

A Study on the Application of Group Cooperative Learning in English Process Writing Teaching in Junior High School

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Abstract

Based on the study on cooperative learning in the writing class and the analysis of the results of the mid-term and final writing exams of the second-year junior students in the Dazhou Middle School, this thesis focuses on the effectiveness of group work in the development of junior middle school students' ability of process writing. The research is conducted with the goal to find out more effective ways for teachers to enhance junior high school students' process writing ability - the ability of analyzing and handling learning materials, cooperating with group members, creating new ideas and summarizing the ideas of the group.

Key words: cooperative learning; group work; process writing

1. Introduction

These days there has been a more and more fierce appeal for students to cultivate their group cooperation spirit and cooperative learning ability. It is confirmed that group cooperation spirit especially that of a small group, and cooperative learning are strongly needed in today's society.

The writers of Oxford English, McArthur and Etherton (1996), claim that many communicative activities such as "speaking", "talking", and "writing" can be done by group work in class time. This suggestion used by teachers and students' group work activities has been widely used in English writing class, especially in process writing class. This paper tries to report the advantages and the drawbacks of the current application of group work in middle school English process writing class. It gives a real and direct view of the present junior school students' learning process and the development of English.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Previous Research on Group Work and Constructivism

The application of students group work in junior high school English class can make a great difference, compared with the traditional lockstep approach. Olsen and Kagan put that group work is "a way of structuring a classroom and learners to actively promote not only communication, but a sense of

community, responsibility and sharing” (1992, p. 8). In group work learning activities, every individual in each group is expected to be responsible for his own learning for English and is motivated and encouraged to enhance the learning of other members.

Constructivism is a theory of instruction and learning that “focuses on the real world complexity and ill-structuredness of many knowledge domains” (Spiro et al. 1992). And Bednar (1992) says that “Constructivism is an active process in which meaning is developed on the basis of experience”. Richards (2005) advocates that “Constructivism is as social and educational philosophy based on the beliefs that knowledge is actively constructed by learners and not passively received.” In his opinion, cognition is not a product of something, but a process which manage the learner’s experience. Constructivism makes the teacher in the modern ages a facilitator, a guide and a reflective practitioner for the students in the English classroom (Richards, 2005). It is clarified that knowledge is not only learned through the instruction from the teacher, it is also and more acquired by the active construction by the learner in an authentic context under the help of other people.

2.2 Researches on the Role of Group Work in Cooperative Learning

It has been proved that learning a language is not just an action of acquiring the linguistic and grammar rules of the language, it is also a process of being familiar to the language contexts and the usage of the language mentally and psychologically. Previous studies have made it clear that motivation influence the rate and final results of language learning. Constructivism is one of the basic language learning theories originated in the twentieth century. And learning a language means the differences happens to a learner’s cognitive system. Piaget’s theory of cognitive development illustrates the language learning process. Zone of proximal development theory (ZPD) explains the guiding function of a teacher in language learning. It also tells the teachers and instructors that the knowledge which the students are learning can be organized slightly harder than their present language competence to lead them to a new stage of understanding. As a result, while assigning tasks to students during group work learning, the tasks can be designed slightly beyond the students’ current language level to cultivate their innovative ability and potential and to develop their habit of deeper thinking.

3. Research Design

3.1 Research goals

The researches and studies carried out by previous scholars reveal that group work can be applied to the English writing teaching in junior middle schools to develop the process writing skills of students. Using group work in writing teaching can change or influence students’ attitudes to English writing and can not only improve their frequency of writing but also enhance their ways of thinking and their responses to the teachers and other students (Atkinson, 2003).

The purpose of doing the research is to find out the merits of group work in English writing teaching and to improve students’ process ability via group learning in junior middle school classrooms. The experiment is to be set up to help the junior high students find the most appropriate ways for themselves with a common goal to achieve the success in process writing. Also, the study will use group work to

cultivate the cooperative spirits of junior high school students to help them get easier access to the future society.

3.2 Research subjects

The candidates of this experiment are students in grade eight from Dazhou Middle School. The chosen classes are Class 19 and Class 20. They are parallel ones. Class 20 is set up as the experimental class while Class 19 is the control class. The 50 students in Class 20 and the 53 students in Class 19 are similar on gender, learning achievement and age. As the student teacher of the two classes, the author has the chance and condition to put the experiment into practice. Class 20, the experimental class, is instructed in group work while Class 19 is taught in traditional method.

3.3 Research instruments

3.3.1 Pretest and Post-test

The experiment started with the mid-term exam which can be seen as the pretest of this experiment. Students in both Class 19 and Class 20 take the exam under the supervision of the teachers at the same time. The results and works of the students in the writing part will be used as the results of the pretest. After the experiment, the final exam will be regarded as the post-test, and the scores and the works will be used to finish the analyses of this study.

