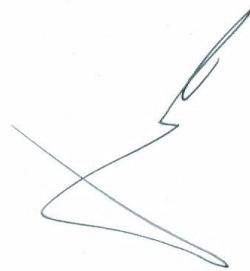


COOPERATIVE LEARNING AND ORAL EXPRESSION COMPETENCY FOR CHINESE

STUDENTS OF ENGLISH

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Paper Advisor

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by

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## ABSTRACT

Although the English education in China is being improved, students are still studying in a passive habit. Most of the students think that it is hard to improve their oral ability in the traditional education system. And the related information indicates that most undergraduate students, who have already passed the CET-6 & CET-8 which are the college English tests, cannot communicate in English. There is extensive appearance of “Mute English” that draws general attention to the problem and further suggests the need for requirements to improve students’ English speaking ability. In particular, it is a great challenge to improve the oral English for students of English in China.

Through the investigation and analysis of the oral situation of Chinese students in the past 12 years, the influences on the English speaking ability have been the following: Language Environment, Psychological Barriers, Vocabulary, and Listening Problem. Focused on these four influences, Professor Wang in year of 2004 pointed out that the greatest influence on oral ability is the Psychological Barriers. He also suggested that making use of cooperative learning could lead to success in oral English.

This paper analyzes the speaking ability of English students, and states four solutions. In particular, it discusses cooperative learning and its role in improving English students’ oral ability.

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## INTRODUCTION

Although the English education in China is being improved, students are still learning passively. Most of the students, especially the English majors, think that it is hard to improve their oral English in the traditional education system. And the related information indicates that most undergraduate students, who have already passed the CET-6 & CET-8 which are the college English tests, cannot communicate in spoken English. There is extensive evidence of “Mute English” that draws general attention to the problem and further suggests the need for requirements to improve students’ English speaking abilities. In particular, it is a great challenge to improve the oral English for English students in China.

The investigation and analysis of the oral situation of Chinese students in the recent 12 years has been focused on the influences of the English speaking abilities. In particular, it has addressed language environment, psychological barriers, vocabulary and listening problems.. Concerned with these influences, Wang (2004) pointed out that the greatest factor in preventing the development of oral ability is the psychological barriers. Wang also suggested making use of cooperative learning to improve success in oral English. Wang analyzed the state of English students in oral situations, and shared four solutions relevant to the situation. In particular, he discussed how to apply the cooperative learning in improving English students’ oral ability.

### Statement of the Problem

The problem to be addressed is the relationship between cooperative learning and the development of oral expression competency for English students in China.

### Delimitations of the Research

The research will be conducted in and through the Karrmann Library at the University of Wisconsin-Platteville over 104 days. Primary searches will be conducted via the Internet through EBSCO host with ERIC and Academic Search Elite as the primary sources. Key search topics included “cooperative learning”, “oral teaching”, and “cooperative learning and oral”.

### Method of Approach

The first review of literature focuses on the background and problems of students in developing English speaking proficiency in China. A second review of literature states and analyzes the advantages of cooperative learning for students to improve their oral English. Finally, findings are summarized and recommendations made.

## REVIEW OF LITERATURE

### Influences of English Speaking Ability

In recent decades, the process of English education in China has continuously improved. Indeed, the level of spoken English proficiency among university students in China has risen. But students are still studying in a passive manner. A large numbers of students, especially the English major students, think that it is hard to improve their oral English in the traditional Chinese education system. Most of them have the problems with pronunciation and have strong Chinese accent. And the interrelated information indicates that most graduate students who have already passed the CET-6 & CET-8 which are the college English tests, cannot communicate in spoken English. There is extensive evidence of “Mute English” that draws general attention to the problem and higher suggests the need for requirements to improve students’ English speaking abilities.

What causes these students to not communicate with foreigners in English? There are several reasons, including the following:

#### 1. The Barriers to Learning Environment

It is difficult for language learners to find a language situation (Lu xiaoyong, 1998). So, it is important that the language learning environment be good for learners who are trying to learn a language. Shepherd gave a good example. He created a language revitalization program in an elementary classroom on the Salt River Pima-Maricopa Indian Community in Arizona. He created the environment under the assumption that classroom pedagogy cannot help students learn their native language without everyday usage of the language O'odham and Pipash at home (Jeffrey P. Shepherd, 0062).

