

COOPERATIVE LEARNING IN CHINESE ENGLISH CLASSROOMS

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ABSTRACT

For this paper, I will explore the concept of cooperative learning and its feasibility of use in China. First, I will introduce what cooperative learning is and then talk about the history of cooperative learning. I will also analyze the definition and give two examples of cooperative learning activities. Secondly, I will introduce the basic elements of cooperative learning and analyze, "how it is good for teaching." After this, I will compare the advantages and disadvantages of cooperative learning. Lastly, I will discuss the analysis of practical application in China through the above stated information, in which I think, is most important.

COOPERATIVE LEARNING IN CHINESE ENGLISH CLASSROOMS

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Since the late 1970s, experts and teachers in the field of second language teaching and learning have witnessed the invention of many new terms such as "learner-centered," "cooperative," "collaborative," "interactive," and "communicative." It can be explained that collaboration is an interactional philosophy. Collaborative learning is conceptualized as "two or more people sharing responsibility for teaching some or all of the students assigned to a classroom." It involves the distribution of responsibility among people for planning, instruction and evaluations for a classroom of students. Another way of saying this is that collaborative learning is a fun way for students to learn from two or more people who may have different ways of thinking or teaching. Some people say that co-teaching is a creative way to connect with and support others to help all children learn" (Villa, Thousand & Nevin 2). Others see co-teaching as "a way to make schools more effective, and an effective strategy that serves as a means of delivering instruction to students," or "it offers many opportunities for enhancing student learning" (DiMeo, Merritt & Culatta 287). "It creates a dynamic, high energy classroom situation that promotes increased learning for students and teachers" (Friend & Cook 2003: 30). And the ideas are held dearly "is a promising form of professional collaboration" (Morocco & Aguilar 341).

In China, research and practices in cooperative teaching began in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Educational scholars agree that collaborative learning has many positive effects on learning. Collaborative learning, with cooperative learning groups as its basic

form, is regarded as an effective teaching technique which makes use of varied dynamic elements of teaching to promote student learning, and evaluates individuals on group performances and group achievements (translated from Wang 1995: 138, 2001: 7, 2002: 22). Cooperative teaching, as an original and practical teaching practice and strategy, not only enhances learning, but also develops students thinking skills, self-respect, confidence, internal and external motivation and communicative competence (Zhai 286). The purpose of collaborative teaching is to optimize teaching practices and move students from passive learning to active learning (translated from Wang 1995:29). Collaborative teaching is beneficial to originality cultivation (Hu & Hu 109). Collaborative teaching enhances student autonomous learning (Li 20; Zhang 13). English cooperative teaching helps to establish a student centered learning style, enhance classroom learning and improve the students use of language. Collaborative teaching creates opportunities for good learners to help poor learners through varied group activities to make progress together (Zhang 7) However, co-teaching is challenging, and makes many demands on co-teachers (Caietal 24).

CHAPTER 2: DEFINITION

In simple terms, cooperative learning is a new teaching method for Chinese students. Students can use cooperative learning to achieve many social and academic purposes. Cooperative learning is a successful teaching method which uses a variety of learning activities to improve students understanding of a subject. Cooperative learning can also be defined as instructional methods in which small groups of students work together, until all group members successfully understand and complete it. In both definitions, 'group' is the word that is emphasized, that means students must work together. Generally speaking, there are four to five students per group. They share ideas and materials. Highlighted is the conception of goal structure, which is helpful for us to understand the difference between cooperative learning and traditional learning.

In my mind, traditional learning allows the students to see the professor face to face and ask pertinent questions concerning their classes. In the cooperative learning structure, students must to interact with their group mates, and help each other complete academic purpose. In the process, teacher should help students by orally and patiently explaining and the concepts.

Goal structure refers to the type of interdependence among students as they strive to achieve educational objectives. I think people need purpose to find motivation and establish goals, especially students. The theory on 'goal structure' classifies it into three categories: cooperative, competitive and individualistic. The type of relationship involved with a competitive goal structure is exactly the opposite of that found in a

cooperative goal structure: there is a negative relation between the possibility of individuals' attaining their aims and their peers doing so too. In other words, one student achieves his or her goal only if other people don't achieve theirs. But this success is based on others failure, not a real success.

