

A Study on the Application of Group Cooperative Learning in Junior High School English Instruction Taking Minhou No. 6 Middle School as an Example

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ABSTRACT

Group cooperative learning should be fully valued in English classroom teaching in junior high school so as to break the traditional indoctrination teaching mode of English teaching and return the dominant role of class to students. In this study, 57 students from Class 10, Grade 7 of Minhou NO. 6 Middle School were selected as the subjects to empirically investigate the application of group cooperative learning in English teaching by virtue of two questionnaire surveys. Results of the study show that group cooperative learning can significantly enhance students' learning interest and teamwork awareness, but the effect is not obvious in learning attitude; there is no statistical difference between male and female students' acceptance of group cooperative learning in junior high school English instruction. These findings provide beneficial exploration and supplementation for the current English classroom teaching in junior high schools.

Keywords: *Group cooperative learning, Learning interest, Learning attitude, Teamwork awareness, Gender difference.*

1. INTRODUCTION

As is known, English classroom is the main place for students to learn English and innovation in teachers' teaching methods is important for improving students' comprehensive English application ability. However, in China's traditional English classroom teaching, teachers usually adopt the "cramming" teaching method to instill a large amount of knowledge into students without paying attention to whether students really understand and master language knowledge well. Teachers, as the center and controller of the classroom, often neglect students' motivation. Under this teaching mode, students can only absorb knowledge passively and cannot exert their subjective initiative. To a certain extent, this mode limits students' initiative and creativity, fails to cultivate students' cooperative learning ability, and makes it difficult to meet the demand for English talents in modern society. Thereby, it is of great necessity to emphasize the teaching method of group cooperative learning to change this teaching situation, stimulate junior high

school students' interest in learning English, and cultivate their cooperative learning ability. That is to say, the teacher no longer occupies the center of the classroom, but becomes the participant and instructor of the classroom. Instead, students become the center and main body of the classroom. Hence, this study aims to explore the application of group cooperative learning in junior high school English instruction for the sake of improving students' learning interest and cooperative awareness.

2. RESEARCH OVERVIEW

Group cooperative learning is a kind of cooperative learning with a group as a unit, which is a creative teaching idea and mode. In the group cooperative learning process, students cooperatively determine their learning goals and strategies, share their ideas, and help each other to complete the task together. As conceptualized by several scholars, it is a pedagogical approach that emphasizes cooperation between students.

Professor Slavin deems that cooperative learning is an effective classroom technique where groups receive rewards or recognition based on their overall performance, while it is also defined as an umbrella term for a range of instructional methods that organize and facilitate classroom instruction where students learn in groups of 3-5 by interacting and communicating with their peers. According to Wang, cooperative learning is a system of teaching strategies; teachers use the overall performance of group members as the basis for rewards and punishments, with the aim of promoting cooperative interactions among students to achieve common goals. Apparently in the process of cooperative learning, students need to assume the corresponding learning responsibilities, but also help their team members learn to achieve mutual help and progress. This teaching method fully embodies the concept of quality education, helps to overcome the problem of low student participation in the traditional English teaching mode, and can also enliven the classroom atmosphere. In addition, group cooperative learning gives students the opportunity to cooperate independently so that they can learn to cooperate and cultivate awareness of teamwork and competition.

On the basis of research, some domestic scholars have found that group cooperative learning has a certain role in promoting the learning effect of students. Xu discovered that students in the experimental class by means of group cooperative learning learned more effectively than those in the control class, and their test scores were also significantly improved[6]. In other words, students in the experimental class are able to acquire more knowledge in a limited amount of time, and simultaneously they have made great continuous progress in the test. Likewise, in Duan's questionnaire survey, 78.83% of the students believed that group cooperative learning was of great help to their English learning and conducive to enhancing communication among classmates, listening to more opinions and ideas, and further broadening their scope of knowledge[7]. However, there are some problems with the implementation of group cooperative learning. For example, teachers do not have a systematic understanding of group cooperative learning and related theories, which leads to the teaching mode of group cooperation only staying on the surface. For instance, Wei unearthed that in the grouping process, teachers did not fully consider students' learning styles and learning levels; instead, they mostly relied on the front and rear seats to organize

group cooperative learning. As a result, the overall level difference between the groups is too large, which violates the principle of fairness and reduces the enthusiasm of students for cooperative learning. In terms of the arrangement of learning tasks, Tian found that if the teacher did not clarify the specific requirements and learning rules of the task to students, it would lead students to use the opportunity of group cooperation to discuss topics unrelated to the learning content, thus disrupting the normal classroom order and affecting the learning effect[9].

