

The Application of Cooperative Learning in Novel Teaching

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Abstract

Cooperative Learning (CL) has been widely applied in language learning for decades. However, in Taiwan, students are generally accustomed to working or studying alone and rarely have opportunities to experience Cooperative Learning prior to their higher education. Consequently, it will be more challenging for teachers to design and implement Cooperative Learning class activities to encourage and stimulate students' participation and presentation. This study aimed to investigate the case of integrating Cooperative Learning into novel teaching at a technology university in Southern Taiwan. Through class observation, semi-structured interviews and feedback elicited from questionnaires given to the students, we analyzed factors such as oral and thinking skills, social and academic benefits, and preference of activities in applying Cooperative Learning as well as their differences among the factors of gender, experience in Cooperative Learning and preference for grouping. The findings indicate that students responded positively to Cooperative Learning in the novel class, particularly in social benefits. In addition, suggestions for improvement in Cooperative Learning are also recommended for the language teachers.

Key words: Cooperative Learning, Heterogeneous grouping.

I. Introduction

Compare to western learners, Taiwanese students are traditionally shy or passive in expressing their opinions. In addition, being in a very exam-oriented teaching and learning environment like Taiwan, most students are accustomed to working or studying alone and they rarely have opportunities to cooperate with their peers in doing projects prior to their higher education. In view of the teaching style and learning activities in most of the English classes at the secondary and vocational schools, Hong (1996) concluded that a typical English class is teacher-centered instruction with three main learning activities: “reading context, analyzing grammatical structure, and learning vocabulary.” In other words, teachers tend to lay too much emphasis on the cognitive or intellectual aspect of teaching instead of focusing on the real function of language -- communication. Over time, students become passive learners and they do not know how to share their feelings or negotiate with others. Thus, the objective of interactive communication in language education has long been neglected.

Cooperative Learning (CL) is defined as “group learning activities organized so that learning is dependent on the social structured exchange of information between learners in groups and in which each learner is held accountable for his or her own learning and is motivated to increase the learning of others” (Oxford, 1997, p.443) When engaged in cooperative learning, students work together to accomplish the group goals that are beneficial to themselves as well as other members of the group (Johnson, Johnson & Holubec, 1994). In the past decades, CL has been widely applied in the classroom and many researches have illustrated its benefits such as promoting a positive attitude with the learning experience, increasing critical thinking skills, developing social interaction skills, and engendering effective learning (Johnson & Johnson, 1990; Felder, 1997; Panitz & Panitz, 1998; Tan, Gallo, Jacob & Lee, 1999).

Applying CL is more than just putting students into groups and giving them something or some tasks to do. Chan (2000) found that CL is not a popular instructional practice in Hong Kong primary schools, and one of the major reasons is that teachers are not adequately prepared for using CL. Actually, Cooperative Learning contains some principles and techniques that teachers need to be familiar with and if these techniques are mastered, CL can be used to encourage mutual helpfulness and active participation of all group members (Jacob & Hall, 1994). Consequently, it will be more challenging for teachers to design and implement CL class activities to encourage and stimulate students’ participation and presentation in college or university education.

Learning English novel or literature has been considered as one of the essential parts for ESL (English as Second Language) learners. Like any typical traditional English class in Taiwan, the mode for teaching novels has been individualistic, teacher-centered learning; but in recent years, teachers are exploring ways to adopt Cooperative Learning into novel teaching. Although the schools have adopted Cooperative Learning for more than 10 years, most studies on CL focused on science subjects with few on Language acquisitions or novel teaching (Qiu, 2002). This study aims to investigate the effects of integrating CL into an ESL novel teaching class at a technology university in Southern Taiwan.

The research questions include:

1. How well do the students think of the effectiveness of Cooperative Learning in terms of orals skills, thinking skills, academic benefits, preference of activities, and overall evaluation?
2. How do students perceive the benefits of Cooperative Learning in terms of their gender, their experience in Cooperative Learning and their preferences for grouping?
3. What is the student’s feedback about Cooperative Learning?

II. Literature Review

2.1 Cooperative learning

Cooperative Learning is defined as a set of learning processes which help learners interact with each other in order to accomplish a specific goal or develop an end product which is usually content specific (Panitz, 1997). Instructors who use this method believe that learning is essentially a social process, in which the role of the instructors is not simply to impart their own knowledge to their students, but to act as facilitators in the learning process, so that the acquisition of knowledge by the students comes mostly through discussion and negotiation among themselves (Romney, 1996).

According to researchers (Johnson, Johnson, & Smith, 1991; Kagan, 1992; Johnson, Johnson, & Holubec, 1993), the key elements required to achieve a successful CL program are: positive interdependence, individual accountability, promote interaction, cooperative skills, and heterogeneous grouping. For heterogeneous grouping, students are grouped with members with diverse properties in terms of gender, ethnic, and social origin, work experiences and proficiency or expertise in the subject. Researches indicated that heterogeneous grouping is regarded as an effective approach in CL since it facilitates students to be exposed to different viewpoints from different backgrounds and promote their positive interdependence (Romney, 1996; Chan, 2000).

In contrast with the competitive ethos of traditional classroom, CL creates a more relaxed atmosphere which increases students' interactions. Some other advantages of CL in enhancing learners' learning achievement, such as developing oral communication skills, enhancing self-esteem, reducing test anxiety, and creating a strong social support system etc. have also listed by researchers (Johnson & Johnson, 1989; Kagan, 1992; Slavin, 1995; Sachs, Candlin, Rose & Simon, 2003; Yager, Johnson & Johnson 1985). Through implementing Cooperative Learning, the following significant results can be achieved:

Positive learning attitude. When Students help each other, they will build a supportive community which will surely raise the learning attitude and performance level of each member (Kagan, 1986). Felder (1997) also stated that CL increases learners' persistence and likelihood of successful completion of assignment. When individuals face some obstacles and are likely to give up, they are likely to get help from the group and keep going (Johnson & Johnson, 1990).