In the third goal structure, the individualistic one, there is no interrelation between the goal attainments of the people involved, that is, one person's success is independent of another's. From the above, we can see that cooperative goal structure belongs to cooperative learning while individualistic goal structure and competitive goal structure belongs to the traditional teacher-fronted learning.

After that, there is also a combination of cooperative goal structure and the competitive goal structure—this is the cooperation within the group, thus making it competitive between groups as well as in group. In other words, students work through the assignment until all group members successfully understand and complete it. There also have competition in group. This helps students achieve success. Students will strive to be as good as other members in the group.

CHAPTER 3: GROUPWORK FOR TWO EXAMPLES

Reading:

A useful reading activity, where the groups try to sort out a story. This example has been used by my teacher in our class. In China, traditional education plays a dominant role. Chinese teachers accustomed to use traditional teaching method on their class which leads to restrained in thoughts. It is a simple example and it can give us some help knowing and understanding this aspect for our English teaching. Most of Chinese teachers do not have any experiences on cooperative learning. Given cooperative learning theories only cannot help them to understand or use it appropriately.

The following example shows a process of cooperative teaching. We could correlate example with theory. From this, we can learn “how to start,” “how to arrange lesson,” and in the first example, step one, we can know how to choose a conformable content of courses and how to divide the class into groups. On the step three, we can learn that what the teacher should do in this process. The last step is academic goal. I think this a prime example for cooperative learning. The teacher could adapt their own ideas in flexible way according to their content of courses.

Method:

- (1) Choose and copy a story or any other genre, cut it out and shuffle the pieces—one set for each group. Divide the class into groups of three to four students. Give each group a set of cards and tell them to arrange them in the correct order.

- (2) Set a definite time-limit (e.g., 15 minutes) and stop the students at the end of it, whether they have finished or not.
- (3) Check orally by getting one person from one of their groups to read the first line of the story, then another person to read the second line, and so on.
- (4) Get the groups to suggest a title for the story

This example can help students train abstract ability. This method is not so challenging to discourage the student. They should have the ability to complete this method by individual competence. In most Chinese classrooms, the important point of group discussion is often overlooked. This method facilitates this needed discussion. This method can be used at the beginning of the course. This method can start as simple and later, when the students are ready, become more complex. It can build up student's confidence and interest, working to make them enjoy learning. I think this is a very important aspect for teaching. There is one disadvantage of this approach. It will use up a lot of time. A normal class length in China is 45 minutes.

Simulation

This is a simulation for groups of four to five students based on deciding the content of a daily newspaper's front page.

The following example also has been used by Chinese teacher in EFL class. The second example is more difficult than the first one. It requires the student pay more attention and energy. We can see it as an advanced teaching model. It opens up a complex cooperative teaching. A teacher can use this method to enrich the approaches of

their teaching as well. For example, on the step five, teacher could give a chance to every group to represent the storyline through the means of modern drama.

Another reason why I choose these two examples is the teaching materials here are recommended. In traditional teaching method, teachers just read the section, and then explain the meaning. This traditional teaching method generally proves unattractive and students may not get involved. Teachers should change the content of the lesson properly so its meaning is enriching. The teacher should make the teaching method fun instead of a chore.

Method:

- (1) Copy the notes or editors (instruction), one set for each group. Also copy the newspaper stories and the photographs, one set for each group.
- (2) Read through the instructions with the whole class to make sure that they know exactly what they have to do.
- (3) Hand out the news stories and the photographs and let the groups try to work out which ones to use.
- (4) Set a time-limit (e.g., 15-20 minutes), then stop everyone.
- (5) Get each group to read out their choices for the front page of the newspaper and answer the following questions: What was the most popular 'main' story with the groups? Which stories were the least popular?

