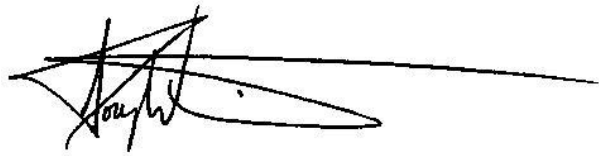


COLLABORATIVE LEARNING AND SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION FOR
CHINESE COLLEGE STUDENTS

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CHINESE COLLEGE STUDENTS

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ABSTRACT

Collaborative learning is a student-centered approach to learning, a form or type of active student learning. In collaborative learning students develop social skills, interpersonal skills, and problem-solving skills. Studies have shown that collaborative learning is an effective learning approach to second language acquisition. If collaborative learning can be introduced into China's educational practices, especially into the college ESL, learning could be greatly enhanced.

This paper examines the rationales that comprise collaborative learning and explores its benefits. The paper also distinguishes collaborative learning from cooperative learning. Although even adult learners may benefit from cooperative learning, this paper emphasizes a contrast between the two and argues that collaborative learning is a better choice.

This paper presents a brief review of some literature on collaborative learning and a summary of its theoretical framework as well as a description of Krashen's theory of second language acquisition with an application of his hypotheses to the setting of the adult learner in China.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Collaborative learning is a student-centered approach to learning, a form or type of active student learning. In collaborative learning students develop social skills, interpersonal skills, and problem-solving skills. Studies have shown that collaborative learning is an effective learning approach to second language acquisition. If collaborative learning can be introduced into China's educational practices, especially into the college English class as an ESL learning approach, learning could be greatly enhanced. Collaborative learning could constitute a major breakthrough for the college English class in China.

Traditionally, Chinese students follow the teacher, do what the teacher asks them to do, think what the teacher asks them to think, and solve problems by the teacher's directions. Instruction is mostly lecture-based. That is to say, students are passive learners in this traditional teacher-centered educational approach. In the past decade, there has been a shift in China's college English classes away from a passive student educational culture to one that is more student-centered than before. This shift can be attributed to several teaching practices, such as cooperative learning, group work, and listening-and-speaking-centered practices. Research in collaborative learning is showing that it may be an even more effective learning approach for use in the college English class in China.

Statement of the Problem

Through the review of literature, this paper presents the following problems: How does collaborative learning differ from cooperative learning; and why is collaborative learning of special benefit to Chinese college students?

Delimitations of the Research

The research was conducted in and through the Karrmann Library at the University of Wisconsin-Platteville and the Cameron University Library at Lawton, Oklahoma, over a period of a year. Primary searches were conducted via the Internet through EBSCOhost with ERIC and Academic Search Elite as the primary sources. Google scholar search was used as well. Key search topics included “collaborative learning,” “cooperative learning,” “second language acquisition,” and “college English learners.

Method of Approach

A brief review of literature on the background of collaborative learning and cooperative learning, and Krashen’s theory of second language acquisition was conducted.

A second review of literature relating to research, studies and theoretical basics of the relationship between collaborative learning and second language acquisition was conducted.

Definition of Terms

Collaborative learning is a student-centered approach to learning. It is active learning. In collaborative learning students develop social skills, interpersonal skills, and problem-solving skills.

On the website Online Collaborative Learning in Higher Education, cooperative learning is defined as, “a teaching strategy in which small teams, each with students of different levels of ability, use a variety of learning activities to improve their understanding of a subject, almost always under the guidance of an instructor.” This paper will argue that Cooperative Learning is a teaching method different from collaborative learning. A case will be presented that collaborative learning is better suited to the college-level learner in China.

Second language acquisition is the process by which people learn languages in addition to their native language(s). The term “second language” is used to describe any language whose acquisition starts after early childhood (including what may be the third or subsequent language learned). The language to be learned is often referred to as the “target language” or “L2,” compared to the first language, “L1.” Second language acquisition may be abbreviated “SLA,” or “L2A,” for “L2 acquisition.”

Linkage to Theory

The study focuses on current practices of collaborative learning in second language acquisition and Krashen’s theory of language acquisition.

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Collaborative Learning

Collaborative learning has been highly praised as a student-centered approach to learning in which students play active roles rather than passive ones. Alderman (2000) examines some basic assumption of collaborative learning.