Interaction skills. The normal classroom interaction is a sequential interaction, in which one person at a time speaks, usually by the teacher. In contrast, in CL, there will be more people speaking—one student per group can speak and simultaneous interaction will occur when many students interact among themselves. (Kagan, 1994). Furthermore, CL promotes societal responses to problems and fosters a supportive environment to manage conflict resolution (Felder, 1997).

Thinking skills. CL promotes the learners' critical thinking skills. Their ability to retain information and their interest in the subject matter also improve (Kulick & Kulick, 1979). Also, Group activities will increase learners' chances to be exposed to various ideas that might be more cognitively complex for their higher level cognitive development (Sharan, Kussell, Hertz-Lazarowitz, Bejarano, Shulamit & Sharan, 1984).

Enhance learning achievement. Basically, CL enhances student's oral communication skills by clarifying and explaining his/her idea through group discussions (Johnson, Johnson, Roy & Zaidman 1985). Also, stronger students can benefit from the group activities as well as the weaker students. Researches showed that when students of higher ability work with students of lower ability, the former benefit by explaining or demonstrating and the latter benefit by seeing an approach to problem solving modeled by a peer (Johnson & Johnson, 1985; Hooper & Hannafin, 1988). Also, Entwistle & Tait (1994) believed that high level of interaction and interdependence among group members leads to "deep" rather than "surface" learning.

In order to attain the above achievements, diverse methods for Cooperative Learning have been developed, and they can be divided into four types: Student Team Learning (STL), Jigsaw, Learning Together (LT), and Group Investigation (GI). (Lin, 2002; Chou, 1994 ; Huang & Lin, 1996). STL can be

further divided into STAD (Student Team-Achievement Divisions), TGT (Teams-Games-Tournaments), TAI (Team Accelerated Instruction) and CIRC (Cooperative Integrated Reading and Composition).

Student Teams-Achievement Divisions (STAD) is originally developed by Slavin.– The main idea behind STAD is to motivate the students to encourage and help each other to master skills or learning materials presented by the teachers (Slavin, 1995). Teams-Games-Tournaments (TGT), originally developed by David DeVries and Keith Edwards, adopts a similar idea and follows most procedure as in STAD except that it holds weekly tournaments while STAD carries out weekly individual tests (Slavin, 1995). The two methods focus on group goals, individual accountability and positive interdependence among students (Johnson & Johnson, 1999). They are two of the most applicable forms of cooperative learning, and have been applied in a wide range of school levels, subjects and classroom settings (Slavin, 1991). Moreover, TGT, which is virtually identical to STAD but substitutes quizzes for games, could be mixed with STAD to stimulate learners' motivation and enthusiasm in learning (Slavin, 1995). In applying CL in novel teaching, some methods were adapted from STAD and TGT in this study, and some modifications were made to meet the specific need of the novel class.

2.2 Cooperative learning and novel teaching

For decades, learning novel or literature has been considered as one of the essential parts for learners of the English language (Lewandowski, Green, Hart, and Schreck 1999). Researchers recognized the value of novels in learning, using novels to spark class discussion (Bunch-Lyons 2000), teach a particular principle such as ethics (Satov, 2001), or bridge the gap from abstract theories to real life events (Bumpus, 2000). Even in sociology classes, novel has its value in enhancing learning. Lieberman, Knox, and Zusman (2004) reported a case in which a novel, the *Dancer's Gift: An Introductory Sociology Novel* was used as a supplement to the main text in a sociology class. More than three-fourths of the respondents in the course reported that the novel was both entertaining and instructive.

Teaching novels automatically lends itself to an environment most suitable for Cooperative Learning. With Cooperative Learning, ideas deducted from the novels are communicated, values are shared and view points are enlarged. In fact, researchers found that Cooperative Learning is effective in promoting values such as intrinsic motivation and task achievement (Long & Porter 1985; McManus & Gettinger 1996; Kohonen, Jaatinen, Kaikkonen & Lehtovaara 2001). In traditional teacher-centered classrooms, teachers dominate most of the classroom speeches and restrict both teachers' and students' communication range. In fact, research suggests that the greatest language development relies on a rich and cooperative environment with an informed teacher (Enright & McCloskey 1988). The CL classroom can be such an environment because it can provide the foundation for a communicative classroom organized to foster collaboration, purpose, student interest, holism, support and variety through building on previous experience (Enright & McClosky, 1988).

Furthermore, in order to achieve success in CL, instructors have sought ways to develop proper classroom activities to reflect the communicative approaches of language teaching and learning. Richards (2006) reported a distinction between three different kinds of practice for communicative language teaching: mechanical, meaningful, and communicative. Mechanical practice refers to controlled practice activities which students can successfully carry out without necessarily understanding the language they are using. It is normally used in repetition drills for practicing grammar or other terms. Meaningful practice refers to activities in which, the practice of language usage is still controlled by the teachers, but students are required to use their own information to make choices on the language concepts and apply them in different situations. In terms of the communicative practice, it refers to activities that focus on language practice within a real communicative context. In such activities, real information is exchanged and the language used is not predictable. These activities involve open-ended discussions which require students to make use of their language resources in addition to the newly acquired language concepts. Thus, the communicative practice will be widely applied as the approach for integrating CL in the novel class. In addition, as Richards (2006) suggested, activities such as tasked completion, information-gathering, opinion-sharing, information-transfer, and reason-gap were also

widely carried out in applying the CL in novel teaching.