This example can be used as a performance, interactive style of teaching. You can ask students to perform the story. It requires students to devote much time and energy to

complete it. Generally speaking, students are more interested in body movement and of the fun incorporated in performing the article. Of course, if you want to save time, you can just let students read the story. Also, there is a disadvantage to this. It could be hard to control the class, students, and course content. You must have a procedure in place so students do not get out of hand.

CHAPTER 4: ESSENTIAL TENET OF COOPERATIVE LEARNING

I summarize eight points about tenet of cooperative learning on basis of Shoran (1994), Slaving (1995), Jacob (2003) and Inn (2003). These points cover the main points of view of cooperative learning in all-round aspects. “Positive Interdependence,” “Collaborative Skills,” “Simultaneous Interaction,” “Group Autonomy,” and “Cooperation as a value” are discussed in most of literatures works. These are points that are easily overlooked such as individual abilities, fair competition and equal opportunities.

In my opinion, cooperative learning does not just mean team work, but it also includes individual behavior. The purpose of cooperative learning is to let every student get help from each other. If a student loses confidence in the learning progress, he or she may not be willing to continue the study. So, cooperative learning is a teaching and learning method, not teaching aims.

In China, individual abilities are being emphasized all the time. I think this is to give more attention to “Positive Interdependence.” This is very difficult for Chinese students. Chinese teacher should change traditional ideas so equality exists between men and women. Also, unfair treatment to the students who does not get good grades should be changed. In the following paragraph, I will explain the essential tenet of cooperative learning, and in the every point, I give out my thought.

Positive Interdependence

Pair or group members understand that every pair or group members depend on one

another, because each pair or group member's efforts are necessary and essential for their success (Johnson & Smith 1995). This is the most important feature of cooperative learning. In each pair or group, every member has their own contribution. In addition, they also care about and support one another in the learning process. Pair or group members have to know that they sink or swim together.

How to achieve it will be the most important thing. There are several principal ways for accomplishing cooperative learning structures (Olsen & Kagan 1992):

- (1) Structuring the goal: every pair/group together to share theories
- (2) Structuring the rewards: teachers do not just give individual scores/grades.

Teacher also needs to consider the groups.

- (3) Structuring materials: Students learning the assigned material and making sure that all other members of your group learn the assigned material.
- (4) Structuring student roles: Make sure each member has a unique contribution so that assigning different roles to every group member.

Positive Interdependence for Chinese students is a fresh and interesting. At the beginning, teacher must give good directions. You know that Chinese students are for the most part implicative, they like share their ideas with others before answering to obtain peer acceptance. They afraid to show their personal thought, unless they can give the only right answer. This is one of the hardest things for a Chinese teacher to overcome.

Individual Accountability

This principle mainly emphasizes individual competence, by checking for

understanding by giving random oral individual examinations. Each student should not only receive help from others. They should take the quiz individually or by teacher randomly selecting a group member to report and explain what their group did or thought.

In China, this educational pattern is a tradition which has continued for hundreds of years. Chinese teachers think that only individual competition can help students get knowledge. They emphasize individual competition because they think the underachiever is unable to learn. That is a terrible and ineffective way of teaching.

Collaborative Skills

This is a new approach for Chinese students. The teacher has to give students very explicit instructions. Students must discuss with each other, give various opinions, listening to others. This is very important for successful group work.

Many Chinese teachers think that this is easy for students to accomplish, but they overlook one point, maybe students do not know how to do this. The teacher must explain for students how this process works.

Heterogeneous Grouping

This means mixing students from a group of varying abilities, interests, or ages in academic classes. This is so they can learn from one another the ideas of experiences of past achievement, gender, personality, which are all elements for heterogeneous groups.

Most of Chinese teachers do not care about the underachiever. Teachers like to put the good students together. I think they are wrong. It seems arbitrary, and a teacher's

success in teaching should be gauged on the ability to teach their worst students.

