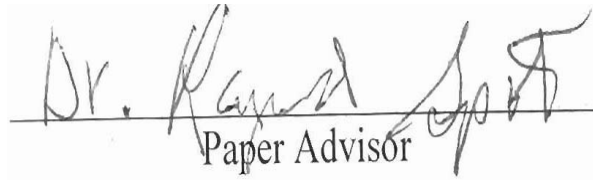


The Influence of Cooperative Learning on Foreign Language Anxiety



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Approved:

Date: April 29, 2009

The Influence of Cooperative Learning on Foreign Language Anxiety

A Seminar Paper

Presented to

The Graduate Faculty

University of Wisconsin-Platteville

In Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirement for the Degree

Master of Science

In

Education

By

Li Na (Sabrina)

2009

Abstract

In China, the study of English is a compulsory requirement for students beginning in the first grade of elementary school. But, because of the influence of traditional teaching models, many teachers pay more attention to the teaching itself, and they do not allow questions or give feedback to learners. Thus, it leads to passive anxiety in learning English for many students. For example, some students feel a lack of confidence in learning English, and some other students are even afraid to express their opinions or problems to their teachers, etc. According to the view of some educators, cooperative learning is one of the effective methods to reduce passive foreign-language anxiety for EFL (English as a foreign language) students.

This paper presents a brief review of literature regarding two opposite views dealing with the effects of anxiety on the language learning.

Some educators believe that a positive mode of anxiety exists. However, most of the educators are concerned about anxieties that are harmful in language learning. A second review of literature is related to research, studies on the advantages of cooperative learning in foreign language class, and its impact in reducing passive anxiety for EFL students is also included.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

In China, the study of English is one of the compulsory requirements for students beginning in elementary school. But, because of the influence of traditional teaching models, many teachers pay more attention to the teaching itself, and do not give feedback to the learners. Thus, it leads to passive anxiety in learning English for many students. For example, some students feel a lack of confidence in learning English and some other students are even afraid to express their opinions or problems to the teachers, etc. According to the view of some educators, cooperative learning is one of the effective methods to reduce passive foreign language anxiety for EFL (English as a foreign language) students.

In the history of research on learning anxiety, there are two opposite views. Some educators believe that there is a positive mode of anxiety that exists. However, most of the educators are concerned about anxieties that are harmful in language learning.

And according to Horwitz et al (1986), there are three performance anxieties: communication apprehension, test anxiety, and fear of negative evaluation. And, from the point of view of many educators, cooperative learning is one of the effective ways to reduce these three kinds of language performance anxieties.

Statement of the Problem

The problem to be addressed is “What is the relationship between cooperative learning and foreign language anxiety?”

Delimitations of the Research

This research will be conducted in and through the Karrmann Library at the University of Wisconsin-Platteville, Hubei College of Economics and SCUN China, over a period of a year. Primary searches will be conducted via the Internet through EBSCO host with ERIC and the Academic Search Elite. Google scholars and the China knowledge network are also listed among them. Key search topics included “cooperative learning”, “foreign language anxiety”, “cooperative learning and foreign language anxiety”, and “group learning in the classroom” and “communicative language teaching”.

Method of Approach

A brief review of literature will be presented on two opposite views about the anxiety effects on the language learning. Some educators believe that there is a positive mode of anxiety that exists. However, most of the educators are concerned about anxieties that are harmful to language learning. A second review of literature is related to research, studies on advantages of cooperative learning in the foreign language class and its impact in reducing passive anxiety for EFL students.

Definition of Terms

Cooperative Learning: a successful 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. Each member of a team is responsible not only for learning what is taught, but also for helping teammates learn, thus creating an atmosphere of achievement. Students work through the assignment until all group members successfully understand and complete it.

Foreign Language Anxiety: foreign language anxiety is a haunting psychological factor in foreign-language learning, which directly results in a series of negative effects, such as classroom nervousness and a lack of confidence in target language communication.

Linkage to Theory

This study focuses on current practices and it is not necessarily addressing any particular theory of language acquisition.

CHAPTER 2

Review of literature

Anxiety: positive effects or negative effects on language learning

Anxiety is the subjective feeling of tension, apprehension of the belonging to autonomic nervous system (Horwitz & Cope, 1986). The anxiety discussed here does not refer to the anxiety of our first date, first career interview, or doing other things for the first time, but instead is associated with foreign-language acquisition, a unique form of anxiety (Guo Jian, 2005). Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope (1986) stressed that there were three related performance anxieties that affect the language learner's progress: communication apprehension, test anxiety and fear of negative evaluation.

