

Research on College English Teaching based on Cooperative Learning

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Abstract

At present, the traditional large-class teaching is difficult to achieve the goal of the Ministry of Education regarding college English teaching. In order to cultivate students' English application ability, cross-cultural communicative competence and autonomous learning ability, the teaching model of cooperative learning is introduced into the classroom. Firstly, based on the group dynamics theory in cooperative learning, classroom teaching and learning theory, motivation theory and social cohesion theory, this paper clarifies the advantages of cooperative learning. Then, in light of the three main factors that influence the effect of cooperative learning, such as the lack of classroom regulation, the imbalance of student participation and the single evaluation mode, the strategies for improving the quality of cooperative learning are given. Finally, based on the analysis of group work in English teaching practice, it shows that cooperative learning is feasible in large-classroom English teaching, playing a positive and effective role in the students' English learning, especially in language output, that students' speaking and writing skills have been significantly improved, and that in the process of cooperative learning, students' autonomous learning ability and their sense of teamwork are enhanced.

Key words: cooperative learning; College English; Teaching Research; theoretical foundation

I. Introduction

The guidelines for College English teaching, formulated by the Ministry of education, clearly point out that the aim of College English teaching is to cultivate students' English application ability, cross-cultural communicative competence and autonomous learning ability. Thus, today's College English teaching emphasizes the students' language output and the cultivation of their learning habits. English learning needs communication, deficiencies can be found out in the process of communication, and then correct them in time, so as to achieve the improvement of language ability. At present, the proportion of teachers and students in Colleges and universities in China is seriously inadequate, and large class teaching is a teaching form adopted by many colleges and universities. Because of the number of students, teachers can only interact with a small number of students, and most of the students' communicative competence has not been promoted in the classroom.

Among many teaching concepts, the College English teaching guide emphasizes the concept of teacher-guided and student-centered teaching, so that teaching activities can be transformed from "teaching" to "learning". In reality, however, most college English classes focus on teachers. Such instillation teaching makes the students have no interaction with teachers or other students.

Since large-class teaching is inevitable, in order to effectively promote the student-centered, teacher-guided teaching, and cultivate students' autonomous learning habit, cooperative learning teaching model was introduced into the classroom. In this teaching mode, teachers are the designers of teaching, students are the center of the classroom, and group cooperation is the main form of teaching.

Cooperative learning started in the early 1970s in the United States. It is a form of teaching organization [1]. It is a mode that students learn together in order to achieve the same goal. Based on the theoretical analysis and summary of cooperative learning, this paper expounds the shortcomings and improvement strategies of cooperative learning in College English teaching, and studies the effect of cooperative learning with teaching practice.

II. The theoretical basis of cooperative learning

The way of cooperative learning focuses on the cooperation between team members. It emphasizes the completion of common goals through mutual cooperation among the members, improve members' abilities in the process of cooperation, and finally improve the individual's learning skills. Therefore, the theory of cooperative learning is based on the development of theories related to psychology and sociology. At present, its main theoretical basis includes:

(1) group dynamics theory

The theory put forward by Kurt Lewin, a German American, believes that individual behavior is the result of interaction between needs and external environment, that is, when individuals are alone, they behave differently in teamwork [2]. In cooperative learning, team members, based on the same goal, will be infected by other members of the team in the learning process, overcome the fear of individual learning, encourage each other and support each other, so as to form a group dynamics and improve the efficiency of completing tasks.

(2) Classroom teaching and learning theory

The theory indicates that task structure, organizational form and reward structure are the main factors affect the quality of classroom learning[2]. Firstly, cooperative learning transforms the way of classroom communication, emphasizing the fulfillment of academic achievements through student to student communication. Secondly, cooperative learning transforms the role of teachers from leading one to supporting one. Finally, cooperative learning transforms the individual competitive model into team's common benefits model.

(3) Motivation theory

The theory not only reflects the intrinsic learning motivation of an individual, but also includes the expectation and encouragement of team members to individuals, so that individuals can achieve their learning goals [3]. Therefore, team members are urged to establish positive dependence relationships, trust each other and support each other to promote team members' learning motivation.

(4) Social cohesion theory

The theory emphasizes that team members' group learning is driven by collective sense of honor, showing collective concern, rather than emphasizing individual interests in motivational theory. Therefore, in the learning process, although the team members have different abilities, each individual is willing to help other members by virtue of his or her unique abilities, attaching much importance to the collective cohesion.

The theoretical views of cooperative learning are not antagonistic but complementary, and these theories work together to form the theoretical basis of cooperative learning. Under the support of these theories, cooperative learning requires team members to work together for a common learning goal. Under the incentive of the common goal, the members of the group respect each other, supervise each other, encourage each other, help each other, and discuss and participate actively. In the process of achieving goals, personal initiative can be brought into full play, so as to enhance personal ability and team spirit, cultivate cooperation spirit and improve overall performance.