Although certain achievements have been made in the study of group cooperative learning, the implications of this learning mode for English teaching in junior high schools remain to be discussed. At the same time, there is a relative lack of research on whether there is a difference between male and female students' acceptance of English group cooperative learning, and the effect of implementing group cooperative learning in real English classroom teaching needs to be further explored. Under these circumstances, the present study focuses on the above aspects to empirically inspect the application of group cooperative learning in junior high school English instruction.

3. RESEARCH DESIGN

By way of two questionnaires, this study endeavors to examine the effects of group cooperative learning on junior high school students' interest and attitude in English learning, as well as their teamwork awareness, and to further inspect whether gender difference will have a significant impact on the acceptance of group cooperative learning. Therefore, this survey will focus on the following three questions: (1) Does group cooperative learning improve junior high school students' interest and attitude in English learning? (2) Does group cooperative learning promote junior high school students' teamwork awareness? (3) Is there a difference between male and female students' acceptance of English group cooperative learning?

On the ground of Lu's research[10], two questionnaires were surveyed. The pre-test questionnaire has three parts. The first part is the students' information, which includes their class, gender, and usual English scores. The second part is a survey of students' English learning status. The questionnaire has a total of 15 questions, 12 of which are further divided into 3 aspects: Part A ("On Students' Interest in English Learning"); Part

B (“On Students’ Attitude towards English Learning”); Part C (“On Students’ Teamwork Awareness in English Learning”). In these three respects, each question has five options, and each corresponds to one score of 1, 2, 3, 4 and 5 (1=exceedingly disagree; 2=disagree; 3=neutral; 4=agree; 5=exceedingly agree). And the final part includes 3 questions concerning students’ preferences for English teaching modes. The post-test questionnaire also has three parts. The first two parts are identical to those in the pre-test questionnaire, whereas the final part includes a question regarding students’ opinion on the benefits of cooperative learning.

In this study, 57 students from Class 10, Grade 7 of Minhou NO. 6 Middle School were selected as subjects. The researcher surveyed these students’ English learning status through the first questionnaire, and then carried out group cooperative learning. Two months later, students completed the second questionnaire. Students filled out both questionnaires in line with their personal experience. Both questionnaires were released during 10-minute class break and were anonymous for students to complete independently. Finally, 57 valid questionnaires were received for both surveys. Among them, 31 questionnaires were from male students and 26 were from female students.

Based on the theoretical framework of cooperative learning, Johnson advocated that the principle of “homogeneity between groups and heterogeneity within groups” should be adopted in the process of group construction[11]. Therein, according to the differences in students’ academic performance, personality characteristics and ability advantages, the researcher divided the whole class into 10 groups with 5-6 students in each group. The learning abilities and advantages of the members within the group are different, but the overall level of each group remains relatively consistent, which makes the survey results more representative and credible.

4. RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

All these collected data were first categorized and then processed with SPSS21.0, and further presented in terms of examining the effect of group cooperative learning on junior high school students’ interest and attitude in English learning, as well as their teamwork awareness. Also, the impact of gender difference on the acceptance of group cooperative learning will be dissected.

4.1 The Effect of Group Cooperative Learning on Junior High School Students’ Interest and Attitude in English Learning

The pre-test and post-test results (“Table 1”) reflect the effect of conducting group cooperative learning on students’ interest and attitude towards English learning. In terms of learning interest (Part A), the mean increased from 3.5219 (pre-test) to 3.8333 (post-test), indicating that with the help of group cooperative learning, students’ interest in English learning can be numerically enhanced. The standard deviation decreased from 0.72315 to 0.46130, demonstrating a more concentrated distribution of interest, implying that cooperative learning has a more consistent effect on increasing interest for most students. Besides, the results of the paired samples t-test ($t=-3.073$, $P=.003<.05$) show that there is a statistically significant difference between students’ interest in learning English before and after the experiment. To put it simply, students’ interest in learning English could progress significantly after participating in group cooperative learning. Moreover, in the pre-test questionnaire, 61.4% of students think that group discussion is their favorite way of learning in English class, which also implies the importance of group cooperative learning in enhancing students’ concentration in class as well as their interest in learning.

