

Application of “Cooperative Learning” in Postgraduate English Teaching

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Abstract. Postgraduates have been equipped with large vocabulary and good grammar, but they are inadequate in practical English usage. The English teacher ought to take advantage of before-class, in-class, after-class periods to carry out cooperative learning, which is helpful not only for postgraduates’ practical English usage, but also for their thought, mind, and psychology.

Introduction

Cooperative learning, also called group learning, originated from UK in the 18th century, and spread to US in the 19th century. In 1970s, American scholar David Koonts advocated teachers to apply cooperative learning strategy to education (He,2012:103). At present, cooperative learning is used globally.

Theoretical Origin of Cooperative Learning

In 1916, American writer John Dewey wrote a book named *Democracy and Education*, which elaborated the notion of “democratic class”. John Dewey suggested that the teacher should establish a democratic and scientific teaching environment, so as to encourage students to study cooperatively and cultivate their ability to solve problems in groups. Some years later, American scholar Herbert Thelan further developed Dewey’s theory and put forward the theory of “group dynamics” which provides theoretical support for cooperative learning (Sun&Wang,2004:75).

Definition of Cooperative Learning

In definition, cooperative learning is a kind of teaching strategy which centers on students and operates in groups. It is based on students’ independent learning ability and it can transform the traditional passive learning into active learning, because students will experience, discuss, and explore learning in groups. Thus, students’ learning interest will be fully aroused. Not only can students acquire abundant knowledge, but they also develop the faculty to make inquiry. Cooperative learning can promote the communication between teachers and students, shape students’ healthy psychology, motivate students’ positive emotion, improve learning atmosphere, and enhance students’ cognitive capacity.

Theoretical Basis of Cooperative Learning

Carl Rogers, who advocates humanistic theory, points out in his book *Freedom to Learn* (1969) that human beings are invested with the natural potential to learn, but the real meaningful learning only happens when the learning content is related to the learner and the learner can participate in the learning on his own initiative. In cooperative learning, group members are interdependent. This relationship will lead to the excellent academic results of each student, because in cooperative learning the mutual help will ensure that each member has grasped all the information and that the interrelationship among the members will become very close, so that learning can produce positive influence on each learner (Man,2009:146).

Vygotsky, psychologist of Soviet Union, thinks that knowledge is not acquired by individual; instead, knowledge is acquired in the course of interaction, especially by interacting with people who are more knowledgeable than oneself (Man,2009:146). Vygotsky puts forward the theory of Proximal Development Zone. He divides the student’s linguistic ability into two kinds: one kind is the real ability to learn by himself; the other kind of ability, which is greater than the former, is the ability to learn with the help of others. The gap between the two kinds of abilities is called Zone of Proximal Development. Cooperative learning will constantly fill in this gap and make Proximal Development Zone become the real self ability, thus making the learner’s ability continually exceed his present level and finally achieve full development.

Development of Cooperative Learning

Since the birth of cooperative learning, it has spread to the world with decades of development. Cooperative learning is especially widely used in American schools: according to a survey, 79% of elementary school teachers and 62% of middle school teachers frequently use cooperative learning in their class. American teachers can freely use their favorite modes of teaching strategies, and the popularity of cooperative learning reveals that it is practical and effective in education. David Johnson and Roger Johnson, two of the major creators of cooperative learning, deem that this teaching strategy can be applied to the education of any grade and any major.

In 2002, cooperative learning was depicted as a kind of teamwork learning, in which students learn together and progress together through interaction (Zheng,2001). Some Canadian scholars consider that cooperative learning is an efficient teaching method for organizing students to ensure mutual learning and interaction in class (Wang & Gao,1996). Another American researcher of cooperative learning, Robert Slavin, refers it to a kind of “teaching mode” (Sheng,1992). Therefore, it is of great significance to carry out cooperative learning in education.

Current Situation of Postgraduate English Teaching and Learning

Current Situation of Postgraduate English Learning

In China, English course is compulsory to postgraduate students. As globalization becomes intensified and English is the most frequently used foreign language, English learning is more and more important for students, especially postgraduate students who, with higher academic degree, are more likely to contact foreign people or culture in their study or later work; therefore cultivating postgraduates’ communicative capacity in English becomes as significant as their major.

