



A Review of Cooperative Learning in Chinese College English Classroom Teaching

Xiaobao Han^{1*}, Siti Maftuhah Binti Damio² & Geethanjali Narayanan³

¹School of International Education, Ningxia Medical University, Ningxia, China.

^{1,2,3}Faculty of Education, Universiti Teknologi MARA, Selangor, Malaysia.

ABSTRACT

In many parts of college English instruction, cooperative learning (CL) has been used; it has numerous benefits, and many professors and students in China prefer it. However, despite the extensive use of CL in college English classes, there are still multiple issues and dilemmas. More research into its practical application is required to reap the benefits of CL and enhance students' holistic development. The key results of a review of CL include that teachers must comprehend students' genuine requirements and the issues they face in learning and give full play to the role of teachers' effective intervention in both online and offline CL.

Keywords: cooperative learning, college English teaching, teachers' intervention, students' holistic development, COVID-19

ARTICLE INFO

Email address: 81174903@qq.com (Xiaobao Han)

*Corresponding author

<https://doi.org/10.33736/jcshd.4425.2022>

e-ISSN: 2550-1623

Manuscript received: 4 January 2022; Accepted: 11 February 2022; Date of publication: 31 March 2022

Copyright: This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the CC-BY-NC-SA (Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International License), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, for non-commercial purposes, provided the original work of the author(s) is properly cited.

1 INTRODUCTION

With the development of China's teaching reform, the ways of college English teaching have gradually changed, and CL has been recognised and praised by the majority of teachers and students. The traditional college English teaching mainly focuses on teachers' explanation of knowledge, and the classroom learning atmosphere is dull. Students' English expression ability is not robust and intercultural communication awareness is insufficient, and the level of comprehensive English application ability is not high (Sun, 2018). The teaching reform in recent years advocates the learning style of independence, exploration and cooperation. CL emphasises interaction and communication, which is a breakthrough and supplement to the traditional teaching organisation form and can make up for the drawbacks of the traditional teaching mode (Wu, 2019). Meanwhile, the application of CL puts forward new challenges and higher requirements for college English teachers.

Due to the outbreak of coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19), most Chinese universities have adopted online teaching, which is also a new challenge to universities and teachers. At present, although online teaching is proceeding normally, there are still many problems in the implementation of online teaching, and it is not easy to reach the expected goal (Huang, 2021), such as students are not active, not participating, and having little interaction in online teaching. Ensuring the quality of online teaching and the effectiveness of students' learning has become a significant problem for teachers. Taking advantage of CL and conducting group discussions and cooperation in online teaching can help mobilise students' sense of autonomous learning and active learning, stimulate students' interest in learning, encourage students to participate in classroom interaction, and cultivate students' creative problem-solving abilities. At the same time, in online CL, teachers should give close attention and positive support, carry out necessary supervision and guidance, strengthen their roles as instructors and helpers to improve the effectiveness of online teaching, and promote the efficient realisation of teaching goals.

In online and offline CL, teachers are responsible for guiding students' learning in many ways. However, as the majority of teachers have not received relevant in-service training, and they are not very clear about the basic connotation, teaching methods, teaching evaluation and teaching reflection when adopting CL to organise classroom teaching, the role and function of teachers have not been fully developed, and the excellent teaching effect of CL is not fully realised. Many advantages of CL have not been fully exploited, the theory and practice of CL have faced a dilemma (Zheng, 2016). As a result, CL appears to remain on the surface of formalisation and can not exert the advantages of promoting students' holistic development (Cai, 2005). Therefore, although many scholars have done much beneficial research on CL from different aspects, it is necessary and meaningful to explore the feasibility and necessity of college English teachers' effective intervention in facilitating the implementation of online and offline CL. In doing so, efforts are made to promote the advantages of CL and improve college English teaching effect in China.

2 METHODS

This study carries out a general review on teachers' implementation of CL in college English classroom teaching. All the related data extracted from China National Knowledge Internet (CNKI) since 2000 will be used.

Through consulting the data from CNKI, it is found that the theoretical research on CL in college English teaching and CL effectiveness both at home and abroad is richer in the literature. The author searches the theme CL on CNKI, and there are 68573 articles, 2078 articles with the theme of CL effectiveness, 723 articles with the theme of teachers and CL, and 28 articles with the theme of teachers' intervention and CL. It can be seen from the above figures that there is much research on CL, which shows that CL is a popular teaching method and strategy at present. However, few types of research on teachers and CL, especially those that combine CL with teachers' intervention. However, there are few types of research on the logical relationship between CL and teachers' intervention.

