

The Comparison of the Difficulties between Cooperative Learning and Traditional Teaching Methods in College English Teachers

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ABSTRACT

The main purpose of this study was to introduce how a college English teacher conducted cooperative learning techniques and compared them with the traditional teaching methods. In this study the teacher as a researcher employed cooperative learning strategies: Students Teams-Achievement Divisions (STAD), Jigsaw II, Number Head Together, and Learning Together (LT). The researcher employed a qualitative approach with on-site observations, interviews, and reflections instructions to understand the effectiveness of teaching in EFL cooperative learning classroom. Based on the empirical findings from cooperative learning and traditional teaching methods in EFL classroom, the difficulties were presented to solve the instructional problems and to meet current need effectively in our global society. Finally, the researcher presented considerations and recommendations for implementation of cooperative learning and traditional teaching methods discussed.

INTRODUCTION

Due to traditional examination-oriented teaching in Taiwan, the procedure of English teaching is less flexible. Most of the teaching in the EFL classroom still emphasizes teacher-centered, teacher-directed instruction. With a big class in teaching, teachers still make use of the traditional teaching methods; there is little interaction among teachers and students. Naturally, the teacher usually spends a lot of time speaking and explaining curriculum in class. Students are required to sit in their seats passively and listen to the lecture attentively. Students tend to memorize English grammar rules, rote vocabulary, and translation skills from the textbooks (Liu, 1997; Wang, 2001). In order to get good grades in English, the teacher might bring the competition into the classroom. Such a traditional instructional approach causes competitive learning and individual performance in the classroom teaching (Robert E. Slavin 1995).

However, too much competition might bring negative interdependence and lower the teaching effects. Cooperative learning seems a potential solution to teaching problems. It is one of the teaching methods to improve language learning, academic achievement and social skills by students' interaction (Kessler, 1992; Wei, 1997). The teacher usually observes students' interaction and encourages all groups to work together effectively during the classroom activities. Successfully Cooperative Learning contains two factors (a) the teacher first task is to induce students to produce active learning (b) teachers have to provide necessary proficient knowledge, and inducement to work harder cooperatively; before the class the teacher should offer designs and arrangement of curriculums (Johnson & Johnson, 1987).

Three studies have shown that in solving many English teaching problems Cooperative Learning plays an important role. Students have more opportunities to practice English and to learn more effectively from classmates as well as teachers. It also helps exercise students' social skills and

interpersonal relationships through interactions with group members (Johnson & Johnson, 1994; Lai, 2002; Wei & Chen, 1993a).

Even if cooperative learning potentially appears to improve language teaching, EFL teachers need to develop a clearly helpful teaching method in EFL classrooms. The researcher tries to assist those who want to use CL strategy, or will be going to use better understand what cooperative learning is and seek the balance between CL and traditional teaching.

This study seeks to discover whether cooperative learning strategies or traditional teaching methods can better serve college teachers teaching English and thus bring greater progress. The researcher hopes that the results of this study may benefit teachers in their English teaching and provide models for future instruction.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Cooperative learning is the instructional use of small groups so that students work together to maximize their own and each other's learning" (Johnson and Johnson, 1999, p.5). In order to have small groups work together successfully, a teacher has to compose five essential elements in each lesson (Johnson & Johnson, and Holubec1990.1993): (a) positive interdependence, (b) face-to-face interaction, (c) individual accountability, (d) social skills, and (e) group processing. To improve teaching and learning effects, teachers can use these five elements as important guidelines in their teaching situations.

The role of the teacher in cooperative learning

The teaching style of cooperative learning is affected by cognitive theory. Their teaching style is highly student-centered. As a Robinson (1995) stated that "teacher conceives self as flexible, permissive, interested in stimulating discussion and seeing other grow" (p.57). As Lightbown and Spada (1993) stated the teachers should more carefully design what students need to learn before they apply those learning activities into their teaching. A teacher in the cooperative learning plays a role as a supporter, facilitator, observer, change agent, and adviser (McDonell, 1992). Teacher's role is to arrange the students in heterogeneous groups, to provide students with proper materials, and to design structural systematic teaching strategy (Chen, 1999).

