Combining Cooperative Learning and Individualized Approach in a Japanese College EFL Course

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Cooperative learning is widely recognized as one of the most effective practices in contemporary education. Cooperation is used in teaching various subjects on various educational levels – from elementary to higher education. However, cooperative learning and recommendations regarding its practical implementation are of general nature and cannot address every particular teaching situation.

As a consequence, educators trying to implement cooperative learning (CL) techniques face a number of difficulties. These difficulties, as researchers point out, relate to individual differences and make cooperation hard to achieve.

This paper is an attempt to contribute to this research. The following objectives were set:

1. Establish individual learning preferences of Japanese college students.
2. Study a variety of strategies that combine cooperative and individual learning.
3. Suggest an optimal combination of cooperative and individual learning in an EFL context.

Classroom research was conducted in order to achieve these objectives. The research consisted of the two stages. The first stage provided the feedback from students indicating their learning preferences. The second stage involved the utilization of various combinations of classroom learning strategies in order to match learners' preferences. The results obtained in this research were described and analyzed. Suggestions regarding structuring EFL lessons were made and perspectives for further research outlined.

Introduction

Many EFL educators appreciate and try to utilize the power of cooperative learning. Cooperation normally involves small groups working on specific tasks, which are best completed through a highly structured process of team work. When successful, cooperative learning results in many well-known outcomes including higher academic achievement, because learners benefit from peer tutoring and from the positive atmosphere of mutual support created in the classroom.

I have been trying to implement cooperative learning in teaching EFL to

Japanese college students for a number of years. During this time, it became obvious that similar strategies and techniques may or may not result in true cooperation between students. Any given set of activities can prove successful or otherwise when used with different groups of learners. As my students are always of the same age, sex (18-20 year-old women), and cultural background (Japanese high school graduates), it seems reasonable to assume that the variable success with cooperative learning might relate to their individual differences.

Theoretical background

The mentioned above observations from teaching practice are supported by the relevant research, which emphasizes the role of learners' individual differences in both learning and instruction (Butler, 1998; Jonassen & Grabowski, 1993; Sarasin, 1998; Scmeck, 1988; Sternberg & Zhang; 2001). However, there is no agreement on the classification of learning styles (Putintseva, 2006). They can be defined, categorized and described in many different ways (Entwistle, 1981). The present paper is based on the definition of Brown and Hayden, who characterize learning styles as a set of factors, behaviors, and attitudes that facilitate individual learning in a given situation (Brown & Hayden, 1980).

A number of learning style models can be found in the research on this subject. Some researchers describe general categories such as information processing, personality patterns, and social interaction (Conner, 2004). Others believe in the importance of considering three areas: cognitive, affective, and physiological (Reiff, 1995). There might be differing viewpoints on the matter, due to the complexity of learning styles and the difficulty of categorizing them. However, the Learning Style Profile suggested by Reiff (1995) appears sufficiently grounded in theory and applicable to teaching practice, in general and to the present study, in particular. The former summarizes related research findings and organizes them into three structural components: cognitive styles (*the way* people learn as opposed to abilities resulting from *what* they have learnt); affective components of learning styles (personality and emotional characteristics), and physiological component (biologically based and related to sex differences, nutrition, and reaction to the environment) (Reiff, 1995).

*Cognitive styles, a*ccording to Reiff, comprise: a) brain dominance (analytical, global, and integrated thinkers); b) conceptual tempo (impulsive and reflective learners); c) Gregorc's mindstyles (Concrete Sequential, Concrete Random, Abstract Sequential, and Abstract Random); d) modality (visual, auditory, tactile, kinesthetic, and integrated learners); e) Gardner's multiple intelligences (bodily kinesthetic, linguistic, musical, spatial, intrapersonal, and interpersonal; f) psychological differentiation (field dependence and field independence).

Affective styles manifest themselves in the person's a) conceptual level (high or low); b) psychological types (thinker, sensor, feeler, and intuitor).

Physiological styles include the following Learning Styles Elements: a) environmental; b) emotional; c) sociological; d) physical (Reiff, 1995).

Obviously, individual learning styles are complex and not easy to pinpoint

or assess. However, they are expressed in learners' preferences, which can be studied and assessed relatively easily. For the purpose of the present study, which focuses on the cooperative mode of learning, learners' preferences to work alone or with other students are essential. Thus, these preferences have been selected for this research.

