Using Cooperative Learning in English Classrooms in China

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Abstract
This paper makes a study of the features of cooperative learning and the feasibility of its application in the foreign language learning classrooms in China. First part is the analysis of the definition and two examples of CL activities; the second part introduces the major principles of CL; the third part is about the merits and problems of CL; the fourth part is the introduction of the current status of CL in China through a small research; in the last part, the author puts forward his suggestions about the application of CL in the foreign language learning classrooms in China.

Key words: Cooperative learning (CL), group work, merits and problems, application in China

Introduction
Since the late 1970s, experts and teachers in the field of second language teaching and learning have witnessed the invention of many new terms such as “learner-centered”, “cooperative”, “collaborative”, “interactive”, “communicative”, etc. Though each term has a slightly different emphasis, they all refer to more or less the same thing within the framework of communicative language teaching and learning (cf. “teacher-fronted, lockstep teaching and learning), an approach of second language teaching and learning that is currently recognized as a generally accepted norm in this field. In this paper, I’ll name this norm as “cooperative learning” (hereafter shortened as “CL”). The fact that communicative language teaching is replacing traditional teaching indicates human being are becoming clearer about the function and mechanism of language and about language learners’ acquisition and learning process of language.

Definition of CL and the conception of goal structure
CL is the instructional use of small groups in order to achieve common learning goals via cooperation (Dornyei, 1997), or in the words of Jacob, Rottenberg, Patrick and Wheeler (1996), it is a group of instructional methods in which small groups of students work together and aid each other in completing academic tasks. In both definitions, ‘group’ is the word that is emphasized. Johnson and Johnson (1979) highlighted the conception of goal structure, which is helpful for us to understand the difference between cooperative learning and traditional learning. According to Johnson, goal structure refers to the type of interdependence among students as they strive to achieve educational objectives. The literature on ‘goal structure’ classifies it into three categories: cooperative, competitive and individualistic. With a cooperative goal structure, individual learners can achieve their own goals only if the people they are working with also achieve theirs. The type of relationship involved with a competitive goal structure is exactly the opposite of that found in a cooperative goal structure: there is a negative relation between the possibility of individuals’ attaining their aims and their peers doing so too. In other words, one student achieves his/her goal
only if other people don’t achieve theirs. In the third goal structure, the individualistic one, there is no interrelation between the goal attainments of the people involved, that is, one person’s success is independent of another’s. From the above, we can see that cooperative goal structure belongs to cooperative learning while individualistic goal structure and competitive goal structure belongs to the traditional teacher-fronted learning. In addition, there is also a combination of cooperative goal structure and competitive goal structure—cooperation with intergroup competition (Johnson, Maruyama, Johnson, Nelson, & Skon, 1981).

Two examples of group work
1. Jigsaw reading: this is a useful reading activity, where the groups try to sort out a story.

Method:
(1) Choose and copy a story or any other genre, cut it out and shuffle the pieces—one set for each group. Divide the class into groups of three to four students. Give each group a set of cards and tell them to arrange them in the correct order.
(2) Set a definite time-limit (e.g., 15 minutes) and stop the students at the end of it, whether they have finished or not.
(3) Check orally by getting one person from one of their groups to read the first line of the story, then another person to read the second line, and so on.
(4) Get the groups to suggest a title for the story

2. Simulation—the front page
This is a simulation for groups of four to five students based on deciding the content of a daily newspaper’s front page.

Method:
(1) Copy the notes for editors (instruction), one set for each group. Also copy the newspaper stories and the photographs, one set for each group.
(2) Read through the instructions with the whole class to make sure that they know exactly what they have to do.
(3) Hand out the news stories and the photographs and let the groups try to work out which ones to use.
(4) Set a time-limit (e.g., 15-20 minutes), then stop everyone.
(5) Get each group to read out their choices for the front page of the newspaper and answer the following questions: What was the most popular ‘main’ story with the groups? Which stories were the least popular?

Major Principles of CL
For the convenience of discussion, I will explain the characteristics of CL from 8 points, namely, the eight major principles of CL, on the basis of Sharan (1994), Slavin (1995) and Jacob and Inn (2003):

1. Positive Interdependence—pair/group members depend on one another for mutual progress and development. This is the most important feature of CL and also what encourage group
members to care about and support one another in the learning process. As Johnson, Johnson, & Smith (1995) summarize, positive interdependence occurs 'when one perceives that one is linked with others in a way so that one can’t succeed unless they do (and vice versa) and/or one must coordinate one’s efforts with the efforts of others to complete a task’.

