

Effects of the Cooperative Learning-based Flipped Classroom Model on Chinese Students' English Proficiency in the EFL Context

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Abstract

This study investigates how the cooperative learning-based flipped classroom paradigm affects the English language ability of Chinese university students in an EFL (English as a Foreign Language) setting. It was decided to use a quasi-experimental study approach. In an integrated skills course, the experimental group engaged in flipped classroom activities based on cooperative learning (CL) for 80 minutes over the course of 24 sessions. Only standard whole-class instruction was given to the control class. The students' spoken English proficiency was evaluated using an oral pre- and post-test before and after the intervention. The national written CET4 (College English Test Band 4) scores were adopted for comparing their general proficiency. The quantitative results revealed that the experimental class made greater gains in oral proficiency than the control class. Despite the fact that there was no significant difference in the written CET4 scores (general proficiency) between the two classes, the experimental class had a greater pass rate than the control class. The deployment of the CL-based flipped classroom paradigm in the EFL environment is further examined in connection to the results.

Keywords: College English; Cooperative Learning; Flipped Classroom; English Proficiency

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Introduction

At present, large classes are generally common in the College English courses in universities in China, and the desired results are difficult to achieve with classroom communicative activities. Many college students have passed the national written CET4 (College English Test Band 4) and CET6 (College English Test Band 6), but they are not fluent enough to communicate orally with native English speakers face to face in real life. The path towards realizing the goal of cultivating students' English ability stipulated in the College English Teaching Guide (2020) needs to be further explored.

Following the student-centered teaching philosophy, the flipped classroom style of instruction engages a mixed learning mode in which students' study inside and outside a classroom setting. Before class the students learn via instructional videos, completing "knowledge absorption". In class they interact with their teachers and peers, achieving "knowledge internalization". In China, like other subjects, to motivate students to become active learners, the application of the flipped classroom model in the College English classroom has gradually been developed. Chinese researchers have constructed and explored different types of flipped classroom models, such as the ones based on APPs (Dou & Wen, 2015), micro-class videos (Lu, 2014), MOOC (Hu & Wu, 2014) and electronic archives (Xu & Li, 2014). These studies mainly explored the effects of the different forms of flipped classrooms on English proficiency of university students in China. The flipped classroom paradigm hasn't, however, been extensively used and researched in EFL classrooms. There aren't many scientific studies that directly address the use of the flipped classroom model to structure students' interaction and maximize their oral output to develop their English proficiency.

This research seeks to develop a flipped classroom model based on cooperative learning (CL) in the College English classroom in an effort to enhance the current College English teaching situation in China. With the integration of information technology into teaching, CL will be structured for students to carry out communicative tasks so that they could have sufficient and effective language output, which would promote the deep internalization of the input. Therefore, this paper explores whether this model has a positive effect on improving college students' oral English as well as general competence (the combined level of listening, reading, writing) through the following research question.

What impact does the CL-based flipped classroom model have on the Chinese university students' oral proficiency and general proficiency in the EFL Context?

Second Language Acquisition, Flipped Classroom and CL

According to second language acquisition theories (Krashen,1985; Long,1996; Swain,1995), when emphasizing the role of comprehensible input, comprehensible input itself is not enough to ensure language acquisition. Learners should not only listen, but also interact and negotiate the language input they receive, and generate output. Language output gives students the chance to try out the language and adjust their utterances, which is helpful for language acquisition. It can also show them the difference between what they want to say and what they can convey. Based on second language acquisition theories, the Chinese scholar Qiufang Wen (2020) and some other scholars constructed the production-oriented approach with Chinese features, in which Chinese students should be given more opportunities to produce language output. College English teaching should create the best language communication environment for students, and help them use the language knowledge they have mastered to complete communicative tasks.

A flipped classroom is the reverse of the traditional style of instruction. Before class, students complete direct instruction by themselves, such as viewing a lecture online, and they can learn the material at their own pace. In class they focus on the discussion of the material. The teacher is better able to help the students engage in active learning by debates, group discussions or presentations. By doing so, the students can have more time to participate in class activities and become much more involved during the lesson. The teacher serves as a coach and supports the students when needed. It is generally argued (Deng, 2016; Zhang, Feng & Liu, 2014) that in the EFL context, when utilized properly, the flipped classroom model can provide many benefits to the students, such as enabling them to take charge of their learning process and having more interaction with their peers and the teacher. However, there are a number of challenges in this model such as inadequate student preparation before class, and higher workload for the student and the teacher (Akçayır & Akçayır, 2018).

