



Research on the Problems and Countermeasures of Applying Cooperative Group Learning Mode in English Classroom of Higher Vocational Schools—Taking the English-language Picture Book Teaching Class as an Example

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How to cite this paper: Shuhan Yang. (2025) Research on the Problems and Countermeasures of Applying Cooperative Group Learning Mode in English Classroom of Higher Vocational Schools—Taking the English-language Picture Book Teaching Class as an Example. *Journal of Humanities, Arts and Social Science*, 9(2), 258-263. DOI: 10.26855/jhass.2025.02.008

Received: January 17, 2025

Accepted: February 14, 2025

Published: March 11, 2025

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Abstract

Cooperative group learning mode is a kind of student-centered teaching and learning mode with group cooperation as the main learning or teaching method. With the continuous promotion of China's education reform, the cooperative group learning mode has been widely used in English classrooms of higher vocational schools. Taking the English-language picture book teaching class as an example, this paper firstly discussed what the cooperative group learning is and introduces the theoretical basis, essential elements and necessity of applying it in the English-language picture book teaching class, then points out the practical problems of applying the cooperative group learning mode in true teaching scenario. Subsequently, it lists and analyzes the potential factors that may have contributed to them and puts forward the targeted countermeasures concerning these problems, aiming to improve the efficiency and quality of the cooperative group learning mode in English classrooms, further boost the interest and motivation of students in learning English.

Keywords

Cooperative group learning; English-language picture book teaching; problems; countermeasures

1. Introduction

In cooperative group learning mode, the group serves as the essential framework for organization and group members help each other to achieve the learning objectives (Gao Yan, 2001). Richards, J. C. and Rodgers, T. S. (2008) consider cooperative group learning as a teaching mode that makes full use of activities in the classroom where learners are working in pairs and groups. As a teaching mode, cooperative group learning has gained widespread attention from teachers and is popular among students as a method of learning. With the ongoing reform of vocational education, it has become a trend to apply the cooperative group learning mode in English classes of higher vocational schools. However, in a true English classroom, cooperative group learning does not achieve the expected effect every time, at times, it serves merely as a procedure that comes with certain practical problems. Therefore, the author does in-depth analysis on these problems and reasons, and finally puts forward targeted measures based on her teaching experience.

2. Cooperative Group Learning

2.1 Theoretical basis

The mental state of “mutual reliance” arises during interactions, influencing how individuals engage with one another (Xun Tingting, 2012). Deutsch also believes that the group goal structure determines the way individuals interact. In cooperative learning, positive interdependence motivates students to collaborate with each other, share resources, and work towards a common goal. Scholar Wang Huiyuan (2015) believes that the cooperative group learning model can strengthen the mental state of ‘interdependence’ among people, and consequently, it may bolster the teamwork and collaboration within the group, thus helping students improve their academic performance. At the same time, interdependent and collaborative relationships can promote students' cognitive, behavioral and affective development, so that students can acquire knowledge and improve their abilities in a highly focused psychological state. Besides psychology, the cooperative group learning model is also related to the developmental theory proposed by Vygotsky, who believed that the key to cognitive development lies in social interaction, for which cooperative learning provides a platform.

2.2 Essential elements of effective cooperative group learning

There are some key elements of effective cooperative group learning. In a study on the influencing factors of cooperative group learning, Olsen and Kagan (1992) proposed five key elements, namely, positive interdependence, group construction, individual responsibility, social skills, and activity organization and scheduling. One scholar argued that for any form of collaborative learning, there are five essential elements, namely, positive interdependence, individual responsibility, positive face-to-face interaction, social skills and group processing. Both scholars put a common emphasis on positive interdependence, individual responsibility, and social skills. Based on prior investigations, Stahl (1994) posits that collaborative learning consists of the following, such as: (1) clear, specific objectives for student learning outcomes; (2) students' recognition of the objectives; (3) a complete set of instructions or directions for the task; (4) groupings of 3-5 people in a heterogeneous group; (5) equal opportunity for success and so on. Based on the researches above, the author concludes that the key elements for successful cooperative group learning can be briefly summed up as the following: (1) rational organization of a group; (2) clear goals and tasks; (3) effective communication and collaboration; (4) teachers' guidance and support; (5) scientific evaluation and feedback. Understanding the key elements is essential for educators to implement effective collaborative learning in groups, and this study is grounded in the five key aspects outlined above.

3. The Necessity of Applying Cooperative Group Learning Mode in English-language Picture Book Teaching Class

In this study, the author adopted the cooperative group learning mode in the English-language picture book teaching, which is mainly due to the following:

3.1 Advancement of language proficiency

- (1) Increase opportunities for English practice. English-language picture books have a lot of vivid expressions. In cooperative group learning, students can have dialogues and discussions about these picture books, which is conducive to the enhancement of oral English as they have more opportunities to express themselves in English.
- (2) Promote language understanding and absorption. Students exchange their understanding of vocabularies and sentences in the picture books in groups, and the collision of different viewpoints can deepen their understanding and memory of English expressions and enhance language learning.

