

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN COOPERATIVE LEARNING AND ENGLISH READING  
COMPREHENSION

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## Abstract

The problem presented in this paper was to identify whether or not cooperative learning had an effect on reading comprehension ability for secondary school students. Another objective was to discover the limitations of cooperative learning to be carried out in China and to make some recommendations for resolving these problems. A brief review of cooperative learning was conducted. A second review relating to research, studies, and anecdotal evidence of cooperative learning and its impact on Chinese students' reading comprehension will be conducted. A third review of literature on the limitations of cooperative learning in China will be conducted. Through a review of the literature, it becomes evident that cooperative learning will have a positive effect on improving Chinese students' reading abilities as long as the problems presented in this paper are solved.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

With the rapid development of its economy and the coming the information society, English is gradually becoming the second language in China. Both the government and English learners themselves have paid much attention to improving English proficiency. The result, however, is very frustrating. After ten years or more of learning English, most students still cannot use English to communicate effectively.

In order to address this problem, the Chinese government introduced cooperative learning as a teaching method in the early 1980s. Cooperative learning is a kind of activity guided by the aim or purpose to be accomplished, which suggests a change from the traditional teacher-centered teaching method to a focus on learner-centered learning. From then on, numerous opinions exist on whether or not cooperative learning has had a positive effect on enhancing the Chinese reading abilities. Some believe that the traditional teaching methods only stress theoretical content and neglect training of any skills involving effective interaction between both teacher-student and student-student in the ESL (English as a Second Language) classroom, while cooperative learning will improve students' confidence in using a second language, encourage students in creative thinking and active learning, and help students gain English reading skills intuitively. Others argue, however, that the cooperative learning method has some limitations related to our current Chinese situations such as too many students in one class, uneven development across China, and a tradition of task-aimed teaching methods.

The debate continues. While more research and convincing evidence is available, the two sides are still split, with each side, it seems, having enough evidence to support their argument. In my research, I will present some findings related to the influence of cooperative learning on English reading comprehension for Chinese students.

### Statement of Problem

The problem to be addressed is “What is cooperative learning?” and “What is the relationship between cooperative learning and English reading comprehension for Chinese students?” There is no certain conclusion on whether or not cooperative learning has had an effect on the reading comprehension ability for secondary school students. So, further research is needed.

### Purpose of the Research

The cooperative learning method has gained a considerable reputation in English as a second language learning classrooms all over the world. Meanwhile, it is also very important for people to enhance cooperation with others to improve speed and success levels for assigned tasks. These address social needs and academic needs for Chinese students. However, the results of students’ English proficiency, especially in English reading abilities, have not improved satisfactorily even after more than ten years of formal instructions. Students who demonstrate sub-standard English reading performance are troubling since reading skill is central to learning and academic achievement in other content areas. Therefore, the purpose of this research paper is to determine whether or not cooperative learning has a positive influence on reading comprehension ability. A related purpose is to discover the limitations of cooperative learning to be carried out in China and to make some recommendations to resolve these problems.

### Significance of the Problem

The cooperative learning method, currently, often seems to be a panacea for a variety of problems demonstrated by English-as-a-second-language (ESL) learners. Due to the traditional instruction method, most of the students still cannot use English proficiently even after ten years or more of studying it. Meanwhile, poor reading performance in particular is troubling since reading is central to gaining new knowledge and to achieving academic performance in other fields. So, in this research paper, we will examine whether or not cooperative learning will have a positive influence in improving English reading ability, and recommendations will be made.

### Assumptions

For the purpose of this paper, it was assumed that all research and review of the current literature was accurately reported. It is also assumed that the literature will make recommendations on how best to use the research available.

### Delimitations of the Research

The research will be conducted in and through the Karmann Library at the University of Wisconsin-Platteville, over seventy (70) 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 and English reading comprehension,” “cooperative learning and reading proficiency as a second language learning,” and “cooperative learning and English reading in China.”

## Method

A brief review of literature on the different definitions and advantages of cooperative learning will be conducted. A second review of literature relating to research, studies, and anecdotal evidence of cooperative learning and its impact on Chinese students' reading comprehension will be conducted. A third review of literature on the limitations of cooperative learning in China will be conducted. The findings will be summarized and recommendations made.

