Enhancing Non-English Majors’ EFL Motivation through Cooperative Learning

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Abstract

At present, most of the Chinese college English teachers fail to pay enough attention to the students’ motivations and the important motivational variables, much less have a systematic way of improving students’ motivation. The thesis aims at producing background information about some research into L2 motivation, illustrating the causes of the lack of learning motivation and proposing corresponding solutions to motivating learning which emphasizes active and responsible learning through interpersonal interaction. A survey and an empirical research was carried out in an ordinary class of non-English major for 15 weeks by applying cooperative learning (CL) method in college English teaching. The result of the survey also provides evidence for the framework which intends to help teachers to develop systematic motivation strategies for non-English majors.

Key words: college English teaching; EFL motivation; cooperative learning; non-English majors

1. Introduction

The problem of teaching non-English majors effectively always haunts college English teachers in China. No matter how hard the teacher tries, students’ passivity is found everywhere in the whole process.
of English learning. Most teachers generalize that students are lack motivation. It is generally acknowledged that motivation is one of the key influences on language learning success. Motivation influences learners’ autonomy, attention, effort, persistence, the frequency of using learning strategies, and their learning achievement, etc. However, at present, most of the Chinese college English teachers fail to pay enough attention to the students’ motivations and the important motivational variables, much less have a systematic way of improving students’ motivation.

The thesis aims at producing background information about some aspects of research into L2 motivation, illustrating the causes of the lack of learning motivation and proposing corresponding solutions to motivating learning which emphasizes active and responsible learning through interpersonal interaction. A survey and an empirical research was carried out in an ordinary class of non-English major for 15 weeks by applying cooperative learning (CL) method in college English teaching. The result of the survey also provides evidence for the framework which intends to help teachers to develop systematic motivation strategies for non-English majors.

2. Literature Review

One important aspect in the curriculum reform of fundamental education today pays a great deal of attention to the development of the students’ affective attitudes (interest, motivation, self-confidence, will and spirit of cooperation, etc), permeating the cultivation of the students’ affective attitudes into the teaching and learning of the subject. Among them, motivation affects the degree of efforts that learners put into foreign or second language learning. Chomsky (see Jane Arnold, 2000:13) even pointed out: “The truth of matter is that about 99 percent of teaching is making the students feel interested in the material”.

Motivation, characterized as a student’s willingness or desire to be engaged in or commit effort to completing a task, is an important component of classroom learning that students may self-regulate. Methods to stimulate or enhance motivation have been abundant. Ur (1984) proposed motivating learners by means of feedback, topic and visual aids, to name a few, while Deci (1995) proposed using films to stimulate learners’ motivation, which should be followed with proper tasks that set a clear goal and leave learners with a sense of achievement upon their completion.

Most of the approaches to promote motivation are on extrinsic motivation, to which rewards and/or punishment are utilized, while few are on intrinsic motivation (Brown, 2001). When practitioners do aim at promoting intrinsic motivation, they are advised to try to promote learners’ perceived competence and perceived control together simultaneously (Brown, 2001).

Motivation in the language classroom is achieved in two ways. The first way involves choosing content, activities, and the materials that meet the needs of the learners. Learners are more motivated to learn the language if they think it is interesting and useful. The second way involves creating a classroom atmosphere that instills confidence in learners. Adults, especially, have the tendency to feel uncomfortable and insecure in attempt to learn a language. The best way in adult learners is to encourage them to work together towards a common goal. Through cooperative group work, the learners gain their achievement goals by their personal efforts and develop their communicative skills by working with others.

Slavin (1990) defines CL as “a kind of class techniques that encourages students to perform all kinds of learning activities in group or small team, helps study some materials and rewards students for achievements or performance of the entire group, enhances teacher-student, and student-student interactions, promotes students to carry out a cooperative learning efficiently”. Marcia & James (2000) see CL as “one variety of active learning which structures students into different groups with defined roles for each student and a task for the group to accomplish”. CL in L2 classroom can increase learners’ motivation. CL motivates students to be active participants in the learning process in three ways: first, students will put more efforts if they know their work is to be scrutinized by peers; the second, students
may learn course material in great depth if they are involved in helping teach it to fellow students; and the third, students will have confidence to interact in the target language if they are in an amiable and relaxing climate.

3. Methodology for the Research

Based on the literary review at home and abroad and New National Standard for English Curriculum, the author thinks that the application of CL teaching approach can change the traditional way of English language teaching (ELT), which pays too much attention to the explanation of grammar and vocabulary while being ignorant of the students’ individual differences, especially their lack of motivation.