Now that positive interdependence is a key factor of CL, how to achieve it will be the most important thing. According to Olsen and Kagan (1992), there are several principal ways for accomplishing CL structures:

1. Structuring the goal: groups work for a shared team product
2. Structuring the rewards: besides individual scores/grades, team scores are also calculated and joint rewards/grades are given for the groups’ overall production.
3. Structuring student roles: assigning different roles to every group member so that everybody has a specific responsibility (e.g., timekeeper, recorder, noise monitor, reporter, etc.).
4. Structuring materials. Students either have to share limited materials or have to fit their materials together to complete the assigned task.
2. Individual Accountability. This principle mainly emphasizes that in each group, each member should not only receive help from others but also help others. That is, each group member has the pressure to learn and to help their groupmates learn. Individual accountability can be encouraged either by each member taking individual quiz or by teacher randomly selecting a group member to report and explain what their group did or thought.
3. Heterogeneous Grouping. This means that students of different characteristics should form a group so that they can learn from one another and complement with one another. The criteria for forming heterogeneous groups include past achievement, gender, personality (e.g., talkative versus quiet), etc.
4. Collaborative Skills. Teachers tend to think that students automatically know the skills of cooperation. Actually they should give students explicit instruction and structural practice. Collaborative skills such as expressing disagreement politely, listening to others and taking turns play a very important role in successful group work.
5. Equal Participation. In each group, members are different in terms of proficiency and characteristics (consistent with ‘heterogeneous Grouping’). Therefore students with stronger ability tend to do more or most group work, thus the participation of each member is unequal. As a result, some measures are necessary to ensure members’ equal participation, which is the essential nature of real cooperative learning. These equal participation ensuring measures include students taking rotating roles in pair or group activities such as interviewer and interviewee, or each student sharing their ideas with partners or other groupmates.
6. Simultaneous Interaction. This principle might be the most convincing rationale for the use of group activities. The point is that ‘compared with a teacher-fronted activity, group work provides students with many more opportunities to practice using the target language and to engage in direct interaction. In the teacher-fronted activity, the group interlocutor necessarily restricted the number of occasions individual students were able to speak out or be spoken to’ (Pica and Doughty, 1985). This point can be clearly seen from the figures below (where T = teacher, s = student, and the lines = main directions of interaction). (McDonough & Shaw, 1993)
In Figure 1, the interaction is carried out between the teacher and individual students, thus the only person that each student can interact is the teacher, but the students that have the chance to communicate with the teacher is very limited. At a certain point of time, there is only one student interacting with the teacher, leaving other students no chance. Figure 2 is about the organization of pair work (in a broad sense, pair work can also be regarded as group work). In this interaction mode, at any point of time, there will be half students communicate with their partners. Similar to pair work, in the interaction mode of group work described in Figure 3, there is one student from each group communicating with his/her members simultaneously. They still have more chances than they have in traditional classes.

7. Group Autonomy. This principle means teachers should give power to groups and try not to interfere with their activities. In that way students will gain a sense of responsibility in terms of their learning and behavior. However, giving students power doesn’t mean that students can do whatever they want to do or the teachers are deprived of any responsibility so that they can go for their own business. Actually, the teacher role has changed when a traditional
class is replaced by a learner-centered class. The difference lies in that in the traditional class, the teacher is the main knowledge giver, or in Tudor’s words (Tudor, 1993), ‘knower’ and ‘organizer’, but in a learner-centered class, the teacher is more a ‘facilitator’ than a ‘knower’. Naturally, the students will be feeling more strongly that they are learning from each other as well as the teacher.

8. Cooperation as a Value. This principle is directly related to principle 7. Now that students are given more power to do their own things, cooperation becomes much more important than it is in traditional class. Obviously, in modern society, cooperation is necessary, so students have to learn this important concept and technique as early as in school. This is beneficial to the learning of language, and more beneficial to the progress of the whole society. I personally think that the education of cooperation should be an inseparable part of education goal.

Merits and problems of CL

1. Merits.

(1) CL can increase language practice opportunities and improve the quality of student talk. In their article, Long and Porter (Long & Porter, 1985) made a calculation (estimation) of individual student’s practicing time, their conclusion is that in a 50-minute traditional, teacher-fronted class, each student has only half a minute to talk while in a CL class, students’ available time can increase as much as five times. This is especially true for the classes in China which are usually larger than those in Western countries. With increased practicing time, students will get more feedback from their peers and the teacher, which is very difficult in a traditional class.