Cooperative Learning Models

Researcher Name	Method	Years
Slavin	Student Teams Achievement Divisions (STAD)	(1978, 1986)
Aronson, Blaney, Stephan, Sikes, Slavin	(Jigsaw II)	(1978) (1986)
Johnson & Johnson	Learning Together (LT)	(1987)
Russ Frank	Number Head Together	(1992)

(Slavin 1995)

The role of the teacher in traditional teaching

Traditional teaching style is affected by behaviorists. Since they determine what students have to learn from general principles in relation to some particular facts or events, they may design their classroom techniques based on the evidence they observed from the students learning behaviorists. In traditional teaching, a teacher plays an important role in the instructional activities. Their teaching style is highly teacher-driven. The teacher usually dominates and controls the activities of the whole class. As

Robinson (1995) indicated that “ teacher conceives self as quiet set, demanding, concerned with subject matter and in getting specific tasks done” (p.57). Their teaching materials would be used to present facts and information, and their teaching methods are formal and impersonal.

At present, the methods the researcher used are discussed below. In STAD students are assigned to four member heterogeneous teams. The teacher first lectures. Students master the material and discuss together to prepare for a quiz related to the lecture. Students take quizzes on the material individually. Each team's score will be the average score of the four team members. This score will be compared to members' previous scores. If a team's score meet or exceed certain criteria, members will get certificates or other rewards.

In Jigsaw II, students work in different teams, as in STAD. Facts of the topic and assigned to groups. Each member of the group is responsible for his or her section. After reading, students from different teams with the same topic meet in an “expert group” to discuss their section. The experts then return to their original teams and take turns teaching their teammates what they had learned. At the end, students take exams that cover all the topics, and the quiz scores become team scores. The scores that students contribute to their teams are based on the individual improvement score.

Johnson and Johnson (1994) advocated that two principles in implementing Cooperative Learning are necessary to teachers: (a) to learn knowledge and the skills of CL to apply the concept and strategies to designing curriculum units for their students’ needs; (b) to train teachers to implement curriculum, strategies and activities of Cooperative Learning. These two approaches are complemented with each other (Wei, 1997; Wang, 2001).

Traditional teaching methods

Traditional teaching instructions focus on grammatical rules, memorization of vocabulary and translations of texts. The teacher controls everything and does a lot of grammatical analysis and translation (Chien, 2004). Based on Chang and Huang (2001) senior high school English teachers in Taiwan reported that they had emphasized reading and grammar skills than listening and speaking skills. In teacher-directed speech, the most common activity was teacher initiation, student response and teacher evaluation (Cohen, 1994).

To better understand cooperative learning, the comparison of the differences between a cooperative learning environment and a traditional environment is necessary:

Comparison between Cooperative and Traditional Classrooms

Dimensions	Cooperative Learning	Traditional instruction
Teacher roles	Facilitator, observer, change agent, adviser, and supporter	Teacher-dominated, controller, and authority
Teaching activities	Group discussion, work together effectively, and teamwork skills	Focus on drills and practices as well as memory and review of knowledge
Interaction	Positive interdependence Two-way communication	Negative interdependence One-way transmit
Evaluation	Emphasis of both learning process and outcomes	Emphasis of learning outcomes

Sources from Johnson and Johnson (1994); Mcdonell (1992); Kessler (1992); Slavin (1995).

Lin (2000) adopted STAD, LT, Number Head Together methods of CL in this experiment. Lin compared them with traditional teaching methods and discovered that students showed more confidence, greater active interaction, enthusiasm and high scores in CL than they did with teacher-led methods.

Adams (2000) in EFL college classroom indicated that speaking, listening, and reading skills were improved but writing ability was less growth and created free-rider in the CL environment.

METHODOLOGY

The study adopted Qualitative research method, including interviews, observations, and reflections of the teaching journal. The researcher interviewed EFL professors H and P who are good at cooperative learning strategies and two EFL professors B and J, who are used to adopting traditional teaching methods about their teaching philosophy, and motivation included to obtain their viewpoints. The interviews were video-recorded and the data were transcribed.

