

# A Study on the Characteristics of Cooperative Groups in Project-Based Learning of Advanced English

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**Abstract:** *Advanced English* is a compulsory course for undergraduates majoring in translation and interpreting, which is an extension of the course of intensive reading for junior students. It aims to cultivate students' advanced abilities of listening, speaking, reading, and writing and translating, comprehensively improve their comprehensive language knowledge level and practical application ability, and gradually enhance students' intercultural communication ability. Meanwhile it also deepens their understanding of society and life, and improves their humanistic quality. However, the wide materials, profound connotation, long sentences make students have difficulty in mastering this course, which further affects their interest in learning and frustrates their enthusiasm for learning. To a certain extent, it is not good at the teaching effect. The study has showed that cooperation study, compared with independent study, can guide students to study actively and create knowledge, this paper takes the course of “Advanced English” in Xi'an Fanyi University as an example. Through the interview of 15 students, it analyzes the cooperation group in the process of project-based learning so as to provide some lessons for undergraduate translation teaching experience.

**Keywords:** cooperative learning; Project-Based Learning; cooperative groups; *Advanced English*

## 1. Introduction

1980's has witnessed cooperative learning become a commonly used form of active pedagogy, which continues to be a valuable tool for learning in academic institutions today (Johnson, Johnson, and Smith, 2007), as it provides benefits for both students and instructors (Shimazoe and Aldrich, 2010). Cooperative learning has been described by Slavin (1996) as teaching methods in which students can work together in small groups to help one another learn academic content. Johnson, Johnson, and Smith (1991) outlined several central elements comprising cooperative learning including positive interdependence, individual accountability, face-to-face promotive interaction, appropriate use of collaborative skills, and group processing, as will be discussed further. Studies on cooperative learning have indicated its positive relationship with student achievement and attitudes about learning (Slavin, 1989; Johnson and Johnson, 1989; Johnson et al., 2007). Cooperative learning has also been found to enhance social and intellectual development (Cohen, 1984; Burton, 1987) and help students build interpersonal skills while promoting a sense of achievement, productivity, and psychological well-being (Nilson, 1998). Further, researchers reported, “...students worked significantly harder for and learned more from the cooperative learning components than from the traditional lecture and text-based components” of courses studied (Carlsmith and Cooper, 2002).

Researchers and education specialists endorse the view that student learning can be maximized, thus academic performance improved, by developing a sense of “we are all in the same boat together,” a basic tenet of cooperative learning (CL). The effectiveness of CL principles and techniques in building a motivating, supportive learning environment is well known (Johnson and Johnson, 1989). As the benefits of collaboration in education are clear, the use of technology to facilitate CL is vital.

The CL model (Johnson and Johnson, 1989) incorporates five essential elements: positive

interdependence, individual accountability, face-to-face promotive interaction, social skills, and group processing. When these elements are structured carefully into the instructional format, improved student participation, motivation, and responsibility have been noted (Assinder, 1991). The student-centered approach of CL leads to learner autonomy. The positive impact of CL has far-reaching effects that extend beyond the classroom, into participants' professional and personal lives.

Problem-based Learning (PBL) is a method of solving problems by students working together in groups. This learning method can help students to improve their ability to master basic knowledge and solve problems, cultivate their creative thinking, and improve their ability of independent learning and teamwork, which is an important way to realize the cultivation of innovative talents. 3 to 5 students are organized together to study the course according to the voluntary or coordinated way. Students and facilitators including teachers would form a harmonious, comfortable and unity of the academic atmosphere because of knowing each other, at the same time establishes the basic conditions for the cooperation study and discussion.

More and more researchers pay attention to the application of cooperative learning model. According to the research, compared with independent learning, cooperative learning can lead students to actively learn and create knowledge, improve students' learning performance and engagement in learning, and accomplish cross-cultural tasks. Advanced English is a compulsory course for undergraduates majoring in translation and interpreting. It is offered in the third grade as an extension of the intensive reading course for juniors. It aims to cultivate students' advanced abilities of listening, speaking, reading, writing and translating, comprehensively improving their comprehensive language knowledge level and practical application ability. It gradually enhances students' intercultural communication ability through the mastery of course content, which can deepen their understanding of society and life, and improve their humanistic quality.