III. Methodology

3.1 Cooperative learning in a novel class

Context

As students need to be familiar with the CL environment so that they can reap benefits from this mode of learning, teachers have to spend some time in explaining the reasons for applying CL in the class and reinforce some communication protocols such as encouraging participation and, respecting and responding politely to different opinions etc., before proceeding to other class activities. As mentioned, the two Cooperative Learning methods--STAD and TGT were partly applied in this study. They include five steps as follows: (1) organizing heterogeneous groups, (2) presenting teaching materials, (3) group practice, (4) giving an individual quiz and (5) computing students' scores and group recognition (Slavin,1995).

In this study, the researcher followed the first four steps in STAD and TGT, and made some modification in the fifth step to meet the needs of the class. First of all, for organizing heterogeneous grouping, besides the diversity of gender, ethnic, social origin, it is important to group students with different language skills and proficiency. The inclusion of such element will avoid forming "Super groups" and "Far-behind" groups in the class. A quick test was administered to help the teacher to roughly gauge the language proficiency of each group. Also, where group size is concerned, it is observed that smaller groups offer members more chances to talk and it is easier to manage while larger groups offer more varieties in terms of skills, personalities and backgrounds for working on big tasks. Nevertheless, Studies have recommended that the group size should be less than six persons (Jacobs & Hall, 1994). As there were 35 students in our class, we divided the class into 7 groups with 5 persons in each group. For the second and third steps, we had the regular lecture delivery and group practice in class, the same as that in STAD and TGT. This is followed by the fourth step. In order to make sure that the students finished the assignment before the class or understood the content after the group discussion, a 10-minute quiz was given from time to time.

Finally, some major modifications were made while applying STAD and TGT in the fifth step. For STAD and TGT, students' quiz scores were compared to their past averages (base scores), and improvement points were awarded to each team member, depending on the extent of which each student met or exceeded his base scores. All team members' improvement points were further added to the previous team scores. In this novel class, the spirit of encouraging group cooperation of STAD and TGT was retained, but the procedures were simplified. For each presentation, the score of each group was announced and the extra credits were rewarded to the groups that made the largest progress from the previous score.

Activities of CL in the novel reading course

In this novel reading course, a variety of group activities were designed and held for achieving different objectives. The activities included:

Make-up stories. It is the perfect way for ice breaking and teambuilding. Before the students were acquainted to a novel, the instructor would introduce the main characters, setting, time and the beginning of the plot. Then each group was required to continue with its own version of the rest of the story. It is always full of surprise and laughter to follow the various developments of the plot. Definitely, it will stimulate learners' curiosity and motivation to know what the "real story" is about.

Tell the plots or retell the stories. Students were requested to tell the plots of assigned sections in the novel, or answer the guided questions from the handouts. The group members would take turns to report after discussion. We could clearly observe that through discussion, students were more confident and organized in their presentation.

What do you think? Besides concentrating on the content, students were encouraged to talk about

how they feel about the stories. The questions include: the characters you like/dislike most and why, the most touching sentences/plots and why, the things/advice you want to tell about the characters etc. Several groups would share the same questions as this provided a great opportunity for students to learn to listen and appreciate others' points of view, not only from members in their own group but also from other groups.

Group competition. In traditional classroom, competition fosters a win-lose situation where talented students obtain all the rewards and mediocre or low-achieving students gain little. However, in CL classroom, students help each other and thus, it builds a supportive community that raises the performance level of each member (Kagan, 1986).

In the novel class, students were not required to memorize all the vocabularies, yet some students encountered some reading barriers because of their poor vocabulary and comprehension ability. In order to relieve their anxiety in acquiring new vocabularies, we had a competition of interpreting the new vocabularies in English¹ and using the vocabularies to make sentences on the blackboard. For students at the average level, it would be tough for one single person to finish alone in a short period of time. However, through teamwork, students found it more interesting, motivating, and efficient in memorizing the words than through reciting the words by themselves.

Another activity most students were fascinated with was the listening comprehension contest. After group discussion, one of the members had to write down the short story and the plots they heard from the CD. It is interesting to find quite a few different details between groups on the blackboard, and everyone would be very eager to know what the real story is about. After hearing the story again, the teacher can assist in finding out the misunderstood parts and what led to the misunderstanding.

Personal experience sharing. It refers to having the students to talk about their personal experiences related to the story. Every member took turn to speak in front of the class. As students were asked to express in English, some low-achieving students could get assistance from their group members.

3.2 Subjects

The subjects of this study include all 35 students in the novel class, with 12 (34%) males and 23 (66%) females and they were sophomores and juniors from different departments in the university. Among the students, 32 (91%) have some CL experience in the university, while 3(9%) were not familiar with CL before taking this course. The students were informed about the group activities and the CL environment in the first class session. All students possessed intermediate level oral and reading abilities as English reading assignment, group discussion, and essays were required in this class.

3.3 Instrumentation

In this investigation, class observation, interview and questionnaire were utilized to scrutinize the effectiveness of CL. The class observations were carried out during the whole semester without students' awareness. The instructor walked around and took notes about individual's participation, reaction, contribution in group discussion or presentation.

For the interview sessions, semi-structured interviews were held weekly during office hours throughout the semester. The semi-structured interviews followed a fairly guided open framework allowing for focused, conversational, two-way communication. Unlike the questionnaire with structured questions with limited choices in the responses, the semi-structured interviewing started with more general questions or topics. The majority of questions were created during the interview, allowing both the teacher and student(s) the flexibility to probe for details or discuss issues.

The questionnaire was dispensed and filled by every student anonymously at the end of the semester. In the questionnaire, there were three parts for the students to fill in. The first part collected information about the background of the students, including their gender, if they have any experiences in

¹ Most students only look up the Chinese interpretation of the words from the dictionary

CL before, and their preferred way of grouping. The second part consisted of twenty-one statements to educate students' perception of CL. Students were requested to indicate how they felt about CL and its accomplishment through rating each statement on a scale ranging from one to five, with one being the least favored and five being their strongest recognition. The third part was an open question that asked students to write down any comment or suggestion about CL.