The researcher observed his class in cooperative learning environment and noted the students' behaviors and interaction in class in the teaching journal. The researcher gathered the leader of the team sheets, and the individual students' observation notes, group evaluation and self evaluation notes included. Then the observation notes, interview data, and reflection notes were transcribed and sorted by content analysis.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

A typical day of teaching in cooperative learning classroom

1. The researcher arranged students into seven heterogeneous groups, introduced the concept of cooperative learning, and explained STAD, Number Head Together, and Learning Together methods simply and clearly to the students. At the beginning, most of the students in the group seemed unfamiliar with this teaching method. They just listened quietly and did not react.
2. First, the researcher introduced the article, played the CD-ROM and presented keywords, phrases and important ideas. The students had to listen to the topic presented attentively in order to answer the questions and learn the teaching material thoroughly.
3. Students worked in groups to share what they had learned. Students were attentive constantly since they knew that their number might be called. The moment the researcher randomly drew out the role, the student would like to be the first to answer the researcher's questions. If the student didn't answer, the members of the team could help their teammates. Once it was answered, the student could earn points for their team. So during the activity, students became more active and enthusiastic than before but sometimes the roles of the group weren't responsible for their duty. Some were doing their individual things; some were chatting with others. When the situation was in the plight, the researcher tried to guide and direct the students timely to play their parts: give praise, encouragement, elaboration to their teammates. If each member of the group was not late for class and no one was absent in class, the group performed smoothly and better than other group.

In Jigsaw II activity, the researcher and the traditional teacher B and J (visiting the class) looked around among the groups to see if they had problems. This was a new challenge activity. Therefore, almost all of the students paid attention to their topic, but seemed busy and noisy during the activity. The class leader helped to take pictures by the video recorder to observe all the students' learning conditions. During the discussion, the groups usually spoke in Chinese.

4. At the end of each class, the researcher distributed self-evaluation sheets and small-group observation sheets to the students, to examine how well each group and individuals had performed. Finally, the researcher requested students to write their reflection notes about this instructional class.

The difficulties of the teacher in Cooperative Learning

1. The researcher observed some of the groups did not work cooperatively very well; especially some distracted students did their individual work and made class noisy, the classroom management was sometimes not easy to deal with.
2. The researcher had to monitor the big class and pay attention to seven heterogeneous groups. It is difficult to control students' chaos and maintain classroom management. Additionally the researcher had heavy workload to prepare for teaching materials and to design activities.
3. It is not easy for the researcher to train the students to adapt to cooperative learning situations and to encourage students to take part in their group activities.
4. It is difficult to have effective methods to measure students' performances. Moreover, some students were absent, which deeply affected the group discussions, cooperative atmosphere and group performances. Students usually communicated with teammates in Chinese far more times than in English in class.

The Difficulties of the teacher in Traditional Teaching

1. Traditional instruction is teacher-oriented. The teacher does a lot of talking, and directs student learning. The learning process in the traditional teaching is just one way communication. The students passively receive what the teacher instructs.
2. Discussions and activities among peers are seldom. There are no cooperative skill instructions. Students fail to listen and speak English because there is too much teaching and too little communication (Lian, 1996). The process of the teaching is boring and dull.
3. Because traditional examinations have guided teaching; the approach emphasizes reading, grammar rules, and memorizes vocabulary (Wei 1997; Chu, 2001). In order to get high scores, and individual goals, the individual competition is indispensable. So students become more selfish and negatively interdependent. Traditional teaching is also Whole-Class Question and Answer, which often increases conversation between the teacher and the high achievers while the rest of the class is indifferent (Kagan, 1995).
4. The teacher's delivering lecture has emphasized the exercise in translation, grammar roles and rote memorization since elementary schools; naturally, in senior high schools and colleges the teacher follows the traditional teaching roles. Less than 20 percent of traditional class is dedicated to language production and gradually lack of creation, interaction, and critical thinking (Goodlad, 1984).

