

COOPERATIVE LEARNING IN TEACHING ENGLISH: THEORY & PRACTICE

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ABSTRACT

Cooperative learning is considered as one of the effective methodologies in teaching and learning foreign languages in terms of increasing students' motivation, improving the attitudes of students toward cooperative learning and enhancing language acquisition. It is vitally important for teachers to know how to assign students in group work. By implementing cooperative method, teachers also motivate learners to participate in all activities as well as giving learners more chances to learn from friends within and between groups.

Key words: *Cooperative learning, motivation, students' attitudes, language acquisition, method*

Introduction

The issue cooperative learning (CL) has been discussed for many decades worldwide. The first researches began in 1890s conducted by Triplett and Mayer. These scholars only focused on the factors contributing to the competitive performance. After that, it opened a new horizon in terms of cooperative learning in different aspects with over 600 studies [10]. According to Johnson & R. Johnson (1989a) [4] during the past 90 years, more than 875 studies have been examined to indicate the benefit of cooperative learning to learners. Learners are more active and creative in working in groups than individuals.

Cooperative learning is defined as learning group activity in which students of different ability, levels and age work in small teams to comprehend and master knowledge [2]. CL is seen as a process where students work together in groups to "master material initially presented by the teacher" [13] and reach mutual goals by discussing, helping and sharing ideas.

The goal of cooperative learning is for students to help each other succeed academically [13]. Within cooperative situations, individuals seek outcomes that are beneficial to themselves and beneficial to all other group members. CL is also an instructional use of small groups so that learners work together to maximize their own learning and other members' one.

In language learning context, Wichadee [15] proposed the definition of cooperative learning particularly: "Cooperative learning is a within-class grouping of students usually of differing levels of second language proficiency, who learn to work together on specific tasks or projects in such a way that all students in the group benefit from the interactive experience."

In Vietnam, seeking efficiency approach in teaching and learning English has raised many issues. In fact, Vietnamese English teachers have applied traditional method which only focuses on teaching and learning grammar for a long time. As result, students face a lot of difficulties in learning as well as communicating English to foreigners in real life. Based on researches of the effective of cooperative learning (CL) in language teaching, CL can improve learning skills, especially English skills in order to promote quality of teaching and learning English.

The importance of cooperative learning

Cooperative learning (CL) has not been only discussed in Western countries but also in Asian countries such as Japan, Thailand, Hong Kong and South Korea. Having the same topic, these studies argued the benefits of cooperative learning in learning a foreign language- English. Through CL activities, students improve their learning and academic achievement, students' retention and satisfaction. By practicing in group works, it helps students develop skills and oral communication, social skills and self-esteem [10]. Researchers implement cooperative learning in some schools and universities to illustrate the effectiveness of studies in terms of promoting students' motivation, building good attitudes of students toward cooperative learning in order to enhance active learning and increasing language acquisition.

Cooperative learning in theory and students' motivation at Thai Nguyen University

Slavin defined motivational perspectives on cooperative learning (CL) which mainly focused on goal structures or the reward. According to Slavin, cooperative goal structures could approach the success of the group in case of all members get successful [13]. This means that cooperative learning groups create situations in which personal goals of each member can be accomplished if the group gets successful. Slavin states that the reward bases on group members' performance or the total of individual performances [2]. By praising and encouraging groups' success, it increases motivational learning process of learners between groups. Therefore, the positive interdependence conducted by cooperative learning groups helps to promote students' motivation in groups[8].

Motivation perspective has mentioned in education as well as in language learning due to it benefits students during the time learning and enriching knowledge. In studies of Sachs, Candlin, Rose & Shum and Norman's [8], they examined the use of CL in language class. Both researchers chose group work activities to conduct the research because it is argued that the cohesiveness of the group is seen as an important factor in the development of motivation by cooperative learning. Slavin also stated that social cohesion perspectives relate to the motivation perspective and the interaction of the cooperative learning group which creates motivational achievement [12]. Many other scholars have proved the efficacy of CL in terms of promoting student motivation. Those studies indicate that CL improves such values as student achievement and intrinsic motivation in comparison with individual learning [11].

