

Co-operative learning as an approach to improving speaking skills for the second-year non-major students of English at Hanoi University of Business and Technology \ cách thức học tập hợp tác như một đường hướng cải thiện kỹ năng nói cho sinh viên năm thứ hai không chuyên tiếng Anh tại Trường đại học kinh doanh và công nghệ Hà Nội. M.A Thesis Linguistics: / Vũ Thị Bích Thủy

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ABSTRACT

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

1. 1. Introduction

This chapter is concerned with the rationale behind the researcher's decision of choosing the thesis subject, and the way she identified the problem facing her students' English speaking skills. Besides, the scope, the objectives, and the research questions as well as the methods and design of the study are also stated clearly.

1. 2. Rationale

Never before has English become so pervasive as nowadays, and English has formally been an important subject in our educational system. "Better English, more opportunities" is the answer given by most Vietnamese university students when asked about their goal of learning English. English can help students prepare well for their future careers as it can not only equip them with a useful source of personal, linguistic, social and cultural knowledge but also provide them with access to modern technology and information concerning a variety of issues in modern society. Especially, our country's recent regional and global participation has been increasing the demand for English speaking people who are expected to communicate verbally with the outside world and access modern technology. Vietnamese students, who are intelligent and hard working, no doubt, have no difficulties in mastering English grammar and vocabulary. Most of them, however, have difficulties in English communicating. For these reasons, at the tertiary level where the source of English teachers for the whole country is provided, English teaching has been granted special support from educational authorities. However, finding out the most appropriate English teaching method that can satisfy the need of the society is still a big problem for generations of teachers in Vietnam.

Thanks to the efforts of several international projects and organizations, the teaching and learning English in Vietnam has been considerably changing in the past years. Various new approaches, methods and techniques on the teaching of English have been introduced and applied in colleges and universities nationwide. Generally, English teaching has shifted from the traditional grammar translation approach to the communicative approach. To be successful in their real classroom's contexts, which are communication-oriented and learner-centered, teachers of English are doing their best to improve their teaching skills.

1. 3. Identification of the problem

It is undeniable that it is very important for teachers to analyze, to reflect on and to make use of their own situations. To some extent, learner-centered teaching is only rhetorical in Vietnam at present. Theoretically, learner-centered teaching requires learners to play the role as negotiators and interactors while teachers as facilitators, analysts, counselors and managers. In the real classroom, many people, including the researcher herself, have misunderstood this approach before this research. When this method was first introduced to Vietnamese education, most teachers just assigned worksheets to students and then left them to work by themselves without observing, analyzing, and reflecting on them while they participated in the task. That is a dangerous idea because some students do not have the maturity to do the task by themselves. They may need some help to finish the task. If they do not receive help from anybody, especially their teacher, they might develop negative attitudes towards language learning which are very difficult to change. If teachers are not clear about this approach, they may create dangerous gaps unconsciously. Gradually, if they are concerned about what this approach means exactly, they may promote students' confidence in language learning, especially speaking skills.

Speaking English is one of the most important skills for students and will help them find a good job in the future. For over several years, the researcher herself has found that students would like to speak but they feel they lack confidence in speaking. As a result, they think that English is very difficult for them and they become bored with learning the skills. The action research study of how to promote students speaking English through co-operative learning is very important because it may also help them to develop other skills. Moreover, Richards (2004: 3) states, “Employers too insist their employees have good English language skills and fluency in English is a prerequisite for success and advancement in many fields of employment in today’s world.”

In order to help English learners make progress in speaking, it is a good idea to focus on their communication skills. Edge (1993: 17) identified the importance of communication that communication is at the heart of modern English Language Teaching (ELT), the goal of language teaching and part of the learning process. Luoma (2004: ix) added that “the ability to speak in a foreign language is at the very heart of what it means to be able to use a foreign language.” Wongsuwana (2006: 44) also stated that speech can be trained and it does not depend on talent.

However, one main reason why English speaking learning in Vietnam is not very successful is that most learners lack the opportunity to learn, and to speak English in an English environment; and for interaction in daily life. Therefore, it is essential to find out the solution to the problem so that English learners have more opportunities to communicate, as well as to interact with one another in a so-called close-to-real English speaking environment. One of the teaching strategies that reflects the principle of learner-centeredness is groupwork, which is designed by Nunan and Lamb (1996: 142) as any classroom activity in which students perform collaborative tasks with one or more partners. It has been considered one of the major changes to the dynamics of classroom interaction wrought by student-centered teaching. Groupwork can greatly increase the amount of active speaking and listening undertaken by all the students in the language class.