To identify what problems non-English majors have and how these problems affect their motivation, and to get an insight into learners’ language learning psychology, a survey was conducted among non-English majors and college English teachers.

There is a general convergence between the results of questionnaire and interview. The interpretation will proceed with regard to the two research questions: 1. the problems for the non-English majors in EFL learning and 2. the way that the problems affect their motivation.

The problems found emerging in EFL learning generally involve the goals, attitudes, self-determination, learning contents, learning strategies, learning methods, and the learning environment. They are as follows: (1). Lack of purpose for learning. The purpose of the majority of students in learning English is just for grades (gaining credits) and future work. (2). Lack of autonomy. Many first-year non-English majors are not used to college life, which emphasizes mainly their self-determination to make their own decisions. They seem to have problems in self-study. (3). Lack of experience. Having not enough practice and rarely being in real-life English communication, they always feel they are not fully ready for utterance and what they have learned is so-called “dumb English”. (4). Lack of confidence. When they are asked to communicate in the target language they are lacking in self-confidence and doubt their own capacity for using English to communicate. (5). Lack of learning strategies. It is lack of learning skills that makes students inefficient in learning the target language, even resulting in a sense of helplessness in it, much less a low motivation.

4. Motivating Non-English Majors through Cooperative Learning

4.1. Research of practicing CL among EFL learners

At the moment she intended to launch the experiment of practicing CL among EFL learners, the author was teaching college English for four classes of non-English majors with seven years’ college English teaching experience. To lessen the personal influence, the author chose the class that she took over from her colleague at the beginning of the new term as the experimental group and another class in the same department as the control group. The students were sophomores in materials science major. They were from different districts of China and characterized backgrounds that could lead to different cognitive styles, thought patterns, experiences and opinions, etc. They were taking New Horizon College English, Interactive English, which were published by Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press.

Through such an experiment, the author hopes to prove that CL is an effective way of fostering non-English majors’ motivation in EFL learning, with the following sub-hypotheses:

(1) The climate in the experimental class is much more enjoyable, trustful, and relaxing with affective variables such as attitude, motivation, interest, self-confidence, self-determination and so on greatly enhanced.
(2) The students become more active and autonomous learners and develop critical and higher order thinking skills, better interaction skills, and promoted social relationship. The experimental study uses some major CL approaches, which are fairly representative to the study of CL, namely, Student Team-Achievement Divisions (STAD), Teams-Games-Tournament (TGT), Jigsaw (JIG) activities, Learning Together (LT) and Group Investigation (GI).

4.2. Strategies for implementing CL to motivate students in English learning

If cooperative language learning is to be successful, both teachers and learners need to be adequately prepared, and interesting, relevant topics and materials must be available. In addition, a number of factors must be taken into consideration to facilitate cooperative language learning. In the following part, a list of strategies will be provided as a reference to help the teacher with implementing CL to motivate students in English learning. (1) Considering the preconditions for effective motivation. (2) Building a cooperative learning climate. (3) Raising learners’ feeling of security to stimulate comprehensible input and output. (4) Getting learners involved in learning program. (5) Making learners engage in English learning cognitively. (6) Developing learners’ self-confidence. (7) Improving learners’ autonomy. (8) Stimulating learners’ interest in learning tasks. (9) Providing learning strategies. (10) Enhancing the teacher’s role in fostering motivation.

4.3. Data collection

The experiment nearly persisted for a term and the author collected data in the following ways: (1) Questionnaire. A questionnaire was conducted at the end of the experiment, which was designed by the author in close consultation with CL and ELT for non-English majors. (2) Transcription and coding. Recording were made regularly in both the experimental group and the control group with the intention to calculate the amount of time distributed to teacher’s talking and students’ activities in the two groups, to measure their learners’ speech production, and to capture the most normal group interaction. (3) Interview. The purpose was to know more objectively about their attitudes, feelings, confusions, problems, and suggestions for CL method to see in which way CL helped them which aspect they think should be improved or changed. (4) Learning and teaching journals. To gather systematic data on the fulfillment of CL, students and group leaders were frequently required to fill in Individual Accountability Self-Motoring Forms and CL Group Reflection Forms.

