

Group Learning in English Oral Class of Non-English Majors in Chinese Colleges: Problems and Strategies

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Abstract

Since 1970s, cooperative learning has aroused wide attention from experts home and abroad and has been popular used in China's college English learning and teaching. The current debate in education is focused on how we can continue to help students be successful both academically and socially. One way this can be achieved in classroom is through the use of cooperative learning. Compared to competitive or individual work, cooperation leads to higher group and individual learning efficiency, higher-quality reasoning strategies, greater meta-cognitive skills, and more new ideas and solutions to problems. This paper attempts to investigate group learning in English oral class of non-English majors in Chinese colleges. A qualitative study method is adopted to analyze group learning used by Chinese teachers and the achievements achieved and problems met by both students and teachers.

Key words: Group learning; Cooperative work; Classroom teaching

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INTRODUCTION

Since implementation of college English program in China, the teaching and learning of English have been

mainly focused on reading and writing. With the trend of globalization, listening and speaking of English increasingly gain much concern among college teachers and students. Meanwhile, cooperative learning has also become a necessity in the new round of basic education reform in China. The International 21st Century Education of Committee has reported to UNESCO which points out four pillars of education, and "learning to cooperate" becomes one of them. It emphasizes not only cooperation socially, but also interpersonally.

Modern instruction incorporates clear expectations, skills to time management and conflict resolution, utilization of cutting edge technology, and development of school and classroom patterns and rituals (Long & Porter, 1985). One strategy that can be highly effective in assisting students to develop these essential skills is group work.

Group work or group learning, when planned and implemented thoughtfully helps students develop cognitive and leadership skills as well as a sense of responsibility, all of which are required in the contemporary society. Learning goes into one's long-term memory when it is challenging, meaningful, and relates to the real world. When students are asked to solve genuine problems, they will work diligently to find solutions. Furthermore, education research has emphasized that when students are actively involved in group activities, they tend to learn best and more of what is taught, retain it longer than conventional teaching, appear more satisfied with their classes and improve project quality and performance (Dillenbourg, 1999). So this paper aims to investigate group learning in college English oral class of non-English majors and explore the existing problems and challenges encountered and try to find solutions in Chinese college context.

1. LITERATURE REVIEW

Group work is "a generic term covering a multiplicity of techniques in which two or more students are assigned a

task involving collaboration and self-initiated language”. Its main purpose is “giving students greater opportunities to speak” (Brown, 1994), and is often considered as an essential feature of communicative language teaching (Brumfit, 1984).

In addition, a psycholinguistic justification has been advanced: Group work provides the kind of input and opportunities for output that promotes rapid L2 acquisition (Ellis, 2008).

Edmondson (1999) conceptualizes group learning as an ongoing process of reflection and action, characterized by asking questions, seeking feedback, experimenting, reflecting on results, and discussing errors or unexpected outcomes of results. Thus the focus is on group processes in terms of interactive behaviors related to group learning. This is in consistent with Argote (Argote, 1999) who suggests that group learning involves the processes through which members share, generate, evaluate and combine knowledge with these related, overlapping processes involving feedback.

Small-group learning is used here to encompass contexts in which students work together in small groups to achieve shared learning goals (Dillenbourg, Johnson, & Johnson, 1999). While cooperative and collaborative learning have different origins, both involve students working together to achieve shared learning goals, both have a history of successfully increasing student learning, and the terms are similar enough that they are frequently used interchangeably (Bruffee, 1995). Johnson and Johnson listed four advantages of cooperative learning: achieve more; be more positive about school, subject areas, and teachers or professors; be more positive about each other; be more effective interpersonally.

Raul and Heyl (1990) note that as group size increases, productive group coordination and meaningful participation by all members become more complex. While variations in small-group size may play important roles in some collaborative tasks, the focus in this paper is on small groups in general.

Researchers (Jacobs & McCafferty, 2006; Jacobs & Goh, 2007) argue that the integration of cooperative learning into second language classrooms is considered likely to facilitate optimum development of a learner’s ability to communicate in the target language because it provides increased opportunities for comprehensible input, real-life experience of language use, and positive peer interaction.

