

Cultural Analysis of Cooperative Learning Problems in Chinese College English Teaching

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Cooperative learning in the ESL classroom has been advocated a lot in China for its advantages of reducing anxiety and maximum opportunities for meaningful input and output. However, most Chinese college English classrooms cannot realize these advantages as expected. This paper firstly identifies the specific problems in Chinese college English cooperative learning, like inactive attitude, unequal participation opportunities, lack of effective organization and guidance, and cultural differences. Special attention is paid to problems induced by cultural reasons because it's particular to Chinese college English cooperative learning. Then the paper analyses the cultural reasons and aims to find solutions for them.

Keywords: cooperative learning, Chinese college English, cultural reasons

Introduction

Cooperative learning in the ESL classroom has been advocated on the recognition that it promotes classroom interaction and enhances learners' cognitive and communicative development (Kagan, 1985). The theory emphasizes student-centered group activities, and student-centered teaching philosophy by dividing students into groups with a different task. Students in the group cooperate with each other, and use common resources to complete the learning task.

An important advantage of group activities is that they effectively reduce students' anxiety. Research has also shown that cooperative learning decreases levels of anxiety and increases self-confidence (Deci & Ryan, 1985). Students' activities in a small range are much easier than answering teachers' questions in front of the whole class. Many students are worried about being criticized or losing face by giving wrong answers, while group activities can relieve them temporarily, and help introverted students take the first step to speak out, thus gradually overcome psychological barriers, and take an active part in group activities. Another advantage of cooperative learning is that it makes it possible for learners to have maximum opportunities "for meaningful input and output in a highly interactive and supportive environment" (Ghaith, 2003, p. 451). In traditional classroom teaching, language interaction, initiated by teachers, usually occurs between teachers and students, and all students only act as a dialogue group. While the dialogues in group activities are initiated by students, so they have face-to-face communication, meaningful negotiation, or role plays, therefore the interaction is far deeper and wider than the one-to-one interaction between teachers and students.

Cooperative learning has been widely used in college English teaching in China in recent years. Students are supposed to improve their oral English and communication skills by practicing and communicating with other

group members in oral English. By interacting with group members, students might gain a deeper understanding of the learning content, thus enhancing the learning effect through feedback and discussion. Students' cooperation and team spirit should also be cultivated by the need to learn to negotiate, divide the labor, and cooperate and mutually support each other. In addition, Chinese students' critical thinking and problem solving skills should also be promoted by the learning environment in which students can share ideas, answer questions, and learn from each other.

However, the fact is not as encouraging as expected. In group activities, there is no lack of students deviating from the task, and the most common behaviors are as follows: keeping silent and looking away or staring at something vacantly; playing with stationery or other things in their hand and talking to a partner in Chinese; talking about topics unrelated to the task; and going online and copying some of the content as a result of the discussion. What happened in Chinese cooperative learning college English class? What are the problems lying behind all the phenomena?

This paper firstly identifies the specific problems in Chinese college English cooperative learning, like inactive attitude, uneven English ability, unequal participation opportunities, lack of effective organization and guidance, and cultural and linguistic differences. Special attention is paid to problems induced by cultural reasons because the former four problems are not particular to Chinese college English cooperative learning. Then the paper analyses the cultural reasons and aims to find solutions for them.

Problems in Chinese College English Cooperative Learning

To be specific, the following problems in Chinese cooperative learning English classroom activities can be found in China: Firstly, inactive attitude: Some students may lack interest in group English activities, thinking that English is only an ordinary test subject instead of an important language with profound cultural background, and have a negative attitude towards group activities, resulting in low participation. Secondly, uneven English ability: In the group, students' English level may be different. Some students have a higher level of English, while others may have a lower level of English, which can lead to communication barriers between students in group activities. Thirdly, unequal participation opportunities: In group activities, some students may dominate, while others lack opportunities to participate in discussions and give opinions. Group activities often become a special performance for a few top students or students who are strong and confident, while introverted students or students who are not strong in English become "unresponsive" bystanders or even outsiders (Li, 2007, p. 68). Fourthly, lack of effective organization and guidance: In group activities, without clear organization and guidance from teachers, students may feel lost and at a loss. They may not understand how to arrange tasks, coordinate time, and role allocation, etc., which affects the progress of activities. Lastly, cultural and linguistic differences: Chinese college students may face cultural and linguistic differences in group activities in English classes. Different cultural backgrounds and language habits may lead to understanding barriers and communication difficulties among students, and students with Chinese cultural background tend to be more introvert, which may prevent them from confidently expressing themselves in the teams.

The former four problems like inactive attitude, uneven English ability, unequal participation opportunities, lack of effective organization and guidance are not particular to Chinese college English cooperative learning. Problems aroused from cultural differences deserves special attention and sparse research can be found on it.