Table 1. Comparisons of students' acceptance of group cooperative learning for the two tests in junior high school English teaching (N=57)

Variables	Test	Mean.	Std. Deviation	t	P
Part A	Pre-test	3.5219	0.72315	-3.073	.003**
	Post-test	3.8333	0.46130		
Part B	Pre-test	3.8702	0.62277	-.817	.417
	Post-test	3.9404	0.41742		
Part C	Pre-test	3.4096	0.59036	-7.267	.000**
	Post-test	4.0900	0.38370		

a Note: (*P<.05; **P<.01)

b Part A = learning interest; Part B = learning attitude; Part C = teamwork awareness

During a three-month teaching internship, by way of observing the English classroom teaching in class, it can be found that if a whole class was taught by the teacher and the students did not take an active part in it by answering the questions, then the students would easily get lost in thought or even doze off, which seriously affects the learning effect. However, after the practice of group cooperative learning, the teacher attracted students' attention by carrying out activities such as role-playing and group discussion, which made them more willing to engage in learning. Compared with traditional teacher-led classrooms, these activities created a more active learning atmosphere. In this case, students were able to practice their language skills and enjoy interaction in their activities, so the group cooperative learning format could directly boost their interest in learning. What is noteworthy is that those students who usually have poor grades or are more introverted are more willing to participate in the class after the implementation of group cooperative learning. In a traditional classroom, these students may be too anxious to answer questions for fear of making mistakes or being questioned individually. But in group cooperative learning, mistakes are viewed as opportunities for shared improvement rather than as individual failures. Each member of the group can express their views boldly, correct each other's mistakes, and become more relaxed about trying to express themselves in English. This inclusive learning environment reduces learning anxiety and motivates students to participate more actively in the learning process, thus enhancing their interest in learning English. In addition, teachers sometimes create authentic situations when conducting

cooperative learning tasks, such as simulated restaurant ordering and shopping scenarios. This situational approach to teaching increases the practicality and interest of English learning. Through the creation of real situations, teachers help students use English to solve problems in practice, exercise their oral expression skills, consolidate the absorbing of knowledge points, and at the same time feel the value of English so as to better their interest in learning.

However, in terms of learning attitude (Part B), although the mean slightly improved from 3.8702 to 3.9404, the results of the paired samples t-test ($t=-.817$, $P=.417>.05$) expose that there is no significant change in students' attitude towards English learning before and after the experiment, so there is no statistical significance. Hence, it can be discovered that the implementation of group cooperative learning has little impact on students' learning attitude. In fact, there is an essential difference between learning interest and learning attitude. Learning interest is mainly a kind of positive emotional experience, which is easily affected by external factors, such as interest in learning content and the teaching method of teachers. Cooperative learning directly stimulates students' curiosity through interactive tasks, thereby rapidly increasing their learning interest. Nevertheless, learning attitude is a relatively stable psychological tendency, and its formation requires long-term accumulation and continuous strengthening. Hence, short-term cooperative learning may make it difficult to change students' learning attitude. Especially in the context of exam-oriented education, students may enhance their interest in cooperative activities because of

“interesting tasks”, but it does not necessarily change the inherent attitude—“English learning is mainly for the test”.

Thus, combined with data analysis and classroom observation, it can be unearthed that group cooperative learning can significantly enhance students’ interest in English learning, but the effect is not statistically obvious in terms of learning attitude.

