

Effects of Collaborative Learning in an EFL Class: From the Perspectives of Chinese Advanced Learners

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Abstract

A 15-week-long EFL task based on collaborative learning was designed in a Chinese EFL learning class to examine how the learning style affects the advanced learners' English study. A total of 56 Chinese non-English major graduate students took part in the research design. After the task was finished, a questionnaire survey was made about how the students felt about the collaborative learning model. Data are collected and analyzed to show how actively the EFL advanced learners involved themselves in the task, how cooperative learning benefited their English learning and growth in other abilities, and whether they prefer cooperative learning or independent learning.

Keywords

Collaborative Learning; EFL Class; Chinese Graduate Students

Introduction

There has been a substantial quantity of research regarding the effects of cooperative learning since early 19th century, and as Slavin (1996) mentioned, it is not just a subject of research and theory, but is used at some level by teachers. Especially, the collaborative or cooperative learning model has been frequently used in the EFL class to help students practice and improve their language skills. Swain (1985) put forward the output hypothesis to emphasize the importance of output in language learning. According to Long (1996), second language learners learn effectively when they negotiate meaning in conversations. Collaborative or cooperative learning provides students opportunities to both practice output skills and negotiate meaning with each other, and thereby, enhances language skills improvement. As for graduate students, the cooperative learning model is more welcomed because these students have a relatively high English proficiency level after about 10 years of English learning experiences at school and university, and compared with younger learners, they are better prepared and more experienced for group discussion and cooperative work. However, these are the author's assumptions, and even though a lot of researches have been done to testify the effectiveness of this learning model, it is still not clear how the learners think about it. Perhaps some would totally disagree with this learning style? Therefore, it is important to know about how the students see, view, feel and experience cooperative learning.

According to Slavin (1983), there are two important components of cooperative learning methods: a cooperative incentive structure and a cooperative task structure. The cooperative learning in this paper involves both of the two components. All group members need to meet and discuss with each other to complete the task, and they are interdependent for the success given to the whole group. The task in this research is a 15-week-long collaborative learning task designed in a Chinese EFL learning class. The purpose of the research is to examine how the participants cooperate with each other to finish the task, and whether they think the learning style has any advantages over individual learning in terms of English skills and other abilities improvement. The four major theoretical perspectives on cooperative learning and achievement proposed by Slavin (1996) are used as a model for questionnaire design. Motivational, social cohesion and English language development are checked. The following is a detailed description of the task design.

1 Collaborative Task Design

1.1 Participants

A total of 56 Chinese non-English major graduate students took part in the research design. All of them are first year graduate students. Since their primary school education, they have studied English for about 10 years, and all of them have passed the National Entrance Examination for Graduate Studies, so they are advanced EFL learners. A questionnaire survey(See Appendix B) was made to the participants to know about their status quo of English learning. The participants' interest in and motivation for English study are examined on 10-point Likert scales. These students show high average values of interest (7.82/10, SD 1.674) in and motivation (8.77/10, SD 1.440) for English study.

1.2 Grouping

The 56 participants are divided into 12 groups, and each group has 4 to 6 persons. The students are grouped according to their interest. A list of topics like English movies, English culture, movie dubbing and imitating, public speaking, English songs, listening and dictation, and reading etc., was rendered by the teacher for each student to choose from. Once the students decided their topics, they formed groups with others who had chosen the same topic.

1.3 Collaborative Task

The group work lasted 15 weeks, and the three stages to complete the task are:

Stage 1: Each group was required to discuss things related to their topic in English each week from week 1 to week 9. They were supposed to organize the meeting by themselves, and the teacher was not involved in the choice of things to discuss or any forms of discussion. Each student wrote about their discussion after the meeting.

Stage 2: On week 10, the students were required to introduce their group activity to other students on campus and try to attract more people to join their group activity.

Stage 3: On weeks 14 and 15, each group gave a 10-minute presentation about what they had done, what they had gained and improved, and how they had improved their English language skills through the 15 weeks. Both teacher evaluation and peer evaluation were made about each group.