III. The problems and improving strategies of cooperative learning in College English Teaching

In College English class, the advantage of cooperative learning is obvious. It is one of the important ways to improve the efficiency of the class in the large-class teaching environment. The outstanding advantages of cooperative learning have been confirmed in the teaching practice, but the improper control of the following factors will directly affect the effect of cooperative learning.

(1) The lack of teachers' classroom regulation and control

Classroom regulation and control refers that in order to achieve the desired teaching objectives and effects, teachers guide students to participate in the classroom and adjust teaching process when necessary[4]. In the practice teaching of College English, teachers usually give the students some tasks related to the subject of the text and require the group to discuss them, and finally someone from the group makes presentation. But in the process of assigning tasks to students, the teachers do not specify the assignments or guide students on a topic, thus the students do not know where to start, what their responsibilities are. In this case, usually the students with good command of English prefer to express their personal views, but weaker members feel ashamed to participate in the discussion, some even chat with each other in Chinese.

Large class means a lot of groups, thus, occasionally, some group members haven't finished their opinions, the bell is ringing, and the teaching plan is not completed. Sometimes because of the speakers' unclear pronunciation or confusing logic, teachers don't give any explanations; the other students cannot make sense, thus losing the interest in listening. So cooperative learning in classroom is just a form. Teachers don't guide cooperation or adjust the teaching in time when students have problems. The actual teaching effect was far from expected.

(2) the imbalance of students' participation

The results of foreign research show that the factors affecting the participation of group activities are very complex, involving many verbal and non-verbal variables. The factors, such as learning motivation, learning style and characters, have important impacts on students' participation in group activities. The foreign scholars, Gardner and Lambert, divided learning motivation into "integrative motivation" and "instrumental motivation"[5], the former refers that learners are interested in cooperative groups and willing to communicate with others, hoping to participate in group activities, the latter refers that the learners aim to obtain the honor or reward. If the students' motivation is not strong enough, they will not be interested in group activities. Or if they think the other members' participation will have negative impacts on instrumental motivation, they will choose to work alone. Meanwhile, influenced by learning styles, some students are good at cooperation. In the class, they like to explore knowledge with group members, while some students are good at independent thinking; their participation in group activities is significantly lower. Additionally, the degree of participation in cooperative learning is closely related to students' personality. Extroverted students are more willing to communicate in English in class, while introverted students are reluctant to participate in English communication activities. Students' learning interest and teachers' teaching methods all have impacts on the participation of the students' group activities. Due to the imbalance of students' participation, cooperative learning is beneficial for part of the team members.

(3) single evaluation model

The work performance theory is proposed by Borman and Motowidb (1993), which is divided into task performance and peripheral performance [6]. Task performance is a performance closely related to the content of the specific job, and the peripheral performance is the performance related to the surroundings. The students' performance in cooperative learning can be divided into two parts: task performance and peripheral performance, which is, completing the task and promoting the task. Based on the common goals, the team members promote the performance of the relevant responsibilities. Therefore, the evaluation of group cooperation should also be divided into two parts: evaluating the result and evaluating the process. When teachers evaluate the effect of cooperative learning, they usually only evaluate the result of cooperation, that is, the quality of task completion, the problem solving ability, knowledge grasping, creativity and expressive force of each group member, but pay little attention to the process of cooperation or even completely ignore them. Only paying attention to the results but ignoring the evaluation of the process, the students' English learning deficiencies can't be noticed and the misunderstanding of English learning can't be corrected in time. Therefore, the students' learning ability based on group cooperation can't be improved as expected.

In order to improve the efficiency of cooperative learning, the following strategies were put forward: the teachers must master the regulation of teaching content and teaching time according to the actual situation in the class; teachers should adopt new and diverse cooperation model to promote learning in the process of cooperation; teachers allocate the tasks according to the degree of difficulty; teachers participate in students' discussion, giving students appropriate guidance and help; teachers make comments on students' presentation, giving positive evaluation and objective advice. Teachers could give interesting tasks and corresponding rewards to stimulate the students' learning motivation. When allocating assignments, teachers are supposed to take students' different learning styles into consideration, combining expressive students and thoughtful ones, introvert students and extroverted ones. The students' cooperative learning evaluation should consider both result and process, including cooperation ability, social ability, working enthusiasm, the implementation of the rules, the degree of participation, and so forth. As teachers cannot fully monitor the process of cooperation, team members can make self-assessment and peer assessment.

