
Action Research on Cooperative Learning of *Business English Writing*

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Abstract: *Business English Writing* is a compulsory course for English majors in Beijing Wuzi University. It is a practical course for students to internalize what they have learned in other Business Reading courses and turn it into business English articles. So cooperative learning method is introduced in this course to help students smoothly finish the writing process. Also, cooperative learning can help students to be more actively involved in learning, increase their learning motivation, improve their self-learning and creative thinking ability, so it has been applied broadly in English Teaching. However, there is seldom study that has been done on *Business English Writing* from the perspective of action research. This action research focused on how to apply cooperative learning in *Business English Writing* courses by comparing the learning results (ideas of the composition and length of the composition) of two classes, one is implemented with cooperative learning while the other is not. The comparison revealed that students were positive to cooperative learning and obtained more writing skills by learning in cooperative groups. In the last part, this paper summarized advantages and limitations of the experiment, and provided suggestions on how to improve cooperative learning in *Business English Writing* course to have a better learning outcome.

Keywords: Cooperative Learning, *Business English Writing*, Action Research

1. Brief Introduction to the Course of *Business English Writing*

As a compulsory course, *Business English Writing* is specially set up for senior students majoring in business English and this course covers typical cases in various fields of international business and it is composed of chapters such as international communication, business ethics, cultural differences, human resource management, international finance, team building and successful companies, etc. This course is a successor course of several introductory courses such as Introduction to Business and Industry, aiming to cultivate students' capability of using fundamental knowledge after they have learned basic knowledge related to international business English. Most samples in this course are selected from Financial Times, The Wall Street Journal, The Economist and other international financial journals and the content is authentic and time-sensitive. Each unit in this course is explained in procedures as follows: supplement the basic vocabulary, introduce the case background, put forward

the problem, discuss and analyze the problem in groups, and finally generate the text version of the problem solution.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Cooperative Learning

Western scholars, represented by American scholars, have been doing research on cooperative learning for over 40 years and a large amount of research work indicates that cooperative learning contains the great practical significance in classroom teaching of various subjects. For example, some researchers has laid the solid theoretical and practical instruction for the application of cooperative learning in foreign language classroom teaching [1-3]. Many domestic scholars have also conducted a large amount of research through applying cooperative learning to the writing teaching. When one search with key words of "cooperative learning" and "English case analysis" in CNKI, one will find 855 articles related to cooperative learning and English case analysis teaching, among which, 13 articles is about the research on the

application of cooperative learning to business English case teaching. The research results have proved that cooperative learning can improve students' writing skill. [4]; train students' team consciousness and cooperation spirit [5]; improve students' thinking ability [6]; promote students' participation in class [7]; reduce students' anxiety in writing [8], etc. However, there are only a few researches on the application of cooperative learning in courses such as Business English Case Analysis. Therefore, this research aims to apply cooperative learning in the process of teaching *Business English Case Analysis* from the action research perspective.

2.2. Action Research

Instead of theoretical research, action research is a record of defining problems existing in the practice of business English education and fixing them. In another word, action research focuses on "practical problems", that education technology decision-makers, deans, department directors and teachers meet in their working process and look for urgent solution.

"Action research in business English is to carry out constant observation and research of specific problems in business English teaching practice and it essentially falls in the range of English teaching research." [9]

Action research is essentially a process of testing and pursuing a more reasonable teaching practice in education. Action research explores a brand new thinking dimension, obtain the new direction of exploration and enhance their capability in education practice and self-transcendence and at the same time enable teachers to obtain a force for inner enlightenment and release.[10] Therefore, the first step of action research is to define "problem". Which can be done like this: in the first class of the course of *Business English Case Analysis*, teachers shall communicate with students on teaching content and students' expectations and find out both the fitting point and gap so as to develop the appropriate teaching plan fitting students' demand. Fear is inevitable because it is the first time for students to use original English textbook and they need to analyze the case all in English. Fighting for the fear alone all by students themselves is not easy, teachers shall change the traditional teaching practice into organizing the cooperative learning groups so as to help students overcome their fear and conquer such a difficult course through team cooperation. Later, teachers shall verify the feasibility of the teaching plan based on cooperative learning and the students' acceptance of such a teaching plan in the teaching practice. Besides, teachers shall also make effective adjustments of the teaching plan as learning goes deeper.

3. Action Research on Cooperative Learning

3.1. Research Object

The action research object is students of grade 2016

majoring in business English in class 1 and class 2 from Beijing Wuzi University. They have finished the fundamental business courses in their first two years of study, that is to say, they have obtained certain writing ability and business knowledge. The research traverses one semester of 16 weeks with 2 class hours in each week and there are 32 class hours in total. Class 1 is experimental class and class 2 is control class. There is no big difference in English proficiency level between students from class 1 and class 2.