2 Research Questions and Questionnaire Design

The three research questions the study attempts to answer are:

- 1) How do the students like cooperative learning in their English study? Do they prefer cooperative learning or independent learning?
- 2) How well does cooperative learning benefit their English learning?
- 3) What other abilities were improved through cooperative learning?

Accordingly, the questionnaire (See Appendix B) is designed to address the following questions:

- 1) how frequently the participants held group discussion
- 2) how actively they participated in the group task
- 3) how frequently they coded switched between English and Chinese in discussion
- 4) whether the group task benefited their English learning, and in what ways they benefited from the task
- 5) whether the group task improved the students' abilities other than language abilities, and what these abilities are
- 6) whether they preferred group learning or independent learning
- 7) whether they would like peer evaluation to be part of the assessment

3 Data Analysis and Results

Data were collected based on an anonymous questionnaire survey. A total of 56 students took part in the questionnaire survey. SPSS 19 is used to analyze questionnaire data. The results are as follows:

1) The participants have shown high motivation for the cooperative learning project. There are 51 students (91%) who claimed that they were active or very active in the group work, and a total of 38 students (68%) has conducted group discussion more than once every week. Forty-four students claimed that they spoke English most of the time during their discussion, and only 12 students used Chinese.

The participants are also asked about whether they prefer cooperative learning or independent learning. Data show that 48 students favored cooperative learning, 4 students showed no preference, and 4 preferred independent learning. There are several reasons that the students favor cooperative learning. First, these students are all graduate students, and more ideas and information from peers would be an important reason for them to participate in group work. Another reason is group discussion in English is a very good chance for them to practice listening and speaking skills, which are their weaknesses. Besides, the topics for discussion are their interest, and learning with others who share the same interest would be fun.

2) To know more about how the cooperative learning style helps the students improve their language skills, a survey has been made. As can be seen from Table 1, cooperative learning is shown to benefit all participants' language learning and has benefited their language learning in the following aspects: interest, pronunciation, listening, vocabulary, knowledge about culture, and EFL learning habit development. A total of 19 students have gained more confidence from the collaborative learning project. More practice with other students in English leads to more confidence, and they become more and more comfortable with speaking English. About 30% of the participants reported that they have become more interested in English. Ten students felt that their pronunciation has been improved through the group work. More than 50% of the students have improved fluency, which could be explained by the fact that they practiced speaking during the group discussion. Eight students reported to have improved listening skills. They need to understand other group members during discussion. There are 11 students who reported to have improved vocabulary. The group work requires searching and collecting information about the topics they've decided to discuss. Thus it is possible for the students to pick up new words and phrases from their resource materials. Nine students benefited from the group work by getting to know more about the English culture. Nine students reported to have developed a good habit of practicing English regularly.

Table 1 Students' Self-report of Progress in Language Learning Through Cooperative Learning

	<i>Number of Participants(56 participants)</i>
confidence	19
interest	17
pronunciation	10
fluency	24
listening	8
vocabulary	11
knowledge about culture	9
practice English more regularly	9

3) Research has found that the participants have not only improved their language skills, but also other skills. Collaborative learning enables the students to discuss, decide, work, help and learn with each other. Table 2 shows that 38 students out of 56 reported having gained friendship, 26 students having developed a stronger sense of teamwork spirits, and 19 students having improved their skills to support and cooperate with others. Because the task requires the students to promote their group activity on the campus, 13 students claimed that they have learned to be better organizers and 6 students have improved their publicity skills.

The quantitative data shown above are in accordance with the student report of their group work. A typical student report of their group activities is shown in Appendix A. From the report, we can see that the participants hold group discussions and activities regularly, and the students have practiced both language skills and other skills such as cooperating skills, presentation skills and publicity skills. The experience is fantastic, in their words.

Table 2 Students' Self-Report of Progress in other skills

	<i>Number of Participants(56 participants)</i>
friendship	38
team spirits	26
coordinating skills	19
organizing skills	13
publicity skills	6

4 Conclusion

Independent learning and cooperative learning are two different models of learning. The author made an assumption that cooperative learning works effectively in an EFL class for graduate students. It is based on that assumption that a research design is made to test the effectiveness of cooperative learning model. The research data have shown that Chinese EFL advanced learners show high motivation for cooperative learning in an EFL class in China. Most of them prefer cooperative learning model to independent learning. And the cooperative model helps graduate students improve language and other skills. Other than language abilities, the students also gained friendship, practiced and improved their cooperative skills, organization skills, and publicity skills.