Simultaneous Interaction

I think this is most helpful for the use of group activities. Compared with a teacher-fronted activity, group work provides students with many more opportunities to practice using the target language and to engage in direct interaction. In the teacher-fronted activity, the group interlocutor necessarily restricted the number of occasions individual students were able to speak out or be spoken to' (Pica & Doughty, 1985).

This theory biased toward output. The Teacher should be a guide in class. Maybe Chinese do not like this; they do not give as much importance to output as they give to input.

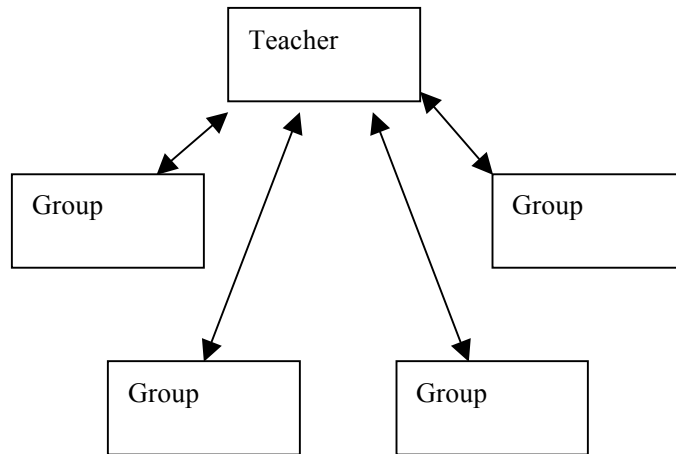
Equal Participation

“Heterogeneous Grouping”, in each group, members have different proficiency and characteristics. Teacher should ensure the participation of each member is unequal, which is the essential nature of cooperative learning. The essential of equal participation include students taking rotating roles in pair or group activities such as speaker and audience, or each student should share their idea with others members or other group mates.

In Figure 1, the interaction is carried out between the teacher and individual students, so the only person can interact are the teacher, but the students that have the chance to communicate with the teacher is very limited. But time is limited; we cannot

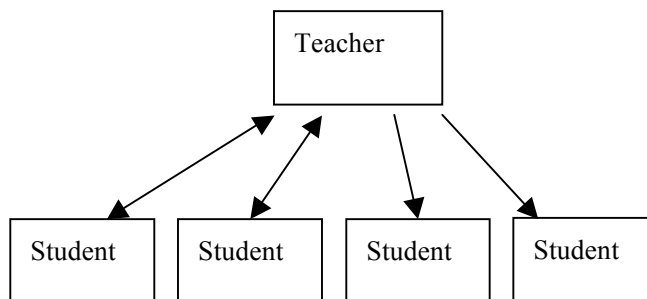
spend all the time on one or two student.

Figure 1: *Interaction between Students Groups and the Teacher*



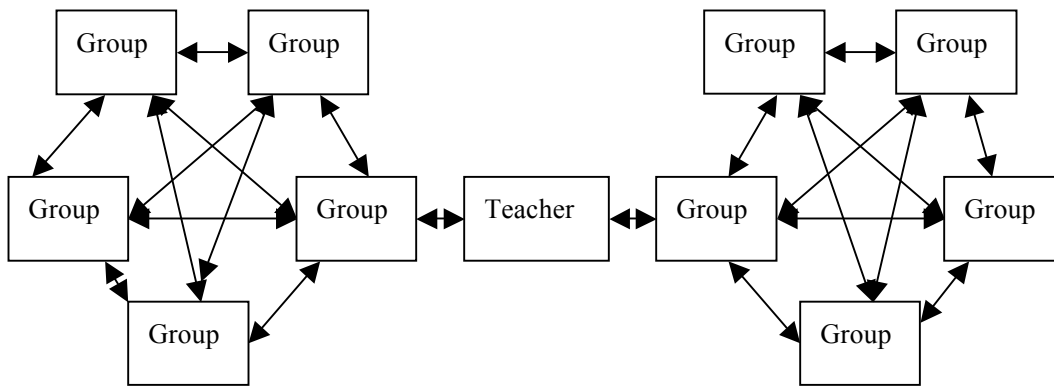
In Figure 2, this interaction mode, you can see, there will be half students communicate with their partners. Similar to pair work, in the interaction mode of group work described.