4.2 The Effect of Group Cooperative Learning on Junior High School Students’ Teamwork Awareness

According to “Table 1”, it can be seen that group cooperative learning has the most significant effect on Part C (teamwork awareness). The mean of the pre-test is 3.4096 and the standard deviation is 0.59036, showing that students’ teamwork awareness before the experiment is at a moderate level and has some minor individual variation. However, after the implementation of group cooperative learning, the mean increased to 4.0900 (post-test), indicating an apparent progress in students’ teamwork awareness. And the standard deviation decreased to 0.38370, signifying that students’ differences in team awareness become smaller, that is, group cooperative learning leads to a more consistent perception of teamwork. The results of the paired samples t-test ($t=-7.267$, $P=.000<.05$) indicate that the increase in teamwork awareness before and after the experiment is highly statistically significant, and this effect is not accidental but owing to the implementation of group cooperative learning. Plus, in the post-test questionnaire, 61.4% of the students believe that group cooperative learning gives them more opportunities to communicate with their classmates and cultivates their cooperation ability. Meanwhile, 64.9% of the students assume that their teamwork awareness and responsibility are enhanced via group cooperative learning.

Still, during the researcher’s internship, through classroom observations and first-hand teaching experience, it can be noticed that whenever teachers assigned group cooperative tasks, students would quickly engage in intense discussions within their groups. This face-to-face communication, debate, and collaborative problem-solving approach allows students to recognize the power and importance of teamwork as they work toward a shared goal that requires pooling their collective wisdom and

abilities. After the teacher defines the learning tasks and requirements, students usually first assign tasks according to their own abilities and advantages, and then assume their own tasks and responsibilities. This assignment helps students to understand the value and importance of each team member, thereby strengthening their teamwork awareness. In teamwork, students can support and encourage each other, particularly when they encounter difficulties. They can also listen to their peers’ ideas, learn different solutions, and broaden their knowledge. This diversified learning method can boost students’ identification with teamwork.

As a consequence, combined with data analysis, classroom observation, and personal practice, it is revealed that group cooperative learning has a significant effect on promoting junior high school students’ teamwork awareness.

4.3 The Difference Between Male and Female Students’ Acceptance of Group Cooperative Learning in Junior High School English Instruction

The researcher divided the participants into two groups of males and females (31 males and 26 females) to examine whether gender differences affect the actual pedagogical application of group cooperative learning.

As can be seen from “Table 2”, before the implementation of group cooperative learning, females outnumber males in all three aspects in terms of mean values. As is known that junior high school girls tend to be more mature in their thinking than boys, and based on the data, it can be inferred that junior high school girls are more interested in English learning, take learning tasks more seriously, and have a stronger teamwork awareness. Yet processed with an independent samples t-test, it can be unveiled that the gender differences in Part A (learning interest) ($p=.805>.05$), Part B (learning attitude) ($p=.506>.05$) and Part C (teamwork awareness) ($p=.877>.05$) are not statistically significant. This result provides a fair starting point for a subsequent study that male and female students have similar perceptions of English learning and teamwork awareness prior to the implementation of group cooperative learning.

Table 2. Comparisons of male and female students' acceptance of group cooperative learning in junior high school English teaching (Pre-test)

Variables	Group	N	Mean.	Std. Deviation	t	P
Part A	M	31	3.5000	0.79844	-.248	.805
	F	26	3.5481	0.63647		
Part B	M	31	3.8194	0.69350	-.669	.506
	F	26	3.9308	0.53349		
Part C	M	31	3.3984	0.57278	-.156	.877
	F	26	3.4231	0.62182		

a Note: (*P<.05; **P<.01)

b M = Male; F = Female

c Part A = learning interest Part B = learning attitude Part C = teamwork awareness

According to "Table 3", after the implementation of group cooperative learning, males outnumber females in all three aspects in terms of mean values. This suggests that males may adapt more quickly to group cooperative learning, show more enthusiasm in teamwork, and utilize group cooperative learning opportunities more effectively, thus improving their learning interest, attitude, and teamwork awareness and making

greater progress. After an independent samples t-test, it can be displayed that gender differences in Part A (learning interest) ($p=.093>.05$), Part B (learning attitude) ($p=.242>.05$), and Part C (teamwork awareness) ($p=.107>.05$) were not statistically significant. That is to say, in junior high school English classes, cooperative learning is applicable to both male and female students without any significant gender advantage.

