

# Cooperative Learning in the Teaching of “An Introduction to English-Speaking Countries”

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**Abstract**—Recent years, the course “An Introduction to English-Speaking Countries” has become one of the three big obstacles in the examination for the English majors. Obviously, the traditional teaching method does not work well there. The work combined the methods of several educational psychologists, exploring cooperative learning in the teaching of the course. It is found out that cooperative learning is an effective method that enhances students’ ability and activeness in learning and promotes a mutual learning pattern.

**Keywords**—cooperative learning; task; team; student-centered

## I. INTRODUCTION

Cooperative learning refers to the practice that 2-6 students with different abilities form a group, engage in learning activities in a cooperative and mutual way, and jointly complete the group's learning goals [1]. Under the premise of promoting everyone's learning level, improve physical performance and obtain group rewards. The purpose of cooperative learning is not only to cultivate students' ability to actively seek knowledge but also to develop students' interpersonal communication ability in the cooperative process. This idea comes from Dewey's view of group activities and group projects and his theory in his book *Democracy and Education*, that is, students should study together to learn about civic and social responsibility.

## II. OBJECTIVE

The textbook *An Introduction to English-Speaking Countries* covers the history, geography, politics, economy and culture of major English-speaking countries (Britain, the United States, Canada, Australia and New Zealand). It is designed to "give English majors an overview of the geography, history, economy, politics and other aspects of major English-speaking countries, to learn about the cultural traditions, customs and social life of major English-speaking countries and other relevant background, "so that students" can not only expand their knowledge but also better improve their language skills[2]." However, the majority of students listed this course as one of the three big obstacles in the examination for the English majors. Reasons mainly include that the teaching materials contain a very wide range of knowledge and hundreds of events, most of which are briefly introduced, lacking detailed plots and interesting description. Besides, some characteristics of Chinese students, such as: only willing to listen to the teacher, not willing to participate, shy, and being afraid of losing face, as well as the difficulty in classroom

activity design and classroom control, forced teachers to adapt traditional teaching method, which proves not effective. In order to achieve the teaching goal of this course, this paper explores the introduction of cooperative learning into the teaching of *An Introduction to English-Speaking Countries*, hoping to improve the teaching and improve students' ability to use English.

## III. METHODS

The teaching USES the methods of several educational psychologists by combining the group-play-tournament approach of Robert Slavin[3] with the jigsaw approach of E.Aronson[4] and the group learning scheme proposed by Johnson[5].

### A. Task Assignment and Team Composition

According to the teaching contents, teaching tasks are divided into 16 units, in line with the 16 weeks of one semester. The teacher will make a brief introduction to the learning objective and the main content of each unit. Students, according to their interests and hobbies volunteered to choose units and form eight study groups. Each group is responsible for the Presentation and Discussion of two units. Each group is usually made up of 4-5 students. Their Presentation and Discussion are arranged after the teachers' lecture of each unit. Each group has twice opportunities to give a presentation in one semester. After class research is required when preparing their presentation. Students are encouraged to search online to find relevant stories, songs, poems, novels and autobiographies to enrich their task and to use computer-aided facilities when demonstrating their preparations. Tasks are usually shared by the group members while discussion and mutual supports were often found during the preparation process.

### B. Cooperative Learning Process

- Define the theme. Group members first study the materials in each unit collectively, analyze the key contents and main events in each unit, and find out the details of the events. The presenting methods were selectable according to the type of the event; they can be storytelling, raising questions, discussion, guessing, and translation. The groups could make their own choice for the method matter.
- Information Acquiring. The inquiry of data is a process of labor division and investigation[6]. Students can use the Internet, books, media and other information

channels to find and collect information related to the event.

- After analyzing, sorting and collecting the data, data should be connected together so as to generate meanings and support classroom presentation and discussion. This is a process of collective creation[7]. Students can use the collected data or materials to make their presentation and discussions more powerful, persuasive, interesting and impressive.
- Choosing an action plan and role assignment is a process to answer the question of "how to do[8]". First, program should be planned and role be assigned for the presentation, then questions or exercises should be designed, and then anticipate questions that may be asked by other students during the discussion. The "how to do" process gives students a lot of space to create, the same materials can be presented in different ways.

### C. Presentation and Discussion

Each unit teaching assigns 1 hour for Presentation and Discussion activities. The responsible groups members learn together, complete the tasks and show the class their results of the unit study. Each group presents their units in their own ways: explanation, teacher and classmates asking questions, or discussion and reply. Or using heuristics to ask questions while explaining by the presenting group. Members in each group are assigned to play specific roles and complete tasks to promote team awards. Teachers can also get involved. In the process of Presentation and Discussion, the teaching roles of teachers and students have undergone a double transformation, that is, students shift from audiences to actors, and teachers from an actor to an audience[9].

