

Enhancing student engagement of a university EFL class through cooperative learning: an action research

Yin ZHONG

China University of Petroleum-Beijing at Karamay, Karamay 834000, China

Abstract: The purpose of this paper is to illustrate how the incorporation of cooperative learning (CL) with an action research (AR) methodology facilitated student engagement of an EFL course at a Chinese university in one semester. This paper first introduces the background and identified problems of the class. Then it describes the cyclical processes of AR that transform students' learning attitudes through CL. Both qualitative and quantitative data were collected, including group tasks, interviews, classroom observations and questionnaire. Based on data analysis, the paper reveals the progress that students made through this approach, such as increased classroom participation, a stronger learning motivation and better task performance. Then it further discusses issues related to improving student engagement and concludes with suggestions for teachers to conduct AR.

Key words: student engagement; cooperative learning; action research

1 Introduction

This paper reports an action-research study conducted in China University of Petroleum-Beijing at Karamay (CUPK) to address the problem of students' inadequate engagement in the EFL learning process.

In today's class where student-centered concept is promoted, it is particularly important for instructors to ensure learners' active participation in the learning process. However, many Chinese EFL teachers find that students are disengaged with learning: They seldom interact with peers or the teacher, do not bring learning materials, and skip the class frequently. Individually, this can be attributed to motivation decline, lose of learning interest and lack of confidence. Environmentally, large class at CUPK is problematic and detrimental to effective language teaching. To address the issues highlighted above, the aim of the present study therefore is to investigate how to improve student engagement in EFL classes at CUPK.

Student engagement (SE) refers to student's active participation in various learning activities and commitment to learning goals. It is comprised of three inseparable dimensions: behavior, emotion and cognition [1]. Behavioral engagement refers to participation in learning contexts, mainly observable performance, like attendance, homework completion. Emotional engagement involves student's feelings about schools, teachers and peers, and learning confidence and interests. Cognitive engagement can be defined as actions undertaken to enhance learning, involving concentration, problem-solving, and deep learning strategies.

SE can be improved through cooperative learning (CL), which refers to the instructional use of small groups where students work together to maximize their own and each other's learning. It has been shown that CL leads to higher academic and social outcomes compared with individual learning [2]. A review of studies of CL in China's English education has indicated that this approach facilitated learner's language ability, social skills and meta-cognitive skills, thereby validating the efficacy of CL in China's EFL instruction [3].

However, simply working in groups does not constitute CL. According to Kagan (1994), the two fundamental elements of CL are positive interdependence and individual accountability [4]. Hence, teachers adopting CL need to foster a culture of positive interdependence, help students adapt to the novel approach step by step, and supervise interactions between students. Besides, there are some challenges for the implementation of CL in China. For example, since grade is seen as the primary goal in Confucian culture, encouraging students to learn cooperatively is not easy because it cannot guarantee a higher score for all [5]. Furthermore, many Chinese students lack cooperative skills, so it will be a challenge for them to transform to the new learning pattern. Finally, at large class, teachers may need to put extra amount of time and effort to manage students' behavior to facilitate successful group learning.

In summary, the purpose of the study is to use CL strategies to enhance student engagement in an EFL course at CUPK.

2 Methods

The study adopted an action research model, which is regarded as an effective way to combine theory and practice together to improve educational practice [6]. The compulsory EFL course at CUPK opened in the first academic year, and this study was conducted at the second semester. The course lasted for 12 weeks, with 200 minutes per week. The prescribed syllabus contained 4 teaching units, with the first unit for orientation, and the rest three units for intervention consisting of cycles of action. During the orientation, the teacher prepared students for the coming implementation of CL; then the actual intervention was implemented and students learned cooperatively.

2.1 Data collection and analysis

The study used a mixed methods approach to achieve data triangulation. Semi-structured interviews were held with randomly selected participants after each cycle of intervention to collect students' opinion about CL. Another source of qualitative data came from classroom observation. One of the teacher's colleague was invited to observe the class twice to provide an outsider view. Group assignments of each unit were also collected to analyze students' behavior change. Quantitative data was collected through a five-level Likert questionnaire to investigate students' attitude towards CL.

Qualitative data was first transcribed and then coded and refined through thematic analysis to generate the major themes. Quantitative data was analyzed separately through SPSS 29.0, to facilitate understanding of students' performance and to corroborate findings obtained from analysis of qualitative data.

3 Research procedure

3.1 Orientation

The main task of orientation was to give normal classes as well as instructions of CL. The teacher spent 5-10 minutes each class explaining the key points of CL, such as its advantages and the five basic principles, with special emphasis on individual accountability and positive interdependence. A grading system that can assess individual's contributions to group is crucial, so students were informed that they would need to submit a peer evaluation form for group tasks, as a method to rate each member's contribution and to avoid free-riding.