Some educators have asserted that a positive mode of anxiety existed. Alpert and Haber (1960) have suggested that some anxiety actually improved performance. Scovel (1978) maintains that anxiety can be helpful in addition to its harmful effects according to the Achievement Anxiety Test developed by Alpert and Haber (1960) that is designed to identify the amount of facilitating and/or debilitating anxiety that a subject has. Scovel thinks that facilitating anxiety "motivates the learner to 'fight' the new learning task; it gears the learner emotionally for approach behavior" (1978). Skehan claimed (1989) in *Individual Differences in Second-Language Learning* that "Some anxiety maybe beneficial and energizing, i.e. a nice amount of stimulation for

activity” (as cited in Guo Jian, 2005). Horwitz (1990), however, argued that anxiety was only helpful for very simple learning tasks, but not with more complicated learning such as language learning.

Nevertheless, most educators are concerned about the anxieties that are harmful to language learning. In the beginning, anxiety may cause negative side effects during language learning input, processing and output. In the input stage, Krashen (1985) stated that anxiety contributed to an affective filter, which made it difficult for the individual to receive language input. Thus the language learner failed to master the target language and language acquisition did not progress. During the processing stage, a student’s anxiety can both influence the speed and the accuracy of learning (Guo Jian, 2005). It may also cause an attention deficit during processing. Anxious students might become distracted with a task because their attention is divided between emotion and task-related processing (Von Worde, Renee, 1998). In this case, anxiety is a distraction. As Ford (1992) explained, “When people concentrate on motivationally inhibiting aspects of a situation (e.g., imagined deficits in personal capabilities or the possibility of undesired consequences occurring), they are unlikely to be able to focus the necessary attention on those actions leading to the desired goal”. In the output stage, the students are so nervous that they can’t communicate with others in English and they can’t fulfill the task (Guo Jian, 2005). And during the language testing, students frequently comment that they know a particular verb form

or vocabulary word and yet fail to apply it on the test or in the oral exercise, resulting in those “persistent ‘careless’ errors in spelling or syntax” (Horwitz, Horwitz&Cope, 1986). When students realize they are making preventable mistakes during a test they often become even more anxious which leads to even more mistakes and increasing anxiety (Horwitz et al., 1986).

Cooperative learning: An effective way to reduce the language Anxiety

As already mentioned, although there may be a positive mode of anxiety that exists, most educators believe that language anxiety still has many harmful side effects in language learning. Thus, how does a teacher reduce anxiety during language learning? According to Slavin (1995), students feel relaxed, respected, motivated and dynamic in a community where they work as teams to set goals, plan schedules, help each other and monitor the process for group tasks. Higher self-esteem, lower anxiety, increased time on assignments, more active participation, an increased sense of responsibility, faster learning, longer retention of material, a greater fondness for school, and improved student attendance are found among students guided by the pedagogy of cooperative learning.

The advantages of cooperative learning can be analyzed according to two major categories of theories (Slavin, 1995): cognitive theories and motivational theories.

The cognitive developmental theories of Piaget stress the importance of peer interaction and active experience (Ripple & Rockcastle, 1964). Piaget believed that learning is the result of “cooperation”. Likewise, Vygotsky (1978) believed that cooperation promotes learning because the process enables learners to operate within one another’s “zone of proximal development.” The zone of proximal development was defined by Vygotsky as “the distance between the actual development level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers”. In another words, the zone of proximal development is the distance between a learner’s actual mental age and the level that the learner may reach with help. Working with peers is academically beneficial because, when learners are closer to one another in their levels of proximal development, they are able to describe things to one another in a simpler way that is easier to be comprehended than when a person with a very different mental age explains it.

Motivation is another reason why cooperative learning makes successful learners. While competition sets up a stage for students to envy the success and wish for the failure of others, cooperation sets up a stage for team members to have a high expectancy of each other. While competition creates a hostile learning environment, everyone is respected and cherished in cooperative learning if the teaching strategies are implemented correctly. High achievers are no longer considered “nerds” and low

achievers are not “losers” any more (Baloche, 1998, p. 6) because students realize that their team members want them to learn and thrive (Slavin, 1978). They become willing to talk with each other, and they are more inclined to help and encourage one another (Slavin, 1995)

Is cooperative learning an effective way to reduce the anxiety in language learning? Horwitz et al. (1986) associate anxiety with three performance anxieties: communication apprehension; test anxiety; and fear of negative evaluation. Therefore, this study will be divided into three aspects to find out whether cooperative learning reduces the anxiety in language learning or not.