3.2 Cultivating comprehensive literacy

- (1) Enhance cooperation and communication skills. Group work requires students to cooperate with each other, exchange ideas, and work together to complete tasks such as role-playing in picture books, adapting stories, and creating nursery rhymes, etc. During the process, students learn to listen to others and express themselves, and their cooperation and communication skills are enhanced.
- (2) Stimulate creativity and thinking ability. When exploring the plot and roles of picture books in groups, students

can think from different perspectives, inspire each other, stimulate creativity, and cultivate critical thinking and divergent thinking. By integrating cooperative group learning into English-language picture book teaching, students no longer learn in isolation.

4. Problems and Reason Analyses

4.1 Students' low willingness to co-operate

Students often show hesitation, low willingness or even resistance to group work or group tasks. For example, when the author considered whether the final examination of the English-language Picture Book Teaching Course should be a one-to-one examination or group examination, she found that almost 85% of the students were willing to take a one-to-one examination through voting, while only 15% of the students expressed their willingness to work in groups.

Reason analyses: weak class cohesion, dormitory conflicts, interpersonal tensions, and individual personality will make students less willing to cooperate; individuals have a stronger sense of competition than cooperation.

4.2 Unreasonable division of tasks in groups

In group work, it often appears that some members are responsible for tasks with heavy workload and higher difficulty, while some members only choose easier tasks. For example, when finishing the task of making an English-language picture book handbill, some students were responsible for searching for materials, drawing, writing, etc., while others were hardly involved.

Reason analyses: Educators might overlook the skills and talents of students when organizing them into groups, resulting in unclear responsibilities and unclear tasks. At the same time, some students lack awareness of taking the initiative to undertake tasks, which may lead to an imbalance in the division of tasks.

4.3 Uneven participation of students

During group discussions, some students actively speak and dominate the discussion, while others seldom participate and are passive listeners.

Reason analyses: Different students' personalities may affect their participation degree; extroverted students are more willing to express themselves, while introverted students are less talkative. In addition, English proficiency is another factor. Meanwhile, teachers may not pay attention to the differences of students and have not taken effective measures to encourage students to participate, nor have they provided the groups with the necessary learning resources. Furthermore, the ultimate reason for the disparity in student involvement is the group's excessive size.

4.4 Inefficient co-operation

When working in groups, it is easy for discussions to deviate from the topic. Working time is not well controlled, which leads to failure to finish the task on time. For example, in the group activity of story adaptation based on English-language picture books, students may discuss too much about the illustrations, which have nothing to do with the adaptation of the story, and in the end, they do not have enough time to complete the adaptation task.

Reason analyses: On the one hand, the group may lack effective organization and management, not setting reasonable rules and time schedules for discussion, leading to unstructured discussions. On the other hand, teachers may lack monitoring of the process of group learning, failing to pay close attention to the progress of cooperation, and failing to identify problems and give guidance in time.

4.5 Lack of in-depth interaction

Interaction within the group often stays on the surface and lacks in-depth exploration of the contents of English-language picture books.

Reason analyses: Students may lack the ability to think critically and deeply, and do not know how to analyze the contents from different angles. When designing questions for cooperative group learning, teachers' questions are not open and inspiring enough to stimulate students to think deeply, and they have not carefully designed cooperative group learning tasks either.

4.6 Inadequate evaluation mechanism

The evaluation system may focus too much on the results, only caring about the results while ignoring the performance of the group, enabling students to focus only on the final results and competition but not on cooperation itself.

Reason analyses: Teachers may not establish a comprehensive, scientific, and diversified evaluation system, and not clearly detail the indicators and methods of process evaluation. At the same time, they may have been influenced by the traditional evaluation system, placing too much emphasis on the quantitative evaluation, but neglecting the comprehensive evaluation of students' ability to cooperate, participation, and the process evaluation.

5. Countermeasures

5.1 Cultivating cooperative awareness and skills

Teachers need to cultivate students' sense of co-operation by explaining what co-operative learning is, the advantages of co-operative learning, and how to cooperate. First, they should introduce the concept of co-operation and guide students to make a plan to read picture books according to the requirements of this course and their own interests. Second, students should understand the methods and paths of cooperative learning. Third, cooperative learning activities may be arranged outside the classroom because class time is limited, mainly used for teacher presentations.

5.2 Carefully designing cooperative learning tasks

To facilitate co-operative learning, it is important to develop cooperative learning assignments that are captivating, relevant, and of moderate difficulty. When designing cooperative learning tasks, there should be clear and reasonable learning objectives, clear individual responsibilities (to be accomplished through reasonable division of tasks and allocation of roles) and necessary information support (teachers provide required information, so that students can get the specific information they need to learn). There should not be too many co-operative tasks at a time. Teachers need to set the frequency of co-operation appropriately according to the content and form of co-operative learning because too much or too little group work will affect the effectiveness of learning and students' motivation. According to the principles above, when designing cooperative learning tasks, teachers should give full consideration to factors such as students' characteristics and abilities as well as the content of picture books, as illustrated in the following examples.