Nevertheless, much research proves the effectiveness of CL and emphasises teachers' roles and functions when implementing CL. Cai (2005) finds out that when teachers use CL to organise classroom teaching, they are not very clear about their roles, which leads to the formalised surface of CL. Thus, the effect of CL is primarily related to the roles and functions of teachers. Yan (2015) argues that only when teachers have a correct understanding of CL and make careful preparation for every activity design can they improve the effectiveness of CL in classroom teaching.

The authors combine CL with teachers' intervention, examines current CL challenges in college English instruction, and proposes ways to guide practice based on CL's traits and ideas. As a result, the study will emphasise the role of teachers' intervention in CL classroom teaching and investigate how teachers' intervention might help CL be implemented effectively. It can be utilised as a guide for college English teachers who want to employ CL in classroom teaching appropriately. More researchers should devote themselves to studying in this field and contribute to the reform of college English education.

3 FINDINGS

The Origin and Process of Cooperative Learning

The research on CL in foreign countries is earlier than that in China. CL was a creative and effective teaching strategy that emerged in the United States in the 1970s and made substantial progress from the mid-1970s to the mid-1980s. In the 1990s, CL began a period of rapid development. Since the 1990s, CL has gradually become a vital teaching mode in many countries globally, and the related research has been deepening. CL has quickly attracted the world's attention, become one of the contemporary mainstream teaching strategies, and has been praised as the most important and most successful teaching reform in the past decade (Vermette, 1994).

Since the end of the 1980s, China began to carry out CL experiments, tried to combine CL theory with teaching practice, and actively sought the localisation of CL. In the early 1990s, CL was gradually introduced into China. Some Chinese scholars made beneficial attempts on CL and achieved good results (Wang, 2002).

China's education reform in recent years has put forward a new teaching concept, which emphasises that the classroom should be student-centred, activity-centred, and student development-oriented and targeted, and set learning to cooperate as one of the critical teaching objectives. Under this background, the CL education mode has received considerable attention. After the promulgation and implementation of the Requirements for College English Course Teaching, a new requirement has been put forward for college English classroom teaching, that is, vigorously advocating the learning mode of hands-on practice, independent exploration and cooperative communication (Department of Higher Education of Chinese Ministry of Education, 2004).

Under the guidance of those ideas, China's educational circle began to pay attention to the CL mode and made remarkable achievements in related theoretical research and teaching practice. However, as the research and implementation of CL in China started late, the advantages of CL are not fully exploited, the formalised CL is serious, there are still many problems needing to be further improved, so it is necessary to conduct in-depth research on CL.

The Understanding of Cooperative Learning

As an essential component of education reform globally, CL has been recognised and promoted worldwide. Researchers in different countries have different understandings and interpretations of CL based on their specific practices in their own countries. Slavin (2014) holds that CL is a learning method and teaching strategy where students work in small groups structured by the teacher to strive for a common learning goal. For Artzt and Newman (1990), CL is an activity that involves a small group of students working together to solve a problem, complete a task, and achieve a common goal. Johnson and Johnson (1999) define CL as students learning more in groups than on their own, which maximises the learning effects for all members in the group. Light (1992) defines CL as a learning environment where students work together in small groups to achieve a common goal. Wintzer (1995) defines CL as a teaching method in which teachers randomly or systematically assign students to heterogeneous teams or groups to complete assigned tasks.

Meanwhile, more and more Chinese educators have begun to pay close attention to the CL mode, proceed with attempts to CL, conduct a series of discussions on the application of CL, and improve it in practice. Yang (1997) holds that CL is an interactive learning method, with the group as the learning unit, each group member is responsible for the overall learning task. Gao (2001) defines CL as an activity in which group members help each other achieve learning goals. Wang (2002) holds opinions that CL takes the heterogeneous learning group as the basic form, promotes the students to complete the learning task together and attain the common goal, and awards students

based on the group achievement. It can be seen that Wang's viewpoint on CL has been combined with many domestic and foreign scholars' opinions.

Based on the relevant research by many scholars and experts at home and abroad, this study tends to make the following understanding of CL. CL highlights the central position of students and emphasises the leading roles of teachers in classroom teaching, in which group members make joint efforts to achieve common learning goals and get rewards together. It represents the general meaning of CL, which applies to the teaching of all subjects.