Firstly, there are the assumptions that knowledge is created through interaction and not ‘transferred’ from educator to student, and (1) learning is enhanced through a social interaction; (2) the learner is not a mere container wanting to be filled by the knowledge of the teacher. Secondly, learning is student-centered, with consideration given to the students’ levels of knowledge, experience and understanding. Thirdly, the educator’s role is that of facilitator of learning, developer of the structure, creator of the context, and provider of the learning space so that students can take control of their own learning.

The value of collaborative learning goes far beyond its benefit to classroom curriculum. In collaborative learning students expand their abilities in problems solving, social skills, and interpersonal skills. When factual information changes daily and can be easily accessed on the internet by the student, it is far more crucial to the student’s future preparedness in this changing world to have the skills needed for working with people. After all, educators want to prepare student for management positions, not just for entry-level jobs. According to Wiersema (2000), collaborative learning is a philosophy of teaching that fits today's globalized world. If different people learn to work together, build together, learn together, change together and improve together in the classroom, says Wiersema, their

lifetime retention of curricular content will be much more likely, and they will become better citizens of the world. It will be easier for them to interact positively with people who think differently, not only those in their home culture, but also those in the rest of the world (Wiersema, 2000). Panitz (1996) points out that Collaborative learning is a way of approaching education, not just a classroom technique. The classroom setting is an ideal group setting where the individual collaborative learner is a respected group member whose abilities and contributions are valued. Authority is shared and responsibility is accepted. Those who practice Collaborative learning do not just do so in the classroom. Collaborative learning beliefs lead the practitioner to a paradigm that allows for a life approach of honoring others, one that reaches beyond the classroom into all social settings such as committee meetings, community groups, and families. This outlook on life becomes “a way of living with and dealing with other people” (Panitz, 1996).

Gokhale (1995) states that those using collaborative learning believe that working in collaborative learning groups heightens interest and promotes critical thinking. “The shared learning gives students an opportunity to engage in discussion, take responsibility for their own learning, and thus become critical thinkers” (Totten, Sills, Digby, & Russ, 1991).

Those advocating Collaborative learning have strong feelings about the affective benefits of this approach. Collaborative learning is “a rewarding experience for teachers and students” (Wiersema, 2000). According to Wiersema, by employing collaborative learning in classrooms, teachers can promote student involvement (an essential element in keeping them focused), have them work dynamically and make them feel good about something they have achieved totally by themselves (2000). Collaborative learning puts students into a small

consensus group in which they see themselves succeeding together, as a team, each individual contributing toward group success.

Each person's role may differ, but it is crucial to the group process. Wiersema (2000) cites Klemm (1994) in listing possible roles assigned to individual small group members.

- A) a reader who reads and interprets the assignment to the group;
- B) an encourager who prods all members to participate in information gathering and discussion;
- C) a summarizer who restates the group's consensus findings;
- D) a checker who makes sure that all members can explain how to solve the assigned problem or generate the appropriate report material;
- E) an elaborator who relates the current concepts to what the group knows from previous experience; and
- F) a recording observer who keeps track of how the group is performing and how each member is fulfilling the assigned role.

Wiersema (2000) argues that a key element in collaborative learning is positive interdependence, "a situation in which students make an effort to teach each other and learn from each other." If students take on different roles within the group, they will each be able to focus on a certain aspect of learning during the learning process and thus work more efficiently. In collaborative learning, it is the teacher's task to explain the use of roles of

students within the groups and to emphasize positive interdependence (Wiersema, 2000). According to Wiersema, another element of collaborative learning is effective interpersonal communication: “Effective interpersonal communication refers to group members staying in contact with each other regularly, making sure that their communication is clear and to the point.”

When collaborative learning practitioners advocate group work, they are referring to a small group. Small groups are more likely to function as effective collaborative learning groups. In large groups, some members are often “asleep” or even excluded from discussion. Most of the mechanisms in collaborative learning, such as “mutual regulation, social grounding, shared cognitive load can only occur between a few participants” (Wiersema, 2000).

Alderman (2006) cites Reid, Forrestal and Cook’s collaborative learning Model (1989).

1. The *engagement* phase involves students acquiring information and engaging in a shared experience that provides the foundation for their ensuing project. The educator provides a structured overview, links new material with old, encourages interaction, and sets directions.
2. The *exploration* phase features students exploring ideas and information in an unstructured environment with time and space for engagement. The educator facilitates monitors, responds and reflects.

