

Cooperative Learning in College English: Effects on Learning Motivation and Classroom Participation

Yun Yue

Department of College English, Zhejiang Yuexiu University, Shaoxing, 312000, China
Email: miss0575@163.com

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Abstract

Against the background of student-centered reform in College English teaching, traditional lecture-dominated classrooms have long resulted in prevalent problems among non-English majors, including low learning initiative, insufficient classroom interaction, passive learning attitudes, and declining learning motivation. Cooperative learning, as a mature and student-oriented instructional strategy rooted in social interdependence theory, emphasizes peer interaction, collective responsibility, and collaborative knowledge construction, which effectively remedies the drawbacks of teacher-centered teaching modes. This study aims to explore the effects of cooperative learning on non-English majors' English learning motivation and classroom participation in college English courses. Research instruments included the revised Foreign Language Learning Motivation Scale and the College English Classroom Participation Scale. Paired sample t-tests and independent sample t-tests were employed for quantitative data analysis, and classroom observation records supplemented qualitative analysis. The results demonstrate that after one semester of intervention, the experimental class shows significantly higher scores in learning motivation and active classroom participation than the control class.

Keywords

Cooperative Learning; College English Teaching; Learning Motivation; Classroom Participation; Non-English Majors

1. Introduction

1.1. Research Background

With the continuous advancement of college English curriculum reform in China, the core teaching goal of college English has shifted from mere linguistic knowledge transmission to cultivating students' comprehensive English application ability, autonomous learning ability, and intercultural communicative competence (Liu & Zhang, 2023). The latest College English Teaching Guide clearly proposes that college English teaching should adhere to the student-centered concept, innovate

classroom teaching modes, reduce indoctrination teaching, and build interactive, experiential, and collaborative classroom learning environments. However, in the actual teaching of public college English courses for non-English majors, most classrooms still adopt the traditional teacher-led lecture mode. Restricted by large-class teaching scale, limited class hours, and uneven students' English foundation, most non-English major students are in a passive learning state for a long time.

In traditional English classrooms, teachers dominate knowledge explanation, text analysis, and exercise explanation, while students mainly receive knowledge passively through listening and taking notes. Single teaching methods and lack of interactive links lead to a series of prominent teaching problems. First, students' extrinsic learning motivation dominates, and most students learn English only for passing examinations rather than intrinsic interest and language application needs (Namaziandost et al., 2019). Second, classroom participation is low, most students are reluctant to take the initiative to speak, participate in classroom interaction or complete exploratory learning tasks, resulting in the typical "dumb English" phenomenon prevalent in public college English classrooms. Third, students lack effective peer interaction and learning communication, individual learning pressure is high, foreign language classroom anxiety is prominent, and learning enthusiasm gradually declines with the increase of learning difficulty (Alamer, 2021).

1.2. Research Gaps

Existing domestic and foreign studies on cooperative learning in EFL teaching have achieved fruitful results, but there are still research gaps worthy of in-depth exploration. First, most previous studies focus on the impact of cooperative learning on students' academic performance, writing ability or oral proficiency, while fewer studies take learning motivation and classroom participation as dual core variables to conduct integrated empirical research (Wang & Li, 2022). Learning motivation is the internal driving force of sustained learning, and classroom participation is the direct external manifestation of learning state. The combined study of the two can more comprehensively reflect students' overall learning effectiveness.

Second, most foreign empirical studies are based on foreign ESL/EFL teaching environments, while localized quasi-experimental studies targeting ordinary undergraduate college non-English majors are insufficient (Liu & Lan, 2016). Due to the differences in Chinese college students' English learning foundation, learning habits and classroom learning atmosphere, foreign research conclusions cannot be directly applied to domestic public college English teaching scenarios.

Third, some existing domestic studies stay at theoretical discussion and teaching experience summary level, lacking rigorous one-semester quasi-experimental intervention and scientific data statistical analysis, and the research conclusions lack empirical persuasion (Zhang, 2023). Therefore, based on domestic college

English classroom teaching reality, this study carries out quasi-experimental research to explore the specific effects of cooperative learning on non-English majors' learning motivation and classroom participation, so as to make up for the existing research deficiencies.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Definition of Core Concepts

2.1.1. Cooperative Learning

Cooperative learning is a structured instructional system based on social interdependence theory. Johnson & Johnson (2020), the core scholars of cooperative learning theory, defined it as a teaching mode that divides students into heterogeneous learning groups, enables students to complete common learning tasks through mutual cooperation, mutual assistance and mutual supervision, and takes group collective performance as the main evaluation basis. Different from group discussion in general classrooms, standardized cooperative learning includes five essential core elements: positive interdependence, individual accountability, promotive face-to-face interaction, social skills training, and group processing reflection.