- (1) Plot summary task: Based on the difficulty of the picture book, students can summarize the main plot in English in groups. For example, when learning the simple picture book such as "Brown Bear, Brown Bear, What Do You See?", the group can say the colors and names of animals in a few sentences; when learning the complex one, students can summarize the story in phases;
- (2) Tiered task: According to students' English level, cooperative group learning tasks can be divided into three levels: basic, enhancement, and expansion. Taking "The Little Prince" as an example, the basic task is to find out and read aloud the key words and sentences; the enhancement task is to describe a character in their own words; the expansion task is to discuss and express their views on the philosophies of the story;
- (3) Interest-driven task. Teachers should consider students' interests when designing tasks. For example, for groups who like to draw, they can create a picture based on the content of the picture book "Goodnight Moon" with an English caption; for groups who like to act, they can adapt the picture book into a short play for performance;
- (4) Project-based task. Let students complete projects. For example, after learning "The Giving Tree", the group can design a project about "thanksgiving", including making posters and composing letters of gratitude.

5.3 Rational grouping with clear tasks

Heterogeneous grouping should be combined with homogeneous grouping. Initially, students can be grouped heterogeneously according to their English proficiency, personality, to promote mutual learning. When performing specific tasks such as picture book performances, homogeneous grouping can be done according to students' abilities, so that students can take advantage of their strengths in the areas where they are good at. At the same time, this method is used to assign different roles according to students' abilities and characteristics.

5.4 Adequate time for cooperative group learning

To facilitate cooperative group learning, it is also necessary to give full consideration to the factors and relationships

between individual learning time and cooperative learning time. In fact, there should be sufficient self-inquiry activities before co-operation, so that students can feel confident to speak; co-operation and exchange time should also be sufficient, otherwise full participation cannot be guaranteed. Since this course has only two classes a week, so cooperative group learning is usually done outside the classroom, which requires the supervisory and each group needs to take the initiative in formulating a cooperative learning plan and completing it on time, stipulating that each member is a supervisor, requiring the groups to discuss and formulate penalties for failing to complete the task on time.

5.5 Timely guidance and process regulation

Educators have the ability to explain inquiries when giving out assignments, take the picture book “The Very Hungry Caterpillar” as an example, they can put forward specific questions. During the discussion, the teacher can patrol and guide the students at the right time. For example, when the students discuss whether the caterpillar is cute or not, they can be reminded to go back to the topic. Teachers should control the degree of guidance, and provide necessary guidance about reading strategies and discussion methods. If the group has difficulty in understanding a certain plot, the teacher can provide students with appropriate prompts. During the process of guidance, if students do not meet the requirements of the activity or the discussion has obviously deviated from the points, the teacher should give appropriate corrections, encourage students to actively participate in the discussion and personally take part in some group activities to solve the difficulties, especially notice the silent students and groups, give them encouragement and guidance.

5.6 Diversified evaluation

Effective cooperative group learning requires diversified evaluation methods, evaluation contents, and evaluation subjects.

- (1) Student self-evaluation. Teachers guide students to evaluate their performance in group work. For example, students can fill out a self-assessment form, rate themselves in different dimensions, and write down their strengths and directions for improvement;
- (2) Students’ mutual evaluation. Teachers organize students to evaluate each other in a group, the evaluation includes the ability of cooperation, the quality of task completion, etc. For example, after the group presentation, other groups can score and give feedback on creativity and expression.
- (3) Teacher evaluation. Teachers make a comprehensive evaluation by integrating observations and students’ learning outcomes, focusing on the overall performance of the group, members’ contributions, such as scoring and commenting according to the intensity of the dialogue among the members. and the fluency of the presentation.
- (4) Knowledge and Skills. Teachers examine students’ mastery of vocabulary, grammar, sentence patterns, and other knowledge of the picture book, as well as the use of skills such as listening, reading, and writing through group dialogue performances to see whether students can accurately use the language;
- (5) Process and Method. Teachers evaluate whether the division of tasks in the group is reasonable, whether members communicate smoothly. For example, teachers can observe whether any member dominates or is silent during group discussions, and whether the method of cooperation is efficient;
- (6) Affective Attitude and Values. To focus on whether students are active and respectful in co-operation, and whether their interest and attitude towards English-language picture book learning is enhanced, as well as to see whether students are willing to share their opinions.
- (7) Classroom observation. Teachers observe the whole process of group cooperation in the classroom, record students' performance, such as who actively participates in the discussion, who encounters difficulties, and summarize the evaluation after class.

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