

# Cooperative Learning Applied in College English Reading Classes

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**Keywords:** Active Learning, Cooperative Learning, Effects, Group Activity.

**Abstract:** Cooperative learning is a relatively new teaching approach which takes group work as a main form. Based on the theory of cooperative learning and by utilizing as an example a text from New College English (Second Edition) published by Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press, this research aims to explore the effects of the application of cooperative learning to reading classes in college English teaching. Results show that application of cooperative learning is effective in college reading classes.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

Reading, as one of the four major language skills, has been playing a vital role in English learning. To read and understand better, students need to have an all-round command of English language. For quite a long time, in English teaching context in China, teachers make all efforts on improving students' reading abilities often to find out an unsatisfactory result. For English reading teaching, cooperative learning is extensively used to stimulate students to learn more actively. Many researchers have proved that it is a creative and effective teaching approach. It is widely acknowledged that cooperative learning creates a more interesting and relaxed learning climate in the classroom. Cooperative learning can reduce anxiety; promote interaction, increase motivation and self-confidence and provide comprehensible input and output, etc. This paper aims to study on the effects of cooperative learning in college reading classes.

## 2 THE APPLICATION OF COOPERATIVE LEARNING TO READING CLASSES

### 2.1 Participants and Instruments

Participants in this experiment were 85 freshmen from two classes majoring in Biology in the author's university, serving as the experiment group (EG with 42 students) and the control group (CG with 43 students) respectively. They shared the same

traditional learning experiences and used the same textbook. Cooperative learning for reading classes was conducted in the experiment class for four months while the control class was still exposed to traditional teaching. Such instruments as questionnaire (see Appendix), pretest, posttest and interviews were implemented. SPSS software was adopted to analyze the test scores.

### 2.2 Preparations for Teachers and Students before Reading Classes

Before conducting this experiment, students need to learn some basic cooperative skills and definitions. Paul J. Vermette (1998, pp. 5-6) defines cooperative learning in this way: "Cooperative learning is not just a strategy, part of a bag of tricks. It is also a philosophy, one in which the teachers see the class as a learning community that serves itself as it helps each and every member. A cooperative classroom team is relatively permanent, heterogeneously mixed, small group of students who have been assembled to complete an activity, produce a series projects or products and who have been asked to individually master a body of knowledge." According to Sharan (1999), five basic elements are essential for cooperative learning to produce the effective cooperative actions and work more efficiently. The five basic elements are: positive interdependence, individual accountability, interpersonal and small group skills, promotive interaction and group processing. Dividing students into small groups is very crucial for effective teaching since students work together from one class period to many weeks. According to their scores in

the pretest, students were divided into different levels. Each group had one high-level, two intermediate-level and one low-level student to ensure the mixture of it. Group members chose one leader they trust most. As a leader, he/she had a responsibility of helping the group members participate in and fulfill their learning activities.

### 2.3 Teaching Procedures

The most popular researched and used cooperative learning methods are Jigsaw, Student Team Achievement Divisions (STAD), Cooperative Integrated Reading and Composition, Group Investigation and Learning Together.

In reading classes, the author employed Jigsaw II. The typical learning procedures in Jigsaw II are often as follows: students first work in heterogeneous teams; they are assigned to experts topics; they read the whole learning materials with emphasis on their expert topic; they meet in expert groups to discuss and master their topics; the experts return to their teams and take turns teaching their teammates about their topic; finally, they receive individual and team recognition. Here is a detailed example about how the author adopted cooperative learning in her teaching practice. This is a text in *New College English (Second Edition)* published by Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press.

#### Book 2 Unit 1 Learning, Chinese-style

##### A. Pre-reading Activities

For the pre-reading tasks, students were assigned to find out some background information about “westerners’ education on children” and “some major differences about education on children between China and the west”. Also, some keywords were divided into 4 groups and each member studied one group of them. They needed to teach others about these new word and expressions next class. For other unfamiliar words, they should try to guess the meaning in the context rather than consulting a dictionary.

##### B. While-reading Activities

First, some students were asked to introduce the background information, next all the members in turns taught others the assigned new words. Then, each group member was responsible for analyzing one different part. Everyone had to study the assigned materials carefully. Then, they went to the “expert group” in which all the experts had the same paragraphs. After discussing with “experts” and understanding fully about the materials, students

came back to their own group and interpreted their materials in turns according to the organization of the passage. After the discussion, some students were randomly asked to answer these questions: What’s the author’s feeling when seeing the typical Chinese learning style (teaching by hold the hands)? How did your parents teach you to learn things when you were young?

##### C. Post-reading Activities

For post-reading activities, students first needed to analyze the text organization. They needed to divide the whole text into several parts and summarize the main idea for each part. Then they had to write down a short passage to answer the following questions: What enlightenment have you got from this text? How would you teach your students after graduation? These passages would, also, be corrected by group members first, and then they handed in another revised one to the teacher.

Evaluations from one and from others are important for students. The following table was handed out to students after each reading class to help them reflect on their in-class behaviors.

## 3 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### 3.1 A Survey on Students’ Attitudes towards Reading and English Learning

Before this study, a survey was carried out among 100 non-English majors chosen randomly from two universities. Ninety-six completed copies from 100 distributed questionnaires were obtained, with a response rate of 96%. As for the questionnaire, there were 10 statements about English learning and reading. This section of the questionnaire was designed to measure students’ attitudes by offering scales for positive attitudes (strongly agree, agree, neutral, disagree, and strongly disagree).