Communication apprehension

Communication apprehension is a type of shyness characterized by fear or anxiety about communicating with people. Difficulty in speaking in dyads or groups(oral communication anxiety) or in public(stage fright), or in listening to or learning a spoken message(receiver anxiety) are all manifestations of communication apprehension.(Horwitz et al.,1986). This often occurs in a language-learning classroom. The students who experience communication apprehension are not only reluctant to communicate with others in the classroom, but they are also afraid to talk with others. According to Hu Yuan Jiang& Zheng Yu (2006), teachers in China often

find such a phenomenon in the classroom: the students are unwilling to respond to the teacher's questions actively in class when a teacher asks a question. Most students just lower their heads or fix their eyes on the textbook. If they are asked to respond to a question, they speak in a very soft voice, which is barely audible to the teacher and not at all audible to the whole class. The reason is not because they don't know the correct answer, but because they lack confidence in themselves and they are afraid of making mistakes or failing to organize a good sentence. Thus, they often tend to engage in an evasion strategy in language learning. (Hu Yuan Jiang & Zheng Yu, 2006). Based on the experiment of Chi Ming Yuan (2006), she finds that cooperative learning is an effective way to reduce communication apprehension in the college-language learning classrooms. Because cooperative learning sets up a stage for team members to have a high expectancy of each other, everyone is respected and cherished in a cooperative learning situation if the teaching strategies are implemented correctly. High achievers are no longer considered as "nerds" and low achievers are not "losers" any more (Baloche, 1998). The teachers become a non-threatening facilitator, a coach, or a guide (Adams, 2000). Students feel relaxed, respected, motivated and dynamic in a group and they become willing to talk with each other, and to help and to encourage one another (Slavin, 1995).

Test anxiety

Test anxiety deals with the fear concerning the frequent testing in the language

classroom. Horwitz et al. (1986) hold the view that “test-anxious students often put unrealistic demands on themselves and feel that anything less than a perfect test performance is a failure”. The students in China experience many exams (i.e. mid-exams, final exams) every semester during their life, especially two cruel and important exams—the entrance exam on entering senior high school and the entrance exam upon entering college. Therefore, stress and anxiety would occur inevitably to the students in class. Although nowadays educators pay much attention to a student’s practical language-application ability in class, they still evaluate student learning effects based on one or two written exams. Furthermore, the exam results are also associated with student scholarship and employment after graduation in China. Thus, it is not strange for most of the students to feel anxious before or during the exams (Hu Yuan Jiang, 2006). Therefore, how does a teacher reduce test anxiety? Johnson, Johnson & Smith (1991) synthesized over 375 studies on the effect of cooperative, competitive and individualistic efforts on student achievement and productivity. They found that students in cooperative learning settings performed better than students in either competitive or individualistic settings. And, based on experimentation, Hamm and Adams (1992) found that cooperative learning improves academic performance among high- and low- achieving students. In group learning, students were able to improve their academic performance. Therefore, cooperative learning is a way to reduce test anxiety (as cited in James C. Flowers and John M. Ritz, 1994).

Fear of negative evaluation

This fear is more broadly based than are the previous two. Tobias (1978 , in MacIntyre et al . 1991) concludes that evaluation , in this case , refers to both the academic and personal evaluations made of students on the basis of their performance and competence in the target language .In China, the students worry most about negative evaluation. During various kinds of activities (i.e. oral practice, tests, exams, etc.), students may be faced with a negative evaluation that causes fear and anxiety of language learning. This kind of negative evaluation hurts not only the students' self-esteem, but also their self-confidence. Generally speaking, low-achieving students seem more anxious about receiving negative evaluations because of their grade (Hu Yuan Jiang, 2006). In order to reduce this kind of anxiety, Hamm and Adams (1992) noted that cooperative learning has positive effects on students' self-esteem, social relations, attitudes toward mainstreamed students, and race relations. In cooperative classrooms, teachers move from group to group to monitor progress and provide specific assistance. In this role, the teacher is “the guide on the side, not the sage on the stage” (Hertz-Lazarowitz, 1992) and the language used is more caring and personal as they work more closely with small groups. Furthermore, the students' language learning is often more spontaneous, varied, and creative as teachers communicate with a more positive attitude toward their students (Hertz-Lazarowitz & Shachar, 1990, in James C. Flowers and John M. Ritz,1994).

CHAPTER 4

Conclusion AND RECOMMENDATIONS

As previously stated, the study of English is one of the compulsory requirements for students beginning in primary school. However, it is also a course that is hard to teach for teachers because the goal is to train student for English comprehensive skills in listening, speaking, reading, writing and translation. However, there is a serious problem in teaching that causes both high-achieving and low-achieving students in China to suffer from language learning anxiety. The students are unwilling to respond to a teacher's question actively in class when a teacher asks a question; most students lower their heads or fix their eyes on the textbook. If they are asked to respond to question, they speak in a very soft voice, which is barely audible to the teacher and not at all audible to the whole class.

Cooperative learning strategies have been discussed for at least 100 years. Educators believe that they benefit not only the students but also the teacher in a language learning class. Thus, by actually engaging in these kinds of teaching strategies, in a more active way, students could reduce their language learning anxiety in class.

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