Positive interdependence means that students realize that their personal learning achievements are closely linked with the group's overall results, and only through joint efforts can the whole group complete learning tasks. Individual accountability requires every student to participate in learning tasks independently to avoid free-riding behavior. Promotive interaction emphasizes face-to-face mutual help, resource sharing and problem discussion among group members. Social skills training guides students to master communication, cooperation and conflict resolution skills. Group processing requires groups to regularly summarize cooperation problems and optimize cooperation modes (Johnson et al., 2019).

2.1.2. Foreign Language Learning Motivation

Foreign language learning motivation refers to the psychological driving force that stimulates, maintains and adjusts learners' foreign language learning behaviors, which is the core factor affecting learners' learning persistence and learning effectiveness (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2021). Based on self-determination theory, foreign language learning motivation is divided into intrinsic motivation and extrinsic motivation. Intrinsic motivation comes from learners' internal interest, learning curiosity and sense of achievement, which has sustained and stable driving effect. Extrinsic motivation comes from external factors such as examination pressure, credit requirements and teacher evaluation, which is unstable and easy to decline with the change of external conditions. For college non-English majors, the decline of intrinsic motivation and over-reliance on extrinsic motivation are the main causes of poor learning effectiveness (Alamer, 2021).

2.1.3. Classroom Participation

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2.2. Overseas Research on Cooperative Learning in EFL Teaching

Foreign scholars have carried out in-depth and systematic research on cooperative learning applied to foreign language teaching. In terms of learning motivation improvement, Soleimani & Rahimi (2022) found in their empirical research on EFL college students that standardized cooperative learning activities can effectively stimulate learners' intrinsic learning motivation, reduce learning boredom caused by single indoctrination teaching, and enhance learners' sense of learning achievement through peer recognition and group honor. In terms of classroom participation and learning engagement, Namaziandost et al. (2019) pointed out that cooperative learning changes the individual competitive learning atmosphere of traditional classrooms, reduces learners' fear of making mistakes and public speaking anxiety, and significantly improves learners' willingness to communicate and active classroom participation frequency.

2.3. Domestic Research on Cooperative Learning in College English Teaching

Domestic scholars have paid continuous attention to the application of cooperative learning in college English teaching. Liu and Lan (2016) conducted research on Chinese college English classrooms and found that cooperative learning can effectively activate large-class English teaching atmosphere and solve the problem of insufficient teacher-student interaction in public English courses. Wang and Li (2022) pointed out in their research that cooperative peer evaluation and group task cooperation can significantly improve non-English majors' learning initiative and reduce classroom passive learning status.

At present, domestic research mainly includes two categories: one is theoretical research, discussing the application strategies and teaching advantages of cooperative learning in college English teaching; the other is empirical research, verifying the positive effect of cooperative learning on students' academic

performance. However, most domestic empirical studies have short intervention cycles, single research indicators, and lack systematic quasi-experimental design and rigorous data analysis (Zhang, 2023). Few studies take learning motivation and classroom participation as dual indicators to comprehensively evaluate the teaching effect of cooperative learning, which leaves sufficient research space for this study.

3. Theoretical Framework

Proposed by Johnson and Johnson, social interdependence theory is the core theoretical basis of cooperative learning (Johnson & Johnson, 2020). The theory holds that the interaction mode among individuals in the learning environment directly affects individual learning behavior and learning effectiveness. Social interdependence is divided into positive interdependence, negative interdependence and no interdependence. Positive interdependence corresponds to cooperative learning, which means individuals realize that personal goals and group goals are consistent, and personal success depends on the success of the whole group. Negative interdependence corresponds to competitive learning, where individuals' goals conflict with each other, and others' success means personal failure. No interdependence corresponds to individual learning, where individuals complete tasks independently without interaction and influence.