3. The *transformation* phase involves students in activities to 'reshape' the information by reorganizing, clarifying, elaborating, and practicing or using information in a purposeful way. The educator monitors, facilitates, and provides information.

4. The *presentation* phase involves students in presenting their findings to an "interested and critical audience." The audience should be 'authentic' and provide feedback. The educator facilitates presentations and checks that goals are being met.

5. The final phase, *reflection*, involves students reflecting on what they have learned in the process, and offering constructive ideas on improving their learning. The educator reviews learning outcomes, processes, and student's responses, then reflects on these for future planning.

Butler and Coleman (2003) see collaborative learning as following one of five primary collaboration models: library, solicitation, team, community, and process support. The following are a few common objectives of the team model:

- Members have a shared stake in their success
- Members are often bound by the parameters of a project
- Members are interdependent
- Membership is tightly controlled
- Membership is relatively small (2-20)
- Most members both read and write content
- There is a higher level of interactivity
- This model has many of the characteristics of an e-meeting

- Access and security are tight and often based on roles, groups, or projects
- New members can get up to speed by reading the group “history”
- Content/document management and project management features such as: check-in/check-out, version control, task and issue management, and escalation
- Co-editing, project dashboards and/or executive overviews are also common.

Collaborative Learning versus Cooperative Learning

Online Collaborative Learning in Higher Education defines collaborative learning as “any instruction method in which students work together in small groups toward a common goal” and cooperative learning as “a teaching strategy in which small teams, each with students of different levels of ability, use a variety of learning activities to improve their understanding of a subject, almost always under the guidance of an instructor.” Panitz (1996) points out, “Cooperative learning is a set of processes which help people interact together in order to accomplish a specific goal or develop an end product which is usually content specific. It is more directive than a collaborative system of governance and closely controlled by the teacher... [T]he fundamental approach is teacher centered whereas collaborative learning is more student centered.” Alderman (2006) states that collaborative learning allows knowledge to be gained by “working together, conversing, sharing, arguing and shaping the tenets of the field.”

According to Panitz, “Collaboration is a philosophy of interaction and personal lifestyle whereas cooperation is a structure of interaction designed to facilitate the accomplishment of an end product or goal” (1996). Referring to Myers (1991), Panitz (1996) describes the differences between the two, and collaborative learning and cooperative learning as follows: (a) “Collaboration” focuses on working together; “cooperation” stresses

the product of such work. (b) They have different histories; collaborative learning has British roots; cooperative learning developed in America based on Dewey and Lewin. (c) Collaborative learning looks for quality as it stimulates higher order thinking skills when students analyze and discuss; the cooperative learning tradition looks for quantity, i.e. the product of learning. Panitz (1996) states that Rockwood (1995) emphasizes that both methods have many parallels. When looking at both methods, it is obvious that they both use small groups of students, both center around a task, and both expect the groups to present their findings to the whole class. Rockwood summarizes the differences between the two methods: Cooperative learning focuses on factual knowledge, and collaborative learning focuses on the social process that engages the learner in a search for knowledge. “We understand knowledge to be a social construct and learning a social process.” (Brufee, 1993)

Panitz (1996) also quotes Myers’ (1991) in describing the differences between collaborative learning and cooperative learning:

Supporters of co-operative learning tend to be more teacher-centered, for example when forming heterogeneous groups, structuring positive inter-dependence, and teaching co-operative skills. Collaborative learning advocates distrust structure and allow students more say in forming friendship and interest groups. Student talk is stressed as a means for working things out. Discovery and contextual approaches are used to teach interpersonal skills.

Panitz (1996) explains Rockwood (1995) as emphasizing that the authority in collaborative learning rests mostly with the small group. The small group is given more say in the project than the teacher and the experts that have published on the subject being

researched. The power exercised within the small group is more important than the final results of the project. The best project assignment does not have set answers. The group should be able to come up with unique and original results. The process of giving the authority to the small group is more important than the product produced. Even though cooperative learning has a small group set up, it is still teacher-centered. Authority still centers on the teacher. Tasks have predictable outcomes. In collaborative learning, “the instructor--once the task is set--transfers all authority to the group. In the ideal, the group's task is always open ended” (Rockwood, 1995, in Panitz, 1996).