Groupwork has especially received more and more emphasis in language classroom and groupwork activities are used in many aspects of the second language instructions, particularly in encouraging students' oral practice. Working in groups, students are not passively sitting and listening to the teachers, but joining actively in the learning process. However, it is not always true that whenever students are asked to work in groups, the cooperation will occur. Generally, there are problems such as some group members dominate the group and impede the participation of others. Therefore, how to organize groupwork successfully in the classrooms is the question of great concern for many language researchers as well as language teachers.

In learner-centered approach, group work is the most effective way to reach success; and cooperative learning is undeniably the most flexible and powerful grouping strategies as in cooperative learning, learners work together to accomplish a shared goal. Therefore, they are motivated to work together for mutual benefit in order to meet their own and each other's learning. Cooperative learning can create an environment in which students' need of love, belongingness, power, freedom and fun can be met in a way that is beneficial for both academic achievement and the development of the learners' social and learning skills. Cooperative learning implementing programs have been applied successfully by thousands of teachers from all over the world. However, the application of cooperative learning has not been popular in Vietnam. There have been few studies on cooperative learning application in teaching English, particularly in teaching speaking.

As teaching English at Hanoi University of Business and Technology, the researcher sometimes failed to organize her second year students, who were non-major students of English, to work successfully in group activities. The students came from different regions all over Vietnam, and even though their acquisition of English grammar and vocabulary was quite good, most of them got difficulties in speaking because of many reasons. The students mostly had very little chance to use English in communication, so they were very shy to speak. Moreover, some students who came from urban areas often had better speaking skills than those who came from rural areas. During speaking activities, the strong ones talked a lot, the average spoke some, and the weak students seemed to keep silent all the time. The researcher had carried some strategies such as talking to them to find out their problems, choosing the interesting topics, monitoring frequently to help, encouraging the weak ones to speak and asking the strong ones to help their friends by assigning the roles for them and keep asking questions to force them to speak. This did not help a lot. Therefore, the fundamental reasons causing this problem was really a big question for her. She kept on finding the ways to get all her students equally involved in the class speaking activities. During the search, the researcher had found some articles and books about implementing cooperative learning strategies to improve group activities in which cooperative learning can be used as a mean to improve students' cooperation, participation and even their language proficiency. According to these articles and books, the benefit of cooperative learning had been explored in Vietnam and should be taken into account.

For all the above reasons, it is strongly desirable for the researcher to propose "*Co-operative learning as an approach to improving speaking skills for the second-year non-major students of English at Hanoi University of Business and Technology*" as the subject of this study.

1. 4. Scopes, objective and research questions for the study

This study was a kind of action research which was designed and conducted by the researcher herself. The study was limited to the investigation of students' attitudes towards cooperative learning, the level of their participation in groupwork, which was a dimension of cooperative learning, in classroom speaking activities as well as the effect of cooperative learning on the students' speaking performance. The study was conducted on the second-year students who were studying English as a minor subject at Hanoi

University of Business and Technology. Thus, the first and foremost objective of the study is for the sake of the students at Hanoi University of Business and Technology, where the researcher worked as a teacher of English. Although any generalization of the findings should be made with caution, it is expected that this study will serve as a source of references for teachers of English on the teaching of speaking skills, especially for those who consider cooperative learning as one of the best educational innovations.

To be more specific, in realizing this study, the main **objective** is:

- To investigate the effects of cooperative learning on students' participation and achievement in speaking skills.

With this objective, the **research questions** are:

- What are the students' attitudes towards cooperative learning?
- What are the effects of cooperative learning on students' participation on group activities and their progress in speaking skills?

1. 5. Methods of the study

This research is realized with both qualitative and quantitative analysis.

Quantitative analysis is involved in the process of data collection and analysis, which was carried out at Hanoi University of Business and Technology. The instruments for this process included two observation schedules fulfilled by the researcher herself, and the researcher's three colleagues and two M.A. classmates, who were working as the classroom observers during the research; and the records of the students' oral progress test scores.

On the other hand, qualitatively analyzed, the research was based on the students' attitudes to cooperative learning through their written journals after each cooperative-learning-oriented speaking lesson.

1. 6. Design of the study

The study is divided into **six** main chapters:

Chapter one is the Introduction, which states the rationale, the scope, the objective, and the research questions as well as the methods and design of the study.

Chapter two presents all necessary literature review that relates to the study.

In chapter three, the study - an action research on the improvement of the non-major, second year students' speaking skills at Hanoi University of Business and Technology - is described.

One of the main contents of the study, the data analysis is reported in chapter four. In this chapter, the researcher analyzes the data collected quantitatively and qualitatively to reach the findings of the study.

In chapter five, the discussion of the findings related to the research questions with reference to the literature review is mentioned.