Approaches Dealing With the Less Particular Problems

The following approaches can be considered in dealing with the problems: Firstly, stimulating students' interest: Regarding the phenomenon of students' low enthusiasm in group activities, a survey in School of International Cultural Exchange of Fudan University was done (Chen, 2010, p. 20), giving each student a questionnaire to choose the reasons why they dislike group activities. The reason for topping the list is lack of interest in the topic. The second reason is not knowing what the teacher wants them to do.

It means that knowing the interest of their students is the first step before designing challenging activities, and then before choosing and implementing a formal cooperative learning strategy, several conditions, like time allowed, the complexity of the task, should be evaluated to determine whether or not it is the best approach for the situation (Smith, 1996, p. 76). Make sure to provide students with flexible assignment of tasks and roles, and appropriately adjust the difficulty and content of group activities according to students' English level and interest, so that every student can have the opportunity to participate in and play their own advantages. What's more, providing guidance and training are necessary. In every lesson there should be an academic objective specifying the concepts, strategies, procedures, and so on, and a teamwork objective specifying the interpersonal or small group skills to be used and mastered during the lesson (Smith, 1996, p. 77). In Chinese college English class, teachers can provide necessary guidance and training for students to effectively organize group activities, promote cooperation and communication, and guide them to overcome language and cultural differences to enhance the effectiveness of group activities. In addition, promoting equal participation and communication is also essential: Teachers should encourage students to participate equally in group discussions and decision-making, and put in place mechanisms to ensure that every student has the opportunity to express their views and opinions.

More Research on Problems Induced by Cultural Differences

The former problem itself is complex enough and a lot of researches have been done by scholars. However, the solution of these problems cannot ensure the success of classroom cooperative learning in Chinese college English class because of one particular reason: cultural differences.

Chinese are always stereotypically labeled as being "collective", but Chen and Li (2005) found that Chinese in fact scored significantly higher on vertical individualism, an orientation wanting to be better than others. Moreover, the Chinese were found to make more competitive decisions than the "individualistic" Australians did (e.g., Hofstede, 1980). This finding suggests that there is more complexity involved in an individual orientation than simply labeling it as either collectivistic or individualistic. There is the coexistence of a strong collectivistic/cooperative orientation and a strong individualistic/competitive orientation in the Chinese (Chen, 2011, p. 356).

Among Chinese college students, individualism is relatively important. Many students pay more attention to individual achievements and interests, but neglect team cooperation and collective interests. This results in teamwork where individual awareness and self-expression often override team goals and teamwork.

Apart from individualism, competitive culture can be counted as another important reason. There is a fierce competitive environment in Chinese society, and competition between individuals is very common. In this case, individuals are more inclined to pursue personal success and status than to cooperate with others or share resources, which makes it difficult to form and develop a sense of teamwork.

Education system also accounts for a big part of the reasons. China's education system and working environment are often oriented towards individual competition and encourage individual excellent performance and competitiveness. Cultivating students' or employees' teamwork ability and team consciousness is often not the focus of education and training, which may lead to the weakening of team consciousness.

Another reason related to cultural values should also be paid enough attention to: introvert personality. In Chinese culture, reputation and personal image are highly valued, and trying anything new may mean taking risk of losing face. In this cultural context, individuals may be more concerned with their own image and reputation and are reluctant to take risks or risk the failure of the team; thus the development of a sense of teamwork among college students is inhibited.

Being introvert also leads to fewer face-to-face communication, which then leads to trust challenges in a team. The building of trust among team members can take more time and effort, which can affect cooperation and sharing among team members.

Approaches to Problems Induced by Cultural Differences

To improve the team consciousness of Chinese people, the first step is education and training. In the field of education and training, from kindergarten to college, from schools to business, a lot of effort should be put on the cultivation of team cooperation and team consciousness by developing the cooperation skills and team spirit of students or employees, and providing cases and practical opportunities to strengthen team cooperation. Some successful teamwork cases can be shared and publicized to inspire and encourage others to adopt the teamwork model.

Structuring cooperation among students instead of just putting students in groups to learn is also fundamental. Sometimes though students sit side-by-side at the same table, they do their individual assignments. Sometimes though the students are assigned a task as a group, it happens that one student does all the work and the others put their names. To be cooperative, a group must have clear, positive interdependence; members must promote each other's learning and success face-to-face, hold each other personally and individually accountable to do a fair share of the work, appropriately use the interpersonal and small-group skills needed for cooperative efforts to be successful, and process as a group how effectively members are working together.

In cooperative learning, the importance of team success should be emphasized. Students are aware that team achievements and collaboration can lead to greater success, and team recognition is included as part of individual and team evaluation. Team members have common goals and rewards, so they are motivated to contribute to the team and feel valued in the team's success.

Teachers can help construct a culture of open, transparent, and respectful communication within the team, and a learning environment which provides effective communication training and opportunities to promote good relationships between teams and encourage positive communication and trust building.

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