

The Teaching Research on Collaborative Learning to Improve Students' Spoken Proficiency in Secretarial English

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ABSTRACT

The general trend of higher education indicates the reformation of the core curriculum in management. This thesis introduces the teaching theory of collaborative learning, takes the example of the specific contents of secretarial spoken English teaching, compares it with the traditional teaching method, expounds its detailed application to the secretarial spoken English class, and indicates the points for attention in the process of collaborative learning as well as their solutions, which is of practical significance.

Key words: collaborative learning method; secretarial English oral; teaching reformation

1. INTRODUCTION

Since the reform and opening up in 1978, English for Secretary has always been offered as one of the compulsory basic English courses of public administration major in colleges and universities, which highlights the status of this course in the public administration major. With high practicality, English for Secretary requires students to master both professional secretarial knowledge and English, and thus the ability and skill of proficient spoken English in foreign business is one of the teaching difficulties. As most students in public administration major are not good at English, if an appropriate teaching method is not on offer, they are often in a passive embarrassment with an uneasy posture and a flushed face and speak a little Chinese when they speak in English as a secretary. This does harm the building and strengthening of interests and confidence in oral trainings. To improve such situation and create a virtuous circle in secretarial English teaching, cooperative learning is a favorable approach.

2. AN OVERVIEW OF COOPERATION LEARNING

2.1. Definition

Cooperative learning, now widely used in education worldwide, is a system of novel and effective teaching theories and strategies. In it, students in heterogeneous groups help each other reach the common learning goals and receive assessment and awards on the basis of the overall scores of groups. It creates a positive, sound and relaxed environment in which group members attend activities on an equal footing, assist each other under the same learning

goals, and as a result generate group dynamics. By transforming competition between individuals into groups, such kind of learning reduces students' pressure and enhances their confidence, and also meets their needs of communication, performance and enquiry. Then, students will form internal motivation in their study, a security for their voluntary study.

2.2. Modes

Cooperative learning is different from simple group learning and has a varied of modes, such as discussion, dialogue, cooperation and performance. The most common are as follows:

2.2.1. Group Competition

Students are placed in mixed groups by different abilities and together finish the tasks set by teacher. And then, students with near-same grades in each group compete with each other.

2.2.2. Group Total Points

Similar to group competition but different from the rating method, it just changes the grades of each member to group total points through quizzes.

2.2.3. Jigsaw

Students are divided into many groups and in these home groups students are assigned a different topic. Next, students leave the home group and group with other students with the same topic and study it. Last, students return to their own

home group and inform the rest of their assigned topic.

2.2.4. Group Learning

Take each group as one. Every member completes a part of the group task and after debates, each group reports its results.

3. THE APPLICATION OF COOPERATIVE LEARNING IN ENGLISH FOR SECRETARY

In the traditional situational teaching, the oral teaching process of every new unit is: warming-up→ topic introduction→ vocabulary and sentence structure teaching→ one on one situational practice. In the last part, students make a conversation with who are nearer according to a concrete situation created by teachers. With such method, teachers aim to let students repeatedly practice relevant words and sentences till they reach a proficient level to finish the oral task of the unit. The fact, however, is unpleasantly different. Normally, two students work together in dialogue content, and recite their own lines until they can speak them out without a script. If the pair are asked to demonstrate their conversation in front of the class, they will speak eloquently, off the top of their head, but if one of them is joined by a randomly selected one and the new pair are asked to talk right away, they would be overwhelmed, or struggle to squeeze out a few words. Obviously, the effect of this kind of teaching is frustrating, so reforms must be launched.

Taking the first unit Job Interview in the English for Secretary as an example, the author compares traditional situational teaching with cooperative learning to show that the latter is effective.

3.1. Traditional Situational Teaching

The key of the oral training in this unit is English interview. After teacher introduces interview skills, tips, common vocabulary and sentences, and some questions frequently asked by interviewers, teacher starts the situational dialogue simulations. According to the previous situational teaching modes, teacher would show a job advertisement in class and ask students to prepare individually or collectively the roles of interviewer and candidate after class, such as questions of the former and responses of the latter. Besides, students are informed that a random part of them are expected to conduct role playing in the next class. Since students more or less take some chances of not being selected, their preparation is not sufficient enough. Therefore, in the demonstration, most candidates are nervous, affected, and bad in spoken English, and some interviewers are not qualified in asking questions.

