On the Strategy to Enhance the Efficiency of the Cooperative Learning Method in the College English Teaching in China

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Abstract—The cooperative learning, which is also called the collaborative learning, is one of the most important learning theories nowadays, which promotes learning cooperation between teacher and students, students and students. The cooperative learning method is a kind of teaching mode which takes students as the center and takes groups as the form. It changes the teaching mode and it is conducive to cultivating students' cooperative awareness and autonomous learning ability. The article first illustrates the connotation, theoretical base, and elements of cooperative learning method, then explains the four typical problems arising in the cooperative learning, and finally puts forward seven methods to cope with the problems in order to enhance the efficiency of the cooperative learning method.

Index Terms—the cooperative learning method, interdependent, assessment, interaction, efficiency

I. INTRODUCTION

Although there is a long history of thousands of years that group cooperation learning is applied in teaching, yet not until the works of vygostky were published in 1970s is the cooperative learning method widely considered the key teaching method in the learning process (Swain, 1995; Slavin, 1996; Johnson, 1998; Ferris, 2005; Lian, 2012; Ma, 2017). The cooperative learning method emerged in 1970s and it made substantial achievement in the middle of 1980s. At the beginning of 1990s, scholars and experts had done a lot of research on the cooperative learning method and accomplished greatly. The cooperative learning method is also called "group study", which is a learning mode in which students achieve their learning goal together through their cooperation and teamwork (Wu, 2011; Hu, 2012; Liu, 2012; Li, 2015; Li, 2016; Liao, 2017).

The cooperative learning method is a teaching approach which organizes classroom activities into academic and social learning experiences. It emphasizes structuring positive interdependence. Students must cooperate to complete tasks together toward academic goals. Unlike individual learning, students learning cooperatively can capitalize on one another's resources and skills (asking one another for information, evaluating one another's ideas, monitoring one another's work, etc.). Moreover, the teacher's role changes from supplying information to facilitating students' learning. Everyone succeeds when the group succeeds. Ross (1995) describes successful cooperative learning tasks as intellectually demanding, creative, open-ended, and involve higher order thinking tasks. Cooperative learning is also related to heightened levels of student satisfaction. The cooperative learning method can create a relaxing learning atmosphere for students, activate the social psychological atmosphere in class, improve students' academic scores greatly, and can also promote students to form good meta-cognitive qualities. But because of some factors such as the management of the teacher's ability, students' different ages and characters and so on, various problems may come up in the implementation of the cooperative learning (Nam, 2011; Sorden, 2013; Wu, 2014; Qin, 2007; Zhao, 2011; Xu, 2012; Zhang, 2015; Zhu, 2017).

II. THE CONNOTATION OF COOPERATIVE LEARNING METHOD

The cooperative learning is also called the collaborative learning, which is based on the modern social psychology, educational sociology, and cognitive psychology, studies and uses the interpersonal relationship in the classroom teaching as the starting point and goal, taking the cooperation between teachers and students, students and teachers as the center, with the team activities as the basic teaching methods, with group performance as evaluation standard, and with the standard quasi-reference evaluation as the basic means to improve students' learning achievement, and its ultimate goal is to improve the social psychological atmosphere in the class, to make the students form a good psychological quality and social skills. In the cooperative learning classroom, students are divided into groups according to their gender and abilities, and the group is the learning unit. Team members work together and each student does his best to master what he has learned and make his contribution to the group's common learning goals. In this teaching model, teachers are the designers, promoter, facilitator of classroom instruction. The classroom teaching is student-centered and takes group activities as the main form of teaching.

The basic process of the cooperative learning is to present teaching objectives--collective teaching (classroom

teaching)--group cooperation activities--test--evaluation and reward. The goal of cooperative learning teaching is not only academic, also includes cooperation skills: not only cognitive, but also affective (such as mutual respect, mutual help, and etc.). The Cooperative learning has a positive impact on students' cognitive development and motivation, and also on students' intelligence and non-intelligence factors.

III. THEORETICAL BASE

Theoretical base is social interdependence theory, which claims that social interdependence exists when the outcomes of individuals are affected by their own and others' actions. There are two kinds of social interdependence: positive (when the actions of individuals help the achievement of common goals) and negative (when the actions of individuals hold back the achievement of each other's goals). Social interdependence may be different from social dependence, independence, and helplessness. Social dependence exists when the goal achievement of Person A is affected by Person B's actions, but the reverse is not true. Social independence exists when the goal achievement of Person A is unaffected by Person B's actions and vice versa. Social helplessness exists when neither the person nor other can influence goal achievement.