However, group learning in oral classes of non-English majors in college context and its efficacy have not been sufficiently studied. Thus, this paper makes an attempt to present a detailed analysis of group learning in English oral class, which hopes to enhance students’ cooperation linguistically and interpersonally within classroom setting.

2. PROBLEMS AND REASONS

The key spirits of group learning act in accordance with the cooperative inquire and experience of the new curriculum standards of English in colleges. If teachers apply the cooperative methods in classroom activities appropriately, students’ comprehensive ability will improve accordingly. However, in practical application, there exist many problems.

2.1 Vague Objective

In college English oral class, teachers usually begin with some warm-up questions related to the topic, and then students discuss around the given topic. If students lack the necessary experience of group learning and teachers know little about the strategies and approaches of cooperative learning, students’ group activities can hardly achieve the desirable result.

According to the survey carried out in my oral English class, some students complained that they sometimes could not understand the teachers’ requirements and they suggested that clear explanations of tasks and objectives for the group and every individual are essential to effective group activity. They hope that teacher had better repeats the tasks clearly. Group leaders or inspectors are also expected to repeat the tasks to group members and follow them accordingly. More importantly, teachers should go around the classroom to monitor what is happening within groups and give necessary help if needed.

2.2 Insufficiency in Organization

When students are allowed to discuss within groups, they easily get started with great enthusiasm, but most of the time they head forward with inconsistent topics. Group leaders simply assign the respective role and responsibility and lack the necessary supervision. Most importantly, teachers often divide groups randomly, so some students are bored with the fixed discussion pattern, while others are overburdened.

As to the time allocation, teachers usually don’t give students sufficient time to think and discuss. In fact, students just begin to brainstorm or have discussed for limited time. Teachers usually hurriedly asked students to present their group ideas.

As Chinese college English class is often carried out in a classroom with so many students inside, teachers have to hurriedly organize group activity within limited time to complete learning tasks. Without sufficient time to think and negotiate and communicate, students cannot adequately carry out group activity, resulting in poor performance of group learning.

2.3. Less Interaction in Activity

Usually some active students seize the opportunity to practice. Because of their solid language foundation they tend to be the spokespersons within the group.

While others remain passive due to their relatively weak language basis, especially those introverted students who remain silent. Moreover, some students are less confident to express their opinion and refuse to reveal their true idea. Even some others choose Chinese to express themselves.

From my observation and interview with some students in and after class, I find that there is little interaction and modification in the process of group work. Most students just talk randomly rather than mutual-communication. Besides, some students only focus on expressing themselves without listening carefully to others. What they are really concerned with is to wait for their own turn to present their ideas. This leads to the embarrassing situation of “zero listeners” and to some extent, it will cause polarization of learning.

The reasons may lie part in passive personalities of some Chinese students. The students in my class are mostly from Shandong Province which is Confucius’ hometown. Their personalities are more or less affected by Confucius’ traditional doctrine. They are modest in class to ask a few questions and reluctantly participate in oral activities to show themselves. In addition, most students are faced with the contradiction between their poor English performance and the desire to communicate with others. In order to protect their faces, they would pretend to have already understood something rather than insisting on getting to the bottom of something.

2.4 Teacher’s Factors

“Why use small group learning?” It is a fundamental question of group learning for teachers. Here are some questions for teachers about their teaching and if they answer “yes”, then they have answered the question for themselves.

- Do you think students can learn more from one another, often more than from you?
- Do you think the best use of classroom time is to get students engaged in problem-solving?
- Do you like a noisy classroom in which students are tackling your assignments together?

Teacher’s careful design and organization are key to successful group performance. Firstly, insufficient organization affects the efficient development of group activity. When forming groups, teachers randomly divide groups or give students too much freedom to find partners. Meanwhile teachers are not engaged in group discussion to supervise the process of activity. Instead they shut their eyes to inactive group members and those students who prefer to stay alone rather than join a group. In fact teachers’ attitude toward those passive participators could affect learning initiative of group members. Secondly, unscientific and less comprehensive assessment of group performance could infect the enthusiasm of cooperation. Some teachers just focus on the overall assessment of groups, especially the spokespersons’ performance, and

neglect group member’s contribution. Besides, the degree of participation and cooperation, interactive skills of individual group members are not included in the list of overall assessment.