CL brings the concept of cooperation into the teaching system, meets the needs of the modernisation of education and the cultivation of talents needed by society, and provides a broad background for us to study and improve the effectiveness of the teaching system (Wang, 2003). In teaching, CL emphasises the basis of class teaching, with CL group as the basic form of activities. CL emphasises the interaction between teachers, teachers and students, and students in the teaching process. In terms of the roles of teachers and students, CL advocates for teachers to be good "directors" and students to be good "actors", attaches more importance to students' activities and focuses on students' learning (Wang, 1996). Therefore, teachers play a vital role in the implementation of CL, act as facilitators, instructors and supervisors, and do an excellent job in designing students' group learning tasks, organisation of the learning process and evaluating the evaluation of group learning effect.

The Essential Elements of Cooperative Learning

Compared with traditional teaching, CL is not just a reform of teaching organisation. Simply grouping and naturally collaborating cannot make students cooperate reasonably with each other, and solely participating in group activities with a positive attitude also cannot guarantee the success of CL.

In the practice of CL, due to various reasons, formalised and inefficient CL is expected, which fails to give full play to the advantages of CL and fails to mobilise students' learning enthusiasm. However, effective CL can solve these problems. Students can actively participate in group activities, discuss, help each other, form a positive interdependence, and jointly achieve group learning goals under teachers' effective intervention and guidance. Johnson and Johnson (2002) have pointed out that the essential elements of adequate CL include the following five aspects. Positive interdependence: Students need to realise that they are responsible for their learning and the other people's learning in their group. Face-to-face promotive interaction: Teachers maximise students' opportunities to promote each other's success by helping and encouraging group learning. Individual accountability: Each student must undertake specific learning tasks and master the assigned tasks simultaneously. Interpersonal and small group skills: Teachers must teach students some social skills to agree, trust each other, communicate accurately, and succeed in cooperation. Group processing: The group must regularly assess the status of joint activities to maintain the effectiveness of group activities.

The success of CL requires teachers to understand the essence and essential elements of CL. Effective CL is realised through teachers' making full use of the crucial elements and teaching strategies of CL at an appropriate time, changing their roles to become classroom organisers, instructors, supervisors and evaluators, and carrying out effective intervention in CL. Meanwhile, students can progress in all aspects, constantly improve their communicative ability and cooperative consciousness, and promote their growth and progress through effective CL. Therefore, only when CL plays an influential role can students improve their abilities in various aspects, and classroom teaching becomes effective.

The Practical Problems of Cooperative Learning

Over the past several decades, CL has become the primary research subject associated with social skills and academic achievements (Kyndt et al., 2013). However, although CL effectively improves students' academic performance, social communication and cooperative skills, teachers still encounter difficulties implementing this teaching mode (Sharan, 2010). Hennessey and Dionigi (2013) find out that teachers have limited knowledge, concept, understanding and cognition of CL, which are barriers to its successful implementation. Sharan (2014) argues that CL requires new skills for teachers, such as designing the learning activities, developing collaborative teaching skills, playing the role of facilitator and evaluating group performance. It may bring challenges for teachers and students accustomed to more traditional learning ways. Thus, teachers need to explore the practical method of CL to meet better the challenges of implementing CL.

Meanwhile, CL has some outstanding problems in practice in China. It is mainly reflected in the following three aspects: Firstly, from the schools' level, it lacks practical organisational guidance, and teachers are not trained and instructed for effective CL. Secondly, the teachers' cognition of the CL concept is not clear from the teachers' level. Due to the lack of scientific cognition of the nature of CL, the current classroom cooperation is becoming increasingly a mere formality (Hao, 2010). The group's formation is not scientific, and the responsibilities within the group are not clear. The cooperation task is blind and random and cannot mobilise students' active participation. Lack of process supervision, teachers' leading role is not fully reflected. The implementation of the evaluation mechanism is not scientific—teachers' lack of ability and inaccurate role positioning. Thirdly, there is a lack of training in cooperative skills and collective sense from the students' level.

Findings from previous studies suggest that there are many problems in CL, most of which belong to the teachers' level and what is put forward as high requirements for teachers. Besides, the emphasis on student-centred is growing, consequently ignoring teachers' role as pervasive in cooperative learning. Thus, how to correctly position the role of teachers and the function of teachers are the focus of scholars' universal concern. When college English teachers implement the CL in online and offline teaching, there are many different aspects needing teachers to improve their comprehensive abilities. CL should be carried out under the guidance, design, support and help of teachers. The lack of teachers' leading role ultimately causes the ineffectiveness of CL activities, and the lack of teachers' effective intervention is the critical factor that affects the low efficiency of CL.