Based on the results of the project at Thai Nguyen University, researchers found out that there were benefits of CL in improving students' motivation in learning [11]. The majority of students were interested in cooperative learning tasks in classroom. Students felt more relaxed and freer while doing all activities such as group work in language class. Students' inspiration increased intensively because they had more chances to practice speaking English between groups or group discussions and to learn English in various different ways which they rarely did in normal lessons. It is clear that students' motivation was enhanced because lessons attracted students to all activities.

Hence, developing motivation in education environment is more essential for both learners and teachers. More necessarily, learning foreign language as well as other subject motivation can bring positive outcomes in learning process [12].

The attitudes of students toward cooperative learning

Researchers as Johnson [10] and Slavin [13] have shown that cooperative methodology has more benefits for learners in learning, contributing to students' development and achievement. As noted in studies of Meteetum (2001), Olsen & Kagan (1992), Moryadee (2001) and Somapee (2002) [15], students had positive attitudes toward cooperative learning in comparison with other methods. Due to the fact that they have chances to challenge to a variety ways of learning which they never practice in normal classes. Therefore, CL activities create motivational learning, learners' inspiration and positive attitudes. It is one of the most important elements for learners in their learning. Students' positive attitudes help students realize the role and the importance of learning through their lives so that they have right orientation for current learning and future learning.

Wichadee examines the effects of cooperative methodology on language learning especially learning English and studies attitudes of the first year student in Bangkok University toward to this method [15]. The findings indicate that most students agreed that CL is moderately positive. Also, assessment forms show they performed good cooperative learning behaviors in their tasks and most students are interested in cooperative activities.

Similar to the study of Wichadee (2005), through comparing between control groups and experiment groups, researchers interpreted and concluded that students feel excited in working in cooperative learning groups and have more opportunities to communicate to all members in different groups in class. As a consequence, a number of students have positive attitudes towards using cooperative learning in English.

In general, students feel more excited in learning English in cooperative class. They are able to have more English practice, more interaction with friends and more knowledge.

Cooperative learning in theory and language acquisition at Thai Nguyen University

Kagan indicates that language acquisition is defined by factors as a "complex, interaction of a number of critical input, output and context variables"[2]. He also points out that cooperative learning (CL) has an intensive positive impact on contribution of language acquisition. According to researchers such as Slavin, Johnson [10], cooperative learning is considered as an effective method for teachers to organise and manage class activities. It also improves language acquisition during the process of learning.

Cooperative learning (CL) method including a lot of activities; for example, jigsaw, group investigation Shlomo Sharan, student teams achievement divisions and learning together and learning circle focuses on working together in pairs or in groups. Unlike individual working, in cooperative learning class students are required to learn more actively with a lot of different activities as well as different partners and groups. Through cooperative activities, students have opportunities to communicate and to discuss English tasks given by teachers. Students also share their opinions, experiences surrounding lessons and help other members in groups to reach the mutual goals. CL can stimulate students to learn and participate in all activities. Therefore, by practicing with their peers and in groups, students use language more frequently especially using English in class. It is an effective way to improve English and language acquisition.

Besides, researchers have done a number of studies in relation to comparing cooperative learning and traditional method in teaching and learning language. In traditional classrooms, teachers spend most time on presenting and explaining lessons. Students receive less practice with peers; less communication even communication at a low linguistic and limited English proficiency [2]. In contrast, researches on CL illustrates that cooperative learning supplies second language students with more opportunities to hear more language, complex language as well as speaking during the time of interacting with peers [2]. Similar to the researches, Careen studied cooperative learning in a French foreign language class, found that all groups showed their improvement in oral practice and aural comprehension. By comparing cooperative learning and traditional methods, her study showed that students in the cooperative learning groups acquired more vocabulary than what they have learnt in traditional method [1]. As noted that, the language use increased in the cooperative learning. As a result of this, students can practice four basic English skills such as listening, speaking, reading and writing. Language acquisition, therefore, is improved because of more cooperative learning in classroom.