## Definition of Terms

**Cooperative Learning.** Cooperative Learning denotes a relationship in a group of students that requires positive interdependence (a sense of sink or swim together), individual accountability (each of us has to contribute and learn), interpersonal skills (communication, trust, leadership, decision making, and conflict resolution), face-to-face positive interaction, and processing (reflecting on how well the team is functioning and how to function even better). (Johnson and Johnson, 2008 <http://www.co-operation.org/>)

**Reading Comprehension.** Reading is considered as a complex act of communication in which a number of textual, contextual and reader-based variables interact to produce comprehension which is based on word recognition, vocabulary, sentence patterns and text structure awareness (Shaaban, 2006)

## CHAPTER 2

### REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

#### An Overview of Cooperative Learning

Cooperative Learning is “a relationship in a group of students that requires positive interdependence (a sense of sink or swim together), individual accountability (each of us has to contribute and learn), interpersonal skills (communication, trust, leadership, decision making, and conflict resolution), face-to-face positive interaction, and processing (reflecting on how well the team is functioning and how to function even better)” (Johnson and Johnson, 2008). From the definition of cooperative learning, we can easily recognize some of its obvious advantages, such as motivation to learn, cooperation with others and fostering of critical thinking, etc.

In the past century, cooperative learning experienced three stages: social interdependence, cognitive-developmental, and behavioral. During these periods, numerous models of cooperative learning arose, such as Student Teams Achievement Divisions (STAD), Cooperative Structures (CS), Group Investigation (GI) (Sharan & Sharan, 1992), Complex Instruction (CI) (Shaaban, 2006), and Learning Together (LT) (Johnson & Johnson, 1999). Cooperative learning strategies such as pair reading, treasure hunts, word mastery activities, and team writing allow students to realize that their contribution and ideas will be valued and accepted by peers and teachers (Stevens, 2003).

Because cooperative learning has long enjoyed a solid pedagogical reputation, some English teachers maintain that they have been using these methods in class for many years. However, they may mistake group activities for cooperative learning and fail to recognize what cooperative

learning really is. According to Calderon (1990), cooperative learning is not merely a series of activities or techniques which let teachers play games with students who are assigned certain tasks in groups. In order to carry out cooperative learning effectively, teachers should have a clear understand of the principles and theories behind it and manage teaching processes by guiding students with social rules, roles, procedures, and strategies. The most distinctive character of cooperative learning is that it emphasizes a way of thinking and interaction between teachers and students.

Under the influence of traditional Confucian ideas, Chinese students are used to leaning passively in the class, and the teachers' role is to direct instruction. In cooperative learning, however, teachers and students should exchange their roles during study. As teachers, they shift their role from that of transmitters of knowledge to that of mediator of thinking (Stevens, 2003). They are no long expected to be knowledge providers and managers of assessments. The teachers become “the conductor by setting up direction for tasks, assigning students to teams, delineating social roles and students' roles, modeling, teaching an monitoring the norms of interaction , and leading and debriefing after each activities.” (Calderon, 1990, p. 12) As students, they must know what they should do and how to fulfill their role, and then try their best to contribute to the team task and be involved in the cooperative environment.

It is not difficult to recognize that the cooperative learning teaching method has some outstanding advantages compared with traditional instruction in China. However, the question of whether or not cooperative learning has had a positive effect on reading comprehension ability for secondary school students still needs further research and evidence.

### The Advantages of Cooperative learning

The academic and social advantages of cooperative learning are globally recognized by researchers and educators. Proponents have cited a long list of academic benefits. These include the following: cooperative learning affords students more opportunities to use the target language; lets students play different roles and functions in the group; permits students to address their own doubts, concepts and hypotheses; requires that students be responsible for their own study (Diaz, Justicia & Levine, 2002). In addition, cooperative learning can be used with students of different ages, levels of language proficiency and backgrounds; and it sets up a “student-centered” learning environment (Calderon, 1990).

In working collaboratively, learners strive to achieve one goal with one cause in their mind. This will encourage students to be at the center of learning and to learn together. They will enjoy learning, which may not occur in isolation (Faryadi. 2007). Meanwhile, cooperative tasks allow groups of students to produce something new that each member could not produce alone (Shaaban, 2006). Without pre-conceived answers, outcomes or solutions, students may freely express their own ideas and find out the truth by themselves. In this way, students become self-reliant, so that no matter what problems or difficulties they will face in the future, they know what to do step by step without asking teachers for help.

Compared with the traditional teacher-centered teaching method, the cooperative learning teaching method is more often favored by teachers and students in large cities and coastal areas in China. Many of these teachers have realized that in a cooperative learning setting, students’ performance is managed not only by the teacher, but by all who are present in the classroom (Peng, 2006; Rao, 2002). Taking English reading comprehension for example, in a traditional classroom, “the teacher’s main functions are lecturing, designing, assigning, testing the students on the materials that have been covered in class and graded” (Mohammad, Lazonder & Jong,

2004, p.9). This approach, however, will not enhance the students' reading skills, as they just write down what their teachers' expect. But in a non-traditional class, "students are expected to move around and get hands on experience, while the teacher acts more as a guide and less as the sole authority" (Hayes, 1987, p. 18). So, students will have the opportunities to exchange opinions and communicate with others. In this way, they will have a deeper understanding of the reading materials and will gain more reading skills after conquering several difficulties and problems during reading.