Interviews with Professors H and P (Cooperative Learning)

After class the researcher often consulted Professors H and P. about the teaching techniques and activities of CL. Thus the researcher had reflections and improvements for the next lesson. Their commands were quoted as follows:

H: I have thought of developing implementation and dissemination of cooperative learning as my responsibility in my life to examine the effectiveness of teaching and learning. So seeking seed teachers of CL is the key to diffusing the new, skillful and instructional methods.

The work of cooperative learning is a big challenge and a continuous job. It needs school support and student acceptance. To motivate students to study English in Technology College, I suggest adopting role playing, games, playing interesting CD-ROMS to satisfy practical needs. Being a creative teacher to design meaningful and interesting teaching strategies, the teacher should take part in workshop, seminar or teaching demonstration.

P: Please do not ignore silent, lower achievers. The teacher should try to find the individual potentials among students to play their parts. Every student has a unique talent and ability to help each other. The low achievers do not necessarily communicate with others in social skills.

The absence of the group members greatly affects the discussion of group. If only one is absent, the members have no interest and power to interact with each other. I suggest employing group pressure and post names on the computer bulletin board. Most students can't speak English aloud, and some lower achievers are silent. So encouraging students to speak English bravely in class is the most important issue. Students should not be afraid of losing face; the teacher should ask the high achievers to come to the front to express their opinions in English so as to motivate the peers to speak English.

Interviews with Professors B and J (Traditional Teaching)

Professor B and J came to the researcher's class and said as follow:

B: Usually, I consider the drill and practice to be an effective teaching technique and grammar to be necessary to communication but when I visit and observe the CL classroom I feel I want to work harder. I find active interaction among students. I am afraid that I can not control the class; the class would be noisy and chaos. After all in teacher-directed teaching, the teacher can easily handle the classroom management. And in traditional classes students could learn much content. The procedure of teaching is easily controlled.

J: After observing the strategies of STAD, LT, Jigsaw II, CL is helpful in improving students' communication and dialogue abilities but I hold that methods of CL are more difficult and inconvenient than traditional teaching method.

I teach students grammar directly; drill and practice are main activities. The lecture is somewhat boring. Some of the students feel sleepy; some of the students feel they obtain much content and they enjoy the fast pace. More doing exercises make students obtain correct answers.

CONCLUSIONS

Although the teaching strategy of CL help teachers to create a student-center environment where the students reach the achievement of academic, affective and social-interpersonal development (Slavin, 1995; Johnson and Johnson 1999). The findings of the teaching process in CL showed there were several shortcomings and difficulties, such as free-rider effect, the unified course schedule, and the difficulties of designing meaningful activities, managing noisy and chaotic classroom, grouping the students, facing attendance rate or distracted students and evaluate a vast of students' test grades.

On the other hand, the difficulties of the teaching process in traditional teaching had also struggles such as teaching-led style, too much teaching, explaining and drill activities; little stress on language product, lack of creativity and interaction. During all the process of teaching, though the researcher,

traditional and CL professors encountered several difficulties by means of careful evaluation of interviews, observations, video recording, and teaching journal, the researcher tried to overcome these shortcomings by adopting useful strategies.

The teacher must be familiar with instructional skills in the current English teaching situation. Therefore, schools should set up professional organization or workshop for pedagogical exchanges to consult each other, to share teaching experiences, to express their difficulties and to brainstorm instructional methods so as to promote teachers' professional development. It is also suggested that the teacher should have to train the leader of the class to help reduce teachers' burden in class, and make good use of the computer to contact the students on bulletin board. As Riel (1990); Harmer (1991) indicated that teachers should exercise every type of method in the CL and make good use of computer to evaluate large set of test data, students' behavior records.

It is recommended that the teacher can revise strategies at any time to find the most efficient and appropriate methods based on students' learning traits to make students enhance learning interest and to reach the best achievement. As Warshauer & Healey (1998) stated teachers are facilitators, organizers and evaluators. Getting rid of the difficulties between CL and traditional teaching methods and adopting appropriate teaching method is the college English teachers' task.

To sum up, the teachers who are willing to implement the new, ideal strategies in our global society should be prepared, patient, skillful, perseverant and flexible through lots of trials and practice to reach teaching goals in current society.

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