So the purpose of cooperative learning does not focus on giving students the final power. There is no real risk taking on the teacher's part. Students in collaborative learning on the other hand are free to develop their project to their own conclusion even when that result does not agree with the teacher.

Panitz (1996) further cites Rockwood (1995) on the concept of a “knowledge community.” Each person already belongs to “knowledge communities” before joining the collaborative learning group. These communities “share vocabularies, points of view, histories, values, conventions and interests.” The teacher in the collaborative classroom helps students learn to take the step from their previous knowledge community into the new classroom knowledge community. Students want to join the new community because they know they have to work with the team in order to succeed. It is a new knowledge community with new foundational knowledge. “To function independently within a knowledge community, the fledgling scholar must master enough material to become conversant with the community” (Rockwood, 1995, in Panitz, 1996). Even the collaborative learning

proponent admits that often it is best to gain the foundational knowledge needed by implementing cooperative learning techniques. Only with a foundational English knowledge can students perform group tasks assigned in the target language.

College students in China have been educated in English since preschool. The foundation knowledge has already been gained. Educational literatures comparing collaborative learning and cooperative learning suggest that collaborative learning is more suitable to these high level students, who have mastered the foundational knowledge of English and are ready for a change in their approach in learning English. Collaborative learning is highly suited to this adult learner. The fact that the student has earned the right to be in college in the first place in the very competitive world of Chinese education makes that student an ideal learner for a collaborative learning setting.

Kashen's Theory of Second Language Acquisition

In the discussion of the kind proposed by this paper, it is essential to introduce at least one current theory of second language acquisition. Steven D. Krashen (1987) contends that second language acquisition consists of five main hypotheses:

- Acquisition-Learning
- Monitor
- Natural Order
- Input
- Affective Filter

Of these five hypotheses, the first one, the Acquisition-Learning hypothesis, is the one for which Krashen is most recognized. According to Krashen (1987) there are two

aspects of second language performance: “the acquired system” and “the learned system.” The “acquired system” or “acquisition” describes the process most like the one children use to learn their first language. The language learner uses the target language to communicate in a natural setting such as immersion in the language or imitating experiences that would take place in a cultural setting where the language is used by native speakers. The learner is not worried about how accurate language is but is concentrating on communication with a purpose. The “learned system” or “learning” refers to “conscious” learning of a new language such as takes place in the traditional classroom where a learner studies grammar. Krashen asserts that “acquisition” is far superior to “learning”.

The monitor hypotheses describes how “learning” changes “acquisition.” A learner studies a grammar rule and understands how “acquired” language needs to be “edited.” The learner then changes language if there is enough time, understanding, and concentration.

Krashen divides learners into three groups defined by how the learner uses the monitor. An “over-user” uses the monitor wherever using the target language (usually a perfectionist introvert). Monitor “under-user” is a learner who either does not know better or does not care to worry about corrections (often an extrovert). The “optimal” monitor user corrects language when that is needed to be understood and is knowledgeable enough to know when that is the case.

The Natural Order hypothesis draws from research (Dulay & Burt, 1974; Fathman, 1975; Makino, 1980 cited in Krashen, 1987) that asserts that learning of the target language happens in a definite order, the Natural Order. Research seemed to show that some grammatical structures were likely to be learned before others when looking at a specific

language. In spite of these research findings, Krashen (1987) resists the ideas that a course syllabus should follow that Natural Order. He believes that when “acquisition” is the learning goal, “grammar sequencing” should not be used.

Krashen’s Input hypothesis examines only second language “acquisition,” not learning. Input refers to exposing the learner to language that is on a higher level from the learner’s. Even though it is a stage above, it must still be “comprehensible Input”--the learner must be able to relate to that stage. So it cannot be out of reach for the learner. Krashen believes Input must be considered when planning curriculum. The learner must be continually challenged to increase competence.

Krashen explains this by referring to the learner as being at stage “i.” The learner should be exposed to the next higher input level, a “Comprehensible Input” level “i+1.” Krashen (1987) asserts that an Affective Filter plays a role in language learning but he does not believe it is a causal role. The Affective Filter refers to the learner’s attitude and self-esteem in relation to the learning experience. If the learner has positive feelings, learning is more likely to happen, negative feelings put up the filter to prevent learning.