4.4. Data analysis and discussion

4.4.1. Analysis and discussion of the posttest questionnaire

All the students in the experimental group, altogether 32, filled out the Posttest Questionnaire, and all the answers were valid for the later analysis. The following are the outcomes of the questionnaire:

Results reveal that 84.4% students think of the climate of the CL classroom as relaxing and enjoyable. They believe that their confidence (53.1%) and interest (62.5%) have been improved. Meanwhile, their feeling of anxiety has decreased, though not significantly, yet still quite considerably (59.4%).

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In addition, the learners tend to be more autonomous (56.3%) in their study and most students (78.1%) can voluntarily answer questions, though only 25% learners favor challenging questions. The results indicate that they have shown a promoted motivation in English learning, because they display more interest in, spend more time on, and show more autonomy in English learning. Thereby, the first hypothesis proves right.

Obvious improvement on language skills has been exhibited among listening, speaking and reading. As for the advantages of CL, most students speak highly of it, considering more oral opportunities can be created, more interesting and learner-centered learning can be made through the application of CL. And they demonstrate the second hypothesis that not only they tend to be more autonomous but also communicative skills and social relationships can be improved through the implementation of CL.

Regarding the problems arisen from the process, learners consider it quite difficult to organize the CL activities ensuring every student equal opportunity and active participation with constrained time. In addition, though most team members value the role the group leader plays, considerably percentage of them think group leaders have not functioned fully.

4.4.2. Classroom data analysis

After analyzing the data, we found significant difference between the two groups. During group activities, participants must question, elaborate, discuss, define, share information, disagree and the like in terms of the task at hand. They, sitting in face-to-face view, can easily notice confusion on the parts of fellow interactions, and thereby feel compelled to check their comprehension; the other party as well would feel the need to require clarification. Meanwhile, the discussion tasks increase the amount of time available to each student for oral language production. In contrast, the author noticed that under whole-class condition, learners are quite reluctant or embarrassed to indicate their lack of comprehension. Even

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**Figure 1 Posttest questionnaire**
when most students cannot understand a rather complicated question, no one is willing to ask for clarification.

4.4.3. Discussion of the learning and teaching journals

Forms collected from the learners and observations taken by the author herself during the process revealed that students in the experimental group did welcome this new method and generally actively participate in CL activities. However, there had been a long process before the final positive result came.

Therefore, CL method, in fact, overlaps reflective teaching approach, and the assessment of CL involves formative assessment (performance assessment), which can give teaching a real reflection in time. In the process of CL, the teacher kept a learning portfolio, in which are students’ representative achievements (such as exercises, quiz paper, recorded tapes, reports of their presentation, and satisfactory writing) and reflective reports. A learning portfolio is a window from which the teacher and students themselves can perceive their progress, because each student’s performance has been recorded in it. It is through the learning portfolio the author learned the students’ affective and academic improvement, and thereby strengthened her belief that CL should be an effective way in English language teaching and fostering learners’ motivation and autonomy.

5. Conclusion

From the above analyses, we can conclude that the application of CL is effective because it can raise the level of variables that contribute to motivation, raise achievement, and produce positive social outcomes. CL is gaining broad acceptance in a multitude of language learning classrooms primarily because of its contribution to improving the overall climate of the classroom and its potential for providing supportive and expanded opportunities for learners to use the language.

The various features of CL, particularly positive interdependence, are highly motivating because they encourage such achievement-oriented behaviors as trying hard, attending class regularly, praising efforts of others, and receiving help from one’s groupmates. Success is based on it and one’s groupmates will reward it. Peer support can be a powerful motivator for shy, insecure, or even uninterested learners. In cooperative groups, individuals know that they can get feedback and assistance in making their contributions as clear, relevant and appropriate as possible. This can, in turn, motivate them continue to try, especially when groupmates encourage and support their contributions. CL involves task and reward system that better ensure that all members of the group will participate and do so at the level of their own proficiency. Resource, goal and reward interdependence contribute to motivation, and enjoyable activities encourage participation as well.

In sum, cooperative language learning, by providing a democratic, relaxing and non-threatening atmosphere, which is conductive to a favorable attitude, motivate learners to be brave enough to use target language to communicate.

However, no single method works perfectly in language teaching and learning. There are also some problems in implementing CL: (1) Time crisis. Time control is always a problem in class. (2) The fixed classroom facilities. This problem, to some degree, made group discussion and other group tasks troublesome and decreased the effectiveness of cooperative English learning. (3) Students’ need for going at a different pace. Heterogeneous grouping may hinder those high achievers. (4) Lack of professional techniques for teachers to design and implement CL activities.
References