ABSTRACT: Nowadays, cooperative learning has been increasingly applied in several educational areas in lots of universities. This paper concentrates on the necessity and impacts of the cooperative learning used in Business English courses in Beijing Wuzi University. The methods of questionnaire and interview analysis are applied to find out the real effects and feedbacks of business English learners and to observe the original intention of adopting this teaching method and its real practice by the teachers.

KEYWORDS: Cooperative learning; Business English; Effects; Survey

1. INTRODUCTION

Cooperative learning originated as an educational approach in the United States in the early 1970s and made substantial progress from mid 1970s through mid-1980s. The approach has now become a whole educational strategy gradually, and has popularized among Chinese university classrooms. Recently, it has been increasingly applied in instruction of business English in several areas of China. As a specialized language, business English requires a learner to simultaneously employ mental, auditory and visual senses, forcing us to seek new approaches toward business English learning. Business activities are common in our daily life. It can be arguments over an issue, negotiations between businessmen, documentary interactions between a supervisor and a subordinator, or a promotion among consumers. Introduction of cooperative learning in business English courses may have substantial effects on learning, which this article is intended to discuss.

2. COOPERATIVE LEARNING IN BUSINESS ENGLISH COURSES

Business English serves career goals and covers business activities in all respects. It aims not just to improve learners’ language skills but also to deliver western management ideas, mental conditions, or even the ways to get along with foreigners, and to learn their working methods and life habits. Business English is common in our daily life. A student would only have to accumulate a certain vocabulary to simulate business activities. It offers an easy opportunity for students to practice in groups.

In addition, some courses such as, International Business Negotiation and International Trade Practice have some particular requirements, and cooperative learning are necessary during the learning. In practice, business negotiations involves confidentiality and would not disclose such key information to university classes. If a learner plans to probe into negotiation practice, he needs to analyze parties, backgrounds, pursuits and even cultural differences. Cooperative learning would meet such requirement by forcing learners to collect information and think for the interest of each party. Such practice would help understand the background, purpose, arrangements, negotiation skills, and selection of words, and even etiquettes of negotiation are displayed on scene before the students. Team members are thereby able to learn more experiences in these activities or learn from the comments of teachers and other students.

Business English serves business activities, which call for business thinking and communication skills. In short, business thinking and skills are the principles and ideas a businessman adheres to during the practice. How to realize the ideas? How to attract more consumers in new products developing? How to win negotiations when you get in troubles? These issues all require business thoughts and communication skills. Our goal of learning business English is to establish healthy business minds and fulfill commercial values. Therefore, cooperative learning is especially significant for business English, a course relying more on practices.
3. METHODOLOGY

Evaluation of cooperative learning has been based on direct and indirect evidences—academic performances of students of the 2013 business English class of Beijing Wuzi University. Scores of key courses are the most direct evidence. Homework and reports on students’ learning are the indirect evidence. Business English major at Beijing Wuzi University outlines a number of courses including Business Negotiation, Business English Watching, Listening and Speaking, International Trade Simulation, Business English writing, Business English, Business English Reading, International Business Culture, Introduction of Industry & Commerce, Mankiw’s Principles of Economics, Economic Law. Cooperative learning is carried out in Business Negotiation, Business English Watching, Listening and Speaking, International Trade Simulation, and International Business Culture. International business Negotiation and Business Watching, Listening and Speaking have adopted role play as the target of evaluation both in daily assignments and in final tests. In the course of International Trade Simulation, cooperative learning (including 2 recorded videos of international trade simulation) constitutes 20% of the final score. So is the case in the course of International Business Culture.

The author interviewed several teachers delivering some of the courses. Teacher Gu, who delivers the course of Business English Watching Listening and Speaking, believed that a student’s performance can be reflected by each assignment of cooperation, the criteria are content completeness and cooperativeness. When asked for the weight of each criterium, the teacher answered the criteria are almost evenly weighed. To reach the purpose of Business English learning, the students shall analyse the significance of every assignment so as to correctly and fully simulate real scenes. Teacher Gu also pointed out that cooperative learning is also required by the need to offer equal chances to each member of the huge class to participate in learning, improve their participation and learning efficiency. It turned out that those who took active part in the simulation would receive high evaluation and would become proficient with their skills.

The author also surveyed students with the major of 2013 business English and took the result as supplementary evidence of the effect of cooperative learning. Of the 46 students interviewed, 27 persons preferred to learn courses independently, accounting for 58.7% of the group. But when asked how to improve learning efficiency for Business English, 41 of the group preferred cooperative learning, accounting for 89.13% of the group. Obviously, most students agrees to the importance of cooperative learning with the course of Business English. Only 8.7% of the group doubt the effects of cooperative learning for improvement of their interest in business English. It can be inferred that cooperative learning is good for most of the students learning business English.

4. FINDINGS

Analyzing surveys on teachers and students with business English major at Beijing Wuzi University, we can find the impacts of cooperative learning on English courses as follows:

(1) Learning becomes more effective through cooperation. As a interviewed teacher points out, it’s a real challenge to arrange each of the 40 individuals in learning get involved in a class of 110 minutes. Then, cooperative learning is required to improve participation and increase efficiency in class. As we have seen, evaluation is based on group performance, forcing each member of a study group to take his/her own responsibility and to care for each other. They may need to learn from each other and discuss a common solution. In such manner, each member’s task is greatly facilitated. Meanwhile, cooperative learning allows each student to display his talents within the specified time by forming groups.

(2) Cooperative learning intensifies the students’ understanding of textbooks. As in the case of simulated business negotiation mentioned by the author, the learning process involves a whole chain of hard work including data collection, design of beginning and the end, and the lengthy preparation. It’s a systematic process. Unlike personal study, group study activates each member and motivate them to deeply explore needed knowledge, developing their learning capacities. Tian, who teaches International Trade Practice, points out that the course is deeply reliant on practices and is hard to grasp if the learners confine themselves to textbooks without simulation of the whole process of international trade. Cooperative learning in groups and role play in teams will offer students full opportunity to explore and experience the essence of this course under a simulated environment.

(3) Cooperative learning also improves team spirit and learning capacity for business English. The survey shows 86.96% of the students interviewed confirmed the power of cooperative learning to improve teamwork and communication skills. For their common goal, group members have to correct arbitrary behaviors, cultivate partnership and practice cooperation skills, so as to learn from each other and supplement each other. In interviews of students, Jia said she acted as the team principal and would divide each task among members, organize discussions and supervise conduction. She and her group members all learned from partnerships and
cultural differences that are common under commercial environment.

5. CONCLUSION

As the modern economy grows, business interactions becomes increasingly frequent between China and other countries, and oral English for dealing with business activities is highlighted as an important communication skill. Both teachers and students need to catch its features and develop scientific methods. Facts show that cooperative learning really has a deep impact on business English learning. The effects may be related to personal quality and participation, but learning activities shall be combined with real problems or tasks to guide and maintain students’ interests and motives. The students are better suggested to learn with real tasks, to explore and to discover the unknown actively, and to accumulate knowledge base. It is also a key method to evaluate the effects of Business English learning.

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