3.3.2 Questionnaire

The questionnaire used in the experiment is designed by Zhang Ruifang in her thesis *The Study on Application of Cooperative Learning Strategy in English Class Teaching of Junior High Schools in 2014*. The questionnaire is designed to figure out whether the students like to learn English in groups. It is finished by the students in the two classes.

3.3.3 Interviews

The interviews are done with the teacher and some specially selected students for the purpose to get their opinion about group work learning. The interviews are more likely to be seen as small talks held at the teacher's office or in the classroom. There are no fixed questions about the tiny interviews.

3.3.4 Classroom Observation Table

During the experiment, the author was the supervisor and the observer of the experimental class. The observation table used in this research was designed by Alghamdi (2014) to check if the students were involved actively or cultivated in the activity.

3.4 The Preparation of Group Work

The application of group work learning in Grade Eight students in Dazhou Middle School became the throughout thought of the experiment. Class 20 was set as the experimental class and was instructed in group work during the course. Class 19 was the control class which was taught in the traditional way. The

50 students of Class 20 (the experimental class) were divided into 10 groups with each had almost the average numbers of advanced, average and under achieved students in it. Each group had 5 members. The group leader was not stable and would be acted by each member in turns. The rule was set as that each member in the group should have the equal chance to analyze, discuss and participate.

3.5 Research Procedures

The experiment lasted from the beginning of October to the end of December for eight weeks. The group work carried out in each experimental period was conducted in the following five steps:

(1) Tasks assignment. Before the beginning of the activity, the teacher gave three topics associated with the knowledge they had just learned in the class. Then the student groups chose a favorite topic freely.

(2) Brainstorming stage. After the choosing of the topic, members in each group were allowed to talk brainstorm about the topic. They were given the right to think up any idea about the topic in their heads. Then they could talk about it with their group members. The discussion time was given for them to sum up the ideas of the whole group members.

(3) Presentation. The presentation stage was divided into two branch-steps. The first step was the presentation of the common group idea. After the presentations of all the groups, time was allowed for the presentation of some individual students who had different views on the topics.

(4) Students’ comments. After the presentation, each group was required to give comments about the presentation of other groups or individuals. They could choose any group or individual presenting member to give comments.

(5) Comments and feedback from the teacher. The students’ comments and summaries were followed by that of the teacher. The teacher gave comments on each group and individual speaker, and point out the merits and drawbacks of their ideas.

4. Research Results and Analyses

After the 8-week experiment, the results came out and the observation was finished. This chapter presents the results of all the experiment materials and steps, and makes analyses to them.

4.1 Results and Analyses of the Pretest and Post-test

With a goal to find out whether the students in experimental class had the same level of achievement in writing part as the control class did, the mid-term test was taken by all the students of Dazhou Middle School. The scores of Class 19 and Class 20 were chosen to make the comparison.

Table 2. Results of the pretest in writing part.

Test time	Class	Number of the students	Pass rate	Average writing scores	Excellent rate	Low rate
Before the research	Control class (19)	53	71.7%	16.92	18.8%	16.9%

	Experimental class (20)	50	72%	17.11	18%	16%
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The results showed that students in the experimental class had the similar level of achievement in writing as the control class did before the experiment. Their pass rates, low rates and excellent rates are almost the same. The writing achievements of students in Class 20 were slightly higher than that of Class 19.

The following table is the results of the writing scores of the final English test of the control class and the experimental class. As is shown in the chart that the average writing scores of students in the experimental class dramatically improve compared with the result of the pretest in Table 3. However, the improvement of the writing ability in control class students is very tiny. The fiercer increase is the pass rate of the experimental class from 72% in Table 3 to 92%, which means the development from group learning benefits every single member rather than the advanced students only.

Table 3. Results of the post test in writing part.

Test time	Class	Number of the students	Pass rate	Average writing scores	Excellent rate	Low rate
After the research	Control class (19)	53	75.5%	17.63	22.6%	15.1%
	Experimental class (20)	50	92%	23.11	36%	6%

4.2 Results and Analyses of the Questionnaires

The results of questionnaire from the two classes are quite similar. Both the students in Class 19 and Class 20 prefer group learning rather than the teacher-centered traditional ones. According to the questionnaires, most students who have done good jobs in English tend to choose group work, because they think that they can get stronger feelings about the knowledge they are learning. For some underachievers, they think that group work can improve their spoken English and encourage them to share ideas with friends. In this case, they may come up with some new ideas upon the same writing topic. Almost all students feel easier while the writing is taught in groups.