Figure 2: *Interaction between Students and the Teacher*



In Figure 3, students from each group communicating with other members. They also can get help from teacher. They still have more chances than they have in traditional classes.

Figure 3: *Group Communication*



To sum up, if we can give students equal participation, it will be more useful for students. But there is another problem in China that is sex discrimination; maybe male students can get more chance than female students.

Group Autonomy

That is say teachers should try to trust students and try not to interfere with their activities. It can help students gain a sense of responsibility and confidence in their study and life afterwards (Tudor, 1993). However, giving student's power doesn't mean that students can do whatever they want to do. Actually, we should change teacher role from leader to participant. Even though, Teacher is the main knowledge giver. The

relationship between students and teachers is 'facilitator' and 'knower' not 'knower' and 'organizer'.

Most of teachers do not trust their students. Teachers do not think students have consciousness in learning or they are not motivated to effectively learn in proper ways. This responsibility falls on the shoulders of the teacher though. They should learn ways to properly motivate their students by using different approaches to learning.

Cooperation as a Value

Cooperation becomes much more important than it is in traditional class, when the students will be able to get more trust and support. Facts have proved that, in modern society, cooperation is necessary. Teacher and students must know that concept and technique is very important. This is beneficial for learning.

Cooperation as a value is related to group autonomy. I think that the education of cooperation should be an inseparable part of educational goal. Despite this, Chinese people emphasize heroism. In the classroom setting, we know that an individual's heroism is insignificant.

CHAPTER 5: ACHIEVEMENT AND SOME PROBLEMS

In this part, achievement and problems are discussed. Even though the cooperative learning is a new method, there still exist some problems. Some of these examples include: “Muddled Modeling,” “Faulty Feedback,” “Chaotic Class,” “Native Noise,” “Special cultural expectation,” and “Different individual learning styles and personalities.” These questions are being discussed as focus topics. The discussion will help EFL teachers to figure out their own way of pedagogy and reduce the limitations of adoption cooperative learning approach blindly.

Achievement

- (1) Cooperative learning heightening self-esteem. Learning through cooperation, students will increase their self confidence and self esteem instead of feeling lost or anonymous, especially in large classes.
- (2) Cooperative learning creating caring and altruistic relationships among students. By cooperative learning, students not only practice language skills, they also learn cooperation as a social skill and life value. This is especially beneficial for students after their graduation.
- (3) Cooperative learning can promote students' intrinsic motivation. Edward Deci's definition of intrinsic motivation is like this:

Intrinsically motivated activities are ones for which there is no apparent reward except the activity itself. People seem to engage in the activities for their own sake and not because the lead to an extrinsic reward intrinsically motivated behaviors are aimed at

bringing about certain internally rewarding consequences, namely, feeling of competence and self-determination. (Edward Deci, 1975:23).

Cooperative learning is based on assigning students certain tasks. To finish these tasks, students are supposed to cooperate with one another. Their cooperation is thus made both possible and necessary. If they can complete the tasks through their efforts and cooperation, they will gain a sense of accomplishment and this in turn will encourage them to have more cooperation in future classes. This virtuous circle in learning is favorable for the production of intrinsic motivation.

- (4) Cooperative learning can increase language practice opportunities and improve the quality of student talk. In their article, Long and Porter (Long & Porter, 1985) made a calculation (estimation) of individual student's practicing time, their conclusion is that in a 50-minute traditional, teacher-fronted class, each student has only half a minute to talk while in a cooperative learning class, students' available time can increase as much as five times. This is especially true for the classes in China which are usually larger than those in Western countries. With increased practicing time, students will get more feedback from their peers and the teacher, which is very difficult in a traditional class.