However, due to the materials, profound connotation, long sentences with great difficulty, students have difficulty in mastering this course, which further affects their interest in learning and frustrates their enthusiasm for learning. To a certain extent, it is not good in the teaching effect. This paper takes the project-based teaching of Advanced English in Xi'an Fanyi University as an example. Through interviews with 15 students, this paper analyzes the characteristics of cooperative groups in the project-based learning process in order to provide some useful experience for undergraduate with major of translation and interpreting.

Cooperative group is a kind of learning organization, which advocates systematic thinking, self-transcendence, team learning, common vision and mental model, etc. Cooperative learning group refers to the one that teachers treat students in the classroom as the working groups having common learning tasks. The class itself is a cooperative study group. In order to promote the learning progress of students, teachers will divide students into different study groups or organizations. These study groups are also included in the scope of cooperative study groups. In cooperative learning group, teachers' management methods, methods and goals in class are all centered on students' learning, and students are the origin of classroom management mode of the cooperative learning group's.

## **2. Method**

### *2.1 Data collection*

In this study, 15 students were selected as interview subjects majoring in translation and interpreting who participated in project-based learning of advanced English. This study adopts the semi-structured interview, mainly in the form of face-to-face interview. It takes about 1.5 hours of the average interview length of each interviewee with a total of about 60,000 words of interview materials. Before the interview, the author explains the intention of the interview to the interviewees and asks for their cooperation. After their agreement, interviewees are required to recall as many experiences or examples as possible when they participate in advanced English learning. Also, the author gives appropriate guidance and follow-up

questions according to the answers of the interviewees. At the same time; the whole interview process was recorded to ensure the accuracy and completeness of the interview materials.

(1) What is the common vision of the cooperative learning group of Projected-based Learning of Advanced English?

(2) What efforts have the students made to realize the common vision?

(3) What is the learning effect of project-based learning of advanced English?

## 2.2 Results

In order to test the reliability and validity of the code, this study adopts the method of coding comparison. In addition; this study has chosen 2 senior English teachers who have been engaged in the course of Advanced English for more than 5 years to complete the coding independently. Through the "code comparison", the consistency is between 0.891 and 0.805, with good reliability and validity. There are 21 initial categories, 9 main categories and 4 core genera.

Table Coding

Core Category	Category II	Category I
the values of cooperative groups	the purpose of participation	improving capacities
		developing an interest
	content formation mechanism	personal achievement
		honors
		growth and development
the management of cooperative groups	adjustment students role	communicate clearly
		adjust clearly
	teachers role	role assignment
		changeable
the learning style of cooperative groups	learning materials	leading, zhidao teaching
		network resources
		lessons
	learning activities	keeping resources
		sharing resources
		models
the learning effectiveness of cooperative groups	personal development	team work
		inter-communication
		learning
		capability
		friendship

## 3. Discussion

### 3.1 Values of the Cooperative group

Students participated in the cooperative groups of Advanced English for the purpose of improving their abilities, cultivating their interests and achieving their own results. Many students study in high schools attached to foreign languages with a good learning foundation, so they hope to continue to develop their language skills and improve their ability in university (G11). Many students will learn more (G4, G8, G13), such as a more detailed understanding of English language (G9, G14), a more systematic culture of English-speaking countries (G8, G10, G11), and finally improve their ability (G9, G10, G11, G15) as one of the

personal expectations of advanced English project learning.

At the same time, competition is one of the important ways to test the effect of students' professional learning. In the interview, after learning this course, a student can participate in The English competition (G7) on behalf of the school, in which if he/she gets a good score in the competition (G13) he/she would get opportunities for his/her future employment, which is also the personal expectation of students to participate in project-based learning. On the basis of individual expectations, members in the group gradually get a common vision. By sorting out the interview materials, students all hope to get good grades in the project-based learning for their team and make the team become more and more outstanding (G13). They believe that what they do can contribute to the honor of the team (G15). Beside it, with the students to participate in cooperative learning further, students aims to improve personal power instead of doing a project well, and getting a good score (G8). Therefore, the students get less attention to the result, but more to the process (G9). Therefore, the common vision is team honor and individual growth for the members of cooperative group. In the process of the formation of the vision, members gradually tend to be consistent with each other from the individual's expectations and interests (G7, G10, G12, G13, G15) after the ongoing discussion (G9, G10). During this process, the common vision is slowly formed after the compromise of members (G4, G15), which was approved by most people (G10, G12, G15).

