

# Cooperative Language Learning and Foreign Language Learning and Teaching

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**Abstract**—The paper tries to show the positive effects of cooperative language learning on foreign language learning and teaching. Compared with traditional language teaching, cooperative language learning conforms to the developmental trend of language teaching method and possesses considerable advantages. In the foreign language learning classrooms, cooperative language learning provides students with the necessary academic and social skills. The paper reveals cooperative learning benefits language learning in many aspects.

**Index Terms**— cooperative language learning, characteristics, benefits

## I. INTRODUCTION

Cooperative Learning refers to a systematic instructional method in which students work together in small groups to accomplish shared learning goals. The data in a large amount of research shows, compared with competitive and individualistic efforts, cooperation has positive effects on a wider range of outcomes (Johnson & Johnson, 1991; Slavin, 1995; Kagan, 1999). People operating in a cooperative learning activity attain higher achievement level than those who function under competitive and individualistic learning structures. Other findings in cooperative learning research show cooperation has positive effects on relations among students, self-esteem, long-term retention, or depth of understanding of course material, etc. It has been tested as one of most effective and constructive teaching strategies.

Although hundreds of studies have been conducted on cooperative learning in many subjects, TEFL-related research on cooperative learning is a relatively new and undeveloped area of inquiry in china. The full power of cooperative learning in foreign language classroom needs to be further exploited. This situation drives us to learn more about the characteristics and benefits of cooperative language learning in foreign language class in order to lead to explore the worthwhile effect of cooperative learning on the foreign language learning and teaching.

## II. THE CHARACTERISTICS OF COOPERATIVE LANGUAGE LEARNING

The field of language teaching has experienced great change during the past fifty years. In spite of all changes abroad, foreign language teaching in China remains mainly traditional. Thus comparing cooperative language learning (Cooperative language learning is to apply cooperative learning techniques to the language learning either for the native or foreign language) with traditional language teaching may help us deeply understand its principles and superiority. Here, traditional language teaching refers to the teacher-centered method in which many ingredients of Grammar-translation Method and Audio-Lingual Method are used in the language teaching and learning. Teaching has traditionally concentrated on making the students aware of certain aspects of the code without providing adequate practice. Language learning is viewed as memorizing rules and facts in order to understand and manipulate the morphology and syntax of the foreign language. Most interactions in the classroom are teacher-to-student or teacher-to-students, and student-initiated interaction. Student-student interaction is minimal. Students are seen as acquiring knowledge of language rather than communicative ability directly and they simply passively acquire the new knowledge. The table lists some main differences between cooperative language learning and traditional language teaching (based on the research of Johnson & Johnson, 1991; Nunan, 1989). The comparison, to a large extent, illustrates the characteristics of cooperative language learning.

From the table below, we can easily see that cooperative language learning shares some characteristics with communicative language teaching. They both give high light to the interaction and communication between students and students and teachers, take teachers' role as guider, facilitator, and negotiator, and stress the autonomy and centrality of the students in classroom. They both consider healthy relationships with other classmates are more conducive to learning, and respect the integrity of learners, allowing for personal growth and responsibility, etc. The communicative function of language can also find its way in cooperative language learning.

TABLE 1  
COMPARISON OF COOPERATIVE LANGUAGE LEARNING AND TRADITIONAL LANGUAGE TEACHING

	Traditional language teaching	Cooperative language learning
Independence	None or negative	Positive
Learner roles	Passive receiver and performer	Active participator, autonomous learners
Teacher roles	The center of the classroom, Controller of teaching pace and direction, judge of students' right or wrong, the major source of assistance, feedback, reinforcement and support.	Organizer and counselor of group work, facilitator of the communication tasks, intervener to teach collaborative skills.
Materials	Complete set of materials for each student.	Materials are arranged according to purpose of lesson. Usually one group shares a complete set of materials.
Types of activities	Knowledge recall and review, phrasal or sentence pattern practice, role play, translation, listening etc.	Any instructional activity, mainly group work to engage learners in communication, involving processes like information sharing, negotiation of meaning and interaction.
Interaction	Some talking among students, mainly teacher-student interaction	Intense interaction among students, a few teacher-student interaction
Room arrangement	Separate desks or students placed in pairs.	Collaborative small groups
Student expectations	Take a major part in evaluating own progress and the quality of own efforts toward learning. Be a winner or loser.	All members in some way contribute to success of group. The one who makes progress is the winner.
Teacher-student relationship	Superior-inferior or equal	Cooperating and equal

### III. THE BENEFITS OF COOPERATIVE LANGUAGE LEARNING

Cooperative language learning is gaining broad acceptance in a multitude of language learning classrooms, principally because of its contributions to improving productivity and achievement and providing more opportunities for communication. In order to make the potential advantages of cooperative language learning clearer, this section examines in detail the benefits of using cooperative learning in foreign language classrooms.