As for the quality of student talk, they hold that group work offers more chance for students to develop their communicative competence. Group work involves language varieties other than those highly conventionalized ones used in traditional, teacher-fronted classes, which can rarely be found outside classroom. For example, in group work, to solve a problem or to finish a task, students have to resort to techniques (skills) such as suggesting, qualifying, hypothesizing, generalizing or disagreeing on the one hand, and to topic-nominating, turn-allocating, focusing, summarizing and clarifying skills on the other. Thus group work can better prepare students for genuine communication. I personally think that if the class can improve students’ communicative competence in real communication, we can say the class practice improves the quality of student talk.

(2) CL can promote students’ intrinsic motivation. Edward Deci’s definition of intrinsic motivation is like this:

Intrinsically motivated activities are ones for which there is no apparent reward except the activity itself. People seem to engage in the activities for their own sake and not because the lead to an extrinsic reward... Intrinsically motivated behaviors are aimed at bringing about certain internally rewarding consequences, namely, feeling of competence and self-determination. (Edward Deci, 1975:23).

Cooperative learning is based on assigning students certain tasks. To finish these tasks, students are supposed to cooperate with one another. Their cooperation is thus made both possible and necessary. If they can complete the tasks through their efforts and cooperation, they will gain a sense of accomplishment and this in turn will encourage them to have more
cooperation in future classes. This virtuous circle in learning is favorable for the production of intrinsic motivation.

(3) Promoting a positive affective climate: lowering anxiety and prejudice. In traditional classes, a student who is invited to answer questions has to face the teacher and the whole class. This constitutes a great pressure for the student. In cooperative learning, however, students are divided into small groups. Inside each group, questions are from their group members, they are peers and equal. This can greatly reduce the pressure of answering questions. In addition, when the teacher checks the product of a certain group, the member tend to answer the teacher’s questions on behalf of the group as a whole, that is, his/her answer is the collective idea of the group, no matter how good or bad the idea (his answer) is (Flowerdew, 1998). That is another reason why CL can reduce anxiety and prejudice from the teacher and students. In Chinese, we have a saying that ‘the law doesn’t punish the majority’, though it is not quite rational, it can to some extent describe the psychological state of students in CL class and describe the reason why CL can reduce students’ anxiety.

(5) CL heightening self-esteem. Learning through cooperation, students will increase their self confidence and self esteem instead of feeling lost or anonymous, especially in large classes.

(6) CL creating caring and altruistic relationships among students. By cooperative learning, students not only practice language skills, they also learn cooperation as a social skill and life value. This is especially beneficial for students after their graduation.

2. Problems.

When discussing about the use of group activities in second language learning in the Southeast Asia, Rodgers (1998) describes four arguments against their use and then offers respective counterarguments. I would like to add the fifth one, namely, the individual difference. I personally think these arguments and counterarguments are also applicable in China, or in other words, group activities can be applied to classes in China since in many aspects China is similar to Southeast Asian countries. Below I will briefly explain the five points.

(1) Muddled Modeling. This is the worry that in CL class, students listen to each other and read to each other one’s writing, thus poor models will be provided and fossilized as the target language. In traditional class, by contrast, teacher will correct any non-target-like language thus the model is better or more standard. Rodgers’ counterargument is like this: now people emphasize more on fluency, meaning and communication, less on accuracy. In addition, he claimed, through Porter’s study in 1983, that students didn’t produce more errors while speaking in groups, nor did they seem to learn erroneous language from their peers.

(2) Faulty Feedback. This is the worry that peers will be unable to point out each others’ errors. They can even offer inaccurate correction. The studies cited by Rodgers, such as Bruton and Samuda (1980), Jacobs (1989), show that few instances of miscorrection are made by peers. Besides, I personally think that there should be an appropriate balance between input and output and between quality and quantity.

(3) Chaotic Class is the worry that students will do whatever they want to do thus make the class chaotic and out of teachers’ control. Both Rodgers (1998) and Jacobs and Hall (1994) made some suggestions on class controlling skills and on noise controlling skills, such as assigning a student in each group to be in charge of the noise level.
Native Noise refers to the concern that students will use their native language to talk since the teacher can’t afford to supervise all the groups all the time in class. Rodgers suggests that in Southeast Asian countries where many people are multilingual, code switching should be tolerated. Similarly, I personally think that in English classes in China, Chinese, the students’ native language, should also be tolerated if the quantity and is appropriate and the occasion is suitable, for example, in dealing with culturally specific words. In other words, native language is not absolutely inappropriate in foreign language learning class.