Postgraduates are supposed to have the ability to use English to communicate with foreigners, to make further study, to read major-related materials, to write complicated thesis, etc. However, because of the current teaching environment and strategy in China, many postgraduates do not dare to, or do not have the ability to, communicate with foreigners, which hinders their progress in further study. The cause of this phenomenon is that they lack of the opportunity to practice their oral English, so they cannot think with English and cannot use it at their will. Although postgraduates are equipped with a large vocabulary after years of English learning, they are unable to use the vocabulary to appropriately express themselves (Chen,2014:1-2). Besides, as speaking and listening are closely related, the listening ability of postgraduates is accordingly inadequate. It is therefore of great emergency to enhance Chinese postgraduates’ speaking and listening proficiency in English.

Current Situation of Postgraduate English Teaching

In China’s English class, most teachers focus on examination, thus neglecting the cultivation of practical language usage. The teacher and the exercise are the core of the class; students do not have the chance to express their idea. They have to follow the teaching and thought of the teacher’s. Normally, the teacher is the main speaker during the class, teaching English grammar and vocabulary; the students just sit on their seats listening and taking notes, with almost no participation of the class. This teaching strategy is like writing a letter to the students. The teacher only knows that he has written the letter, but whether or when his students will read the letter is a question mark. (Zhang,2009:153) Sometimes, the teacher may ask some questions, but it is only the top students who have the ability to answer them in such a teaching environment. The slow learners will find no interest in English study; gradually, they may give up English learning.

Unfortunately, such a teaching strategy goes along with students to the postgraduate study. Most English teachers employ the changeless method to teach changed students. Postgraduates are grown-ups, some of whom may age over thirty. They have the English language basis and the complicated mind to express themselves. The teacher should no longer be the center of English teaching; instead, they should walk down from the teaching platform to communicate with postgraduates, or let them communicate with each other in class. The English teach can only be the director or responder, providing aid for students’ further learning

Significance of Cooperative Learning to Postgraduate English Teaching

As for the current teaching and learning situation, it is better to introduce cooperative learning into English class. Compared with the traditional teaching mode, cooperative learning provides a cooperative atmosphere between the teacher and the student; and the student, not the teacher, is the center of learning. Students are divided into small groups, in which they discuss or argue with one another, or they raise and solve the problem by themselves. In this way, their learning initiative is fully developed, thus their learning interest is cultivated. (Zhang,2009:153)

Therefore, in postgraduate English class, it is advisable that the teacher adopt cooperative learning mode. Not only can the mode develop postgraduates' ability of practical language usage, it can also cultivate their cooperative consciousness and social competence. As a result, postgraduates may fully exert the function of English language, and make English perfectly serve their later study, work, and life.

Advantages to Adopt Cooperative Learning Mode for Postgraduates

Providing Students More Chances to Practice Oral English

As a non-major course for postgraduates, English is always taught in a large classroom, with more than fifty students or sometimes with almost one hundred students. Because of time limit and the large capacity of English class, the teacher has to teach the general knowledge to all students, and has no time to communicate with students. But language needs practicing, language needs using. So the traditional teaching method restricts the teacher to mere instruction; nevertheless, cooperative learning can make students learn and discuss in small groups, thus they have more chances to practice and use the language, their oral English will especially be greatly improved.

Cultivating Their Cooperative Consciousness

In traditional English teaching mode, learning is carried out individually. The students have to solve the problem by themselves, while in cooperative learning mode, group members unite to solve the problem. Two heads are better than one. So the efficiency of solving problems is highly enhanced. Postgraduates will be the salt of society, so they must be equipped with the competence of team work (Shi,2008:265). Only if they have the cooperative consciousness, will they contribute more to society hand in hand.

Deepening Their Thought through Group Discussion

Through cooperative learning, postgraduates can discuss with each other, or discuss with the teacher. As postgraduates have their own view and value, they may have insight into things; so through discussion, they can further develop their idea; and they may attain academic achievement through language discussion. By listening to other's point of view in discussion, they can broaden their horizon, and enrich their knowledge; therefore they may obtain new findings in their later study, and make further contribution to the humanity.

Improving Students' English Learning Interest

Language learning is a rather dull task. In traditional English learning, the teacher is the center and he takes the initiative to teach, while the students are the passive receiver of the knowledge, as a result of which many postgraduate students may find traditional English class uninteresting and boring. However, in cooperative learning, the teacher only acts as the organizer of the class. Students are the center of the class and they can take the initiative to learn. Through group cooperation and participation of class, postgraduates can acquire language with great interest; accordingly, the learning efficiency can be greatly improved.

Forms of Cooperative Learning for Postgraduates

Cooperative learning has various forms. Based on group learning, the teacher can devise different kinds of forms of learning that are most appropriate for postgraduates. In order to fully make use of cooperative learning, the forms can be classified into three categories, i.e. before-class forms, in-class forms, and after-class forms.