As for the quality of student talk, they hold that group work offers more chance for students to develop their communicative competence. Group work involves language varieties other than those highly conventionalized ones used in traditional, teacher-fronted classes, which can rarely be found outside classroom. For example, in

group work, to solve a problem or to finish a task, students have to resort to techniques (skills) such as suggesting, qualifying, hypothesizing, generalizing or disagreeing on the one hand, and to topic-nominating, turn-allocating, focusing, summarizing and clarifying skills on the other. Thus group work can better prepare students for genuine communication.

I personally think that if the class can improve students' communicative competence in real communication, we can say the class practice improves the quality of student talk.

(5) Promoting a positive affective climate: lowering anxiety and prejudice. In traditional classes, a student who is invited to answer questions has to face the teacher and the whole class. This constitutes a great pressure for the student. In cooperative learning, however, students are divided into small groups. Inside each group, questions are from their group members, they are peers and equal. This can greatly reduce the pressure of answering questions. In addition, when the teacher checks the product of a certain group, the member tend to answer the teacher's questions on behalf of the group as a whole, that is, his/her answer is the collective idea of the group, no matter how good or bad the idea (his answer) is (Flowerdew, 1998). That is another reason why cooperative learning can reduce anxiety and prejudice from the teacher and students. In Chinese, we have a saying that 'the law doesn't punish the majority', though it is not quite rational, it can to some extent describe the psychological state of students in cooperative

learning class and describe the reason why cooperative learning can reduce students' anxiety.

Problems

I would like to add the fifth one, namely, the individual difference. I personally think these arguments and counterarguments are also applicable in China, or in other words, group activities can be applied to classes in China since in many aspects China is similar to Southeast Asian countries. Below I will briefly explain the five points. When discussing about the use of group activities in second language learning in the Southeast Asia, Rodgers (1998) describes four arguments against their use and then offers respective counterarguments.

(1) Muddled Modeling. This is the worry that in cooperative learning class, students listen to each other and read to each other one's writing, thus poor models will be provided and fossilized as the target language. In traditional class, by contrast, teacher will correct any non-target-like language thus the model is better or more standard. Rodgers' counterargument is like this: now people emphasize more on fluency, meaning and communication, less on accuracy. In addition, he claimed, through Porter's study in 1983, that students didn't produce more errors while speaking in groups, nor did they seem to learn erroneous language from their peers.

(2) Faulty Feedback. This is the worry that peers will be unable to point out each others' errors. They can even offer inaccurate correction. Besides, I personally

think that there should be an appropriate balance between input and output and between quality and quantity.

- (3) Chaotic Class is the worry that students will do whatever they want to do thus make the class chaotic and out of teachers' control.
- (4) Native Noise refers to the concern that students will use their native language to talk since the teacher can't afford to supervise all the groups all the time in class. Rodgers suggests that in Southeast Asian countries where many people are multilingual, code switching should be tolerated. Similarly, I personally think that in English classes in China, Chinese, the students' native language, should also be tolerated if the quantity and is appropriate and the occasion is suitable, for example, in dealing with culturally specific words. In other words, native language is not absolutely inappropriate in foreign language learning class.
- (5) Special cultural expectation. This means in some cultures, people are taught to be submissive, modest and quiet while in some other cultures, it is thought of as normal for people, students especially, to be open, eloquent and active. The former is generally regarded as not favorable for cooperative learning such as the cases in the English classes in China while the second one;
- (6) Different individual learning styles and personalities. Students are quite different in many aspects such as personality, past experience, learning style preference, etc. In my opinion, this is both a problem and the advantage of cooperative learning. The key is how a teacher makes use of the individual difference. Used

appropriately, students can complement with one another during the course of learning.

One should be concerned about the characteristics of Chinese students for the purpose of applying by three points. The first point is obviously favorable; the second point, that students don't want to express negative opinion on their peers in front of the whole class (in traditional classes), makes group work quite appropriate since group work can produce a positive affectionate climate in which the pressure/anxiety is low. The third point, the fact that students are too shy to say out their own virtues in front of the classes, also makes group work appropriate since in groups, students will feel comfortable to praise their group members.