Another important theoretical foundation is motivation theory, which focuses on the reward or goal structure of learning activities. Deutsch divides the target structure into three types: cooperative structure, competitive structure and individual structure. On cooperative learning theory, the competitive structure is for individual construction, which successfully weakens the peer's chances of success and it is not conducive to community cohesion instead; Cooperative structure is suitable for the construction of good interpersonal relationship of cooperative learning group "sharing weal and woe". From this perspective, the most effective means of stimulating motivation is to establish a community of interests in English learning activities, the "community of interests" can be achieved through the common learning goals, learning tasks, learning resource sharing, role assignment and play groups, reward and recognition. The "sharing sorrow and happiness" relationship among team members which bounds them together in a common cause is an important guarantee of motivation.

IV. ELEMENTS

Johnson (2009) put forward five variables that mediate the effectiveness of cooperation. Brown & Ciuffetelli Parker (2009) and Siltala (2010) discuss the five basic and essential elements to the cooperative learning.

A. Positive Interdependence

Students must fully participate and put forth effort within their group. Each group member has a task /role/responsibility therefore must believe that they are responsible for their learning and that of their group

B. Face-to-face Interaction

Members promote each other's success. Students explain to one another what they have or are learning and assist one another with understanding and completion of assignments

C. Individual and Group Accountability

Each student must demonstrate mastery of the content being studied. Each student is accountable for their learning and work, therefore eliminating "social loafing"

D. Social Skills

Social skills that must be taught in order for successful cooperative learning to occur. Skills include effective communication, interpersonal and group skills. Detailed Skills include leadership, decision-making, trust-building, friendship development, communication, conflict-management skills.

E. Group Processing

Group processing occurs when group members reflect on which member actions were helpful and make decision about which actions to continue or change. The purpose of group processing is to clarify and improve the effectiveness with which members carry out the processes necessary to achieve the group's goals.

V. THE TYPICAL PROBLEMS ARISING IN THE GROUP ACTIVITY

There are two sides to everything, and the cooperative learning is not everything. It also has some shortcomings in its implementation. Due to the nature of working in groups, group members can sometimes find that they are not working effectively, which negatively impacts on their progress, and their ability to be successful. Some typical problems identified by individuals working in the cooperative learning are as follows.

A. Uneven Participation of Students in the Group Work

In cooperation learning, many students have a weak sense of initiative and lack cooperative participation. Because the ability of team members is not the same, in the group activities, some outstanding students dominate the cooperation

learning, many other students merely passive listen and even escape the task. There are two reasons why some students are passive. One is that the students are inward or unconfident and reluctant to participate in the activity. In this case, the teacher should illustrate the advantages and necessity of the cooperative learning. And at the same time, the teacher can make them act as the group reporter or group leader and encourage them and eradicate their psychological obstacle. Besides, the teacher can put them into one group, help them finish their learning task, in order to help them build up their learning confidence and gradually adapt to the cooperative learning. And the teacher can assign some activities such as group game, pair work, information exchange task, which is helpful to develop students' cooperative learning ability. Another reason is that the task is too difficult for the students to accomplish. As for this, the teacher can offer some reference and help in order to lower the task difficulty.

B. Unreasonable Division of Groups

Teachers often group according to the "nearest" principle, ignoring differences of gender, personality, knowledge, ability, and achievement of students. In the class teaching, the teacher often groups students causally based on their seats, normally four neighbor students grouped together. This is a simple and rough way, although it is convenient. It is not good for students of different personalities and levels to improve together. The unbalanced grouping will certainly cause the level gap among groups. Some students are silent and could not express any word, and the exchange in some other group is like listening to mumbo-jumbo. If things go on like this, the gap will be widening, and the cooperative learning becomes inefficient. Students can be flexibly grouped in many ways according to different cooperative tasks. Normally speaking, there are two to six in one group, as this is good for students to interact with each other and every student has opportunities to present his ideas. Besides, the teacher should let students choose their own group first and then do some small timely adjustment. When grouping students, the teacher should also consider students' gender, learning ability, interest, and personalities.