3.2. Research Process

Experiment design and implementation.

3.2.1. Grouping

The 25 students in experimental class are reasonably divided into five cooperative learning groups in accordance with the principle of quality ratio and therefore, there are five groups with five students in each group. The male students are much less than female in foreign language school and with lower English proficiency. Therefore, the male students are evenly distributed into each group. After group division is determined, it is necessary to determine responsibility and work division of each member. In the grouping process, the composition of each group shall also take the factors such as sex, academic performance and ability, etc., into consideration to realize the reasonable group division.

3.2.2. Determine Learning Tasks

Build the WeChat group, assign the review task to each group before class, assign preparation materials for case study and analysis after the completion of course-related professional knowledge, and accomplish the above-mentioned tasks in strict accordance with the requirements and time limit.

3.2.3. Cooperative Learning Activities

Teacher assign individual tasks to all group members with appropriate difficulty to match their English proficiency. When the individual tasks are finished, then teacher organize the group discussion to communicate and integrate the findings of each team member to reach a more completed view of the topic. For example, in the unit of "International Payments" each students needs to preview the textbook to have a conceptual understanding of international payment tools before they consult the information respectively, share the information in the group, finish case analysis and finally finish a report as a final learning outcome. Another example is, in advertising unit, the cases involves the work process of the advertising company and the method of winning clients for the advertising company, students should do the group discussion to design an advertisement for client company, so finally they need to compose an advertisement copywriting as the learning outcomes in this unit. Students need to exhibit their final learning achievement in the form of homework or presentation and teachers shall give a timely feedback.

3.3. Findings

3.3.1. Students' Learning Attitude

90% students are satisfied with the teaching mode of cooperative learning; 70% students prefer the report or proposal writing and 78% students believe that this method is helpful for their case analysis learning. The students' satisfaction of classroom cooperative learning and cooperative completion of home assignment reaches 80% and 88%. Students believe that writing assignment is helpful for their writing skills. Students believe that study in groups can enhance communication, interaction and cooperation, foster the internalization of knowledge, and activate the dull classroom atmosphere and therefore cultivate students' team consciousness. Group discussion can trigger in-depth thinking so as to accomplish the effective learning.

3.3.2. Students' Cooperation Ability

The research discovers, based on the students' course summary report and open questions in the questionnaire, that disputes arise sometimes within the group in the group-based learning. According to some students, it is because there is no effective conflict settlement mechanism applied within the group. It leads to a low efficiency of the group work. Therefore, tasks can not be finished in time. Some group leaders are inadequate in coordination and some lazy students choose to be a free rider and contributes nothing to the group work. It is not fair. Students need more training from teachers to enhance their inner coordination ability, and the group assessment system should adopt certain punishment and incentive mechanism to stimulate group members to actively participate in group activities.

3.3.3. Analysis of Students' Writing Assignment

i. Word count

Figure 1 indicates that the average composition length of the experimental class is significantly higher than that of the control class.

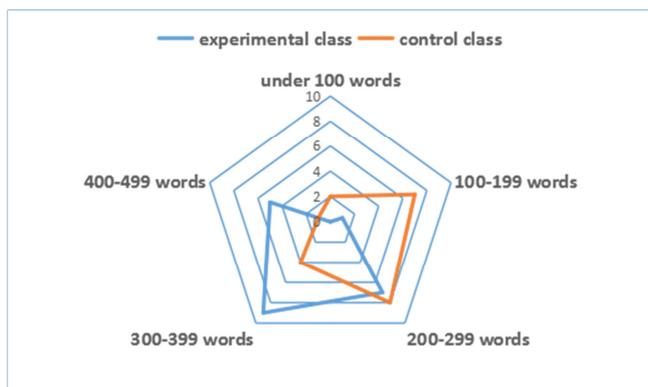


Figure 1. The average composition length of experimental class and control class.

There is no special requirement for the length of composition while the writing task is assigned by the author. Instead, the author only reminds the students to carefully analyze the assignment and accomplish the assignment in

accordance with requirement in order to check how long can students finish their report or proposal. The original hypothesis is as follows: students in the experimental class may finish their report from both pros and cons sides after participated in the discussion of each group, that is to say, they have more topic-related information and may finish the reports with rich materials more easily. The result indicates, just as author assumed, that there is obvious difference in composition length between the two classes.

The compositions finished by students in the experimental class are all more than 400 words, and 50% students finish the compositions above 500 words. While compositions with over 400 words in the control class is much lower, up to 30% students finish the compositions less than 300 words.