Special cultural expectation. This means in some cultures, people are taught to be submissive, modest and quiet while in some other cultures, it is thought of as normal for people, students especially, to be open, eloquent and active. The former is generally regarded as not favorable for CL such as the case in the English classes in China while the second one, favorable; Different individual learning styles (individual vs pair or group) and personalities (introvert vs extrovert). Students are quite different in many aspects such as personality, past experience, learning style preference, etc. In my opinion, this is both a problem and the advantage of CL. The key is how a teacher makes use of the individual difference. Used appropriately, students can complement with one another during the course of learning.

Concerning the characteristics of Chinese students for the purpose of applying CL, Flowerdew (1998) made her study from a cultural perspective. She summarized three points, specifically, the three Confucian values: cooperation, the concept of ‘face’, and self-effacement. She holds that all of the three points can be harnessed to serve the group work in the cooperative classes in China. The first point is obviously favorable; the second point, i.e., that students don’t want to express negative opinion on their peers in front of the whole class (in traditional classes), makes group work quite appropriate since group work can produce a positive affectionate climate in which the pressure/anxiety is low. The third point, i.e., the fact that students are too shy to say out their own virtues in front of the classes, also makes group work appropriate since in groups, students will feel comfortable to praise their group members.

Practice of CL in China

Actually there has been much discussion about the use of new teaching methods (mainly western teaching methods including communication language teaching methods) in China. Some say yes, some say no and some others advocate certain adaptation should be made before the new methods are used. According to Barbara Burnaby & Yilin Sun (1989), and Chen Yuanshan & Rosalind Y. Mau (2003), there is great challenge for CL to be used in China.

Barbara Burnaby and Yilin Sun’s study (1989) concludes that the answer to the feasibility of the application of western teaching methods in China is no. The reason they offer is that generally Chinese teachers lack authentic materials and appropriate consistent testing system, that it is difficult to create an English-speaking atmosphere, and that teachers themselves lack the communication competence. Another source of challenge comes from large classes since in China, classes are generally large, which is already a common sense for many years. Large classes tend to be difficult to manage in CL methods but in traditional teaching, large classes don’t seem to constitute much difficulty for teaching.

In recent years, however, the Chinese Ministry of Education has begun to launch the Quality Driven Education Initiative which requires that teachers should teach students with different
abilities and focus on more creativity in their classes. Thus priority should be given to develop the students’ creativity and different abilities. This, I think, provides the basic rationale for the practice of CL in China in the future. In addition, China is changing rapidly, the conditions for the use of CL are getting better and better. This is also shown in my own investigation (see below). It is high time now for us to consider carefully how to apply some new teaching methods in China.

For my own investigation, the data were obtained from my PGDELT classmates when I was studying in Singapore National Institute of Education in Nanyang Technological University. I designed a small questionnaire which includes fourteen open-ended, multiple-choice and scalar questions on my PGDELT classmates attitude toward the appropriacy of CL (more specifically, group activities) in the tertiary English classrooms in China and the appropriacy and feasibility of CL in their own teaching situation. All my classmates came from different English-major or non-English major departments of different universities in China and can be regarded as typical of their peers. From 32 students, 22 responses were collected (the investigation was done when my classmates were about to go back to China, it was a little hurried and pushy so some classmates’ responses were missed). Among the 22 respondents, 16 gave favorable answers concerning their attitude toward the application of CL while only 6 gave unfavorable answers. Among the students who gave favorable answers, half say their use of CL is successful, the other half not always successful. When answering the question of “what is the biggest worry about the use of CL, most of them mentioned examination-driven education system and the related physical environment.

Five mentioned that students are not cooperative enough because they are not accustomed to CL (some reasons are: some students are too quiet in classes, some want to control the group, some want to do something else, and some don’t have necessary cooperative skills).

From my investigation, we might get the following conclusions: (a) Teachers’ attitude toward the use of CL in China changes a lot; (b) Some constraints on CL, though still exist, improves.

Conclusion/Suggestions
To cope with the rapid development in China, the education in foreign language teaching and learning should also be reformed. CL as a new teaching style has been prevalent in western countries. I personally think sooner or later, new teaching methods such as CL or CLT will be largely applied to the classes in China. Of course some problems, such as, material construction; raising both the teachers’ and students’ cooperation awareness, reform the current testing system and design assessment system pertinent to CL, have to be tackled step by step during the application of these teaching methods.

References


