The Effectiveness of Cooperative Learning in Improving English

Siwei Zhu1,2, Minlei Shi2,3, Yin Ni3, Yiwen Wang4

1College of Education Science, Nantong University, Nantong 226019, P. R. China
2College of International Languages, Jiangsu University, Zhenjiang 212001, P. R. China
3College of International Languages and Cultures, Hohai University, Hohai University, Nanjing 211100, P. R. China
4School of Foreign Languages, Taizhou University, Taizhou 225300, P. R. China

#These authors contributed equally to this study

Abstract: This article intends to analyze the effectiveness of cooperative learning, which aims to improve the English learning ability. The results of students at different stages in cooperative learning are used for reference to make an in-depth analysis and comparison of their respective literary manifestations. Both qualitative and quantitative methods were used in this investigation. Related articles have analyzed similar issues before, but the conclusion of much published research on it is incomplete. This article provides new sights to the cooperative learning under the different English-learning backgrounds. Research has not only shown the advantages of cooperative learning vividly, but also pointed out the drawbacks which still exist in our educational system. These are caused by either the insufficient English proficiency of the low-age students, or teacher’s poor control over group cooperative learning. Elaborating cooperative learning from a critical perspective is even more significant for promoting the effectiveness of English learning.

Keywords: Cooperative learning, Effectiveness analysis, English abilities, Language education.

1. Introduction

Cooperative learning, as a creative and effective teaching theory and strategy, emerged in the United States in the 1970s and achieved substantial development worldwide in the 1980s. As an important learning method, cooperative learning has gradually been recognized and accepted by people. As a successful strategy, each student of the small group of different levels of ability can use a variety of learning activities to improve their understanding, and they each are responsible for helping teammates learn as well. Cooperative efforts result in participants striving for mutual benefit so that all group members can gain from each other’s efforts, recognize that all group members share a common fate, know that one’s performance is mutually caused by oneself and one’s team members and feel proud and jointly celebrate when a group member is recognized for achievement. Based on the current situation of cooperative activities in the classroom, both strengths and weaknesses of group cooperative learning are analyzed and explored in depth how to maximize the effectiveness of cooperative learning, aiming to improve English learning level.

2. The Effectiveness Analysis of Cooperative Learning in Improving English

Many studies have been conducted to discover the effectiveness of cooperative learning. Smith (1996) classifies the multiple outcomes of cooperative learning in the classroom into three major categories: achievement/productivity, positive relationships, and psychological health [1]. Those three categories can also be employed to analyze the effectiveness of cooperative learning in improving English. Based on the pertinent papers that have been collected, it is believed that on most occasions, cooperative learning is useful and helpful when it comes to enhancing English abilities.

2.1 The Strengths of Cooperative Learning

For starters, cooperative learning improves students’ performance in understanding the English reading materials. In classes, students are often asked to answer some questions based on the reading materials (in English) they have just read. After group discussion, the answers they present are much more comprehensive and thoughtful than individual work. Slavin (2014) divides the theoretical reasons behind the effectiveness into motivation, social cohesion, cognitive-development, and cognitive-elaboration [2]. Motivation and social cohesion play the similar role in the situation that in order for the group to achieve a satisfactory result, all group members usually make their most contributions to the group. In other words, all the group members will try their best to do their own work and help their groupmates in the meantime as well. The difference between motivation and social cohesion lies in their different purposes—the former is for individuals and the latter, for the whole group. Cognitive development and elaboration play their roles from different perspectives compared with motivation. The interactions among students expose them to different ideas from their groupmates, enabling them to find defects in their own ideas and learn something new from others’ thoughts. If they find something not so satisfactory in their own arguments, they may go back to the reading materials to read them again. Hence, cooperative learning improves not only their English material-reading skills but also their critical thinking abilities.

Secondly, the communications taking place in the process of cooperative learning can also help students practice their listening and speaking abilities. Discussion is the major form in which cooperative learning carries on. In classes, discussion is usually in a face-to-face interaction. Oftentimes, the teachers will give a task for students to complete beforehand. The first thing students should do is to think on
their own for a moment. After that, they are required to share with each other about their understanding of the teachers’ tasks or questions and ask themselves the question—do I have the same understanding of the task with my groupmates. After the communication part, they may come to an agreement on the topics or concepts. Then, they can move on to the phase of exchanging ideas with each other—what are my contributions to finish the task and how should we divide the work. They must listen carefully to others and meanwhile, think how to express their ideas properly and clearly. Thus, they have got a chance to practice their oral English and listening abilities as well. For those who are less willing to be engaged in the group work at the beginning, they will gradually attempt to participate in the group work when they see other groupmates all passionately take part in the discussion.