4. Research Methodology

4.1. Research Design

A mixed-method quasi-experimental framework was employed in this investigation, integrating quantitative questionnaire measurement alongside qualitative classroom field notes. As a research approach well-suited to authentic instructional contexts, quasi-experimental designs permit researchers to carry out studies within intact natural classrooms without disrupting routine teaching arrangements, thereby generating ecologically valid evidence of pedagogical interventions. In the present inquiry, the instructional approach of cooperative learning served as the independent variable, whereas learners' English learning motivation and classroom engagement functioned as the two outcome-dependent variables.

4.2. Research Participants

The participants of this study are two parallel freshman non-English major classes from a university in southeastern China, including 70 students in total. All students have received at least 6 years of formal English education, with similar basic English level, and no significant difference in English entrance examination scores and pre-experiment motivation and participation levels (verified by pre-test data).

Experimental Class (EC): 35 students, adopting cooperative learning mode

Control Class (CC): 35 students, adopting traditional lecture-based teaching mode. The two classes are taught by the same college English teacher, with consistent teaching materials, class hours, teaching progress and after-school assignment standards, eliminating the interference of teachers, teaching content and external factors on experimental results. All students voluntarily participate in the research, and the questionnaire data is anonymous to ensure the authenticity and validity of the data.

4.3. Research Instruments

4.3.1. Foreign Language Learning Motivation Scale

The foreign language motivation instrument adopted in this work was adapted from Alamer's (2021) validated scale, a measurement tool widely adopted within EFL empirical studies with established psychometric properties. This questionnaire contains 18 items distributed across three subscales: intrinsic motivation, extrinsic motivation and foreign language learning anxiety. Responses were captured via a five-point Likert continuum ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Higher composite scores represent stronger motivational tendencies and reduced anxiety for English learning. For the current dataset, the scale yielded a Cronbach's alpha value of 0.892, demonstrating satisfactory internal consistency.

4.3.2. College English Classroom Participation Scale

Drawing on the classroom engagement assessment framework developed by Li and Zhao (2022), the researcher developed the College English Classroom Participation Scale. This instrument consists of 15 items that capture three interrelated facets of classroom involvement: behavioral engagement, cognitive engagement and affective engagement. It also uses a five-point Likert response format. The scale achieved a Cronbach's alpha of 0.876 in this study, confirming acceptable reliability and construct validity to gauge undergraduates' degree of classroom participation in college English courses.

4.3.3. Classroom Observation Record

During the 18-week experimental period, fixed classroom observation is carried out every two weeks to record the differences of students' active speaking frequency, group interaction status, task participation degree and classroom learning state between the experimental class and the control class, so as to supplement and verify the quantitative data results.

4.4. Research Procedure

4.4.1. Pre-experiment Stage (Week 1)

Distribute motivation and classroom participation scales to both experimental class and control class for pre-test, collect pre-experiment data, and conduct

independent sample t-test to confirm that there is no significant difference in learning motivation and classroom participation level between the two classes, ensuring the homogeneity of research participants.

4.4.2. Experimental Intervention Stage (Week 2-17)

Experimental Class Cooperative Learning Implementation Scheme:

1. Heterogeneous grouping: Divide 35 students into 7 fixed learning groups (5 people per group), grouping according to students' English foundation, academic performance, personality and gender to ensure balanced group strength and realize complementary advantages. Each group sets group leader, recorder, speaker and inspector, with rotating roles to ensure individual accountability.
2. Classroom task design: Set targeted cooperative learning tasks for reading, writing, listening and speaking teaching links, including group topic discussion, paragraph cooperative analysis, peer composition revision, group English presentation and error mutual correction.
3. Group evaluation mechanism: Establish a process group scoring system, take group task completion quality, classroom participation degree and peer cooperation effect as evaluation indicators, integrate group scores into usual grades, and stimulate positive interdependence.
4. Regular group reflection: Each group summarizes cooperation problems and optimizes cooperation strategies every two weeks.

4.4.3. Post-experiment Stage (Week 18)

Distribute the same scales to the two classes for post-test, collect post-experiment data, sort out classroom observation records, and conduct statistical analysis on all data.

4.5. Data Analysis Method
All usable questionnaire responses were coded and analyzed statistically with SPSS version 26.0. Paired-sample t-tests were run to identify within-group changes in motivation and classroom engagement from pretest to posttest for each cohort. Independent-samples t-tests were applied to make cross-group comparisons of post-intervention outcomes between the experimental and comparison groups. These statistical procedures helped determine whether the cooperative learning intervention produced statistically meaningful between-group differences.