Table 3. Comparisons of male and female students' acceptance of group cooperative learning in junior high school English teaching (Post-test)

Variables	Group	N	Mean.	Std. Deviation	t	P
Part A	M	31	3.9274	0.42423	1.710	.093
	F	26	3.7212	0.48645		
Part B	M	31	4.0000	0.45314	1.182	.242
	F	26	3.8692	0.36635		
Part C	M	31	4.1652	0.42322	1.639	.107
	F	26	4.0004	0.31544		

a Note: (*P<.05; **P<.01)

b M = Male; F = Female

c Part A = learning interest; Part B = learning attitude; Part C = teamwork awareness.

On the basis of the data in "Table 2" and "Table 3" from pre-test to post-test, both male and female students increased their mean on learning interest and teamwork awareness. Although the mean value of female students' learning attitude decreased slightly, it still remained at a high level in general. Thus, it can be disclosed that gender difference

could not affect the actual pedagogical application of cooperative group learning. And it is noteworthy that the progress of boys may be more obvious, so it is numerically higher than that of girls. In reality, this is related to the fact that seventh graders are young and have not yet officially entered puberty, and for the time being there is no significant gender

differentiation in their acceptance of group cooperative learning.

5. ENLIGHTMENT FOR JUNIOR HIGH SCHOOL ENGLISH INSTRUCTION

By studying and summarizing various issues, there is no doubt that group cooperative learning is beneficial to the improvement of students' learning interest and teamwork awareness on the whole. In a broad sense, group cooperative learning can promote mutual learning and communication among students, so that students can feel the fun of learning in cooperation, and thus participate more actively in the English class and promote the learning effect. It also cultivates students' teamwork spirit and communication skills by listening to other members of the group, respecting different points of view, and solving problems together. In order to better implement group cooperative learning, teachers need to further improve this teaching method.

First of all, it is of necessity for teachers and students to attach importance to the application of group cooperative learning in English teaching. If group cooperative learning cannot attract the attention and recognition of teachers and students, it is difficult to popularize the application of group cooperative learning; thus, English teaching cannot make substantial progress. In current junior high school English education, the new curriculum standard emphasizes the need to cultivate students' teamwork awareness and comprehensive language application skills, encourage students to actively participate in group activities, stimulate students' learning interest, cultivate their communication skills, and ability to deal with problems, so as to facilitate the advancement of students' English literacy in an all-round way[10]. Thereby, teachers should keep abreast of the times, constantly update their educational philosophy, and implement the requirements of new curriculum reform. It is also important to change the traditional teacher-centered teaching mode, recognize the status of students as the main body of the class, and respect individual differences so that students with different levels of learning can dare to speak in class, give full play to their respective strengths, and gain in cooperative learning.

Secondly, teachers should establish cooperative scientific learning groups, for grouping is the essence of cooperative learning, and the quality of learning group construction has a direct effect on

the effectiveness of cooperative learning. Apparently, creating well-designed groups in cooperative learning can foster positive interactions and mutual growth among team members[12]. Therein, teachers must focus on the division of members in each group in the class. Before grouping, teachers should have a comprehensive understanding of the learning ability and personality characteristics of each student, ensuring that the ability level of members in a group is different but the overall level of different groups is similar. The principle of fairness can be observed only in this way, which is conducive to the complementary of group members and competition between groups. Consequently, students can learn from each other and exchange views in cooperative learning and then form a sense of cooperation and exert the maximum effect of cooperative learning. In addition, to avoid the formation of small groups within the group members, thereafter creating vicious competition between groups, teachers should adjust the members of the group in a timely and flexible manner according to the performance of students in activities and recent learning conditions. By enhancing communication between groups, a good learning atmosphere can be built among entire class.

Thirdly, teachers should clarify to students the learning tasks, time arrangements, and specific requirements before the activity. For students, clear learning tasks can enable them to quickly concentrate on the problem to be solved and to discuss and explore, thus improving learning efficiency and avoiding ambiguity of objectives and inability to start in the process of cooperation. Group members will also have a clear division of labor, a clearer understanding of their roles and responsibilities in the team, and how to collaborate with other members to complete the task. This kind of consensus can enhance the cohesion of the group and the sense of teamwork, and promote mutual communication and support among members, so that each member can give full play to his or her role and work together to achieve the group's learning goals.