The Roles and Functions of Teachers in Cooperative Learning

Nowadays, CL is widely applied in college English classes. College English teachers play more and more critical roles in developing CL, and the teaching effect of CL largely depends on the overall development of teachers.

With the in-depth development of CL in teaching practice, the correct positioning of teachers' roles, constantly improving professional knowledge and professional identity, positive evaluation, development of teamwork awareness, good teaching design, teaching evaluation and hardware investment should be given more attention. Those factors are crucial to help achieve the goal of improving the teaching effect under the CL mode and promoting teachers' development and growth. At the same time, colleges and universities should also strengthen the in-service training for college English teachers, provide policy and financial support, create opportunities for teachers to further their studies, encourage teachers to conduct academic research, and boost their development (Bao, 2014). Besides, teachers should also fundamentally change their teaching concept, fully affirm the form of CL and deepen their understanding and research (Qiu, 2021).

In implementing online and offline CL, the research on teachers' intervention and guidance should be given more attention. Teachers can organise, observe, guide, assist and evaluate the group activities to reach a good teaching effect. Thus, it is necessary to study the teachers' effective intervention in facilitating teachers' implementation of CL to help teachers fully exert the advantages of CL and gain a good teaching effect.

Theoretical Basis of Cooperative Learning

Reviewing previous studies on CL, it can be found that it is no accident that CL has developed into an effective teaching practice strategy around the world. One of the critical reasons for the development of CL is its solid scientific theoretical foundation, such as social interdependence theory, constructivism theory, humanism theory. Experts and scholars both at home and abroad have done many types of research on CL, mainly involving the relevant theory research and teaching effect of CL, which lay a crucial theoretical foundation for this research and provide a valuable reference. CL conforms to the requirements of modern teaching reform; its teaching theory has been recognised by many education experts both at home and abroad and has been widely used in classroom teaching. Under the guidance of these theoretical bases, it brings much enlightenment to the in-depth research on teachers' effective intervention in CL mode. In short, CL has a broad and profound theoretical basis, which is also one of the critical reasons for the rapid development of CL in recent decades.

4 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The teaching strategy of CL has a high requirement on teachers' professional level and classroom organisation and management ability. As an effective teaching method and mode, whether CL can be applied effectively in the actual classroom or not largely depends on the teachers. The findings of this study indicate that there are many factors influencing college English teachers' intervention

in CL. Firstly, it is influenced by individual characteristics. Most teachers lack professional identity, professional ethics and innovative spirit, which will directly influence the implementation effect of CL. Secondly, it is influenced by external factors. The study shows that teachers' in-service training, organisational guidance and hardware investment will more or less influence teachers' teaching effect. Thirdly, it is influenced by teachers' cognition, including knowledge cognition, education cognition and learning cognition. All those factors are critical for teachers to develop adequate CL. Fourthly, it is influenced by teaching practice, which includes teaching design, role change and teaching evaluation. When teachers improve their professional skills, the current problems will be avoided while implementing CL. With the improvement of teachers' comprehensive knowledge and skills in online and offline classroom teaching, the CL teaching effect and students' holistic development will be promoted.

Through research, the authors find that teachers' intervention in CL is effective in college English teaching, but there are still some problems existing in the classroom teaching due to the teachers' lack of in-depth understanding of CL, guidance and practical evaluation; low regulation skills and inaccurate role positioning. Based on the comparative study, suggestions are put forward: First, teachers should better understand CL with the help of in-service training. Second, teachers should enhance professional knowledge and skills to design practical CL tasks to guide students in CL activities. Third, teachers should form groups scientifically and evaluate group members' behaviours and study processes. In doing so, teachers' intervention in CL can fully exert the function and help to improve classroom teaching effect in online and offline CL classes.

5 CONCLUSION

The review and suggestions for future research are intended to be the basis for the theoretical and empirical development of CL. This study shows that CL has been widely applied to college English teaching nowadays, and both teachers and students favour it. Meanwhile, some problems influence the implementation effect of CL, most of which belong to the teachers' level and put forward higher requirements for teachers. This study indicates that college English teachers can implement effective intervention during online and offline CL, which will help solve the current teaching problems and attain a good teaching effect of CL. However, little research has focused on the close relationship between CL and teachers' function, especially teachers' effective intervention. Thus, more research should be encouraged to explore the vast potential of teachers' intervention in CL to fully exert the advantages of CL and promote students' holistic development.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The authors would like to thank all who helped in the data collection and discussion process.