3. SUGGESTED STRATEGIES

H. D. Brown (1994) said “without careful arrangement, orderly and thoroughly monitor, any activity tends to go wrong directions”. Faced with the above problems, in order to effectively carry out group activity in English oral class, some suggested strategies are put forward.

3.1 Grouping

Studies suggest that mixed gender and mixed proficiency pairs may be optimal. The quality of interaction appears to be enhanced if the learners comprising the pair or group are heterogeneous with regard to sex and proficiency level (Ellis, 2008). Moreover, mixed pairings offer something to both sides of learners. So we had better try to mix boys and girls within a group and encourage them to learn from each other.

According to China’s situation, English oral class is usually carried out in language lab with 40 to 50 students inside. Four members of a group are the most practical and effective way to interact. Four members within a group are convenient to talk face to face or side by side. Of course what group size the teachers select in group activity will depend on students’ English proficiency and what kind of activity or technique is carried out.

Moreover, we can try to take full consideration of students’ personality and interpersonal relationship within the same group. If the introverted and unsociable students are in the same group, their discussions most likely lack vigor and vitality. In addition, try to assign students to heterogeneous groups, especially mix students of different traits and family backgrounds and encourage them to play their traits and background knowledge to its full potential. Lastly, try to make the group members fresh and new to achieve group dynamics. Teachers should make efforts to renew the members within the same group unexpectedly and update the standards of dividing groups.

3.2 Making Students Responsible

All the students should know in advance that as group members, they should be responsible for the given task. For example, a recorder is responsible for taking notes, while an inspector supervises group members, such as speaking English all the time or keeping focused on the given topic and a reporter is responsible for summarizing and presenting the group idea. The most important point is to take turns at the roles in groups. After group work, teachers can ask students to comment on other’s ideas and performance.

Through my teaching experience, most students enjoy the process of cooperation and participation and

their enthusiasm are greatly aroused. They strongly experience group power in some way, since their horizons are broadened and the cooperative work becomes more efficient and active than individual job. So group learning can make students stay closely with each other to accomplish their common task, manage time well, share various information and praise.

3.3 Teacher's Role in Group Work

According to Harmer (Harmer, 1997) the teacher can act as a controller, an assessor, an organizer, a prompter, a participant, a resource, a tutor and an investigator. When students are performing group activity, teacher should still be monitoring the whole class. That is, teacher is the "guide" and students are "tourists", but the focus of guidance is to arouse students' active and creative consciousness in learning.

Teachers themselves should have relevant interpersonal communicative strategies. In the implementation process, teachers should provide appropriate learning materials such as useful phrases and expressions, examples, anecdotes, etc. and give sufficient time to warm up the discussion. Basic communicative skills, such as making eye contact, encouraging fellow group members, saying thanks to others' help, listening without interruption and apologizing should be introduced. As students feel ease within group, more cooperative skills should also be taught and reinforced. For example, students are taught how to disagree without hostility, how to seek assistance, how to give and accept compliments, and how to praise and encourage other group members.

As for practical skills, teacher also should guide students to learn how to distribute activity among group members, how to collect information, how to screen, sort and categorize materials, how to express themselves and exchange views, how to handle the disagreements and conflicts, how to make use of their strengths to improve cohesion and competitive force. In doing so, students can know exactly what and how they are asked to do. Moreover, the pattern of "cooperation within groups and competition between groups" should also be introduced to foster motivation and learning interest to improve team play spirit.

During discussion, teachers should not sit at their desks or leave classroom. They need to go around the classroom to observe students' performance, especially those who need help. Besides, teachers should also stop irrelevant activities timely.