### D. Evaluation

The last part of the process is evaluation. The method generally adopted for evaluation is public judges, including both students and teachers. The public judges are composed of members of 7 groups (students who did not make a presentation and discussion on the day). There are generally 7 public judges by group (classes of 40 students), and they grade the study group that did the activity. Any individual student can comment on the activity, praise the performance, and make suggestions for the imperfect. The teacher gives the final essential comment on student performance in presentation and discussion activities. The presenting group records the activities of non-presenting groups (such as how many times the group members ask and answer questions, and participate in discussion...etc. The gained "scores" accounts for 30% of the course grade). The on-duty group and the none on-duty groups, therefore, make an evaluation for each other.

## IV. RESULTS

Cooperative learning completes exploration, expression and communication activities through the division of labor in a team, which enhances students' practical skills and fosters their ability to solve problems and conduct academic research[12]. It is reflected in the enhancement of students' team spirit and comprehensive ability, that is, the ability to use language,

personal display, leadership, analysis and problem solving, etc. It also strengthens the interaction between teachers, learners, learning tasks and learning activities. The whole process of cooperative learning applied in the teaching of *An Introduction to English-Speaking Countries* is a dynamic and multi-directional process of acquisition, which is democratic, interactive, experiential, open and research-based. All these characteristics play a very important role in realizing the new requirements of modern college English teaching in the new situation.

### A. Promoting the Development of Students' Practical Ability

The democratic and interactive characteristics of cooperative learning promote the development of students' practical ability[16]. The cooperative learning teaching paradigm is completely based on the free and democratic teaching method, which weakens the hegemony of teachers. Cooperative learning creates an atmosphere that allows students to freely ask questions and express their opinions, which greatly promotes students' creative thinking. Herrmann believed that one-sidedness cannot be avoided in learning and researching by individuals, and only through interaction and collaboration can the research results of one person be compared and contrasted with those of others, and inspire each other[12]. In cooperative learning, students communicate with teachers and peers through cooperative learning, reach a consensus in understanding the text and the integration of views, realizing equal dialogue, understanding, communication and cooperation between peers and teacher, and providing an open and harmonious learning platform for students.

### B. Promoting Interaction and Solidarity

The experience of cooperative learning promotes the interaction and solidarity of students. People grow through experience. Max Van Manen said "Education needs to shift to experiencing the world. Experience can unlock our understanding and restore a concrete sense of cognition [26]". The constructivist view of learning also emphasizes "knowledge construction", that is, learning is a process in which learners actively communicate with the objective world, others and themselves, thus forming a trinity of "cognitive practice", "social practice" and "ethical practice". In cooperative learning, students perceive "cognitive practice", "social practice" and "ethical practice" through preparation and organization of presentation.

### C. Stimulating the Enthusiasm of Exploring Knowledge

The openness of the groups stimulates the enthusiasm for exploring knowledge. Cooperative learning aims to cultivate students' cooperative spirit and mutual learning ability. The premise of achieving this goal is to provide students with a broad space for exploration and the right to make their own decisions. In order to complete the learning activities excellently, they must explore the knowledge outside the book; make use of the internet, books, media and other resources. Read the bibliography and search for information sites related to the case topic. Sometimes, it is necessary to analyze and interpret the classical, important and new literature. Through information retrieval and search, their vision is broadened, knowledge is enriched, they have more confidence in learning, and the enthusiasm to explore knowledge is stimulated.

The application of cooperative learning in the teaching of the general situation of English-speaking countries makes teachers discover the problems existing between teachers and students in how to cultivate students' practical ability. The teaching paradigm of cooperative learning is a new teaching paradigm with the characteristics of democracy, interaction, experience, openness and research, which is undoubtedly a challenge to both teachers and students. Due to its openness and democracy, it is difficult for teachers to control class activities. The experience and research involved in the activities is also an insurmountable obstacle for Chinese students because they are accustomed to listen to teachers rather than participate, willing to be the audience rather than actors. In the implementation of the teaching paradigm of cooperative learning, teachers and students mainly have the following problems. For example, the diagnosis of students' lack of ability, the compensation of their lack of ability, the allocation of their ability resources, the stimulation of their ability potential, and the reproduction of their ability. The above is the problem found in the implementation of such teaching paradigm, which can only provide some thoughts for the future teachers who adopt this teaching paradigm, and there are still many problems to be discussed. Students are the subject of learning and always the object of teaching research. Only by studying and understanding them more, can we truly teach students in accordance with their aptitude truly realize "teacher-led, student-centered" and achieve the win-win teaching goal for teachers and students.

#### V. CONCLUSION

The research on cooperative learning finds that, in most cases, cooperative learning has positive effects on academic performance, and it can enhance students' cooperative and altruistic behaviors, their liking for others, their self-esteem and their positive attitude towards learning. It enables those introverted ones to be more extraverted through cooperation, and those unwilling to show, to present and communicate become open and active, and those self-closed and self-centered gain joys during the process of making things together. In addition, cooperative learning has been shown to enhance thinking skills. Domestic research shows that cooperative learning stimulates students' achievement motivation level to a large extent, and students' interest in cooperative learning courses increases obviously. It was when the discussion is involved in the preparation, brainstorming started and once a job got finished, a great sense of achievement will be gained and interest in the study would be aroused. Among them, the progress of the students with poor performance is more obvious.

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