CHAPTER 6: TEACHING IN CHINA

In China, there has been much discussion about the use of new teaching methods, like Cooperative learning. Some say yes, some say no and some others advocate certain adaptation should be made before the new methods are used.

This concludes that the answer to the feasibility of the application of western teaching methods in China is difficult to use. The reason they offer is that generally Chinese teachers lack authentic materials and appropriate consistent testing system that it is difficult to create an English-speaking atmosphere, and that teachers themselves lack the communication competence. Another source of challenge comes from large classes. In China, classes are generally large. Large classes tend to be difficult to manage in cooperative learning methods but in traditional teaching, large classes don't seem to constitute much difficulty for teaching.

In recent years, the Chinese Ministry of Education has begun to launch the Quality Driven Education Initiative which requires that teachers should teach students with different abilities and focus on more creativity in their classes. Thus priority should be given to develop the students' creativity and different abilities. This, I think, provides the basic rationale for the practice of cooperative learning in China in the future. In addition, China is changing rapidly. The conditions for the use of cooperative learning are getting better and better. This is also shown in my own investigation. It is high time now for us to consider carefully how to apply some new teaching methods in China.

Take the simulation exercise as an example which in my second part be used. Students asked to be divided several small groups. In the first half of the course, they must work together and take a presentation based on the recent news or the photographs. The topic should be randomly assigned to each small group, and students were encouraged free expression in this topic. Teacher should be careful not to wander too far from the main ideas. The presentation could show available evidence of research and propositional thinking. Student could save the presentation on the digital cameras or the computer. After that, students could analyze and evaluate it. Teacher should explain the regulation and she tandard for evaluation. To sum up, students represent their expressive and creativity through the process of presentations, as well as the competency of the effective cooperation with other students in detailed the study, Structuring.

Some other reasons are, some students are too quiet in classes, some want to control the group, some want to do something else, and some don't have necessary cooperative skills. From my investigation, we might get the following conclusions: (a) Teachers' attitude toward the use of cooperative learning in China has been changed a lot; (b) Some constraints on cooperative learning are improving, though still exist.

As far as I am concerned, when a Chinese teacher adopts the new method to teaching, he or she cannot forget the traditional teaching method because the traditional method has overwhelming advantages. Cooperative learning brings us a brand new theories system with western educational significance which provide our EFL teachers with benefits and creative models, and cooperative learning as a new method are worth

trying and deeply researched.

CHAPTER 7: CONCLUSION

Cooperative learning had many merits. Cooperative learning can increase language practice opportunities and improve the quality of student talk as well as promote student's intrinsic motivation. Cooperative learning can also improve the quality of both student and teacher learning. Even though this is so, through my research in this paper, we can see that cooperative learning is difficult to use and develop in China.

Teachers are often times ill-equipped to teach and deal with the dynamic and complex aspects of cooperative learning in the classroom setting, such as class and noise controlling skills. They lack authentic materials and an appropriate consistent testing system, as well as communication competence in English. China is a country that focuses and takes pride in its own culture and ways of doing things. For education and teaching purposes, this new method could be difficult to be accepted by Chinese people; students, teachers and even parents alike.

Chinese parents value education very much. They tend to hold close the traditional view of education. Under that large umbrella of traditional viewpoint, Chinese parents tend to value the "mark" or grade instead of the innovative teaching style. Teachers may feel pressure not to change to a new method if their students could not understand it and obtain get a high score. This is in fear that they will lose their job.

Another source of challenge comes from large class size in China. Classes are generally large, which is already a commonly known aspect for many years. Generally, cooperative learning classes have four to five students and one teacher, but in China,

classrooms typically have 40+ students for one teacher. It is difficult for the teacher. I think that a balance between input and output or between quality and quantity needs to be in place. The Chinese knowledge factory, a type of teaching organization in China, chooses teachers based on how fast they can talk and relay information to students due to the large content of its courses. This is only input and teachers do not have any other choice such as even utilizing cooperative learning.

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