Fourthly, when teachers conduct cooperative teaching, they should base on the teaching objectives and focus on imparting knowledge to students and cultivating their skills; they should not put the cart before the horse by organizing too many activities, thus delaying the teaching that they are supposed to accomplish. In light of Wang, while the teaching mode has an impact on the teaching outcome, the importance of teaching

content cannot be underestimated[13]. In essence, teaching content is the core of teaching because the essence and core part of teaching content usually does not change much, regardless of the teaching mode. Therefore, teachers should reasonably evaluate the necessity of cooperative learning when teaching, not for the sake of cooperation but after ensuring the effectiveness of group cooperative learning before implementation, as Gillies' research found that reasonable teaching links are the basis for the smooth implementation of group cooperative learning[14]. This enables teachers to teach according to the content of the textbook unit and makes students actively involved in group cooperative learning. In the meantime, it can also enhance the interaction and communication among group members and actively share their ideas and insights, thus helping students to master the knowledge points and improve their language expression and cooperation ability, which is advantageous to the development of junior high school students' comprehensive English ability. Hence, when designing the teaching links of group cooperative learning, teachers should center on the content of the unit and give full consideration to the teaching key points and students' interests.

Finally, after the end of group cooperative learning, teachers should pay attention to the evaluation of students. Through the teacher's feedback, students can acquire their knowledge points, application level of skills, as well as their strengths and weaknesses in the process of cooperation, so as to provide a clear direction for subsequent learning and the basis for improvement. Moreover, teachers should actively encourage and affirm the group's performance in the process of cooperative learning, which can stimulate students' self-confidence and learning motivation to a certain extent and cultivate students' teamwork awareness and collective honor. Teachers can also guide students to carry out self-evaluation, mutual evaluation among group members, and mutual evaluation between different groups to conduct comprehensive and scientific evaluation of students' participation in group cooperative learning from multiple aspects and dimensions.

6. CONCLUSION

Regarding the above analyses, the following conclusions can be drawn. Group cooperative learning can significantly enhance students' learning interest and teamwork awareness, but the effect on learning attitude is not statistically

obvious. In response to this, as a prerequisite, teachers and students are supposed to lay emphasis on the application of group cooperative learning to English classroom teaching. What's more, although male students' acceptance of the application of group cooperative learning in English learning is numerically better than female's, there is no statistical difference between the two genders. In addition, by exploring the implications of group cooperative learning for junior high school English teaching, the researcher found that only when teachers fully understand the connotation of group cooperative learning, make reasonable and scientific groups, clarify learning tasks based on teaching objectives, and attach importance to teaching evaluation can they better utilize the effect of group cooperative learning and promote the all-round development of students.

The application of group cooperative learning in junior school English instruction is a complex subject for a lifetime. In essence, there are some inadequacies in the empirical study. First, the scope of the survey is not wide enough, and the sample size is limited. Therein the research results only represent the status quo of the 57 students from Class 10, Grade 7 of Minhou NO. 6 Middle School, and the conclusions drawn may not be completely consistent with the application situation of group cooperative learning in all junior high schools' English classes. Thus it is recommended to expand the scope of investigation and increase the number of samples. Then, there is some deficiency on whether gender difference affects students' acceptance of group cooperative learning in English teaching. It is well known that students' performance will be influenced by their age, and seventh-grade students are relatively young, many of whom have not formally entered puberty, at which time the gender differentiation of most students is not evident. Hence, the difference in the results between male and female students in impacting student acceptance is not significant. If higher grades were involved, such as eighth or ninth grade, the gender differentiation of students would likely to be more distinct, and the study findings would be more objective in terms of the gender divergence.

Next, the improvement of students' English learning ability and teamwork awareness is closely related to whether teachers correctly carry out group cooperative learning. However, drawing conclusions based solely on the cooperative learning approach adopted by one teacher is unrepresentative. Therefore, it is suggested that

experiments should be conducted in different grades and disciplines to understand the effects of group cooperative learning on different teaching contents and teaching stages and further verify the universality and applicability of experimental results. Last, it would be better if there are good comparative cases of group cooperative learning in English teaching in other junior high schools. As a consequence, this research may not be authoritative enough to offer practical suggestions for bettering the application of group cooperative learning in junior high school English instruction.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This paper is funded by 2023 Education Scientific Research Project of Young and Middle-aged Teachers in Fujian Province (Grant NO. JSZW23028).

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