3.4 Data analysis

The background of the students was analyzed first with simple descriptive statistics. This was followed by the analysis of the effectiveness of Cooperative Learning with respect to various factors including oral skills, thinking skills, social benefits, academic benefits, preference of activities and overall evaluation. The mean and standard deviation of the ratings awarded by the students to each of the statements relating to the various factors were calculated. These mean and standard deviation values of the statements were then used to compute the grand mean and grand standard deviation of their respective category. Detailed analyses on the relationship between the factors and the students' background were also carried out, and they involved cross tabulations of the responses to the 21 statements in the questionnaire by gender, experience in cooperative learning and their preference for grouping. In addition, t-test and ANOVA were applied to investigate the significance difference in scores awarded to the twenty-one statements between genders, CL experiences and grouping preference. The significance level for the test, α , was set at 0.05. Finally, the responses to the open question were compiled and discussed.

IV. Results

4.1. Students' grouping preference

As mentioned, the heterogeneous grouping was arranged by the teacher in this study. However, in the survey, students were still given an option to indicate their preference on how the groups were formed.

The students were given four options: teacher-arranged grouping, students' free-grouping (in which, students can choose their group members), random grouping, and others. The result showed 4 persons (11%) chose teacher-arranged grouping, 24(69%) preferred students' free-grouping, 7(20%) circled random grouping, and none (0%) marked others.

4.2 Students' evaluation on the effectiveness of CL

The factors of oral skills, thinking skills, social benefits, and academic benefits, preference of activities, and overall evaluation from students' response to the 21 statements in the questionnaire were analyzed. The results were tabulated in Table 1 as follows:

Table 1: Students' Evaluation on the Effectiveness of CL

Factor	Mean(SD)	Grand Mean, (Grand SD)
Oral skills		
1. I am active in group discussion.	3.46 (0.66)	3.73 (0.64)
2. Cooperative learning enhances my oral communication skills.	4.00 (0.49)	

Thinking skills		
3. Cooperative learning encourages diversity of thinking skills.	4.11 (0.58)	4.01 (0.63)
4. Cooperative learning stimulates critical thinking.	3.91 (0.66)	
Social benefits		
5. Cooperative learning stimulates higher achievement by group competition.	3.97 (0.71)	
6. Cooperative learning improves my communication ability.	4.03 (0.51)	
7. Cooperative learning enhances social interaction skills.	4.11 (0.47)	4.05 (0.60)
8. Cooperative learning increases leadership skills.	3.94 (0.64)	
9. Cooperative learning develops accountability to team.	4.17 (0.62)	
Academic benefits		
10. Cooperative learning promotes learning motivation.	3.54 (0.78)	
11. Cooperative learning helps me understand the text better.	3.66 (0.64)	3.69 (0.70)
12. Cooperative learning reduces learning anxiety.	3.69 (0.63)	
13. Cooperative learning increases learning satisfaction.	3.69 (0.68)	
14. The cooperative makes learning more interesting.	3.89 (0.76)	
Preference of activities		
15. I enjoy the activity of “make-up stories”.	3.51 (0.82)	
16. I like the activity of “listening comprehension training”.	3.71 (0.79)	3.73 (0.77)
17. I think the group discussion helps me understand the content.	3.80 (0.63)	
18. I enjoy the activity of “vocabulary contest”.	3.89 (0.80)	
Overall evaluation		
19. Cooperative learning fosters higher academic achievement than learning by oneself.	3.83 (0.71)	
20. Cooperative learning helps me in understanding the content.	3.91 (0.74)	3.97 (0.72)
21. Cooperative learning helps me to know how to work with others in the future better.	4.19 (0.69)	

Table 1 presented the mean and standard deviation of the students' ratings (from a score of 1 to 5) on their attitude towards each of the statements. Each factor to be analyzed was represented by a group of statements: oral skills (S1-2), thinking skills (S3-4), social benefits (S5-9), academic benefits (S10-14), preference of activities (S15-18), and overall evaluation (S19-21).

From the result of statement 1 and 2, we found that although most students agreed that CL could enhance their oral communication skills ($M=4.00$), they were not so positive about their being active in group discussion ($M=3.46$). Statement 3 and 4 requested students to evaluate if CL improved their thinking skills. Expectedly, students showed their strong approval in this factor with a grand mean of $M=4.01$.

Statements 5 to 9 inquired if there were any social benefits they gained in CL from different aspects. Students were very positive in this category as shown in statement 6 ($M=4.03$), 7($M=4.11$), and 9 ($M=4.17$); however, they had slight reservation in two statements: CL stimulates higher achievement by group competition (S5, $M=3.97$) and CL increases leadership (S8, $M=3.94$). In sum, the students confirmed that CL has great contribution in social benefits--the highest one among all the factors.

In terms of academic benefits, we not only investigated if CL helped in understanding the text (S11, $M=3.66$) but also examined the effect of CL on their academic performance, such as promoting learning motivation (S10, $M=3.54$), reducing anxiety (S12, $M=3.69$), increasing satisfaction (S13, $M=3.69$) and making learning more interesting (S14, $M=3.89$).

From statement 15 to 18, we listed some representative activities held in this class, and the results indicated that the students' preferences among the four activities were similar as the means fell between a narrow range of 3.51 to 3.89.

From statement 19 to 21, we asked students to have an overall evaluation of CL. The grand mean ($M=3.97$) revealed students' positive attitude toward CL. Among the three statements, the students showed their highest support for statement 21, about CL's helping in working with others ($M=4.19$).

4.3 CL benefits by gender, experience in CL and group preference

1. CL benefits by gender

As mentioned, among the 35 subjects, 12(34%) were males and 23(66%) were females in the novel class. The responses to each of the 21 statements were tabulated in Table 2 categorized by gender. The first figure for each set of statistics represented the mean rating and the figure in parenthesis represented the standard deviation.