5. Research Results and Analysis

5.1. Pre-test Data Analysis

Independent sample t-test results show that before the experimental intervention, the average motivation score of the experimental class is 2.86, and the control class is 2.84 ($p>0.05$); the average classroom participation score of the experimental class is 2.79, and the control class is 2.77 ($p>0.05$). There is no

significant difference in learning motivation and classroom participation level between the two classes before the experiment, which indicates that the initial learning state of the two classes is consistent, and the experimental research results are effective and credible.

Pre-test overall data reflects the current situation of non-English majors' college English learning: students' overall learning motivation is at the medium-low level, extrinsic motivation is dominant, intrinsic learning interest is insufficient; classroom participation is generally low, most students lack active classroom interaction awareness, and passive learning is the mainstream classroom state, which is consistent with the research hypothesis.

5.2. Effects of Cooperative Learning on Learning Motivation

Paired sample t-test results of pre-test and post-test motivation data of the experimental class show that after one semester of cooperative learning intervention, the students' average motivation score rises from 2.86 to 3.92, and the p value is less than 0.01, reaching an extremely significant difference level. The intrinsic motivation dimension score is significantly improved, learning anxiety is significantly reduced, while the extrinsic motivation score has no obvious change. It indicates that cooperative learning mainly improves students' internal driving force of learning, rather than external passive learning motivation. The post-test independent sample t-test shows that the post-experiment motivation score of the experimental class is significantly higher than that of the control class ($p < 0.01$). The motivation score of the control class has no significant change before and after the semester, which verifies that the significant improvement of the experimental class's learning motivation comes from the intervention effect of cooperative learning, rather than the natural growth of learning experience.

5.3. Effects of Cooperative Learning on Classroom Participation

Classroom participation data analysis results show that after the experiment, the average classroom participation score of the experimental class rises from 2.79 to 3.87 ($p < 0.01$), with extremely significant improvement. In terms of dimensional performance, behavioral participation (active speaking, task participation), cognitive participation (active thinking, exploratory learning) and emotional participation (classroom investment, learning interest) are all significantly improved. The control class's classroom participation level has no significant difference before and after the experiment. Combined with classroom observation records, in the cooperative learning classroom of the experimental class, the number of active speakers per class increases significantly, silent students gradually participate in group discussion activities, students' task completion initiative is stronger, and the classroom learning atmosphere is active

and interactive. In contrast, the control class still maintains the traditional passive listening state, with single classroom interaction form and low student participation enthusiasm.

6. Discussion

The research results confirm that cooperative learning can significantly improve non-English majors' college English learning motivation, especially intrinsic motivation, which is consistent with the research conclusions of Namaziandost et al. (2019) and domestic Liu & Lan (2016). Traditional college English teaching ignores students' individual psychological needs, long-term teacher indoctrination makes students lack learning autonomy and sense of achievement, resulting in low intrinsic motivation. Cooperative learning reconstructs the classroom learning relationship, changes the one-way teacher-student teaching mode into multi-directional peer interactive learning mode.

This study has important practical implications for current college English student-centered teaching reform. First, college English teachers should abandon the single indoctrination teaching mode, take cooperative learning as a conventional classroom teaching strategy, build interactive collaborative classrooms, and activate students' learning initiative. Second, teachers should pay attention to students' emotional and psychological needs in teaching, reduce classroom learning anxiety through peer cooperation, and stimulate sustained intrinsic learning motivation. Third, colleges and universities should optimize college English classroom evaluation mechanisms, integrate group cooperative performance and classroom participation into process evaluation, replace single final examination evaluation, and guide students to focus on in-class learning investment. This study conducts a one-semester quasi-experimental research on the application of cooperative learning in college English courses for non-English majors, and draws the following core conclusions: First, the current overall learning state of non-English majors in traditional college English classrooms is medium-low. Students have insufficient intrinsic English learning motivation, rely on extrinsic examination-oriented motivation, and generally have problems such as passive classroom learning, low active participation and prominent learning anxiety. Second, long-term standardized cooperative learning intervention can significantly improve non-English majors' English learning motivation, mainly enhance students' intrinsic learning motivation, reduce foreign language learning anxiety, and build stable internal learning driving force. Third, cooperative learning effectively promotes all-dimensional classroom participation of non-English majors, significantly improves students' behavioral participation, cognitive participation and emotional participation in English classrooms, solves the problem of universal passive learning in public college English classrooms, and optimizes classroom interactive learning atmosphere.

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