On the other hand, in China, because of unpleasant language learning environment, students seldom practice oral English in the classroom, and have a hard time finding a partner outside the classroom. For example, in the dormitories students are not comfortable speaking English with their roommates; but in the classroom students have limited time to practice oral English and usually talk Chinese about an English topic which is given out by the teacher. Obviously, the environment t influences students' oral ability because of the lack of communication.

## 2. Psychological Barriers

Students' psychology of English learning is decided by their motivations, manners, interests, and personal values. Good psychological or affective conditions could greatly promote the study of English, but the psychological barriers obstruct English study in different ways (Wang Xiaoping, 2004). In other words, if students have no confidence and communication stops, they stop learning English. Nearly 50% students believe that the biggest barriers which restrict English communication badly are psychological in nature. It is generally created by a lack of self-confidence and a lack of motivation. Most students do not have the confidence to speak English in the classroom, because they fear to speak incorrectly. Some of them lack the motivation in class to communicate in English. Some of them complain that they lack enthusiasm for speaking English because the teacher is too severe and the class is boring. Even indeterminate motivation exists for some students who think that it is unnecessary to talk to foreigners because English is not their major and useless in the future. Therefore, students care less about the achievement in English courses. Thus, when students have no confidence and no motivation to speak English, the English learning stops

and they do not communicate in English.

### 3. Vocabulary Problem

In the computer field, designers decide on the words to be used, and as frequent users find these words obvious and natural. Other less frequent users are simply required to learn the system's words (Tang Zhifeng, 1998). It is the same situation as in the language learning fields for English students. For example, if a person has a limited vocabulary, it would be very hard to communicate with other people, especially with native speakers. Vocabulary is an important part in learning oral English, so that not enough vocabulary results in low proficiency in communication. Almost every student is perplexed by a lack of vocabulary when expressing themselves in English. This phenomenon causes problems in communication. Most students find out that it is hard to express their ideas because they cannot use a word if they have less vocabulary. They also believe that those students who are good at speaking English must have a large vocabulary. This indicates that poor vocabulary and insufficient comprehension would hinder social contact and the development of spoken English.

### 4. Acoustical Barriers

Schools are places of learning where speaking and listening are the primary communication modes. Until recently, neither the general public nor school planners were aware of the significant negative effect of noise and excessive reverberation on the learning process. The large body of research describing this problem is making everyone more aware of the importance of good acoustics (Peggy Nelson, 2002)

Acoustical Barriers cause English students to communicate poorly. Some students are

usually good at writing English, but they cannot speak a word, because they have difficulties processing spoken English. They cannot hear or understand what the native English speaker expresses. Some other students who are not good at speaking English join the English Corner to practice their oral English. However, they find that if the partners speak too fast, they cannot keep with pace and understand their partners' meaning. As a result, they feel disappointed a lot.

Spoken language as a skill is a bidirectional communicative activity which combines information input with output. It requires that the students not only express their own opinion, but also understand others. Listening plays an important role in communication. Therefore, eliminating the obstacles in students' oral communication becomes the key point in improving the efficiency of English teaching.

### What Is the Cooperative Learning?

Cooperative learning is a new theory and approach. It began in America at the middle 20<sup>th</sup> century, and has been widely used and spread. In the 1990s, cooperative learning developed in China and became an efficient educative activity.

Cooperative learning is based on the idea that learning is a naturally social action which the participants talk among themselves. David W. Johnson and Roger T. Johnson, who work in the Cooperative Learning Center in the University of Minnesota, think that cooperative learning is the instructional use of small groups so that students work together to maximize their own and each other's learning (Johnson & Johnson, 1989, P12). Cooperative learning exists when students work together to accomplish shared learning goals (Johnson & Johnson,

1991, P7). Anuradha A.Gokhale argued that: within cooperative activities individuals

seek outcomes that are beneficial to themselves and beneficial to all other group members (Anuradha A.Gokhale,). Each student can then achieve his or her learning goal if and only if the other group members achieve theirs. The idea is simple. Class members are organized into small groups after receiving instruction from the teacher. They then work through the assignment until all group members successfully understand and complete it. Cooperative efforts result in participants striving for mutual benefit so that all group members gain from each other's efforts, they recognize that all group members share a common fate, knowing that one's performance is mutually caused by oneself and one's colleagues, and feeling proud and jointly celebrating when a group member is recognized for achievement. In cooperative learning situations there is a positive interdependence among students' goal attainments; students perceive that they can reach their learning goals if and only if the other students in the learning group also reach their goals. A team member's success in creating a multi-media presentation on saving the environment, for example, depends on both individual effort and the efforts of other group members who contribute needed knowledge, skills, and resources. No one group member will possess all of the information, skills, or resources necessary for the highest possible quality presentation (Johnson & Johnson, 1991).