#### A. *Providing the Chances of Input and Output*

Cooperative language learning provides much more opportunities for learners to comprehensible input and output and the processes of negotiation. Jia (2003) holds that effective language learning depends on structuring social interaction to maximize the needs of communication in the target language. For example, students divided into six groups in a class can get six times as many opportunities to talk as in full-class organization. Cooperative language learning creates natural, interactive contexts, where students listen to each other, ask question, and clarify issues. Group interaction assists learners in negotiating for more comprehensible input and in modifying their output to make it more comprehensible to others (Crandall, 1999; kagan, 1995). In cooperative group settings, when communicating in group work, students need to make them understood so they adjust their language to suit the members of that group. As a result, there is a much higher proportion of comprehensible input. A survey of research on pair/group work conducted by Long and Porter (1985, cited in Ellis, 1999), indicate that learners produce more, use longer sentences, and do not speak any less grammatically in group work than they do in teacher-fronted lessons. Students will speak in different way on the same topic, ensuring students to listen to and comprehend language from various sources and to obtain modeling and feedback from their peers. There is a principle that interaction drives learners to produce more accurate and appropriate language, which itself provides input for other students. Therefore, cooperative language learning is valuable in the oral practice and listening comprehension.

#### B. *Creating Effective Climate*

If the language class is meant to be a place where individuals can practice in communication in the foreign language, it is vital to establish a social and affective climate in which students are not restricted, aggressive, or feared (Stern, 1992). Cooperative learning, like other group work, offers a relaxed climate in the classroom, while it also increase student motivation (Brown, 1994; Crandall, 1999). Individuals have the opportunity to rehearse their answers before being asked to offer them in front of the whole class so their anxiety and fear of failure may reduce. Time to think and receive feedback form group members, and the greater likelihood of success reduce anxiety and can result in increased participation in learning language (Crandall, 1999). Therefore, more participation will inevitably increase learner's self-confidence and self-esteem.

Another affective benefit of cooperative learning is an increase in student motivation. Clarke (1989, cited in Hedge, 2000) suggested collaborative classroom motivated students to involve in language reading activities. Motivation leads to more extensive use of language and the development of greater language proficiency. In the cooperative groups, face-to-face promotive interaction and resource, reward, role interdependence can be powerful supports and encouragements for the insecure students. Learners are thus motivated to pursue larger academic success.

### C. *Increasing a Variety of Language Functions*

Cooperative language learning allows learners more chances to produce language in a functional manner. In traditional classroom, discourse is usually initiated by the teacher in an artificial setting, but cooperative learning can be used to create a mimic real-life social settings in which language is normally used. For a specific purpose in accomplishing the group task, cooperative groups can be helpful to students in developing their social abilities. In the study of Michael Long and his colleagues (1976, cited in Lightbown & Spada, 1999) with adult learners of English as a foreign language in Mexico, they found that the students produced not only a greater quantity but also a greater variety of speech in group work than in teacher-centered activities. Students may find themselves involve in requesting, clarifying, making suggestions, encouraging, disagreeing, negotiating of meaning, exchanging conversation during group work. Working in cooperative learning groups will foster learner discourse control and thereby ensures opportunities for language learning.

### D. *Fostering Learner Responsibility and Independence*

The final aim of cooperative learning is to make each student a stronger individual through doing work cooperatively. Cooperative learning, therefore, emphasizes individual accountability. It places responsibility for action and progress on each of the members of the group somewhat equally. Positive role and goal interdependence help students become more autonomous and self-controlled and less dependent upon outside authority, and over time, they will gradually move from interdependence to independence (Johnson & Johnson, 1991).

There are additional important benefits of cooperative language learning. Cooperative activities around the curricular content can provide more opportunities for use of the new items and lead to the development of both academic language and social language. In addition, studies indicate that there are beneficial effects of cooperative learning in more higher level reasoning, more frequent generation of new ideas and solutions, and greater transfer of what is learned within one situation to another than did competitive or individualistic learning (Johnson & Johnson, 2000).

## IV. CONCLUSION

Cooperative learning, compared with traditional instruction, tends to promote productivity and achievement and providing more opportunities for communication. When connected with foreign language learning, it shares the same basic set of principles with the widespread Communicative Language Teaching. It makes clear that the objective of foreign language teaching is not only to teach students some grammatical rules and vocabularies, but also how to use the knowledge in practice to express or narrate thoughts and ideas. Cooperative language learning responds to the trend in foreign language teaching method with focusing on the communicative and effective factors in language learning. It is not surprising that cooperative language learning is beneficial in foreign language learning and teaching. It is worthwhile for teachers and scholars to introduce this method to language learning classroom.

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