Before-Class Forms of Cooperative Learning

The before-class forms of cooperative learning mainly refer to the preparations before English class. As postgraduates are mature in their study, mind and psychology, the teacher can assign them difficult tasks to complete. For example, before the beginning of a unit, the teacher can assign some high-level questions for each group to discuss. Each member of the group must take part in the discussion and write a reflection of group discussion, and then expose their views before the whole class. Another form is to let the groups prepare the background information of the new unit. The information must be specific and comprehensive, which asks each group to divide the work into several parts. Each member of the group is responsible for a part and everyone acts a role of the work. Finally, each group chooses one member as the representative to make presentation in class. By comparison with other groups, students can find the merits and avoid the demerits of others. This is a good way to acquire knowledge and improve oneself. Sometimes, as some postgraduates have work experiences, the teacher can let students prepare the instruction work. Then they need spend much time on the preparation of the instruction. Group members cooperate in getting ready for the class, one analyzing the new words and phrases, another searching for the cultural background, the third one taking charge of the grammar, the fourth one doing the translation, the fifth one being the lecturer, and so on. By getting everyone involved into the preparation of the instruction, the students have grasped much information and knowledge of the new unit, and the teacher may find the in-class instruction and group activities much easier to carry out.

In-Class Forms of Cooperative Learning

Group presentation

At the beginning of the class, the teacher can check the preparation of the unit group by group, so as to adjust the teaching content according to students' preview and try to identify the key point and difficult point for students. And then, by analyzing the text, the teacher puts forward some questions for groups to make critical thinking, and then lets each group make presentation. Postgraduates are rather mature in their mind and thought, therefore group presentation can fully exert the potentials of each member, and the final presentation of each group is the result of multi-minds, thus it is normally comprehensive and objective.

Topic discussion

According to the content of each unit, the teacher should prepare some typical and related topics for students to discuss in class. Generally, for each period, the teacher can provide one or two topics. While discussing, each group must find one to take notes. The teacher, as the director of the discussion, walks among the groups to supervise the discussing process. The teacher ought to give each student opportunity to express himself, and different opinions are advocated and encouraged. The teacher should especially pay attention that he should not try to correct the student's pronunciation all the time, for it will interfere with the student's thinking and confidence. If the teacher does want to do so, he should only do it after the student's presentation.

Pair cooperation

Pair cooperative learning was advocated by Kagan(1994). In this kind of cooperative learning mode, the teacher firstly gives students some time to think about a question independently, and postgraduates are capable of this kind of tasks. While considering the question, students may take notes or jot down the outline for his opinion. After finishing the independent thinking, a student is asked to make a pair with the classmate around him, exposing the insights to each other. Finally, all the students in class will communicate with one another. Thus all the viewpoints towards the question are collected and shared. This kind of cooperative learning is suitable for some simple tasks, e.g. to recall what were taught last time.

After-Class Forms of Cooperative Learning

Cooperative learning in the dormitory

The dormitory is a good place for carrying out cooperative learning; the dormitory is an enclosed space and the roommates are familiar with each other, so it is convenient to perform some after-class cooperative learning activities in the dormitory. For example, the roommates can make the dormitory a small "English Only" zone, which means all members are forced to speaking

English in a designated time in the dormitory. The roommates can imitate such circumstances as shopping, teaching, dating, daily chatting, etc. (Geng,2006:114) With using oral English on a day-to-day basis, postgraduates' speaking English is bound to improve.

Cooperative learning on the Internet

Modern college students like communicating on the Internet. The teacher should try his best to utilize the Internet to enhance student's English communicative ability. The teacher may create a website for students to chat in English, and this website can also be used as a forum to expose the postgraduate students' viewpoints on specific events. During the discussion, the teacher can help the students solve some problems and lead the students to set up healthy values. The students themselves can also find cyber friends in English speaking countries on the Internet, which has been proved an efficient way to practice oral English.

Conclusion

Cooperative learning is a perfect means to improve postgraduate students' comprehensive English proficiency. As postgraduates have already laid the basis of English vocabulary and grammar, cooperative learning can help them further enhance the ability of practical English usage. There are before-class, in-class, and after-class strategies of cooperative learning. The English teacher should make full use of these strategies to enable postgraduates to participate in cooperative learning. Only if all these teaching strategies are used appropriately and artistically in English class, will postgraduates' English application ability be greatly improved.

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