The above may be summarized into follows:

- (1) Cooperative leaning is mainly working in groups.
- (2 ) Cooperative learning involves in interactive work.
- (3 ) Cooperative learning requires teacher guidance.
- (4 ) Cooperative learning emphasizes both collective and individual responsibility.
- (5 ) Cooperative learning lets students play the central part.

The fundamental idea of cooperative learning is constructed by six rudiments which include interaction, goal, teacher and student, form, situation and valuation (Yang Jin, 2001,). In their work, Johnson & Johnson also provided the following five essential elements (Johnson & Johnson, 1994):

### **Positive interdependence**

Positive interdependence links students together so one cannot succeed unless all group members succeed. Group members have to know that they sink or swim together.

### **Face-to-face or promotive interaction**

Students need to do real work together in which they promote each other's success by sharing resources and helping, supporting, encouraging, and applauding each other's efforts to achieve.

### **Individual and group accountability**

The group must be accountable for achieving its goals and each member must be accountable for contributing his or her share of the work. Individual accountability exists when the performance of each individual is assessed and the results are given back to the group and the individual in order to ascertain who needs more assistance, support, and encouragement in learning.

### **Interpersonal and small group skills**

Preferable social skills for effective cooperative work do not magically appear when cooperative lessons are employed. Instead, social skills must be taught to students just as purposefully and precisely as academic skills. Leadership, decision-making, trust-building, communication, and conflict-management skills empower students to

manage both teamwork and taskwork successfully.

### **Group processing**

Group processing exists when group members discuss how well they are achieving their goals and maintaining effective working relationships. Groups need to describe what members' actions are helpful and unhelpful and make decisions about what behaviors to continue or change. Continuous improvement of the processes of learning results from the careful analysis of how members are working together and determining how group effectiveness can be enhanced.

### Why Use Cooperative Learning?

Currently, English teaching in China has many undesirable characteristics that is derive from traditional instruction. Language teaching in China should change the old situation and end traditional practices. The teacher-centered classroom should be transformed into student-centered classroom, and then the teacher should be the guide in the cooperative learning process.

More advantages could be found by processing cooperative learning strategies. Firstly, cooperative learning develops students' social skills. During the action of group work, students are allowed to share and exchange ideas with each other in order to successfully solve the problem. This would be very helpful for students in developing their interpersonal skills.

Secondly, cooperative learning could increase students' motivation in language learning. Cooperation is required most when students are working the same task. Moreover, each member has opportunities to contribute to the group. The contributor would be proud of the

group members. Such accomplishment for the whole group would encourage every member to practice cooperative learning and help each member to develop a positive attitude towards language learning (Johnson & Johnson, 1989).

Cooperative learning also helps students in developing their independent competency. When a topic is given out by the teacher, all students would have their individual opinions. Each one can make a contribution to the group which reflects a wide range of perspectives (Wang, Haertel & Walberg, 1998).

Additionally, cooperative learning could help students to easily understand the ideas. Because lots of ideas and views are shared, students may have receive different kinds of response or feedback, so that each student can effectively have better understanding about the construction of these ideas or views or even the topics which are posed by the teacher.

Therefore, based on these advantages upon, English students in China would benefits from cooperative learning during language instruction, particularly in developing their oral abilities.

#### Cooperative Learning Eliminate the Speaking Obstacles

Cooperative learning helps students to eliminate speaking obstacles. There are four major models: the debate model cooperative model, the competition and partner model and the role play model. Each model works on an oral problem.

The debate model in cooperative learning improves the language environment. In cooperative learning, the teacher works as a guide or organizer and has the responsibility to establish a freer language environment that lets the students share the experience. To use debate model in cooperative learning is a good choice. The teacher could uses simple

language to request that the student divide themselves into positive and negative sides to carry on the discussion on the social hot spot topic. The teacher requests the students to finish sufficient preparation for the debate, have rational evidence, and consult the material on their own, in the group discussion. Each group member expresses his or her own opinion and speaks freely. People should express and hear the different viewpoints and opinions, and then compile the group viewpoint. In the debate process, the teacher acts as a neutral body to the groups and judges the winner who has full proof and good language organization. This process not only expands students' range of knowledge, but also sharpens the team's cooperation and nimble utilization of their language ability. The students have "experienced personally" the truth and a natural feeling. Thus, they pay more attention to coherent language and connotative meaning. It makes their study more efficient.