In addition to the above academic advantages of cooperative learning, it also provides some outstanding social benefits. First, cooperative learning "teaches the skills of the future" (Calderon, 1990, p. 7). In cooperative settings, students have to share the resources, experiences and knowledge and do team work. Cooperative skills are essential for progress toward a future of global peace and economic prosperity. In addition, students learn how to communicate with others, which helps them to maintain stable family relationships, friendships and successful careers. Furthermore, the cooperative learning method will develop students' leadership. The prerequisite of cooperative learning is the respect for students regardless of their ethnic, intellectual, religious, educational or cultural background (Faryadi. 2007). In the future global working environment, a good leader must learn to communicate and work well with others within the full range of social situations, especially with fluid social structure, human diversity and interdependence (Calderon, 1990).

When we focus on reading comprehension, there are some potential benefits of cooperative learning on improving reading abilities. As see in the study by Jacobs (2000), in a cooperative environment, students can infect each other with enthusiasm for reading. "Knowing that their peers are reading can motivate students to read" (Jacobs, 2000, p.3). There is no doubt that

students with motivation to learn will perform much better and more efficiently than unmotivated students. Furthermore, according to Vygotsky's theory, students who are in the "zone of proximal development" can learn things actively. The zone of proximal development means teachers ensure that the setting is not too hard or too easy. A similar viewpoint is also delivered by Klashen, who points out that optimal learning occurs with low anxiety. Since the cooperative learning model is a "student centered" teaching method, teachers play an auxiliary role in the learning process. In this way, students will feel much more relaxed when expressing their ideas and making mistakes. Meanwhile, peers in a group provide an audience and interlocutor, and students can share what they have read (Jacobs, 2000). After reading some interesting materials, students want to share what they have read. At this time, peers will be the best audience. When students engage in the exchange ideas and feelings, they will provide new perspectives and discover new opportunities to practice their new language.

However, this does not mean that cooperative learning is a panacea. Each coin has two sides. Something may be considered as a benefit when seen from one side, but when you seen from the other side, it could be a defeat. As seen in the study by Jacobs (2000), one advantage of cooperative learning is that more proficient students can help other students in the group. Thus, from the point of view of Bainbridge, although cooperative learning is a method of instruction that makes students work together aiming at specific tasks, it can simultaneously help students to develop leadership skills and teamwork abilities. It also makes gifted students work with non-gifted students in a group, so that gifted students may help non-gifted students to finish the tasks directly or by examples, which may make gifted students learn nothing new while non-gifted students cannot get needed practice (2008). So we cannot make an arbitrary

conclusion about the cooperative learning method. Furthermore, this method has some practical limitations in China.

### The Practical Limitations of Cooperative Learning in China

Since cooperative learning has enjoyed growing popularity in China, it is considered to be the best solution for the widespread problem of Chinese students with low competence in using English even after tens of years of formal instruction. However, the outcome is not satisfactory. From the investigation of the job market in China, many multinational companies' interviewers complain about employees with low English competence even though they may have earned high marks in CET4 and CET6. This suggests that cooperative learning is not as useful as we thought it to be, or could we be ignoring some aspects of it while we are using it?

In the recent research carried out by Hu (2005), the indications show that the adoption of CL practices does not occur uniformly across China but varies due to the differences among the local environments in different parts of China. Uneven economic development in China imposes many constraints on CL. According to Hu's study (2005), there are 252 Chinese students which are divided into four groups: CC Group (students from capital cities of coastal provinces), OC Group (students from other cities of coastal provinces), CI Group (students from capital cities of inland provinces) and OI Group (students from other cities of inland provinces). Because the coastal provinces have been much more developed than inland provinces and the capital city is the chief administrative and economic center of each province, the students from CC Group and CI Group perform much better than OC Group and OI Group in using English. From the results of the research and my personal teaching experience, the reasons for this difference may be summarized as follows:

- a. The availability of different resources like textbooks, teaching equipment, teachers, etc.

In the developed sites, secondary schools and universities can afford the costs of employing qualified English teachers and introducing the latest English learning materials (Yu, 2001). Without these resources, students from less developed areas are less likely to learn as well as those from more developed areas. Furthermore, with the development of recognition in language teaching methods, the quality of instruction has been considered to be more important than or at least as important as the language of instruction (Cheung & Slavin, 2005). More and more English teachers accept and support cooperative learning. However, in the less developed area, a classroom with 50 or more students is too crowded to implement cooperative learning, and a teacher who has to teach 150 or more students a day is also too busy to pay attention to the quality of teaching (Stevens, 2003).