One point deserves special attention is that teachers should correctly handle the relationship of language fluency and accuracy. Communicative approach emphasizes information transmission, free selection of language and communication goals. But in actual communication, students more likely fail to apply certain grammar points and vocabulary, so errors and mistakes are inevitable. When students are discussing and exchanging

their views, teachers should not focus on certain mistakes. What they need is to write down their mistakes and to correct them with students afterwards. After group work, teachers had better focus on the pronunciation errors and grammar mistakes to improve language accuracy. Make sure not to hurt students' self-esteem and try to encourage them with tolerant words.

3.4 Comprehensive Assessment

Students work hard because they know they have to produce collective wisdom to the whole class. Actually, nobody would like to be blamed for poor performance. Usually the active learners play a major role, while the less effective learners are activated and led to follow up. The poor or intermediate learners get more input. Conversely, advanced learners get more opportunities to practice when they are communicating with intermediate or poor learners. So overall evaluation should be highly advocated which combines language performance, participation, cooperation degree and attitude. Moreover, language accuracy should not be the only standard to make judgment. Another bold attempt is to try to integrate peer evaluation within groups with teacher's assessment. The way of self-assessment and mutual assessment creates a fair and scientific atmosphere. But how to avoid personal subjectivity within groups is also worth further considering.

CONCLUSION

This study is undertaken to localize the practice of cooperative learning—group learning among Chinese English learners. This study makes an attempt to analyze the present situations and the problems that participants met in this activity. According to the research, in order to approach the challenges of group learning in English oral class, teachers have to make adequate preparations. Before the implementation of cooperative learning, teachers have to learn the theories and practice of cooperative learning from home and abroad consciously and carefully organize classroom teaching. And also special factors of Chinese students learning English have to be taken into account. However, no matter how hard the teacher has tried, he/she cannot be an expert on it. So there is still a lot needed to be improved constantly. When designing an activity, teacher should take notice: the activity really happens in daily life and is operational; it should base on students' experiences and interest, contribute to students' improvement in abilities, skills and knowledge; the activity should accelerate the connection among topics and then develop students roundly.

Group learning helps to motivate students in many ways. It can improve students' interest in learning English and change their attitudes toward English learning, such as fostering students' sense of responsibility, confidence, friendship, cooperation and concentration and help to build a learner-centered atmosphere in the classroom. A

favorable language learning atmosphere needs the joint efforts of both teachers and students.

As we all know, there is no almighty mode or means in any teaching. Group learning is no exception. There are still some defects for group learning itself. For example, the 45 minutes for a class was generally divided into two parts: teacher's introduction and explanation and students' group learning activities and their presentations. But the time for students to learn individually and think independently is shortened. Moreover, students' improvements in English accuracy and ability to think critically are areas for further study.

As for the assessment process, how to avoid personal subjectivity among groups and to combine overall assessment with individual assessment remains further consideration and study.

Nowadays research on group diversity has also begun to investigate the form of diversity that is based on psychological features of group members and includes individual differences involving personality traits and values, as well as attitudes, preferences and beliefs (Harrison, 2002). When suggesting group formation, how to take into account of students' learning styles seem to constitute a valuable tool for establishing groups. So how to raise students' self-awareness of their learning styles to gain insight into their thinking and to help embed diversity in the process of group building and to formulate successful learning strategies remains further study.

Future research on small group learning in China is needed to determine more about group dynamics and the ways in which teachers can promote deeper critical thinking, decision-making and complete difficult intellectual tasks in the small group setting. Sweet and Michaelsen (2007) highlight how the interactions of small group members change predictably over time, and our instructional strategies are likely to influence these changes. Also, knowing that there is emerging evidence for "collective intelligence" in a small group (Wooley, 2010), and how it is influenced more by factors other than the average or maximum individual intelligence in small group, compels us to design strategies that capitalize upon these factors to give students the richest experiences possible.

We sincerely hope these suggested methods and further research areas from this small-scale but in-depth investigation of group learning can throw light on the application of group learning method in Chinese English-learning contexts, as well as having application in other EFL university contexts. More effective methods can be explored to help students improve their communicative and cooperative competence in group learning.

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