What is the reason for such big difference when there is no specific requirement for report length? According to the survey, at the beginning of the experiment, about 80% students in the control class believe that weak writing ability is the major problem in English learning, which is higher than that in the experimental class at 39%. If the self evaluation on weak writing ability made by students in the control class is objective and real, some students might have adopted the strategy of "avoidance" [11], that is, they finish the composition with fewer words through avoiding the difficult words and phrases and sacrificing their in-depth thinking.

ii. Quality of ideas and argumentation method

The number of ideas and how student present ideas effectively are very important for the successful writing. Previous scholars used to define idea as the key view and key principle in body paragraphs. [12]

Students in experimental class and control class can clearly express their opposition or agreement with the controversial topic, that's to say, they have clear clue of thoughts; they can write the topic sentence at the beginning of the body paragraph no matter how long their compositions are.

Table 1. Number of ideas in the body paragraph.

Class	number of paragraph	number of words	number of ideas
experimental class	3.4	380	3.5
control class	2.6	310	2.4

Other than idea number, idea elaboration are also important for measuring the quality of a composition and idea elaboration are more important for any successful writing. [13] This article compared the number of ideas and idea elaboration method in the body paragraph of composition finished by students of the two classes. Author chose 10 composition from experimental class and 10 from control class with around 400 words. The small number of compositions makes the numerical comparison contain no statistical significance. However, Table 1 indicates that experimental class performs better than control class in the three average indicators, that is, number of body paragraph, number of words and number of ideas. The comparison mirrors that the experimental class execute the collaborative learning have better performance than the control class.

4. Reflection and Improvement

The collaborative learning shows its effectiveness in improving learners writing ability in terms of ideas expression but in practice, there is still spaces for adjustment.

4.1. Teachers' Guidance for Group Cooperative Learning

The settlement of conflicts in collaborative learning is essential. Lacking of ability to coordinate the conflict will lead to a low efficiency, that's what happened in after-class group learning. Therefore, it is necessary to train students, especially the team leaders, to acquire ability to carry out cooperative learning strategy so as to guarantee the effective implementation of cooperative learning. Teachers shall teach students the way of establishing group cooperation principle, to insist on practicing the principle, and to make the principle a routine in group activities. Besides, conflicts might happen inside the cooperation group. Therefore, it is necessary to set the rules in handling conflicts in group cooperation so as to establish the sound interpersonal relationship and cooperation relationship with group members. Such as set the time length of conflicts settlement, if the conflicts can not be fixed in certain time period, then it need to be left off-the-table.

4.2. Student Mutual Evaluation

There are two parts involved in the evaluation process--student mutual evaluation and teacher's evaluation. teacher can always give their timely feedback but when it comes to the student mutual evaluation, it is usually with neither sufficient guidance nor prompt delivery to the evaluated group, so the students evaluation system did not work well as expected. Therefore, firstly, it is necessary to offer students an explicit criteria. and do a sample evaluation for students to follow. Finally, timely delivery of mutual evaluation result is necessary after mutual evaluation is finished. The groups who received the evaluation is required to make amendment based on feedback opinions and even write a reflection diary if it is necessary.

4.3. Insufficient Training on Students' Logic Ability on Writing

Cooperative learning in the classroom focuses more on arranging students to cooperate with each other in discussing pieces of writing tips instead of training them the reasoning ability behind writing. As a lot of writing practices are finished after class, students cannot get timely instruction on their after-class assignment. [14] Therefore, the paper they finished lacks of conception and logic and their writing is just the combination of templates. Students have made no obvious improvement in their logic thinking and creative thinking. As a result, it is an urgent task for teachers to strengthen the training on students' ability in logical thinking. Teachers shall inspire students to work out their mind map when they try to write under certain topic and improve their ability in discovering problems and solving problems in the writing process. Besides, teachers shall create the real

business scenario to train students' critical thinking in business context as a way to form them a lifelong writing ability.

5. Conclusion

The action research that lasts one semester shows that cooperative learning method applied in the course *Business English Writing* can effectively improve students' writing skills. But appropriate applying cooperative learning needs a long way to go. Teachers shall make a reasonable implementation plan according to actual teaching situation. It is important to improve classroom efficiency and students' ability in speaking and writing. However, it is also important for teachers to negotiate well with the students, educate and guide the students in this process so as to establish a harmonious and interactive relationship with the students. [8] The action research will continue with improved plan and reflection. Will it improve the teaching effectiveness in *Business English Writing* course? Will it accomplish the full and active participation of students? Will it inspire students to conduct the in-depth thinking? All these doubts will be verified in practice.

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