The cooperation model in cooperative learning eliminates the psychological barriers. The emotion factor such as motivation and self-confidence directly influence the effect of language learners. The fewer psychological barriers that are held, the more self-confidences the learners possess. Thus, their language input would be increased. The cooperation model could eliminate the learners' psychological barriers. Because the learners come from different areas, there are lots of different aspects including personality, gender, academic achievement, and ability. So, we should follow the principle that every homogeneous group is constructed with different member trait. If the learner cannot apply the knowledge and the skills during cooperative learning with others, this knowledge and these skills are useless. After practicing the cooperative learning, the learners may act according to the respect authority recognize, enhances strong points and avoid weaknesses. They also share various topics and information

of interest, split up work, coordinate mutually, make-up mutually, and explore the topics. Through the cooperative learning, learners reduce anxious feelings, eliminate the psychological barriers, and simultaneously receive the attention and the respect of others. Learners also could strengthen their confidence. This will make them more positive about the educational activity and stimulate their enthusiasm for English study. During cooperative learning, the teacher's courage and learnedness eliminates the learners' psychological barriers, this has a crucial affect. Therefore, teacher must guide the cooperative learning reasonably in the oral English teaching activity. The teacher encourages rather than criticizes, and makes the circumstances more acceptable for students while correcting their mistakes.

The competition and partner model in cooperative learning eliminates the vocabulary problem. Students must expand their vocabulary when they are improving their communicative competence. Teachers can use the cooperative competition model to increase students' interests. For instance, the word spelling competition, guessing games etc. Cooperative learning includes individual processes and competitions which do not require that every student be successful, but they may progress (Wang Tan, 2002, P29). The partner model is could also be used in cooperative learning. The partner model refers to the cooperation relations between the students to complete the same specific task. In this way, the student is no longer being a passive assimilator, but is a positive collaborator and participant. Moreover, word games could improve the student's interest in study and enliven the student's thinking. In cooperative learning, students are divided into several groups; everyone in the group plays a part in the game. The student cooperates with others in the game, acquires knowledge in the game, and takes pleasure in the game.

The role play model in cooperative learning eliminates the listening problem. Oral language is different from written. Most native speakers use lots of idioms, slang and adages in daily communication. Therefore, when students communicate with native speakers, they might not easily be followed the fast pace. This brings problems for students in normal contact.

The listening problems have three aspects:

- (1) The student is not familiar with the pronunciation.
- (2) The student is not familiar with the informal phrases.
- (3) The student is not familiar with idiom, slang and adages.

The role play model could easily eliminate these barriers which are very disturbing. Role plays in the cooperative learning are not like traditional role plays. They let the students in the same group play instructor and learner. They can change their own role in the process of cooperation. They can also embody the tones of different student. By practicing the cooperative learning in class, the teacher could demonstrate different meanings by altering the tone. This helps explain the different situations of oral English, such as irony, anger, uncertainty etc. Teachers could also set up more real situation in terms of foreign movies, dramas and English songs. Learner could be divided into several groups to guess, discuss and play. There are all kinds of oral expression in the above examples. The members in the same group could also use the Internet to get more information about the local expressions after class. They could share their knowledge orally.

## CONCLUSIONS

Cooperative learning at present is the one of most remarkable and fertile areas of theory, research, and practice in education. It is a kind of open classroom form that can enhance the student's interest and memory. It surely brings brand-new experiences to English teaching.

Cooperative learning emphasizes that the students play the central part in the class and it is different than the traditional ways which gave the teacher a central part in the class. Groups are formed in the teaching process so that the students in the groups are activity to study and pursue the subject with full engagement.

Cooperative learning offers the students the opportunity to practice oral English. It creates a relaxed environment, enlivens the atmosphere, enhances students' confidence and determination, and changes the relationship between teacher and student. Therefore, in English teaching, individual processes, cooperation and inquiry are especially important. The improvement of students' English speaking ability is a process that puts the self-expression and practice at the core. It was restricted by all kinds of factors, such as language conditions, thinking, psychology diathesis, and environment of learners. They can expect an effect of constant accumulation and application of creativity. The learners should know that they construct knowledge for themselves, not others. The practice in oral classes should emphasize the individual responsibility and promote the study of others. This will improve the English oral communicative competence of learners more efficiently.

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