After the formation of the common vision, the long-term learning is affected by subjective and objective factors such as ability, knowledge level and teamwork, which would make the common vision often change more or less (G4). At the beginning of the common vision, everyone have confidence in themselves (G11, G15), which would make them assured (G10) and do the very high and ideal (G11) common goal. Along with the advancement of learning and training, the common goal will become more clear (G10, G13), because of the gradual understanding of themselves and the team's ability (G11, G14). After the profound understanding to their own advantages and disadvantages (G13), they would reduce and adjust the common goal, which would be close to the team's real ability level (G10, G13) through mutual understanding, compromise, and running-in (G14).

### *3.2 Management mode*

In the cooperative learning group of Advanced English, students are divided into leaders, creatives, implementers, learners, etc. (G14, G15). Each participant starts from the part he/she is good at, performs his/her own duties, and makes joint efforts for the success of the team, without causing chaos to the team (G9, G10). In practice, the role of students participating in cooperative learning groups is often flexible. When there are problems in learning, the members may be learners to learn to make up for the deficiency. When they are familiar with the problems they encounter, the members will become the imitator of knowledge to tell everyone what they know (G11). There is no permanent role in cooperative learning groups. Each person will become a leader in his or her own area of expertise, and a learner in others' area of expertise (G10). It can be said that in cooperative learning groups, there is no strict boundary for the division of student roles, and everyone can be a role of every kind (G15). Students in cooperative learning groups admire those who have clear thinking (G9, G10, G13, G14), especially stable production structure or design program (G13, G14), the strongest strength in all aspects (G7, G10, G13), strong executive ability (G4, G8, G11) and can coordinate the team (G7, G9, G13, G15).

In cooperative learning group, the teacher's role cannot be ignored. Students consider that teachers play a controlling and leading role in groups. During interviews, middle school students will compare teachers to "baby-mother" (G4) and "catalyst" (G13), supervise students in learning and training (G4), guide students in training to conquer difficulties and avoid detour (G13). Students believe that teachers will be more comprehensive than students in thinking and leading the way in training (G10). At the beginning, since many students had not participated in project-based learning before, teachers undertook the task of enlightening (G8, G11) and teaching students some basic knowledge (G10, G11, G14). In addition, cooperative learning group of students encountered many difficulties, such as sidetracking in some of the problems (G4, G10), at this time, the teacher can play a bigger role on the key issues for some students (G4, G10) or inform the students to give up (G4), in a way of thinking or viewing difficulties (G10), helping

students to move forward (G11, G12, G13).

In addition, in the analysis of the interview data, we found that, in the eyes of students, teachers are also another role as the resource providers (G4, G10, G15). In the training, the teacher should provide students such as study materials (G13, G4), intercollegiate exchange (G9, G13, G14), competition show (G9, G15), etc, to help students to learn better.

### *3.3 Learning methods*

In the course of project-based learning, cooperative group is inseparable from the acquisition, preservation and sharing of learning materials. Through the analysis of the interview data, we found from the source of learning material, students are learning how to deal with similar problems (G9, G11) mainly according to the network video and strategy (G8, G9, G11 ). They can find the way of thinking from their solution to the problems from which they encounter (G8, G9, G11,).

For a wide variety of network resources, new students are not good to identify the network resources that often get help for reference blindly (G10, G13). The experienced students will give more remind and guidance (G8, G11), to help novice with clear details, identification and study materials (G13). In addition to helping to identify and search learning materials, the students would accumulate more experience over a long period of time. Every year, members of the group participating in the project will communicate and instruct with experienced students in the daily learning and training (G11, G15), and then "teach" their own experience to the best of their ability (G11).