3.2. Cooperative Learning

To help students show themselves wonderfully in English interviews, cooperative teaching is good. Specific steps are as follows:

3.2.1. Intensive Teaching and More Practices

To begin with, teacher gives a deep introduction of the keys and difficulties of the interview, from preparation to tips during the interview to follow-up, and then organizes students to practice more with varied content and forms which should involve listening, speaking, reading and writing, accompanied with imitative and creative methods. Finally, teacher organizes a demonstration to make students clear to their role in the interview.

3.2.2. Scientific grouping

The whole class is broken into different groups, each of which includes 4 to 5 students at different levels and appoints a leader in charge of the operation and coordination of cooperative learning in the group. One group stands for interviewers in a foreign company, and the others for interviewees.

3.2.3. Cooperative Task Assignment

The task of the interviewer group is to design the company's business range, nature and scale, release job advertisements, organize interviews in the next class, and send English brochures and advertisements to the interviewee groups and teacher by email.

The interviewee groups prepare the interview based on the information provided by the interviewer group. The members discuss what interviewers may ask, how to answer them, and what questions they as an interviewee want to ask, simulate the interview within the group, and pick out a candidate to participate in the final interview.

3.2.4. Create Interview Situations

Divide the classroom into several areas for interviews and accordingly organize applicants to receive their interview.

3.2.5. Introducing Reward System

When interviews are completed, the interviewer group votes the best applicant, whose group will be rewarded with points. Teacher reviews and gives a summary to the performance of both parties, and encourages and praises them in an appropriate timing.

3.3. Comparison between Two Teaching Methods

After identifying their respective tasks, students can show great interest. The interviewer group actively searches for information on the Internet, brainstorms ideas, filters out the best solutions, and produces fine, concise and novel brochures and job advertisements. Members of the application group discuss how to deal with interviewers' tricky questions, collectively choreograph answers, and work together to develop an applicant "star" in the group. Through serious and detailed preparation, the interview work is carried out in a busy and order way. Compared with traditional teaching, the candidates in cooperative teaching mode perform better on the whole. Many things, from the fluency of spoken language, reaction to eyes and body language, have been remarkably improved and deserve praises.

3.4. Teacher's Role in Cooperative Learning

The degree of teacher's participation largely determines the success of the interview simulation and it is one of the most important factors that affect the educational results of this style of learning. Teachers should play the following roles:

3.4.1. Organizer

Teachers should be fully prepared for group activities. To put together heterogeneous groups, and so as to raise the awareness of competition among groups and inspire students' potentials and creativity as well as possible, teachers must be familiar with students' situation, learn about their different actual English level, ability, tendency and personality and then divide them into groups by different qualities;

3.4.2. Mentor

Teachers should help students understand the tasks and requirements of activities, input them in a sense of collective responsibility, competition, and challenge;

3.4.3. Supervisor

Teachers should spot problems and correct mistakes in time, such as correcting students' wrong pronunciation and wording, reminding students who have spoken Chinese of trying speak it in English, checking whether they are digressing or only touching the surface of topic, so as to secure depth and focus in cooperative learning;

3.4.4. Promoter

Teachers must know students in person, focus more on introverted students and slow ones, try to render them less shy, encourage them to speak boldly, and promote all group members to reach learning goals with the help of group leaders.

Each of the above-mentioned roles inspires specific behaviors in the process of cooperative learning, affecting students' learning and thus playing a specific role.

4. SUMMARY AND REFLECTION

Cooperative learning teaching theory highlights the interaction between students, and students and teachers, which echoes the aim of secretarial English learning. Cooperative learning transforms students from passive recipients to active participants, and transforms teacher-centered teaching model into a student-centered and teacher-led one, which is indeed the most important and successful reform in teaching.

However, no method is perfect and has its own shortcomings, as does cooperative learning, such as poor cooperation. A lack a sense of collective responsibility may drive a few top students to monopolize the entire group activity, and those with a poor English may feel ashamed to speak and their study is still passive. In this regard, teachers should take personal differences into consideration and integrate humanistic spirit. They can also randomly check the completion of tasks, arrange some tests, or evaluate in groups (group members are graded on the basis of their contribution, cooperative awareness, participation and other factors.) As such, students' initiative and dedication will be strengthened, and the role of cooperative learning can be truly played.

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