- b. Not in harmony with the syllabus

Syllabuses of English teaching in China mostly are the same, except for some coastal areas, special development districts, and some large cities. So, in most parts of China, if the teacher helps his or her students to develop a cooperative learning environment, the class may take more time to finish, which might not be in agreement with the syllabus, and some of the students might not be able to sufficiently understand the key points.

- c. Different perceived values and reasons for learning English

Those in developed areas and undeveloped areas will have different perceived values and reasons for learning English (Nunan, 2003). There is no doubt that in the developed areas, residents will have more opportunities to practice and use English due to the introduction of foreign investment, joint ventures and technological transfers. English is becoming a part of people's everyday life in these areas. Therefore, more than half of the participants in the CC

Group and the CI Group (60.42% for the CC Group and 56.86% for the CI Group) consider career-related or communication-related as their most important reason to learn English (Hu, 2005). The situation in less developed regions is quite different. After graduation, students will regard English as a useless tool for their lives and jobs. Without the motivation to study, it is impossible for the OI Group and the OC Group to perform better than the CI Group and the CC Group.

d. Potential poor cooperation

Group work is an important strategy for cooperative learning, but it often proves to be far from satisfactory in a Chinese classroom. Catalano (1997) believes the reason that many Chinese students, especially those living in the poor and remote areas, are too shy and afraid to open their mouths and discuss with others, and it is difficult for the teachers to solve such a problem in a very short period of time.

e. The deep rooted Chinese traditional teaching system

The traditional Confucian ideas also have an important influence on the implementation of cooperative learning in China. The crucial responsibility of teachers is to display their knowledge in their lectures and to make the students remember all the facts. If they play games with students or ask students to do role play during the class, they will be suspected of not doing their job (Wu, 2001). At the same time, research by Yu (2001), has pointed out that even recently, a number of researchers, experts and educators still doubt whether cooperative learning is superior to direct instruction or not. Since evidence could support both sides' opinions, some teachers may refuse to try this new teach method or to use it partially.

f. Testing and examinations in China

The form of English language testing is especially influential in English education in China. Students who want to enter the nationally-famous universities must get high scores on the National Matriculation English Test (NMET). Meanwhile, students who want to find a good job after graduation must pass the College English Test Band 4 (CET-4) and the College English Test Band 6 (CET-6) or even the Test for English Majors Band 8 (TEM-8). However, all of these examinations are designed using predominantly multiple choice questions, which constrain language teaching in a rather negative way (Wu, 2001). The task-based assessments force both teachers and students to learn English in an academic sense, not to use English to communicate in real life situations.

## CHAPTER 3

### CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Through a review of the literature, I have examined the definition of cooperative learning and distinguished between cooperative learning and traditional direct instruction in China. Meanwhile, it also becomes evident that most research has concluded that cooperative learning offers a solid solution for improving students' reading abilities in China. However, there are some practical difficulties and limitations in carrying out cooperative learning across China that relate to regional disparities including a host of policy, economic, social, and cultural factors. Clearly, further research should be done to improve the implementation of cooperative learning in China, So, the following recommendations will be made to address the current situation of cooperative learning in China based on researchers' studies and my own experience.

The adoption of cooperative learning in China inevitably involves transforming the traditional direct instruction approach, which is not an easy task. So, the government should pay more attention to these existing problems. To decrease the regional disparity in instructional practices relating to curricula, school facilities, and the teaching force should be a top priority for our government (Hu, 2005). If possible, schools should begin English education as early as possible.

Secondly, teachers should begin to transform "teacher-centered" methods into "student-centered" methods. In a cooperative setting, the teacher is expected to be a knowledge provider, guide and manager of assessment, rather than a dominator and lecturer (Klingner &

Vaughn, 1999). In order to get used to this change, teachers must be well trained in appropriate teaching strategies and classroom management techniques for inspiring critical thinking, and high-order questioning as well as materials and curriculum adoption (Calderon, 1990). Furthermore, teachers should try to encourage students to learn autonomy and initiative and nurture students' natural curiosity. Thoughtful and open-ended questions will help students to improve their critical thinking skills, while "Yes or No" questions will only restrict students' cognition.

Finally, each student should recognize that the host of learning is himself or herself. The teacher is only a person who teaches you how to learn. In the classroom, students should learn to gain new knowledge through creative thinking and active learning on the basis of what they have already known and learned.

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