Another task was to guide students to establish groups. The ideal number for group learning was 4-5 students [7], and for Asian students, it is advised to allow them to choose their friends as group members. Hence, friendship grouping

strategy was adopted, and 61 students formed a total of 15 groups of 3-6 people.

3.2 Cycle 1

Group tasks, like text structure analysis and vocabulary learning, were given before the class. During the class, the teacher invited students to share their learning outcome. At first, most students were still silent. To break the silence, the teacher proposed that students could first discuss the question with group members and then compete for answering it. The group that answered the question could get bonus points. The change was significant. Most groups actively joined in the activity, and students evaluated it as "stimulating".

Despite the improved participation of students, problems also occurred. First, it was hard for the teacher to accurately rate individual's contributions to group tasks because all students gave full marks to their partners in peer evaluation form. To address the problem, the teacher adjusted the way of assessment that groups needed to specify the contributions of each member in their submitted assignments. Another issue was that some groups lacked face-to-face communication. As face-to-face interactions between group members are key to group work, the teacher reiterated to the students that team members must sit together; otherwise, the team would be penalized.

3.3 Cycle 2

To foster closer seating among group members, the teacher required students to arrive in the classroom 5 minutes prior to class and sit in designated group arrangements. Over time, students cultivated the routine of sitting with their teammates, significantly mitigating the incidence of absences and facilitating direct interaction among group members. This approach has earned recognition from the observer, but he also emphasized the importance of language quality: "It's the teacher's responsibility to correct the improper language use". Similar to this issue was the reflection from students: "We mainly asked each other what the answer was, but rarely discussed what we have learned" (S9). The teacher thus clarified that the essence of positive interdependence lies in the exchange of knowledge and views during team interactions. Students were encouraged to focus on the skills acquired through collaboration, rather than just completing tasks.

Additionally, students indicated that the group assignment should be altered, noting that answers readily available in textbooks are unchallenging, and there is a need for more "useful" exercises aligned with assessment criteria. Consequently, the teacher decided to craft diverse sub-tasks within a comprehensive group assignment, varying in complexity, and allowing students the autonomy to select their preferred ones.

3.4 Cycle 3

Group task of this unit comprised mini-tasks of varying difficulty, catering to all members' capabilities. Students selected tasks suited to their proficiency levels, with advanced students opting for challenging tasks such as summarization, while others focused on simpler tasks like vocabulary sorting and identifying factual information. A student remarked: "The varied tasks were more engaging and motivating" (S7). This tiered approach also fostered greater interaction among group members, leading to more frequent information and idea exchange that is essential for group work completion. The observer commented favorably on this design to increase active participation in group discussions.

4 Results and discussion

The questionnaire aiming to investigate students' attitudes toward CL was circulated after the final intervention class. Fifty eight valid copies were included in the analysis. The results showed that most students believed they benefited from CL, such as less anxiety and more enjoyment of the class, enhanced learning motivation and efficiency, and improved participation and performance. This echoes qualitative data that CL has increased student engagement.

First, students' behavioral engagement increased during CL. Around 80% of students agreed that they were more willing to join in the class, and it was observed that students interacted actively with the teacher and spent more time

completing group assignment. A major reason for the enhanced engagement was the desire to earn grades for their group, which was reported by over 60% of participants. Another 44% said they were more prepared through group learning. CL also made those shy or introverted students engaged and stimulated. An example was, "I made more progress this semester because other members always encouraged me to participate" (S4).

Students were also more emotionally engaged because CL reduced their learning burden and anxiety, which was supported by more than 90% of respondents. For many, task division and peer support not only lessened the amount of workload and enhanced learning efficiency, but also gave them an opportunity to study with their friends, adding enjoyment of the class. One student recalled: "Actually my English is not good, but I love speaking it to my partner" (S10). That is, by leaning with friends, students became more confident and interested in language use, and improved their self-efficacy. Some also attributed this to the novelty of the new approach. A typical comment was, "CL is quite new to me, and I was rather enthusiastic" (S4).

As for cognitive engagement, the most frequently reflected advantage of CL was that it created an encouraging environment for interaction, and thus improved students' concentration. Some appreciated the chance to communicate freely with teammates: "It's hard to keep focus for a long time, but having discussions with friends can effectively avoid inattention" (S17) and the reminding from their group: "I will be criticized by other members if I swipe the smart phone" (S5). Others compared CL to lectures and indicated that the interactive method reduced distraction, for instance, "If the teacher rarely interacts with us, we will get lost easily" (S16).

