s/he could not allocate enough time to students.

(2) It is very meaningful to develop teachers understanding about cooperative learning before s/he adopts this approach in the class instruction. The definition of cooperative learning indicates that cooperative learning is quite different from forming students into

groups and discussing the teachers question together. It sounds simple but in practice it is a more complex form of instruction, so the role of teachers in student-centered class is more challenging.

(3) The teacher needs to prepare students for cooperation. Teachers have the responsibility to help students know at the very beginning how to write, present a summary or a report and how to provide constructive feedback about both oral and written contributions made by their peers.

(4) The teacher needs to encourage low-achieving students to answer questions and discourage high-achieving students to dominate other group members. Also, teachers need to emphasize the importance of individual accountability consistently to raise students' awareness that that each individual should make contributions to group performance.

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