C. Unclear Rules of Group Work

In the English class, it is a common phenomenon that the teacher raises a question for students to discuss, and then the class is very hilarious and excited. If we observe carefully, this is only a superficial "fake hilarity". Actually it is disorderly. Some teachers issued a cooperative learning instruction, and then students are just sitting by in the seat together, without the correct division of study group, some students with good academic performance in a group, and some students with poor academic performance in a group, and there is no clear division of labor among the team members. In some group, two or three students speak up together, they say their own ideas and never listen to each other. And in some group, there are only one or two people speaking, while others are quiet and sit absent-mindedly. Some groups try to escape delivering speech. And some groups grasp the opportunity to chat, laugh or do some other things. The classroom is noisy, but they cannot solve the problem and the learning is not efficient. The reason for all these is that the teacher does not set clear rules for the group work.

D. Improper Assessment Method

In the cooperative learning, we often think it is correct that group cooperative learning takes the achievement of group as evaluation standard. However, this may lead to the misunderstanding of teachers who work in group cooperative learning: teachers often put evaluation and reward on the whole of the group in the course of teaching, thus ignoring the development of individuals. In the cooperative learning, there is often a report for each group. But the reporter often says, "I think..." or "I suppose..."and so on. Their opinion cannot stand for the whole group, but can only represent their own idea. The teacher often makes an assessment like "You're right!", "Good!", "What a good idea!" and etc. The teacher often tends to assess individual students other than the group and often assess the result of group cooperative learning rather than the learning process and method. The teacher seldom makes assessment on students' learning attitude, learning habit, participating degree, creative awareness or practical activity. And the teacher often ignores the inward and silent students. The impartial, incomplete assessment easily frustrates students.

VI. THE STRATEGY TO ENHANCE THE EFFICIENCY OF COOPERATIVE LEARNING

A. To Establish Active Interdependent Relationship among Group Members

One key character of efficient group activity is the interdependence relationship. Once the active interdependence is formed, students realize their own success is closely related with other group members. The task structure requires every member to make their own contributions. And the students realize that if they want to finish the common goal, every group member is necessary. They not only need depend on other group members, but also responsible to others. Only in this case, the condition of group cooperative learning is mature. One result of high efficient group cooperative learning is learners can acquire macro meta-cognitive awareness. They know how and when they acquire new knowledge and skills. The teacher can establish interdependence relationship among group members through the following two ways, a) to create different learning experience through assigning different tasks to different group members; b) to guide students to engage in student-centered interactive study.

B. To Increase Students' Face-to-face Interaction

Only when students have face-to-face interaction, can they offer help to each other in their academic study and personal development. When students are actively involved in their group work and help their group members, they also practice some skills required in the effective learning group. Although the teacher can help students, yet the interaction among groups can help students strengthen their understanding of themselves. When the teacher offers help, students often come to consensus in concept easily. But in the student-centered discussion, there are more meta-cognitive narration and problems. The students' face-to-face interaction process enables students to have deeper understanding of how to study. There are some ways to foster students' face-to-face interaction ability, for example, note-taking, pair discussion, role play and situation simulation. Respect the ideas of other group members. Students should show that they have heard other member's ideas and when disagreeing do so politely and respectfully. Students should know that understanding that working in a team requires some negotiation and compromise. Besides, Students can take a break to diffuse the situation and recollect thoughts at a later meeting.

C.   To Cultivate Students' Inter-personal and Group Communicative Skills

The teacher can create some rules, demonstrate some social communicative skills, offer opportunities for students to practice, and design some group tasks to help students foster and expand their inter-personal communicative skills. There are some ways to promote students' inter-personal communicative skills as follows: a) To have a clear mind/ idea. Before presenting their own thoughts, students should be able to organize and clarify them. Thought Map is an efficient tool to help students organize their thoughts before presenting them. b) To be involved in some activity listening to others' ideas. In order to realize the interaction in the group and learn from each other, students must listen and understand their group members. Active listening means that the listener listens attentively, the teacher should encourage speakers and make sure that the listener can understand what the speaker says. c) To respond to group members. Students should put forward constructive comment on their group members and they should not be absent-minded. d) To think from different angles. In order to make group work more efficient, the teacher should train students to consider situation and problems from different angles and create chances for them to present different points as to a certain topic. The concept of cooperative learning is to enable students to get in touch with different ideas and construct students' ability to understand others' ideas and form their own ideas.