CL also facilitated students' cognitive engagement at deeper levels by making them recognize the value of overcoming difficulties and become open to challenges. An example was, "Sometimes the tasks were not easy, so we had to work very hard. This made me annoyed at first, but gradually I gained a sense of fulfillment from the process" (S15). Group sharing also developed students' critical thinking and deep thinking abilities. One recalled, "Everyone has strengths and weaknesses, and we may just consider one side of the question if we work separately. So we often shared opinions with each other" (S6).

Besides, students agreed they had a stronger sense of responsibility and tended to put greater effort to achieve group success. For example, the fear of slowing the group project down pushed low-or-medium level students to be diligent: "I felt motivated to learn, because I knew if I didn't finish my part on time, we would fail to complete the whole assignment" (S5). Meanwhile, high-level students tended to engage in more effort to earn a good grade for their group. "If it was my own job, I might not treat it seriously; but for group task, I tried my best or it would affect the grades of other members" (S13).

Despite the overall enhancements in SE, there are still some problems that CL has not fully addressed. For example, some introverted students were not as participatory as others. "Shy students were not used to public speaking, and often more fear of making mistakes in front of the class" (S11). But it should be noticed that refusal to expressing opinions publicly doesn't mean non-participation. Actually, those who were shy "knew the answer and shared ideas with us" (S2). So different ways of participation, like interactions within groups and online communications, should also be identified and counted.

Another issue is that students' devotion to English beyond coursework was still inadequate. Two reasons may explain that. First, the separation between English and professional education in most Chinese universities makes students believe that English is irrelevant to their vocational studies and employment prospects, thus deterring them from investing additional time. A student noted, "The heavy burden of major study leaves us no time to study English" (S9). The lack of intrinsic motivation is another reason. For many Chinese college students, passing CET-4 may be the main aim of learning

English, leading to a loss of impetus once they past the exam.

4.1 Obstacles of implementing CL

In spite of the encouraging results, individual, group and culture issues hindering the successful implementation of CL also emerged. Individually, the biggest obstacle was uneven participation. Since taking one's own responsibility is crucial, not contributing to group assignments can frustrate high-contributing members, and negatively affect their cooperative experience. A student expressed, "I got annoyed when some members were indifferent to our group tasks and did nothing" (S10). Additionally, the grading system was criticized by some as unfair, with low contributors receiving the same grades as active participants. So it is of great importance to set a grading system that can identify and assess individuals' contributions.

Second, it is found that students lacked social skills associated with CL and did not truly understand the core of positive interdependence. Behavior like using demanding tone, failing to express dissent timely and the tendency to avoid conflicts prevented students developing a good relationship with teammates. Similarly, insufficient information exchange within groups resulted in incomplete knowledge acquisition, and deprived students of the chance to benefit from the learning experiences of their peers. An example was, "We did discuss the group tasks, but not extensively. We concentrated on individual work" (S14). It is imperative to make students realize that their personal growth is contingent upon the collective support and collaborative efforts of their team members.

Third, our prior concern that the prevailing test-oriented educational culture in China would influence students' inclination towards CL has been substantiated through research. Nurtured in an environment that prioritizes test outcomes, students have developed a predilection for rote learning and a belief that only exam-relevant knowledge holds value. This mindset leads to skepticism regarding the efficacy of CL, for instance, "Activities were interesting but useless because they would not be assessed in tests" (S12). Instructors are thus suggested to incorporate test-relevant skills into task designs to address students' pragmatic concerns of test performance.

4.2 Limitation

A drawback of this study is the unsuccessful attempt to assess individual's contributions to the group. To safeguard the self-esteem of introverted students, random calling for questions was not employed; instead, group members were given the autonomy to respond voluntarily. This approach, however, may diminish their sense of accountability for group projects and foster free-riding. Other limitations of this kind of study are related with ethical issues. As a teacher-researcher, when interviewing students, the teacher was inherently concerned with their performance, which may affect the result. Feedback from students may also be influenced by their desire to please the teacher.

5 Conclusion and reflection

The study investigates how, within the disadvantage of large class, to improve student engagement in one EFL course at CUPK. It is found that CL fosters a higher level of student engagement, bolstering their self-efficacy and confidence. This can be largely attributed to the creation of an open, inclusive, and student-centered environment by CL. Nevertheless, as discussed above, issues that undermine the effectiveness of CL, including unequal participation, a lack of cooperative skills, and ingrained test-oriented learning habits, need to be further explored by future studies.

The most important impact of implementing CL on teachers is that it helps them overcome the disadvantages of large class. By assigning students to fixed groups and seats, the teacher could identify individual's problems promptly and provide tailored instruction. Meanwhile, the study has validated the value of action research that it can continuously improve the practitioner's practice. For the teacher, the process increases her teaching autonomy by making her examine the class critically and regularly.

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Conflicts of interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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