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Appendix A. Student Sample Writing about Group Discussion (Weekly Journal)

- I. At the meeting today, we meet each other as a team. Our four members are from different majors. And there are two girls including me from literal arts, while the two boys are from engineering majors. Though we have different backgrounds, all of us like watching English drama and movies, which leads us to form the interest group. And we can share ideas and opinions on English movies. That's fantastic. At this meeting, we also make some simple plans for our activities in the following term together, including how to hold our activities, what we want to get after those activities. Not only will our members have more meetings to watch or appreciate English movies, but also we are going to expand our group by attracting some people who have common interest to join us. I'm looking forward to growing up with our group.
- II. Today, we have an discussion on the movie, Beautiful Mind. This movie is popular, and we are all interested in it. So we choose this movie to have a deep learning. This time, our discussion focuses on its plots and personal feelings on this movie.

In my opinion, when Nash was young, his classmates were so excellent that he was so eager to be more successful than them. The pressures from outside and inside eventually drive him mad. What he couldn't do in common life was all completed in his imagination. Fortunately, he has a good wife and some kind friends. With their help, he can balance the reality and his imagination. At last, he got the Nobel Prize. Sometimes, like Nash, we really want to get something and try our best. In this process, how to treat the distance between your desire and the reality is so important. We should just focus on what we could do, rather than what we could get. And whatever happened to you, please remind yourself of insisting on our target. In our discussion, other members share their ideas. Like Liu Lei said, he thought it was Alicia's care and love became the motive force of beating the disease and helping Nash's heart get out of the terrible phantasmal.

- III. This time we concentrate on vocabulary and expressions that appear in Beautiful Mind. I think learning some local expressions is a good approach to improve our language skills from watching movies. And so we take this as our second discussion theme on this movie. After watching this movie, some expressions catch our attention, such as "I have a chip on both shoulders", "I got to get something down", "lone wolf", "No stretch. Pressed and folded", and so on. We are familiar with those single words, but when they are combined with each other, we can't get their meanings immediately. The only approach is to pay more attention to these local expressions while reading or watching. And the sharing of others helps me notice some expressions that may be ignored by myself. And when I was watching this movie, I take a memo of those expressions, such as "dull your mind", "show some promise", "your answer isn't face the wall", "have the upper hand", "right this way", "great deeds come at great cost", "lost track time of work", and "lost his grip on reality".
- IV. Since speaking is also very important for improving language skills, this time we choose some dialogues from the movie to imitate. In my preparation, I have paid attention on its tones, stress and pronunciation. And I try to speak like the character in the movie. It is very difficult to imitate their talking well. Tang Wei is my partner. And we choose a dialogue between Nash and his roommate in the beginning. It just lasts for about 1 minute. But they talk a lot. It's not easy to catch their speed. We have prepared a lot in our spare time. At the meeting today, we performed it in front of our other members. And our members appreciate it and give us their advices on our performance.
- V. Today, we transfer our discussion to another movie, The Pursuit of Happiness. As we know, it's a very moving story. Just like last movie, we first have a discussion on its plots and our own watching feelings. In the movie, the poor Christ was unfortunate, for he got a wife who was not understandable at all and was in bad luck with his business. But he was very fortunate also, for he got a son who was very thoughtful and, I think, tough life experiences always make a great person. It is said that this movie is inspired by a true story, and I want to say, this movie does inspire me a lot. What impressed me most are: Christ's wife left him because of life pressure, and Christ's love to his son and Christ's strong belief towards life. Through these, I know that it is not easy to be a good husband and a good Papa, since in reality only love cannot make everything. And I also learn that one has to strongly believe himself, no matter how difficult the situation is, but of course, hard-working is indispensable. In our discussion, we shared our viewpoints on this movie. Some members were impressed by the spirits of

Christ's, while some are moved by Christ's love for his little son. But we all learned something from the movie.