Chapter six is the conclusion where the main contents of the study are summarized. In addition, the pedagogical implications of the study as well as the limitations of the study and the suggestions for further studies are discussed in this chapter.

Besides, the list of references and the appendixes are also parts of this study.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter presents some of the most important issues in theory of cooperative learning in general and in language teaching in particular. The main features are taken into consideration, namely, the concepts related to the study including the communicative language teaching and the teaching of speaking skills, the definitions of cooperative learning, and cooperative learning structures. Moreover, this is the study conducted on the second year, non-major student of English at Hanoi University of Business and Technology, where the course book Market Leader (Pre-intermediate) - a book for business English - is exploited, so the speaking skills in General Business English as well as the task-based learning and how it is exploited in business English are also introduced in this part. Before reaching the minor conclusion of the chapter, it is the researcher's wish to mention the benefits of cooperative learning and some of the previous studies on cooperative learning with reference to the enhancement of students' speaking skills.

CHAPTER 3: THE STUDY

In this section, besides the minor introduction and conclusion, four main categories are addressed. The first one is the context of the study, which houses the description of the students' learning context and learning materials in their second year at Hanoi University of Business and Technology. In the second category, the methods of data collection are presented carefully. The introduction of the action research participants lies in the next part. The most important part of the chapter, which is the procedures of the study, describes in details the problem identification and the plan of action.

CHAPTER 4: DATA ANALYSIS

The previous chapter presents the study which includes the context of study, the methods of data collection, the participants, and the research procedures. This chapter presents the data analysis. The chapter begins with the findings related to the impact of cooperative learning on students' participation in speaking activities, and the students' attitudes towards cooperative learning. As presented in the previous chapter, chapter three, data related to students' participation under the impact of the experimental cooperative learning were analyzed quantitatively whereas data on students' attitudes were analyzed qualitatively. The chapter concludes with the discussion of the findings.

CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION

In this chapter, the summary of the main findings, the comments on the limitations of the study and suggestions for further studies, the pedagogical implications, and the overall conclusion of the study are presented.

5. 1. Summary of the major findings

The study was generally successful, despite some of the defects, which will be presented in the next section. The effects of cooperative learning on the students' participation and achievement have been discovered and students' attitude towards cooperative learning has been investigated. With regards to both quantitative and qualitative analysis, the study has

provided positive results. Firstly, most of the students as the participants in the research showed their interest in participating into cooperative learning structured speaking activities. Secondly, besides the stronger relationship with their teammates was proved during the implementation of the research, all of the students performed that their English speaking skills were significantly improved based on the observations during the process and the final test results. Moreover, one module with students gave the researcher opportunities to discover their strengths and weaknesses showed during their group cooperation as well as their difficulties, expectations, desires, feelings revealed through the journals, all of which were a valuable source of information a teacher needs to know so that the researcher can adjust and strengthen her role as a teacher, a facilitator in classroom activities.

The methods and tools used were appropriate and effective in collecting the necessary data. The tables and charts apparently show the improvement of the students' participation and achievement. Most of the students found satisfied for being able to work in an environment in which they actively participated in learning. The increasing quantity of the students' interaction in the post- speaking activities shown in the tables supports the idea that all the students in a group worked hard together to reach the goal of the group by asking questions, responding others, explaining and clarifying ideas to teammates, etc. The weak students were not hesitant to ask for help as their group-mates were willing to help and encourage them to take part in conversation practice. The good students found themselves progress through helping friends, they improved their oral communication skills and some other academic skills such as higher level thinking skill, critical thinking skill in explaining, clarifying, tutoring, evaluating, eliciting, discussing and debating, formulating ideas, etc. Obviously, the students were more confident, independent, active, responsible, involved in learning. More importantly, the students could found out and use suitable leaning strategies which help to direct their long-term learning.

In addition, the students' attitudes towards cooperative learning were investigated in the study. The qualitative findings from the students' journals revealed a satisfying fact that all the students of class TC 1201 were interested in the cooperative learning strategies, and they all wished to be taught in the light of cooperative learning approach in their following modules of English at university.

Further more, the study helped to build up the researcher's confidence in applying cooperative learning strategies to the teaching of speaking, especially the teaching of general business English at her university. In the process of doing research, the researcher was also aware of the importance of making careful and conscious selection of suitable structures, which had an impact on the students' achievement.

5. 2. Limitations of the study and suggestions for further studies

This is an action research which was conducted to improve teaching and learning with reference to a particular group of students. Like other action research, it has obvious limitations. First of all, the finding can not be generalized and should be interpreted with caution when applied to other contexts. Secondly, the observers were classroom teachers. Although they were explained carefully before they conducted classroom observations, the data they collected may be unreliable. And because of this reason, internal validity of the data might be a problem, too.