Thirdly, in cooperative learning, students’ positive performance can promote their enthusiasm for English learning. According to David and Roger’s survey (2009), cooperating and valuing cooperation to others can bring psychological health more than competition or working alone [3]. In a two teachers’ evaluation of the strengths of cooperative learning, it can be inferred that cooperative learning can make students more confident and motivated, reduce students’ anxiety and increase students’ sense of responsibility [4]. These advantages have some potential help in learning English language. Three strengths can be classified into two aspects: for one, the first two points concentrating on the emotional experience are the basis of attending cooperative learning spontaneously for starters because students’ safety need and belonging and love (Maslow’s hierarchy of needs theory) are satisfied during the process. For another, the last strength can be ascribed to social morality, different from general psychological emotions. In cooperative learning, students of different levels can work together to struggle for better performance. Therefore, students with weaker ability will continue thinking and solving problems, which differs from the situation where they work alone and easily give up. Students with strong ability will bridge the gap of their own understanding when they explain and clarify the task to weak students. Both students can benefit from cooperative learning and their abilities of learning English are improved in this subtle way.

2.2 The Weaknesses of Cooperative Learning

Admittedly, to a large extent, cooperative learning has a significant role to play in improving English. However, if it is not implemented well, cooperative learning can also do harm to English learning.

Firstly, productive cooperative learning entails good cooperation among students, which requires students to have basic English knowledge and cooperation ability. In this sense, cooperative learning is inappropriate for lower grade students since in most cases they are not skillful enough to work out a question together. For example, they may find it difficult to use precise and accurate words or phrases to express their opinions. As for students who have learned English for some time, it is their responsibility that determines whether they can cooperate with one another smoothly. Students lacking accountability will no doubt exert an adverse influence on their groups, exhausting other members and hindering the whole groups to explore more knowledge about English. As a result, cooperative learning activities should be well-designed and carefully organized according to the real conditions of the students.

Secondly, apart from students, active participation from teachers in cooperative learning is necessary as well. Nevertheless, compared with traditional class, teachers are expected to prepare more before holding cooperative activities on the ground that cooperative learning is predominantly centered on students’ needs. And during the process of cooperative learning such as group discussions, teachers are supposed to offer immediate and accurate guidance for their students and intervene them in time when they fall into misunderstandings or conflicts. Therefore, cooperative learning will take up a lot of time for teachers to prepare beforehand and have high requirements such as professional quality and time management for teachers, which may affect the normal progress of the course. Besides that, teachers may also need to cope with the potential language problems arising in the cooperative work, adding to the load of teacher’s work as well.

In summary, cooperative learning should never be reckoned as a one-size-fits-all method to help students improve English. After all, fruitful cooperative learning lies more in positive interdependence between students and teachers [4].

3. Conclusion

All in all, cooperative learning is at present widely applied in daily English teaching and has been proved to be beneficial for enhancing English abilities. Even though there exist some weaknesses of this kind of learning mode, its huge advantages in improving English should not be disregarded. Namely, the strengths of cooperative learning have surpassed its weaknesses and both students and teachers are recommended to take full advantage of cooperative learning.

Furthermore, in accordance with the research, some suggestions are as follows. From the perspective of students, they are expected to seize the chance, trying to participate in cooperative learning and reaching their own “Zone of Proximal Development” (Vygotsky, thought and language, as cited in Eun and Barolhy, 2019) [5]. It is commonly believed that students who take an active part in cooperative learning can enhance their English skills rapidly since cooperative learning offers a good platform for them to practice, exchange and refresh their knowledge with one another. As for teachers, they are required to take action to manage cooperative learning activities, maximizing its effectiveness as much as possible. For example, teachers should clarify their objectives for each cooperative activity and search enough pertinent information themselves beforehand, so as to guide their students to work efficiently in group and form the good habit of cooperation with others. Only in this way, can students and
teachers generate the so-called positive interdependence between each other to fulfill the goal of improving English abilities.

Acknowledgments

The work described in this paper was fully supported by a grant from the 2021 National College Students’ innovation and entrepreneurship training program of China “Where could we find our native accent? - Research on dialect education in early childhood” (No. 202110304015Z).

References