D.   To Be Clear about the Responsibility of Individual and Group

In the high efficient group activity, we should establish duty system of two layers: individual duty system and group duty system. Individual should make contributions to the common task, and all the group members should also be responsible for the efficiency and result of the whole task. The teacher can make students clear about the responsibility of individual and the group through the following ways. a) To integrate duty system to the task. There should be a time limit to every period of the task as to individual and the group. Students should make assessment on their own work and the group work. Every group member will get two kinds of scores, one is for individual work, and the other is for the performance in the group work. The teacher should assign specific roles to students in each group to structure their role and participation. b) To set the expectation of group task. The teacher should give feedback centering on the task, for feedback is the core of the duty system. And the teacher should also use a team contract to establish roles and expectations, and Teach students how to give feedback to each other. If the teacher want to cultivate students' sense of individual duty and the whole group duty, we must establish assessment system, encourage group members, teachers and students to give feedback to each other.

E.   To Develop Students' Positive English Learning Self-efficacy

The English learning self-efficacy is the learner's expectation of whether he can accomplish their English learning tasks successfully, which is a subjective judgment of the individual's ability to learn English. Many studies have shown that self-efficacy is a predictor of the successful use of various autonomous learning strategies in the learning process. Self-efficacy has a great influence on the learners' ability to complete their tasks effectively, and their mental states and the use of learning strategies in their learning activities. Students with high self-efficacy are usually experience more fun in learning English, full of confidence, participate actively, set higher learning goals, can put more effort and time in face of difficulties, have a more positive attitude and emotion and he has less anxiety and low self-efficacy. In the cooperative learning, the teacher should encourage students to have a correct and positive English learning self-efficacy and participate the group work actively and devotedly. The teacher should establish why a member is quiet or not participating and tell students that all opinions will be valued and Ensure that each member gets their turn to contribute.

F.   To Group Students Reasonably to Promote Cooperative Learning

Grouping is a very important factor in cooperative learning. At present, the following two cooperative learning grouping models are widely adopted both at home and abroad. a) Jigsaw model. In this model, each student is enrolled in two groups. After determining the learning goals, the team members go to their respective group to study and analyze the problems. After the task is completed, the members return to their study group and the study groups share their results. b) Survey model. The model can be grouped in three ways: one is according to interests, another is grouped by friendship, and the third is grouped by special skills. After the grouping, the teacher introduces the contents of the lesson to the students, and the class discusses the content and draws up a set of propositions to be discussed further.

Each study group selects a proposition and divides this large proposition into a number of branch issues assigned to each member of the group. Each member is responsible for studying his own problems and writing the results of the study. The group sums up each member's report, forms a general report, and shares his findings with the whole class. Each group presents its findings and gives time for the class to discuss it.

G. To Adopt Various Assessment and Award Ways

The teachers' assessment is of great importance in stimulating students to participate in the activity and improving the learning quality. Therefore the teacher's assessment should be supportive, targeted, guiding and all-around. On the one hand, the teacher should combine personal comment and group collective assessment. It can promote group members to learn, help, compensate and learn from each other. On the other hand, the teacher should combine the process assessment and result assessment together. In the evaluation of cooperative learning, teachers should not only pay attention to the result of study, but also pay more attention to the process of learning. The teacher should not only make comments on the group learning result, but also should make comments on students' cooperative attitude, cooperative method, participating degree, and pay more attention to students' listening, communicating and cooperative ability. Besides, in the cooperative learning, teachers should pay attention to every student, offer timely supervision and guidance, carry out active and effective learning evaluation, otherwise, the cooperative learning will become a "mess". Teachers can improve students' learning enthusiasm, promote mutual supervision, cohesion and morale, and achieve the goal of cooperative learning by way of comparison and evaluation. At the same time, teachers need to pay attention to the evaluation strategy, and combine the guidance and motivating. This kind of learning evaluation can improve students' learning motivation and cooperation achievement.

VII. CONCLUSION

The cooperative learning method is one of mainstream learning theories nowadays. It is a creative teaching theory and strategy which is widely used in many countries in the world. As a result of its remarkable effectiveness, it has been hailed as the most important and successful teaching reform in the past decades. And in China, it has been attracting a lot of concern of scholars, experts and English teachers. Many researches indicate that the cooperative learning method is effective to develop students 'intelligence and non-intelligence. However, there are still some problems and disadvantages in the method which impede the teaching efficiency. We can try to improve the teaching efficiency through such ways as: establishing active interdependent relationship among group members, increasing students' face-to-face interaction, being clear about the responsibility of individual and the group, cultivating students' inter-personal and group communicative skills and adopting various assessment and award ways.

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