- VI. Today, we focus on good expressions we can learn from *The Pursuit of Happiness*. Everyone show us some expressions they noted when watching the movie. What I show are "I mean that", "you made all the right moves", "you want nobody's hands in your pockets but your own", "bring them over", "Win a round", "I was broke", "Don't jerk me around", "stand out in my program", "lack out" and "you are a piece of work". Some were also showed by others. And we go to watch the movie when we can't explain its meaning easily. In this process, not only have we get lots of good and local expressions, also we could improve our speaking skills. I think it is wonderful to learn something together.
- VII. At the meeting today, we turn to do some imitations on some chosen dialogues of the movie. The two boys in our group a dialogue happened in Christ's job interview. In the beginning, Christ was depressed since he thought he was going to lose the job. But fortunately, the boss chose to give him a chance. In the whole dialogue, we can feel the change of Christ's moods, from sad to excited. And I think the two boys have done a great job. Their pronunciations, tones and stresses are very familiar with the original dialogue in the movie.
- VIII. This time we have a discussion on how to hold an open activity. First, we decide on the theme. We are going to have a discussion on the movie, *Forrest Gump*, which is well known. And in addition, we will share ideas on other movies and dramas. After deciding what to do in the salon, we make a poster together. And we come up with several interesting words to attract more people to join us. Then, we decide to stick it tomorrow. We are looking forward to getting others' attentions.
- IX. Today, we hold a salon as we've planned. Surprisingly, nearly 10 people come to join our salon. And in the beginning, everyone make a brief but interesting self-introduction. And many people tell us their favorite movie or TV drama. When there is someone whose favorite movie is exactly what you like best, some kind of friendship is built up. And we take about the movie, *Forrest Gump*. The comprehension of *Hamlet* varies from reader to reader. Everyone can have different feeling on one movie, which lead to a hot discussion. In general, I think it is successful.
- X. Since the time for group report is coming, we have an discussion on how to make a good report. First, we make sure what we want to show in front of the class. Then we divide it into 4 parts, and each member is responsible for one part. Tang for introduction, Yuan for internal meetings part, Liu for salon part, and me for conclusion. In my opinion, what we've done in this term is wonderful, and now we should try to show them to others. It may be a test for our improvement in English skills. I wish it will be successful.

Appendix B.

Questionnaire Survey (Anonymous)

1. Self Assessment (1: lowest; 10: highest)

Listening	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Speaking	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Writing	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Reading	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10

Confidence in English 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
 Interest in English 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
 Motivation for Learning English 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
 Motivation for Cooperative Learning 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

2. Your Area of Interest: _____ (E.g. : Movies, public speaking....)

3. My group conduct group discussion _____

A. at least once every week B. once every week

C. about once every two weeks D. seldom

4. I was _____ in the group discussion.

A. very active B. active, and did my best

C. active, but could do better D. not active

5. During the group discussion, _____.

A. I seldom spoke English. B. I spoke Chinese most of the time.

C. I spoke English most of the time. D. I seldom used Chinese.

6. The group work has _____ benefited my English language learning.

A. greatly B. to a certain degree C. almost not

7. The group learning has benefited my English learning in the following aspects : (E.g.: boosting my confidence in learning English well, improving my pronunciation, improving fluency in speaking English, improving listening, knowing more about culture....)

8. I've improved other abilities besides language progress through the cooperative learning project: (E.g.: developed my teamwork spirits, organization skills, cooperation skills, and publicity skills...)

9. Cooperative learning is _____ independent learning.

A. more effective and beneficial than

(Reasons: _____)

B. almost the same as

C. not so effective and beneficial as

(Reasons: _____)

10. I hope group work accounts for _____% of the total score.

11. Would you like peer evaluation to be part of the evaluation?

A. Yes (Reasons : _____)

B. No (Reasons : _____)

12. The reasons I like the group work are:

The reasons I do not like the group work are: _____

13. Suggestions for the group activity design:

Appendix C. Peer Evaluation

Group _____

Item	Score (10-6-3)
Communication Skills	

Organization	
Impact on Audience	
Teamwork	
Presentation Skills	