In general, CL promotes language acquisition in English speaking countries as well in non speaking countries. According to many studies in Asia such as in Japan, Korea and Thailand, the use of cooperative learning benefits both learners and teachers. CL creates more chances for students to practice with their peers so that it promotes language use of students in and outside class.

Methods of cooperative learning: Theory & Practice

There is an enormous diversity of cooperative approaches. It can be used informal or formal way. According to Johnson et al. [5], they refer to informal CL as short meetings. Students work in pairs, discuss simply and share information from lectures or further activities such as watching movies. In addition, learners may be work on a different portion to bring together as a whole or they may all be working on the some tasks.

Researchers have studied various methods and have very specific descriptions of some cooperative learning methods which they have discovered to have proven successful in some areas. Some of these methods are considered effective methods can apply to language learning: the Jigsaw, Group Investigation, Student Teams Achievement Divisions, and Learning Together.

Jigsaw: The jigsaw method was designed by Elliot Aronson [2]. Students are divided into teams to work on academic material which is broken down into sections. Team members read their own individual sections, and then meet in expert groups to discuss their sections. Students then return to their teams and take turns teaching their group members about their sections.

Jigsaw would be useful in a second language classroom for a reading selection. In their expert groups, students have chance to discuss new vocabulary in addition to important ideas in the reading before reporting back to their groups. This would be very conducive to discussion and negotiation in the target language due to the explanation of new material that other group members have not seen. As noted by Pica, negotiation has been shown to improve students' comprehension and quality of learning [9].

Group Investigation: Group Investigation was developed by Shlomo Sharan [2]. In this method, groups take on topics within a unit studied by the entire class. The groups break these topics into tasks within the group and carry out the activities necessary to prepare group reports, which are presented to the class as a whole.

This method is useful to do creative projects in the second language classroom. Groups would be given a theme to prepare and would be required to break that into smaller topics for research and discussion. Many opportunities for meaningful language use would take place.

Student Teams Achievement Divisions (STAD): In STAD, Slavin says that students should be assigned in groups of four including heterogeneous learners [11]. Teachers present new lessons and students then work within their teams to ensure that all team members have mastered the lesson. Students then take individual quizzes.

Scores in each part will be compared in order to assess students' improvement. Team scores are obtained by summing those points. Slavin points out that this is most appropriate for teaching well-defined objectives. This may be useful for grammatical forms as well as vocabulary. The form or vocabulary would be introduced and taught to the class. Students would then be responsible for ensuring that they have mastered the material, with the help of their team members. Teams could be given worksheets or other materials. In this type of cooperative learning activity, students would be learning specific grammatical forms or vocabulary, and in addition, they would be given the opportunity to communicate in the target language, thus using the language in a meaningful way.

Learning Together / Learning Circles: A Learning Circle is a series of discussions, demonstrations, reports on readings and presentations, through which the members of the Learning Circle share their knowledge and experience and learn new information. Members also apply and test new skills.

The process started with people identifying how they wanted to explore the theme of personal transformation. The purpose of this initial process was to encourage people to personally think deeply about the issue and surface insights and learning to share with the group. The sharing began virtually when participants responded to a set of reflection questions. Responses were compiled and shared with the group in advance of a one-day face-to-face gathering. We used an analysis of the responses to create a framework of understanding that we then tested with the group when we met.

Conclusion

The paper has examined the topic cooperative learning (CL) in language teaching. Through a number of researches of CL, scholars point out the effectiveness in teaching and learning English such as increasing students' motivation, improving the attitudes of students toward cooperative learning and enhancing language acquisition. This paper mentions to four popular CL methods which have been used in language teaching, for example, Jigsaw, group investigation, student teams achievement divisions and learning together and learning circle. With benefits of CL in teaching and learning English, this method is considered as one of the useful approaches for teaching and learning language. By cooperative activities, students learn in active way with a lot of lesson activities. Working in groups and doing mutual tasks stimulate students' motivation. It creates more chances for students to learn with friends and from their peers.

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