Table 2: CL Benefits by Gender

No.	Male (n=12)	Female (n=23)	No.	Male (n=12)	Female (n=23)
1	3.50(0.80)	3.43(0.59)	12	3.83(0.58)	3.61(0.66)
2*	4.33(0.49)	3.83(0.39)	13	3.83(0.83)	3.61(0.58)
3	4.33(0.49)	4.00(0.60)	14	4.17(0.72)	3.74(0.75)
4	4.17(0.58)	3.78(0.67)	15*	4.00(0.85)	3.26(0.69)
5	4.25(0.75)	3.83(0.65)	16	3.92(0.90)	3.61(0.72)
6	4.17(0.72)	3.96(0.37)	17	4.00(0.60)	3.70(0.63)
7*	4.42(0.51)	3.96(0.37)	18*	4.25(0.75)	3.70(0.76)
8	4.08(0.67)	3.87(0.63)	19	3.92(0.79)	3.78(0.67)
9	4.33(0.65)	4.09(0.60)	20	4.25(0.75)	3.74(0.69)
10	3.83(0.94)	3.39(0.66)	21	4.33(0.65)	4.10(0.72)
11	3.67(0.78)	3.65(0.57)			

* Independent T-Test, $p\text{-value} < 0.05$

From table 2, it revealed that male students generally showed more positively toward CL than female students. From the t-test, the p-values of statements 2, 7, 15, 18 were all less than the significance level of 0.05. This indicated that there were significant differences in the responses between males and females, in terms of whether CL enhances students' oral communication skills, social interaction skills and if they enjoy the activity of "make-up stories" and "vocabulary contest".

The mean scores for the males' attitude toward CL ranged between 3.50 and 4.42. The male students were particularly positive toward the idea that CL enhances social interaction (S7, $M=4.42$) but they did not perceive themselves as strongly in being active in group discussion (S1, $M=3.50$). Also, most male students agreed that CL not only facilitated their interaction with others but eventually enhanced their oral communication skills (S2, $M=4.33$), encouraged their diversity of thinking skills (S9, $M=4.33$), and helped them to know how to work with others in the future better (S21, $M=4.33$).

For female learners, the mean values for the attitude factor range from 3.26 to 4.10. Females gave the highest scores to statement 21, CL will help them to know how to work with others in the future better ($M=4.10$) but they showed less favor for statement 15, if they enjoyed the activities of "Make-up stories" ($M=3.26$). In fact, statement 15 yielded the biggest difference in the mean values (a difference of 0.74) between males ($M = 4.00$) and females ($M = 3.26$) among all the 21 statements.

2. CL benefits by experience in CL

There were 32 (91%) students joined the class with experience in CL and 3 (9%) students joined without experience. Table 3 tabulated the mean scores for each of the 21 statements by experience together with the standard deviation in parenthesis.

Table 3. CL Benefits by Experience in Collaborative Learning

No.	Yes (n=32)	No (n=3)	No.	Yes (n=32)	No (n=3)
1	3.41(0.61)	4.00(1.00)	12	3.66(0.60)	4.00(1.00)
2	3.97(0.47)	4.33(0.58)	13	3.63(0.66)	4.33(0.58)
3**	4.03(0.54)	5.00(0.00)	14	3.84(0.72)	4.33(1.15)
4**	3.81(0.59)	5.00(0.00)	15	3.47(0.80)	4.00(1.00)
5	3.91(0.69)	4.67(0.58)	16	3.66(0.79)	4.33(0.58)
6*	3.97(0.47)	4.67(0.58)	17	3.75(0.62)	4.33(0.58)
7*	4.06(0.44)	4.67(0.58)	18**	3.78(0.75)	5.00(0.00)
8*	3.88(0.61)	4.67(0.58)	19**	3.72(0.63)	5.00(0.00)
9*	4.09(0.59)	5.00(0.00)	20**	3.81(0.69)	5.00(0.00)
10	3.44(0.72)	4.67(0.58)	21**	4.10(0.67)	5.00(0.00)
11	3.59(0.56)	4.33(1.15)			

*Independent T-Test, p-value < 0.05

**Independent T-Test, p-value < 0.01

The t-test was conducted to test if there was any significant difference in students' perception of CL between those students with CL experiences and those without. From Table 3, the p-values of statements 3, 4, 6, 7, 8, 9, 18, 19, 20, 21 were all less than 0.05, indicating that there were significant differences in the responses between the two groups of students. This finding showed that the CL experience led to different opinions on the benefits of CL.

In general, all the means from "without CL experience learners" were higher than those from "with CL experience learners", especially for statements like stimulating critical thinking (S4, 3.81/5.00)², enjoying the activities of vocabulary contest (S18, 3.78/5.00), fostering higher academic achievement than learning by oneself (S19, 3.72/5.00), and understanding the content (S20, 3.81/5.00). It was worth noting that, for several statements--3, 4, 9, 18, 19, 20, 21, the mean scores awarded by this group of learners were as high as 5.00.

For the 32 experienced CL learners, the means for the following items were comparatively low: active in group discussion (S1, M=3.41), promoting learning motivation (S10, M=3.44), and enjoy the activities of "make-up stories" (S15, M=3.47).

3. CL benefits by grouping preference

Students' preference for grouping method can be categorized into: Teacher-arranged grouping (TAG), Students' free-grouping (SFG), and Random grouping (RP). The mean and standard deviation (in parenthesis) for the ratings on the 21 statements for each category are presented in Table 4.

² The first mean value is for learners "with CL experience" and the second is for learners without CL experience.

