

Effects of Collaborative Learning in an EFL Class: From the Perspectives of Chinese Advanced Learners

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Abstract

A 15 week long EFL task based on collaborative learning was designed in a Chinese EFL learning class to examine how the learning style affects the advanced learners' English study. A total of 56 Chinese non-English major graduate students took part in the research design. After the task was finished, a questionnaire survey was made about how the students felt about the collaborative learning model. Data are collected and analyzed to show how actively the EFL advanced learners involved themselves in the task, how cooperative learning benefited their English learning and growth in other abilities, whether they prefer cooperative learning or independent learning, and how the participants' language abilities and English learning motivation correlate with their attitudes toward cooperative language.

Keywords

Collaborative Learning; EFL Class; Chinese Graduate Students

Introduction

The collaborative learning model has been frequently used in the EFL class to help students practice and improve their language skills. Swain (1985) put forward the output hypothesis to emphasize the importance of output in language learning. According to Long (1996), second language learners learn when they negotiate meaning in conversations. Collaborative or cooperative learning enables students to both practice output skills and negotiate meaning with each other. The following is a description of a 10 week long collaborative learning task designed in a Chinese EFL learning class to examine how the learning style affects the Chinese advanced learners' English study.

1 Collaborative Task Design

A total of 56 Chinese non-English major graduate students took part in the research design. Since their primary school education, they have studied English for at least 10 years. Thus they are EFL advanced learners. These students show high values of interest(7.82/10) and motivation(8.77/10) for English study. Each of the 56 participants was required to join a study group after class to discuss one topic of interest in English every week. There are 12 groups, and each group has 4 to 6 persons. The topics students have decided to discuss are English movies, English culture, movie dubbing and imitating, public speaking, English songs, listening and dictation, and reading. On week 10, the students are required to promote their group activity on the campus and attract other students to join them. On weeks 14 and 15, each group gave a 10 minute presentation about their group work and achievement, and how they improved their language through the task. Both teacher evaluation and peer evaluation were made about each group. After the task was finished, a questionnaire survey was made about how the students felt about the collaborative learning model.

2 Research Questions

The three research questions the study attempts to answer are:

- 1) How do the students like cooperative learning in their English study? Do they prefer cooperative learning or independent learning?
- 2) How well does cooperative learning benefit their English learning?
- 3) What other abilities were improved through cooperative learning?

3 Data Analysis and Results

Data were collected based on an anonymous questionnaire survey. The participants were asked about:

- 1) how frequently the participants held group discussion
- 2) how actively they participated in the group task
- 3) how frequently they coded switched between English and Chinese in discussion
- 4) whether the group task benefited their English learning, and in what ways they benefited from the task
- 5) whether the group task improved the students' abilities other than language abilities
- 6) whether they preferred group learning or independent learning
- 7) whether they would like peer evaluation to be part of the assessment.

SPSS 19 is used to analyze questionnaire data. The results are as follows:

1) A total of 38 students (68%) has conducted group discussion more than once every week. These students show high motivation for cooperative learning. There are 51 students (91%) who claimed that they were active or very active in the group work. Forty-four students claimed that they spoke English most of the time during their discussion, and only 12 students used Chinese.

2) As can be seen from Table 1, cooperative learning is shown to benefit all participants' language learning in the following aspects: interest cultivation, pronunciation, listening, vocabulary, knowledge about culture, and English learning habit development.

As for whether cooperative learning or independent learning is preferred, 48 students favored cooperative learning, 4 students showed no preference, and 4 preferred independent learning.

A majority of the participants (45 out of 56) would like peer evaluation to be part of the assessment.

Table 1: Caption of Table 1

	<i>N</i>
confidence	19
interest	17
pronunciation	10
fluency	24
listening	8
vocabulary	11
knowledge about culture	9
development of habit	9

3) Besides language learning, data also show that the participants reported improvement in other abilities. Table 2 shows that there are 38 students out of 56 who reported to have gained friendship, 26 students have developed a stronger sense of teamwork spirits, and 19 students have improved their skills to cooperate and support others. Because the task requires the students to promote their group activity on the campus, 13 students claimed that they have learned to be better organizers and 6 students have improved their publicity skills.

Table 2

	<i>N</i>
friendship	38
team spirits	26
coordination skills	19
organization skills	13
publicity skills	6

4 Conclusion

For EFL advanced learners, the research data have shown their high motivation for cooperative learning in an EFL class in China. Most of them prefer cooperative learning model to independent learning. Other than language abilities, they also improved their friendship, cooperative skills, organization skills,

References

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