Application of Krashen’s theory

Krashen’s theory supports the effectiveness of collaborative learning in the college English class in China where adult students come to the process fluent in the target language. An authentic setting of “acquisition” is created in the collaborative college class as students discuss and explore how to solve the project problem. Conversations take place in that target language. The small group provides a non-threatening environment. Focus is not on language

learning but on effective communicative use of the language, on “acquisition” and “learning” with emphasis on “acquisition” while “learning” in a natural setting.

Should the group decide to encourage monitoring, or at least not discourage it, the group provides peer pressure in a competitive setting for improving communication. The individual group member decides when and if to “monitor” while communication during the problem-solving process. The Natural Order allows for acquisition in a communicative setting after years of learning in a traditional class.

Since student group members and the college English class in China are each on different levels of English because of personal knowledge, talent, intelligence, and regional origins. The small group offers many levels of input. Student English skills are not uniformed. At any given time while the group is working, different group members would excel, depending on the group project and the changing members of the small group. Collaborative learning offers the ideal environment for varying input levels. In addition, peer pressure within the college setting is a cultural fact in China. Before even entering public school as a child, the student competed for the best educational slots. By the time the students entered middle school, class rankings were posted publicly for all students and teachers to see. So public student ranking in china offers a cultural incentive to respond to the Input hypothesis in Krashen’s theory.

There is no better vehicle for a passive affective filter than collaborative learning. The small groups are safe. The nature of collaborative learning offers honor to each member and values input. A setting of acceptance allows for comfort in the classroom. The teacher authority that might have been threatening has been transferred to peers who are encouraged

to foster success in each member of the group. A positive affective classroom culture has been created deliberately.

Collaborative learning is an ideal method for SLA as it supports Krashen's theory.

Benefits of Collaborative Learning to the College English Class

Kristin Gerdy of Brigham Young University writes, "Learning is enhanced when it is more like a team effort than a solo race. Good learning, like good work, is collaborative and social, not competitive and isolated. Sharing one's ideas and responding to others' improves thinking and deepens understanding." Wiersema, (2000) gives a practical example of a collaborative learning project. A teacher assigns an advanced English class of 25 students to research "different countries where English is an official language." As 25 students study different countries the teacher is surely going to also learn from the variety of information. If the teacher makes this a collaborative learning activity, then congratulates the whole group with a comment like "Oh, I didn't know that!" the students will feel proud. The objectives achieved in that assignment are increasing general knowledge, building vocabulary, acknowledging cultural differences and learning tolerance. Different members of the group could focus on different aspects of the countries, such as politics, economy, culture.

English writing skill is one of the highly emphasized skills in college English teaching in ESL. Alderman (2000) cites Bruffee (1985) as pointing out a number of advantages of collaborative activities when making writing assignments. The benefits that Bruffee (1985) lists apply to writing assignments in the Chinese college English class.

Collaborative learning

- repositions writing as “conversation” and encourages students to talk about their internalized thoughts, clarifying, extending and recasting them for “publication,”
- organizes students for productive conversation,
- helps students negotiate among themselves to resolve differences of opinion, and judgment, and to analyze why these occur,
- assists students in developing judgment,
- offers a structure for learning,
- assists students in constructive criticism of others' work, and
- provides opportunities for a form of “publication” (reading unpublished work aloud).

The very nature of collaborative learning especially suits college ESL students in China. Because English is required at the university level and has been required since the students earliest formal schooling, the Chinese students are highly motivated to succeed in the college course. The students come to the course with years of foundation knowledge, making it likely that small group interaction can successfully be conducted in the target language. Because Chinese students have been educated in a teacher-centered environment for years and have been in English classes for years, they are ready for an approach that honors them as thinking, mature adults. The collaborative class then becomes an “authentic” setting for honest discussion in the target language by valued members of the small group.

CHAPTER 3

CONCLUSION

Collaborative learning is a student-centered approach to learning, a form or type of active learning. In collaborative learning students learn to learn and tutor one another so that they can develop social skills, interpersonal skills, and problem-solving skills. Students play active roles in collaborative learning, working in small consensus groups and discussing and exploring open-ended issues. The fundamental approach of cooperative learning is teacher centered whereas collaborative learning is more student centered.

Collaborative learning is more suitable to high level students who have mastered the foundational knowledge and become “ready to discuss and assess.” Collaborative learning can benefit the college students’ second language acquisition in an ESL context of learning culture, literature, and writing.

Collaborative learning is the ideal vehicle for ESL learning on the university level in China.

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