Table 4. CL Benefits by Grouping Preference

No	TAG N = 4(11%)	SFG N = 24(69%)	RG N = 7(20%)	No	TAG N = 4(11%)	SFG N = 24(69%)	RG N = 7(20%)
1	3.50(0.58)	3.38(0.65)	3.71(0.76)	12	3.75(0.50)	3.63(0.58)	3.86(0.90)
2	4.00(0.00)	3.92(0.50)	4.29(0.49)	13	4.00(0.82)	3.54(0.59)	4.00(0.82)
3	4.00(0.00)	4.04(0.62)	4.43(0.53)	14	4.25(0.50)	3.71(0.75)	4.29(0.76)
4	3.75(0.50)	3.83(0.70)	4.29(0.49)	15*	3.75(0.50)	3.29(0.75)	4.14(0.90)
5	3.75(0.50)	3.88(0.68)	4.43(0.79)	16	3.75(0.96)	3.58(0.78)	4.14(0.69)
6	4.00(0.00)	3.96(0.46)	4.29(0.76)	17*	3.75(0.50)	3.63(0.58)	4.43(0.53)
7	4.00(0.00)	4.04(0.46)	4.43(0.53)	18	4.00(0.82)	3.79(0.78)	4.14(0.90)
8	3.75(0.50)	3.83(0.64)	4.43(0.53)	19	4.25(0.50)	3.67(0.70)	4.14(0.69)
9	4.00(0.00)	4.13(0.61)	4.43(0.79)	20	3.75(0.50)	3.79(0.72)	4.43(0.79)
10	3.25(0.96)	3.54(0.66)	3.71(1.11)	21	4.50(0.58)	4.05(0.65)	4.50(0.84)
11	3.75(0.50)	3.58(0.58)	3.86(0.90)				

*ANOVA, p-value < 0.05

Table 4 showed that most students preferred students' free-grouping (SFG, 69%); random grouping (RG, 20%) was the second choice and teacher-assigned grouping (TAG, 11%) was their last choice.

There was generally not much difference in students' perception of CL among the three grouping preferences. From the ANOVA which tested the significant difference in the mean values among the students with different grouping preferences, only statements 15 and 17 showed a p-value that was less than 0.05, indicating that the students' opinions differ in whether they enjoyed "Make-up stories" and whether CL helped in understanding the content.

Looking at the responses of the students by different grouping preferences, students who chose Students' Free Grouping (SFG) awarded the lowest ratings among the three groups to statements like: if they were active in group discussion (S1, M=3.38) and enjoyed the activity of "Make-up stories" (S15, M=3.29). Also, the means were the lowest in almost all the statements relating to academic benefits (S10–S14). Interestingly, the students who preferred Random Grouping (RG) were very positive about CL's help in understanding the content (S17, M=4.43). Their score for this statement was the very much higher than that of the other two groups (M=3.75 for TAG and 3.63 for SFG). The Teachers-Arranged Grouping (TAG) was students' last choice. Yet, for statement 19, CL fosters higher academic than learning by oneself, the mean for students who chose TAG was the highest among the three (M=4.25 for TAG, higher than 3.67 for SFG, and 4.14 for RG).

4.4. Class observation and interview

Some results were revealed from class observation and interview in this study. From the class observation, we found that absence of the group members, shortage of time, and deviation of subject were the common factors influencing the group performance. On students' hesitation in being active in group discussion, some possible reasons derived from class observation and interviews with the students were: students were not well-prepared for the assignment, they did not want to be embarrassed by making mistakes in front of the groups and they preferred waiting for others for better ideas etc.

For grouping methods, some students suggested adopting different ways of grouping such as random grouping or changing group members from time to time, and they believed that would help enhance the social interaction. In terms of academic challenge, students pointed out that poor vocabulary and comprehension were the two major barriers in novel reading. Also, during the interviews, some

highly-achieved students complained that they contributed more than what they received in teamwork. *“I do most of the job and some team members do almost nothing. How come we can get the same reward?”* *“When discussing, someone just sat here and waited for the answers.”*

V. Discussion

The foregoing section presented the findings of how students perceive Cooperative Learning as an effective learning tool in various aspects. In this section, we explore the reasons that led to the results and attempt to rationalize the reactions of the students towards Cooperative Learning. With these introspections, we hope to find ways to improve the CL environment so that it will be more beneficial to the students.

5.1 Students' composition

We observed that there were more female students (n=23) than male students (n=12). It is quite common to find that females seem to be more interested in learning language than males. In Taiwan, the number of females is usually larger than male students in a language related department. Cross (1983) stated that the teaching of modern languages in Britain is largely in the hands of female teachers. This is also similar to the situation in Taiwan. In addition, as all students were either in their second or third year of studies, it is not surprising to see that most students have experiences in CL. However, there are still a small portion of students who have not experienced CL with group activities.

5.2 Evaluation of effectiveness of CL

While investigating if there is any improvement in oral skills, most students agreed that CL could enhance their oral communication skills. This finding corresponds with Shi's (2002) report that there is a tendency that as the learning process gets longer, the experimental group performs better communicatively as compared to the performance of the control group.

For thinking skills, besides shedding light on understanding the content with CL, students enjoyed discovering diverse ways of thinking during group discussions and class presentations from other groups, especially when they were “funny and creative”. This is the same conclusion as Kulick & Kulick (1979) and Sharan et al. (1984).

For the factor of social benefits, we can conclude that most students improved their communication ability, social interaction, accountability development through group activities. However, we noted that the students were not as positive concerning the benefits of enhancing leadership and achievement through competitive activities. This could be due to the fact that students are traditionally shy and passive that they usually do not take initiatives to lead. For weaker students, they may lack confidence to actively participate in the competitive activities.