Table 1 shows that 28 of the students are not enthusiastic about reading classes. Reading is crucial for improving language proficiency while 30 students do not regard reading as an interesting experience. About 54 students consider reading to be the most difficult part for them; however 44 students spend little time reading various books. Only 29 students often pay special attention to the beginning as well as the end of the reading materials where some key information may be presented. Most students have not formed a good habit of noting down the beautiful words and sentences they read in

books. Most students consider reading comprehension to be very difficult due to the unfamiliar words. Hence, whenever meeting the new words, many students will reach for a dictionary, ask for their classmates or even skip it instead of trying to guess its meaning in the context. About 35 students will regularly think about the internal or external factors that hinder their comprehension in order to find out better ways to promote their reading skills.

From this survey, it is clear to see that students still need to make great efforts on many aspects such as forming appropriate reading habits, reflecting more about themselves, thinking more actively while reading books and most important of all, spending more time reading various beneficial books to enrich their culture background.

### 3.2 Data Analysis on Test Scores

A pretest and a posttest were held at the beginning as well as at the end of this research. To guarantee the validity of the data, all the test papers which included four reading passages were chosen from reading comprehension part in CET-4(College English Test Band 4) papers. CET-4 is a nationwide test held by the National Ministry of Education for all the Non-English majors to test their language proficiency at the end of each semester. Five questions with four different answers (only one was the best answer) were followed each passage. Altogether, there were 20 questions (one point for each question), so the total score was 20. The author graded all the test papers. The results of the tests were analyzed by SPSS.

Table 4 shows the mean score of experiment group is much higher than that of the control group. The significance level is 0.000, which means that  $p < 0.01$ , therefore, the difference can be very significant. This table shows students in experiment group have obtained great achievements.

The mean score for the experiment group in the post-test is improved about 3 points compared with that of the pre-test. The significant level is 0.000, which is  $p < 0.01$ , hence, it shows that students in the experiment group have made great progress in reading in this research.

All these tables indicate that reading ability in experiment class has been improved a lot under the instruction of cooperative learning after four months. It is a desirable outcome for both the teacher and students. Definitely, this satisfactory result will bring more confidence to students in their future learning.

### 3.3 Interviews from Students

At the end of this experiment, students in experiment class were interviewed with three open-ended questions: 1) What is your viewpoint on cooperative learning, effective or ineffective? List out your reasons. 2) List the advantages and disadvantages of cooperative learning; 3) What suggestions would you like to give for future cooperative learning?

Though a few students do not like cooperative learning, most students think it is effective and meaningful for their learning. The exchanges of ideas and cooperation with others can broaden their horizon and enrich their thoughts. Meaningful interaction in target language can enhance their language acquisition. Although a few students who prefer to be independent learners may feel awkward and boring when interacting with others, cooperative learning is welcomed by most students. After all, it is rare to find out a teaching method that can satisfy the needs of all the students and all the classroom settings. Cooperative learning can help learners become active and autonomous learners rather than being constantly taught what to do and how to do by the teacher.

## 4 CONCLUSIONS

All the results from classroom observation, questionnaire, test scores and interviews show that cooperative learning is effective in this research. Cooperative learning can reduce students' anxiety and enhance their active involvement in learning. Most important of all, it can help student build self-confidence. There is a famous saying: "Tell me and I will forget. Show me and I may not remember. Let me try and I will understand." It just shows the importance of "try" and "involvement" in the process of learning. More "try" will definitely help students learn better. Cooperative learning just provides more chances for students to "try" and to "involve" in the classroom activities. To conclude, cooperative learning model demonstrates a clear picture of the "student-centered" principle in college English reading classes. Cooperative learning is worthy of further exploration and being adopted to many other teaching fields.

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2. Reading various books either in English or in Chinese is very interesting to me.
3. Reading is the most difficult part for me, especially in the CET-4.
4. I always set aside some fixed time (e.g. everyday or every week) to read various books after class.
5. The average time I spend on reading every week is usually more than 2 hours.
6. I often pay special attention to the beginning as well as the ending of the reading materials. I always note down the beautiful words or sentences that come to me in reading materials. Reading is difficult for me mainly because of the new words and I will become anxious on seeing some new words in reading comprehension. I often try to guess the meaning of new words from the context in reading comprehension.
10. I often reflect on the internal or external factors that hinder my understanding in reading.

**APPENDIX**

Questionnaire

1. Reading classes are generally very interesting to me.

Table 1: Results of the questionnaire.

Total Number(96)	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree
1	27	22	19	17	11
2	28	22	16	15	15
3	33	21	10	14	18
4	30	17	5	18	26
5	31	14	4	24	23
6	16	13	6	31	30
7	11	16	7	33	29
8	24	15	8	23	26
9	37	22	8	16	13
10	18	17	6	29	26

Table 2: Results of Independent Sample T test for Pretest of CG and EG.

Pretest	N	Mean	SD	Variance	df	Sig.(2-tailed)	t	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference
CG	43	8.56	3.104	9.633	83	.955	-.057	-.037	.653
EG	42	8.60	2.914	8.491					

Table 3: Results of Paired Sample T test for Pretest and Posttest of CG.

CG	N	Mean	SD	Std. Error Mean	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
Pretest	43	8.56	3.104	.436	-.053	42	.958
Posttest		8.53	2.702				

Table 4: Results of Independent Sample T test for Posttest of CG and EG.

Posttest	N	Mean	SD	Variance	df	Sig.(2-tailed)	t	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference
CG	43	8.53	2.702	7.302	83	.000	-.5134	-3.108	.605
EG	42	11.64	2.878	8.284					

Table 5: Results of Paired Sample T test for Pretest and Posttest of EG.

EG	N	Mean	SD	Variance	Std. Error Mean	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
Pretest	42	8.60	2.914	8.491	.460	-6.630	41	.000
Posttest		11.64	2.878	8.284				