4.3 Results and Analyses of the Observation

There were 10 groups in Class 20 (the experimental class). The activities were supervised by the teacher. And if the teacher was needed while the students were finishing their tasks in groups, he or she will come and help. The following observation table used is borrowed from Alghamdi (2014). After eight weeks' experiment, the observation is finished by the author.

Table 4. (Observation during the first group work class)

Interaction variables	Frequency level/active numbers of groups				
	1 student	2 students	3 students	4 students	5 students

1. Makes basic statement during discussion.		1 group	6 groups	2 groups	1 groups
2. Responds to others' requests for basic information with brief statement.	1 group	3 groups	4 groups	1 group	1 group
3. Explanation with giving example.	2 groups	4 groups	3 groups	1 group	
4. Asks open-ended questions (how, why...)	1 group	7 groups	2 groups		
5. Requests clarification from others.	2 groups	6 groups	1 group	1 group	
6. Direct actions of the group. (Gives directions, organizes responsibility)	5 groups	3 groups	2 groups		
7. Supports or encourages others in the group.	4 groups	5 groups	1 group		
8. Write down others' opinions.	7 groups	3 groups			

Table 5. (Observation during the last group work class)

Interaction variables	Frequency level/active numbers of groups				
	1 student	2 students	3 students	4 students	5 students
1. Makes basic statement during discussion.					10 groups
2. Responds to others' requests for basic information with brief statement.				2 group	8 group
3. Explanation with giving example.			1 group	2 groups	7 groups
4. Asks open-ended questions (how, why...)			2 groups	1 group	7 groups
5. Requests clarification from others.		1 group	3 groups	5 groups	1 group
6. Direct actions of the group. (Gives directions, organizes responsibility)			2 groups	6 groups	2 groups
7. Supports or encourages others in the group.			2 groups	4 groups	4 groups
8. Write down others' opinions.			2 groups	3 groups	5 groups

From the two tables above, the differences can easily be found out that, before the experiment, most

students were unlikely to talk to each other or share their ideas with others, whereas the result after the experiment differs a lot. The group members are more outward and talkative than they were before the experiment in classroom.

As a result, the brainstorm period is more active than it was in the writing classroom before the experiment and more students are actively involved in the discussion during the group work. The note taken from others' presentation has reported that the students are becoming more and more aware of useful information spontaneously rather than being passively asked to do it by the teacher. That informs that they are more sensitive for the English writing materials than they were before the experiment. After the experiment, almost all students can talk actively to their group members and enjoy the chance cooperating and discussing with them. Moreover, with the development of the oral and written abilities, the students become more sociable and have stronger feelings of organizing.

4.4 Results and Analyses of the Interviews

According to the interviews with the students in class 20 (the experimental class), most students point out that the activities done in group work make them feel more active and interested than that of a traditional classroom. Some students who used to be less active tend to be more outward and talkative now after the experiment. All the students feel easy and relaxed while involved in a group work learning course. Some students even spontaneously continue their topic after class for many times. As for the teachers, they hold the idea that group work makes the classroom more alive and active. The teachers say that while taking part in the group work, the students are becoming more and more outgoing, talkative and confident. Teachers are more likely to put students in groups for the reason that this learning method will motivate students to be more energetic and interested in English learning, and lead them to the actual study of English writing actively, not passively pushed by the teachers. They find that the students are quite happy to be involved in the group discussion and group analysis. The teachers also think that teaching in groups enhance the cooperative, communicative and innovative abilities of the students. Some teachers find it easier for them to develop the brainstorm habits for students in group work teaching. Both the students and the teachers are fond of group work. They think learning and teaching by groups make them relaxed and feel harmonious. The teacher emphasizes that group work enables the students to talk more and help with their integrated English skills such as listening, speaking and writing.

5. Conclusion

The results and the analyses of the study show that group work learning is a proper way for junior middle school students to learn English process writing. As a component in cooperative learning, group work enables all the students to participate in the activities and makes them confident and bold enough to do the presentation in front of the whole class. It is a more scientific and more effective way of instruction. It develops the cooperative spirits of the students, changes their way of thinking, and gives them the idea of sharing and discussing, which makes them more outward.

Moreover, group work is far more than a method for English learning, and it also helps to change their attitudes towards English writing and to build the social-psychological system for the students

unconsciously. Group work also wide-spreads the idea that while competition benefits people, cooperation does more. As the linguistic and interpersonal abilities developed in the process of group work learning, the multiple intelligences are cultivated at the meantime. The open, frank and harmonious atmosphere of group work in the classroom improves the relationship between the teacher and the students, and bridges the generation gap between them. It changes the traditional rigid classroom into a harmonious, democratic and equal environment of learning, which helps to make the traditional education closer to the quality-oriented education.

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