

Let's Work It Out: Effects of a Cooperative Learning Approach on EFL Students' Motivation and Reading Comprehension

Authors : Shiao-Wei Chu

Abstract : In order to enhance the ability of their graduates to compete in an increasingly globalized economy, the majority of universities in Taiwan require students to pass Freshman English in order to earn a bachelor's degree. However, many college students show low motivation in English class for several important reasons, including exam-oriented lessons, unengaging classroom activities, a lack of opportunities to use English in authentic contexts, and low levels of confidence in using English. Students' lack of motivation in English classes is evidenced when students doze off, work on assignments from other classes, or use their phones to chat with others, play video games or watch online shows. Cooperative learning aims to address these problems by encouraging language learners to use the target language to share individual experiences, cooperatively complete tasks, and to build a supportive classroom learning community whereby students take responsibility for one another's learning. This study includes approximately 50 student participants in a low-proficiency Freshman English class. Each week, participants will work together in groups of between 3 and 4 students to complete various in-class interactive tasks. The instructor will employ a reward system that incentivizes students to be responsible for their own as well as their group mates' learning. The rewards will be based on points that team members earn through formal assessment scores as well as assessment of their participation in weekly in-class discussions. The instructor will record each team's week-by-week improvement. Once a team meets or exceeds its own earlier performance, the team's members will each receive a reward from the instructor. This cooperative learning approach aims to stimulate EFL freshmen's learning motivation by creating a supportive, low-pressure learning environment that is meant to build learners' self-confidence. Students will practice all four language skills; however, the present study focuses primarily on the learners' reading comprehension. Data sources include in-class discussion notes, instructor field notes, one-on-one interviews, students' midterm and final written reflections, and reading scores. Triangulation is used to determine themes and concerns, and an instructor-colleague analyzes the qualitative data to build interrater reliability. Findings are presented through the researcher's detailed description. The instructor-researcher has developed this approach in the classroom over several terms, and its apparent success at motivating students inspires this research. The aims of this study are twofold: first, to examine the possible benefits of this cooperative approach in terms of students' learning outcomes; and second, to help other educators to adapt a more cooperative approach to their classrooms.

Keywords : freshman English, cooperative language learning, EFL learners, learning motivation, zone of proximal development

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