For future action, the researcher is going to apply cooperative learning in the same group of students for a longer period of time. To be more specific, she is going to conduct a longitudinal study which focuses more on the correlation between students' participation and their learning outcomes as well as the long-term effect of cooperative learning on students' oral performance.

Within the one module time limit for the research, the researcher decided to narrow the topic of the research to "*Co-operative learning as an approach to improving speaking skills for the second-year non-major students of English at Hanoi University of Business and Technology*". If there had been more time, she would have wished to carry out studies on related subjects.

However, before thinking about other related research, it can not be denied that there are some areas within this research which can be further developed into full research as well. The topics such as: How to clarify students' problem in group activities? How to do the grouping successfully? How to train students' necessary skills to work well in cooperative learning group? What is the suitable interaction between teachers and students in cooperative learning? etc. are interesting topics to do research on.

One important related subject is the continuous study on the same population of students in their next module of English to see how well they work in cooperative learning groups and how much improvement they make in speaking as well as in other language skills.

Finally, to reach a higher reliability, the researcher wishes to have a chance to carry out the research under an experimental condition. This means she would have two classes of students, one experimental class and one controlled class.

These research subjects are what the researcher and her colleagues realized that they should continue to do after this study. It is the researcher's hope that the study will be of great interest and raise some other research subjects related to the readers' field of teaching, then more careful research will be realized about the application of CL to teaching English skills.

5. 3. Pedagogical implications of the study

First of all, cooperative learning and implementing program really proved its effects in teaching speaking. Whether this small scale action research within a limited time can not represent a bigger population of students in general, the statistic analysis result still strongly suggests the integration of cooperative learning strategies into classroom activities. Cooperative learning strategies are not only applied in teaching speaking but also other skills so that the students are more knowledge, confident and skillful to work in cooperative learning activities. Moreover, to encourage them on the initial trying of this new method, the department of English at HUBT should provide some investment to organize and conduct the program on a larger scale such as regular student-organized English speaking clubs, students' magazine with helpful knowledge, experience, skills for their learning and future jobs.

Besides, when implementing cooperative learning, the following very important factors should be taken into consideration: conducting cooperative learning classroom, establishing a cooperative activity, organizing group effectively, and managing group activities successfully. Therefore, whenever the teacher discovers a problem that students have during group activities, they can immediately choose some suitable structures and strategies which can help to solve the problem and design interesting and effective activities.

Additionally, the realization of the study has strengthened the orientation and proved the practicality of cooperative learning in teaching English in Vietnamese university context where most of the students used to be taught by teachers of traditional approach, considering the teachers as experts of knowledge, so depending on the teachers. Some of the techniques of cooperative learning are especially helpful for Vietnamese learners because they can develop their higher thinking skills, critical thinking skills, independent working, sharing, etc.

Administratively, assessment of speaking should be of various types. There should be individual assessment such as reports, or group assessment such as group projects.

5. 4. Conclusion

It is undeniable that the application of cooperative learning in teaching speaking skills is very essential to the success of communicative approach. With the attempt to improve the ability of English communication for the Vietnamese, particularly for the non-major, second year students of English at Hanoi University of Business and Technology, the writer (as well as a collaborative researcher) has just presented an action research on the application of cooperative learning structures that she has carried out with the help of some colleagues as co-researchers.

The rationale that leads to the study as well as the statement of the problem has been stated in chapter one, the introduction.

The literature review has been presented in chapter two of the study. Also, some approaches, definitions of cooperative learning and the structures of cooperative learning have been viewed in this chapter. Moreover, the related literature to speaking skills has been also carefully presented, including the nature of speaking, the problems with speaking and speaking activities, and the speaking skills in business English.

The study has been described in detail in chapter three. The researcher has developed the methodology and procedure of the research in this part as well.

In chapter four, the researcher has presented the data analysis, in which the researcher analyzed all the data collected quantitatively and qualitatively. The discussion of the findings with reference to the literature review and the discussion of the research questions have also been presented in this chapter.

Basing on some major findings, some pedagogical implications as well as some suggestions for further studies have been put in the last chapter. The benefits of cooperative learning in teaching speaking has been proved with emphasis on selecting appropriate cooperative structures, doing effective grouping, using suitable techniques of managing cooperative activities. With the success of the study, cooperative learning is also recognized and strengthened, at least in the university where the researcher is working. In the future, it is hoped that more studies on cooperative learning will be realized, such as those listed in the further studies mentioned in the previous section.

Finally yet importantly, although the study still owes some shortcomings, it is the researcher's deeply wish that the study, to some extent, can be the help for teachers of English speaking, especially for those who teach the non-major students.

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