IV. Cooperative learning practice

In order to cultivate students' language application and communicative competence, enhance students' autonomous learning ability, mobilize students' learning enthusiasm and improve classroom efficiency, the cooperative learning teaching mode is adopted for a semester in College English teaching practice.

The teaching practice has proved that cooperative learning can effectively improve students' English skills, cultivate students' learning ability, promote communication between students and students, and enhance the effectiveness of teaching.

(1) group division

According to the principle of "intra group heterogeneity and group homogeneity"[7], the class is divided into 8 groups, based on the results of the examination, there were 6 students in each group. Taking the gender and personality factors into consideration, the group members were slightly adjusted. In the group, the personality of the group is complementary, the proportion of boys and girls is coordinated, and the English standard of the group is balanced.

(2) The responsibilities of the group members

The responsibilities of the 6 group members are given below. The students discuss and confirm the number in the group, and change their duties once a month. Clear division of labor can effectively avoid freeloaders. Job rotation can cultivate students' abilities in many aspects.

number	Duty
1	Cooperation coordinator
2,3	Cooperation recorder and reporter in class
4,5	Cooperation recorder and reporter after class
6	Cooperation supervisor

(3) Curriculum design based on cooperative learning

Preview:

Students work together, get familiar with the vocabulary related to the theme, and design scrabble games, then ask each other questions based on the text, after that figure out relevant domestic and foreign movies or novels and introduce to members, finally find out related cultural background and share with members

Leading in:

"The teaching process is a continuous activity to raise questions and solve problems," said Bruner, an American psychologist [8]. Problems stimulates students' thinking, but the way of leading-in questions needs to be diversified, such as questions only, pictures and questions, videos and questions, scenes and questions, and events and questions. After the introduction, the cultural background knowledge are introduced among groups.

Text study:

The teacher first divides the text according to its structure, and tells the students' its macro structure. Then, group members work together to interpret the text, find out its micro structure, and analyzes the relevance and coherence of the sentence. Each group is responsible for one paragraph, working out the lexical conjunction and the logical conjunction within the paragraph. Group member 2 or 3 shows the results of the discussion and write the key words and logical words on the blackboard. After all the members share their views, the teachers lead the students to grasp the macro structure of the text and the author's writing ideas, and teach students cultural differences.

After class task:

Students are required to cooperate to write three-paragraph composition, and use some linking words and logical words in the text according to the macro structure and writing idea of the text. One member of the group completes a piece of writing, then passes it down to the next member, and the rest three members are responsible for the vocabulary, grammar correction and the structure correction. Each group member is responsible for different writing part.

Reflection:

The group members start self-evaluation and peer evaluation, share the harvest and deficiencies, and record the reflection content as the basis for the evaluation of the cooperative learning process.

(4) the effect of cooperative learning

At the end of the semester, the students were tested and SPSS17.0 was used to analyze the data collected.

The results of independent sample t-test showed that there were significant differences in student's overall English achievement (Sig.=.001<.05), student's vocabulary achievement (Sig.=.000<.05) and student's writing achievement (Sig.=.000<.05) before and after group cooperation. Among them, the result of writing $t=-6.404$, and the result of the vocabulary $t=-4.147$, indicating that effect of cooperative learning on students' writing was more obvious than on the vocabulary. However, there is no significant difference on students' reading performance (Sig.=.539>.05) after cooperative learning.

Table 1 independent sample test results

project	Total achievement		Reading achievement		Vocabulary achievement		Writing achievement	
	T	Sig.	T	Sig.	T	Sig.	T	Sig.
T-test	-3.446	0.001	-0.617	0.539	-4.147	.000	-6.404	.000

From the student's overall performance and item results, under the guidance of teachers, cooperative learning has a positive impact on student's academic performance improvement, especially the language output, which is consistent with the Swain's output hypothesis theory. Swain (1993) believes that the output hypothesis has three functions for language acquisition, including attention function, test hypothesis function and metalanguage function [9]. Both speaking and writing are the process of language output. In the process of output, students will be aware of their own language errors and constantly adjust their output according to the feedback obtained, so as to achieve the purpose of expressing the right language.

V. Conclusion

Under the large class teaching environment, the feasibility of cooperative learning shows that cooperative learning has played a positive and effective role in promoting students' English learning, and language output ability has improved significantly, such as speaking and writing. In the process of cooperative learning, group members could find their own shortcomings and improve them when cooperating with others. Students become more self-confident and more active, enhance the sense of group cooperation, improve their self-learning ability and promote the overall development of the students. In the teaching practice, teachers can also combine cooperative learning with MOOC or flipping classes to achieve the modernization and diversification of the teaching model. However, there are also some shortcomings in this study, such as less research objects, short research time, and the students' cooperation after class cannot be supervised.

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