In the area of academic benefits, we discussed about the effectiveness of CL in enhancing students' academic performance. While Qiu (2002) stated that CL helps the students to increase English academic achievement and promote learning autonomy etc., Zhu(2006) found that, under the learning-teaching strategy, although the experimental group achieved higher scores than the controlled group in learning attitude, there were no significant differences in achievement. In this study, we found the scores for those questions relating to Academic benefits comparatively low--the lowest one among all other factors. It seems that most students still believed that academic performance relied on individual's effort and the assistance from CL is quite limited.

Generally speaking, students consented to CL's integration in novel teaching in terms of social interaction, thinking skills, oral skills, overall evaluation and academic achievement as most researches suggested (Felder, 1997; Johnson, Johnson, Roy & Zaidman 1985; Kulick & Kulick, 1979). More

specifically, students' response to the social and thinking skills benefits from CL was the most affirmative, while the response to the academic benefits was the least favorable among all.

5.3 Gender, CL experience and grouping preference

The result strengthens the notion that CL enhances the social benefits for both male and female students. Chou (1994) pointed out that besides learning achievement; there are no significant differences in terms of gender, anxiety, and cooperation preference in CL classrooms. However, in this study, there were interesting points observed from the male and female students. The male students approved the idea that CL enhances social interaction, but they were not so active in group discussion. This is probably due to the varied personalities, lack of oral communication skill or not well-prepared for assignment. Yet, we also noticed that female students were more concerned about their performance in class, so they preferred the activities with competitions as they can benefit from advance preparations, instead of activities such as "make-up stories" which require one to react spontaneously. This explains the significant differences between males and females in the mean scores awarded to preference for "make-up stories" and "vocabulary contest".

For the survey on CL experience, the three students who did not have any experiences in CL showed their positive attitude toward CL, even on their first CL-experience in this class. Obviously, they enjoyed the new mode of learning that enriches their thinking skills and social interaction ability, and the variety of the activities. They gave their strong support in the overall evaluation. On the other hand, comparatively, the experienced CL learners lost interest in practicing CL. This phenomenon could be explained by the general belief that it is easier to make progress from zero to one (from no experience to experienced CL learners) than from good to be better (to expect better result for the experienced CL learners). To sum up, different learners have different expectation of their learning environment, and it seems that it will always be a tough challenge for instructors to keep devising interesting and effective class activities that meet the students' need in CL classrooms.

For CL benefits by grouping preference, we discovered that students who chose Random Grouping (RG) showed their highest support for CL among all. In general, the RG students tend to be more adventurous; they enjoy the challenge in learning new things, and indicated that they gained the advantages in CL. On the other hand, the majority of the students who chose Students' Free Grouping (SFG) are inclined to be conservative and they prefer to stay in a familiar environment by picking group members by themselves. We can conclude that the SFG students are comparatively passive learners and apt to follow the controllable routines in learning. The Teachers-Arranged Grouping (TAG) awarded a higher score for academic benefits. On the other hand, SFG students did not quite agree with the academic benefits in CL. As grouping was assigned by the instructor in this novel class, this method of grouping concurred with the students who chose TAG and hence they perceived favorably towards CL's contribution to academic benefits. On the other hand, those students who preferred SFG were not happy with the grouping method, might reflect their dissatisfaction in their ratings on the same factor. In sum we can infer that grouping assignments may affect their perception of how CL contributes in their academic performance.

5.4 Students' feedback

Generally speaking, students applauded the innovative way of learning from group cooperation. However, through the open questions in the survey, class observation and interview, the students revealed that there are constraints to this form of learning and suggestions were given for improvement in the implementation of CL. The students' opinions are compiled as follows.

Grouping

Heterogeneous grouping was applied in this study since it possessed many advantages in CL. However, students were tired of unchanging environment and looked forward to new stimulations in learning. The possibilities of using random grouping for different activities might be considered occasionally as an alternative to stimulate learners' motivation.

Assessment

Assessment is always the major issue of students' concern. The complaints of free-riders and the unfairness in the assessment is not a unique case. Qiu (2002) pointed out that the issue about student's complaint on the free-rider effect lies in the fact that the one-grade-for all policy only unfairly benefited the free-riders, in some cases, the non-effort of the free-riders may affect the group performance. Therefore, policies must be set to ensure equity in assessment. In this class, the evaluation came from students' individual performance as well as group's presentation. Initially, the instructor would know if everyone finished the assigned part of the novel through the short quizzes administered before the class. Also, the teacher would check around the groups during group discussions and identify the earnest, aggressive students or the quiet, absent-minded teammates in each group. The latter ones would be requested to provide reasons for their inactiveness and they would be given extra assignment to make up for their lack of contribution. Also, the students' participation would definitely be an essential part of their final evaluation.

For the presentation part, each person was expected to take turn to be the representative for reporting the group's findings, and their performance would also be counted as one of the personal quizzes as well as the team's grade. In terms of group assignment, the distribution of the tasks for every member would be listed. Besides the evaluation for the whole teamwork, some credits would be added to or deducted from specific individuals because of their above or below average performance.

We also found that for some students, it was alright to share their ideas with good friends but not so "fair" if they were to share them with not-so-familiar members. Indeed, besides academic advantages of CL, the values of helping, respecting and sharing with other people seem to be another vital lesson for students to learn.

Time management

Time controlling is also an important issue in implementing CL as there are usually more unpredictable and complicated situations happened in the CL classroom than the traditional one. Sometimes, it is liable to cause the syllabus to fall far behind schedule. It is certainly not advisable to enforce a rigid schedule since we encourage everyone to finish his or her speech as completely as possible. However, situations like deviation from the subject during discussion and presentation should be avoided and both the teacher and students must be aware of the time limits for discussion.

VI. Conclusion and Suggestions

It is gratifying to know that in general, students responded positively to Cooperative Learning in this novel class. Owing to the teachers-arranged heterogeneous grouping, students were given chances to work with other classmates they were not so familiar with. It was delighting to see how team members learned how to respect each others' opinions and reach the goal together step by step. The policy of extra credits also successfully encouraged teams failing in certain presentation to make brilliant progress in their following presentation.