REFERENCES

Artzt, A. F., & Newman, C. M. (1990). Implementing the standards: Cooperative learning. *The Mathematics Teacher*, 83 (6), 448-452. <https://doi.org/10.5951/MT.83.6.0448>

- Bao, X. L. (2014). The dilemma of professional development of college English teachers and its breakthrough approaches. *Education and Vocation*, 98 (30), 87-88. <https://doi.org/10.13615/j.cnki.1004-3985.2014.30.038>
- Cai, H. Q. (2005). On the role orientation of teachers in cooperative learning. *Education Exploration*, 25 (1), 32-33.
- Gao, Y. (2001). Classification, research and classroom application of cooperative learning. *Education Review*, 17 (2), 14-17.
- Hao, X. L., & Shang, Y. L. (2010). Problems and countermeasures of cooperative learning in college English teaching. *Overseas English*, 11 (6), 56-57.
- Hennessey, A., & Dionigi, R. A. (2013). Implementing cooperative learning in Australian primary schools: Generalist teachers' perspectives. *Issues in Educational Research*, 23 (1), 52-68.
- Huang, L. N. (2021). Construction of college English blended teaching mode based on online platform. *Journal of Jilin TV and Radio University*, 34 (1), 22-24.
- Johnson, D. W., & Johnson, R. T. (1999). Making cooperative learning work. *Theory into Practice*, 38 (2), 67-73. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00405849909543834>
- Johnson, D. W., & Johnson, R. T. (2002). Learning together and alone: Overview and meta-analysis. *Asia Pacific Journal of Education*, 22 (1), 95-105. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0218879020220110>
- Kyndt, E., Raes, E., Lismont, B., Timmers, F., Cascallar, E., & Dochy, F. (2013). A meta-analysis of the effects of face-to-face cooperative learning. Do recent studies falsify or verify earlier findings? *Educational Research Review*, 10, 133-149. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.edurev.2013.02.002>
- Light, P. H., & Mevarech, Z. R. (1992). Cooperative learning with computers: An introduction. *Learning and Instruction*, 2 (3), 155-159. [https://doi.org/10.1016/0959-4752\(92\)90006-8](https://doi.org/10.1016/0959-4752(92)90006-8)
- Qiu, H. M. (2021). Study on the common problems and solutions of group cooperative learning in junior high school English teaching. *Exam Week*, 15 (28), 103-104.
- Sharan, Y. (2010). Cooperative learning for academic and social gains: Valued pedagogy, problematic practice. *European Journal of Education*, 45 (2), 300-313. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1465-3435.2010.01430.x>
- Sharan, Y. (2014). Learning to cooperate for cooperative learning. *Annals of Psychology*, 30 (3), 802-807. <https://doi.org/10.6018/analesps.30.3.201211>
- Slavin, R. E. (2014). Cooperative learning and academic achievement: Why does groupwork work? *Annals of Psychology*, 30 (3), 785-791. <http://doi.org/10.6018/analysis.30.3.201201>

Sun, Y. X., Qu, H. M., & Chen, J. H. (2018). The application of cooperative learning in college English teaching. *Industrial & Science Tribune*, 17 (22), 145-146.

Vermette, P. (1994). Four fatal flaws: Avoiding the common mistakes of novice users of cooperative learning. *The High School Journal*, 77 (3), 255-260.

Wang, T. (1996). The basic idea of cooperative teaching. *Bulletin of Chinese Language Teaching*, 19 (9), 53.

Wang, T. (2002). On the basic idea of cooperative learning. *Educational Research*, 24 (2), 68-72.

Wang, T. (2003). On the contribution of teaching theory of cooperative learning. *Curriculum, Teaching Material and Method*, 23 (8), 16-20. <https://doi.org/10.19877/j.cnki.kcjcjf.2003.08.005>

Wintzer, M. (1995). Educational psychology in the Canadian classroom. *New Jersey: Prentice-Hall*, 36-48.

Wu, L. N. (2019). Application of cooperative learning in college English Teaching. *PR Magazine*, 15 (11), 74-75. <https://doi.org/10.16645/j.cnki.cn11-5281/c.2019.11.047>

Yan, F. (2015). Teachers' role in group cooperative learning under the background of new curriculum reform. *Education for Chinese After-school (Theory)*, 9 (29), 102.

Yang, Y. S. (1997). Cooperative learning and development of children's analogical reasoning ability. *Forward Position*, 19 (10), 51-54.

Zheng, Y. X., & Liu, X. C. (2016). A comparative study of cooperative learning theory between China and Japan—take Wang Tan and Sato's theory as an example. *The In-service Education and Training of School Teachers*, 33 (3), 75-78.