The team would to save the own successful application and the case (G9, G11, G12, G13), which they would seldom use in the future. But the learners think that these projects are all the difficulties they have overcome which would become new knowledge to be saved (G9, G12). Through completed projects, the cooperative group has established its own technical "database", which is convenient for timely inquiry and use in future projects and can shorten the completion time of the project (G13).

As mentioned above, teachers provide opportunities for the learning group to communicate with students from other schools. During the communication, members of the cooperative learning group will use their problem-solving methods (G9) for reference in the communication with students from other schools, and incorporate these advanced experiences into their own "database" (G4). Therefore, it can be said that to gain experience and draw advantages from the outside world (mainly other schools) (G4, G10), and become important learning materials for their own cooperative learning group.

In the analysis of research materials, we found that in cooperative learning groups, besides the clear division of learning mentioned above, learning and sharing around learning materials are also very important learning activities. Around learning materials, members of cooperative learning groups often take steps of imitation, understanding, thinking and modification (G4, G15, G11) to gradually internalize them into their own knowledge and skills. In the analysis of the interview materials, we found that learners would actively and subconsciously share the good learning materials they met in the completion of the project (G4, G10), and organize their peers to analyze and discuss the learning materials (G10, G13). We analyze the learning materials together to find the direct correlation or similarity with the team's ongoing project (G13, G14), to help the team to better complete the project.

### *3.4 Achievements in learning*

After participating in the cooperative study group, students realize that their operational ability has been improved (G15) and their thinking more logically (G15, G10, G8). In the process of completing the project, the students expressed that they gradually learned to break down the problems they encountered, and then they would try and improve continuously, and finally solve the problems (G10). By participating in the study, students showed that they were better at communication and expression, able to share and communicate with people around them, and deal with the relationship with people around them (G15). They were more willing to communicate with others (G10). Students have changed from being introverted to being more willing to communicate with others (G4), and they are not as shy or nervous as before with

their social skills improved (G10, G13, G15).

Through the analysis of the interview materials, we find that in terms of study habits, students feel great about learning new things all the time by participating in cooperative study groups (G8). They find that they can keep learning and know what they want to learn so as to work hard for it (G14). Through the analysis and coding of the interview data, it can be seen that after participating in the cooperative learning group, students have improved their abilities such as hands-on practice, knowledge application, communication and sharing.

## **4. Conclusion**

### *4.1 The relationship between common vision and personal expectation*

In the group, it is important to establish the common vision, so that students have the power of unity. When members of the group have a real common vision, it can hold the group together. In the learning process of Advanced English learning in which the scores are as the main evaluation goal to achieve excellent results. In the establishment of the common vision, attention should be paid to the mechanism of the common vision formed by the convergence of students' personal expectations, and the common vision should be gradually formed based on the personal growth and interest cultivation of students' expectations. It is essential to avoid simply positioning achievement of score as the common vision. Attention should be paid to the growth of students to avoid utilitarianism.

### *4.2 Member structures of diverse roles*

According to the creative theory of complex systems, diversity and the relationship between diversity is an important condition for the creation of systems. The cooperative learning group has the roles of leader, instructor, learner and coordinator, etc. In practice, students should choose various roles independently according to their abilities, so that students can give full play to their strengths and improve their abilities in the role. As a member of cooperative learning groups, teachers should be good supporters to provide knowledge support for students. Teachers should provide necessary knowledge support through projects and questions and emotions. Teachers should also support students to build flexible, diverse, equal and easy team structure in the cooperative learning group, encouraging students to express different views, and complete the learning task; Teachers should also provide opportunities for students to communicate and learn from each other and reflect on their progress in study.

### *4.3 The practice of learning method*

Although there are a lot of advanced English textbooks and materials in the market, they are often difficult to adapt to the actual situation of the school. From the previous analysis, it can be seen that in practice, cooperative learning groups will start from problems, consult network materials in a targeted way, and form their own materials through reference, imitation and improvement. In addition, students will save successful attempts or reflections as learning materials to form their own "database". Therefore, in practice, we should guide students to pay attention to the selection and accumulation of materials, to form learning materials with the school's own characteristics, and school-based teaching materials. In terms of the organization of learning activities, students should be guided to carry out more metacognitive activities, summarize experience in identification and reflection, and continue to learn to improve their abilities.

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