However, we must take note that the factor for academic benefits received the lowest mean score among all other factors. One possible explanation to this situation could be attributed to the social issues in learning. We recognize that students tend to learn more at ease in an environment which they are familiar and comfortable with. To address this problem, besides having occasional change in grouping as suggested by the students, we can consider allowing the students the flexibility of choosing their group members on the condition that they meet certain criteria such as balancing the number of students from different gender, fields of studies and level of English proficiency. In this way, the heterogeneity in grouping is maintained but at the same time, it relieves students' learning anxiety as they chose their group members by themselves. Hopefully this will improve learning motivation and learning satisfaction.

We also observe that in the overall evaluation, the students did not strongly support the idea of "Cooperative Learning fosters higher academic achievement than learning by oneself". The lack of appreciation of interdependence learning could be due to poor time management during group

discussions and students' unwillingness to share with members other than their friends. It is utmost important for the teacher/facilitator to monitor the group discussions so that discussions are kept within context and each student is made to participate and share his/her ideas. Activities should also be carefully designed to ensure that there is ample time for individuals to grasp and reflect on the new concepts by themselves, as well as the eventual sharing during group discussions.

Likewise, to address the issue that students did not benefit from CL in areas like leadership building and competitive activities, cares should be taken in the design and the facilitation of group activities. Competitive activities should be set at a level so that there are chances for weaker students to contribute. During class discussion, instructors should help in the appointment of discussion leaders when the need arises.

It has been observed that female students, most of them who lack confidence, had indicated that they prefer activities that require early preparations while more males were in favor of the "make-up stories" activity. It would be interesting and encouraging for students from both genders, if there are activities that allow for both prepared scripts and impromptu speeches which do not require much preparation. Activity that involves students presenting a skit from parts of the novels is one possible option. Students who lack confidence in speaking up can prepare their scripts before hand and those who are more confident and do not like to be well-prepared, can come up with their impromptu lines.

To instill "freshness" in CL in order to keep the interest alive, especially for those students who had experience in group learning and needed new stimuli in their learning process, instructors will have to constantly review the acceptance and effectiveness of current activities and devise new activities. Perhaps the next possible activity could involve certain aspect from Problem-Based Learning (PBL), or Project-Based Learning (Alan & Stoller, 2005; James, 2006; Wang, 1999), in which students can learn through solving problems and explore any further information of their interest but related to the novel. However a successful implementation of such activity entails comprehensive planning in order to keep the activity relevant to the objective of the novel class.

On the issue of "fairness" in assessment, we recognize that it is unavoidable to have "free-riders" in any group projects. In addition to class observations and extra assignments given to inactive students, we can examine the possibility of incorporating peer-assessment into part of the grading system. Nevertheless, we also need to be careful in allotting weight to peer-assessment in the final grade as students may not be objective in their assessments.

"Learning is enhanced when it is more like a team effort than a solo race. Good learning, like good work, is cooperative and social, not competitive and isolated. Sharing one's ideas and responding to others' improves thinking and deepens understanding" (Gerdy, 1998). By collaborative and communicative learning, the CL approach will undoubtedly become one of the mainstreams in language learning in this century. Nevertheless, CL is not a panacea that solves every problem instantly. Teachers and researchers still need to evaluate and determine under what circumstances and processes that CL will be more effective. In the further study, we hope to extend the CL experiences into other aspects of language learning.

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Appendix

Questionnaire distributed to students for the survey.

Male _____ Female _____

Any group experiences of class experiences in university

Yes _____ No _____

Preference of grouping

1. _____ if they prefer teacher-arranged grouping
2. _____ students' free-grouping
3. _____ random grouping
4. _____ others

Questionnaire for Cooperative Learning

1. I am active in group discussion.
2. Cooperative learning enhances my oral communication skills.
3. Cooperative learning encourages diversity of thinking skills.
4. Cooperative learning stimulates critical thinking.
5. Cooperative learning stimulates higher achievement by group competition.
6. Cooperative learning improves my communication ability.
7. Cooperative learning enhances social interaction skills.
8. Cooperative learning increases leadership skills.
9. Cooperative learning develops accountability to team.
10. Cooperative learning promotes learning motivation.
11. Cooperative learning helps me understand the text better.
12. Cooperative learning reduces learning anxiety.
13. Cooperative learning increases learning satisfaction.
14. The cooperative makes learning more interesting.
15. I enjoy the activity of "make-up stories".
16. I like the activity of "listening comprehension training".
17. I think the group discussion helps me understand the content.
18. I enjoy the activity of "vocabulary contest".
19. Cooperative learning fosters higher academic achievement than learning by oneself.
20. Cooperative learning helps me in understanding the content.
21. Cooperative learning helps me to know how to work with others in the future better.

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實施合作式學習法於小說教學

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摘要

近年來，合作式學習法已被廣泛地使用在語言學習上。然而在台灣，在大專教育之前，學生已習慣於自我學習，而較少有機會體驗與同儕合作的學習經驗。這將使大專教師在針對合作式的學習法去設計活動而期待同學的參與及表現時，更具挑戰性。本研究將討論以合作式學習法運用於科技大學之小說課程中之成效。經由課堂觀察、面談及問卷調查，除了了解學生在施行此學習法中，所較認同的教學活動外，本研究也將分析合作式學習法在口語表達、思考模式、社交能力、學業認知上等因素所扮演之角色及其在性別、合作式學習法之經驗、分組方式的喜好之差異性。結果顯示同學對施行合作式學習法於小說課程中，持以肯定的態度，特別在社交能力的加強上。最後，也將就如何增進合作式學習法效果，提出建議，以供語言教師參考。

關鍵字：合作式學習法，異質分組。