Research questions

On the basis of the teaching practice observations, on the one hand, and the research reports, on the other hand, the following objectives were set:

1. To find out the learning preferences of Japanese women's college students in regard to cooperative learning.

    2. Study a variety of strategies that combine cooperative and individual learning.

    3. Suggest an optimal combination of cooperative and individual learning in an EFL context.

In order to reach these objectives, the following study was conducted at the Koryo International Women's College in Aichi prefecture, Japan during the spring term in 2006.

The study

The subjects were two groups of first year students who were studying an English Communication Skills course (thirty nine participants in total). The course was taught once a week for thirteen weeks. Prior to the course, the students were not familiar with each other, which eliminated the possibility of interference of previously formed personal feelings or attitudes.

The classroom research was conducted in two stages, each stage lasted for six weeks. All twelve lessons (the first and the second stages) were structured the same way: review of the previous lesson's language points was followed by presentation of new language material, which was followed by language practice: listening, speaking, and language activities with a focus on grammar, vocabulary, and language use. Every lesson included approximately equal ratios of individual, pair, and small group work. In brief, the research conditions can be summarized as follows:

a) invariable factors: the subjects, the duration of the first and the second stage, the place, the course taught, the lesson procedure, the teacher;

b) variable factors: the classroom strategies, i.e. the use of teaching material graded according to the grouping of the subjects.

The first stage of the research consisted of six sessions, which proceeded as described above. For pair and small group work, random choice (a draw) was used, so that in every lesson all students had different partners. Thus, students with differing learning preferences worked together. At the end of this stage, the students were offered a questionnaire, which was aimed at finding out whether the students preferred working individually, in pairs or in small groups, i.e. their

learning preferences. In the second section, the students were requested to rate the activities used in class (from 1 (the highest) to 5 (the lowest). The obtained data was processed, and the second stage was planned.

During the second stage, for pair and group activities, the students were paired or placed in small groups according to their learning preferences. A variety of activities was for individual, pair, and small group work. These activities included the Internet EFL grammar and vocabulary quizzes, listening and reading tasks.

At the end of the second stage, the students were given the same questionnaire as before. Once again, they were requested to indicate their learning preferences and rate the classroom activities. This was done in order to see 1) whether grouping the students according to their learning preferences toward cooperation had any effect on their attitude to the classroom study and 2) whether the teaching strategies (the choice of activities) were effective. Finally, the data obtained from the two stages were analyzed and conclusions were drawn.

Conclusion

The present study demonstrated the following findings. First, a significant number of students changed their learning preferences from individual toward pair and group work (Appendix 1): out of twenty students, who changed their learning preferences altogether (nineteen did not change), twelve people chose group work, as opposed to six people who changed their preference toward individual activities. Second, the rating of classroom activities has not changed significantly (Appendix 2).

These findings, to a certain degree, suggest one way of inducing learners' willingness to work with others, thus, making cooperative learning successful. At the same time, it is not clear what exactly determined the shift of many students towards favoring cooperation. This could be the point of further research.

The classroom activities received a satisfactory rating, which indicates that their selection according to the learning preferences (and grouping) of learners is a good way to cope with individual differences in a Japanese college EFL classroom..

Hence, it is possible to suggest that bringing students with similar learning preferences together allows them to freely employ similar learning styles without feeling deficient or intimidated. This way, they can feel more comfortable and relaxed and enjoy their work. However, further research is required in order to determine how individual learning styles and preferences can be taken into account by educators striving to improve classroom instruction.

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Appendices

Appendix 1

Changed Learning Preferences	Number of Students (Out of 20)
Individual to Group Work	4
Pair to Group Work	8
Pair to Individual Work	4
Group to Pair Work	2
Group to Individual Work	2

Appendix 2
The Change in Rating of Classroom Activities (average points)

1. Students with unchanged learning preferences

	Individual Activities	Pair Activities	Small Group Activities
Rating went up	5.2	7.5	9
Rating went down	2.6	1.5	2

2. Students with changed learning preferences

	Individual Activities	Pair Activities	Small Group Activities
Rating went up	6.2	6	8

Rating went down	3.6	4	3