CL means that to complete common tasks, students actively participate in the learning process, have a clear division of responsibilities, and encourage each other to learn together. Different from the traditional group activities, there are obvious differences in group formation, division of labor, interaction structures, cooperation principles and teachers' roles

(Jacobs,1998). During the CL process, teachers first design interactive tasks, require group members to take turns to play relevant roles, and follow certain principles of cooperation and interactive forms to carry out communicative activities. At the end of the event, group feedback and suggestions are offered for improvement.

Previous studies have shown that CL activities can provide students with the opportunity of generating language input and output, which is helpful in promoting communication among members (Crandall,1999; McCafferty et al, 2006; Masoud, et al., 2013; Lin, 2014;). With the flipped classroom style of instruction, whether CL can better improve the students' English level, especially their oral ability, will become a new angle to explore in the EFL context.

The Framework of the CL-based flipped classroom model

In order to develop students' English application skills, the flipped classroom model views learning as a series of communicative tasks that are directly tied to the teaching objectives. This model operates both within and outside of the classroom, as indicated in the accompanying picture. How does this teaching model runs before class, in class and after class are presented as follows:

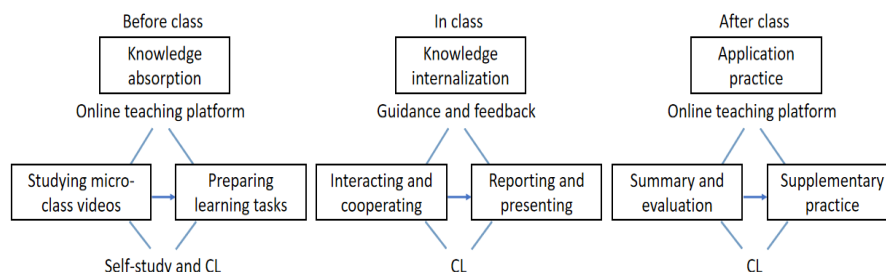


Figure 1: The Framework of the CL-based flipped classroom model

Before Class

Before class the teacher makes clear learning tasks, summarizes learning points, makes related micro-class videos and designs CL tasks. Based on the texts of Book One (Li, 2014) and Book Two (Li, 2014) of the new editions of *College English Integrated Skills Course* published by Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press, learning contents include text ideas and

structures, vocabulary, difficult sentences, grammar and cultural knowledge. At the same time, some extracurricular English learning resources are integrated into the learning contents. According to the English level of the students in class and the text content, related PPT, micro-class videos and learning task lists are developed. These learning materials are uploaded to the Black-board Teaching Platform of the university (<https://bb.fosu.edu.cn>) and the course website (<https://www.fscolleageenglish.com/>). After receiving the teacher's notice, the students learn independently the micro-class video to get familiar with the new knowledge points and complete the unit exercises according to the learning task list. At the same time, the students in groups of four discuss and communicate with their members, work together, implement personal responsibilities and prepare classroom group activities. In this process, the teacher and the students communicate and answer questions in the class Wechat Group. As a result, the students complete the absorption of the language knowledge before class.

In Class

Communication is vital for developing the language. Apart from answering the students' questions, CL-based communicative activities are organized to help students complete the internalization of the language knowledge. Mainly based on such forms of CL as Jigsaw, Think-Pair-Share, Group Discussion, Roundrobin and Group Project, communicative activities are carried out in class. Jigsaw is used to play the role of the teacher, summarizing the text information, making PPT and presenting the main ideas of some designated paragraphs, key vocabulary and cultural knowledge. Jigsaw is also used to retell part of the text in groups, forming a general idea. Think-Pair-Share and Group Discussion are used to exchange personal views on topics related to the texts. Roundrobin is used to write meaningful paragraphs about the new words and phrases just learnt; Group Project is for recording their group discussions related to unit topics and making videos. During the process of the CL activities, the teacher is an organizer, facilitator and guide. To guide students to make full use of the language knowledge obtained through self-study before class for interactive communication and presentations, vocabulary help and feedback are provided for the students when necessary. Each group has a group leader, a secretary, a timekeeper and an inspector. Each member plays his corresponding role in the activity to improve the group work efficiency.

After Class

At the end of each class, the group carries out self-assessment and peer evaluation according to a CL Evaluation Form, giving positive comments on what has been achieved and reflecting what needs to be improved. The teacher then comments on what the students have done, points out their problems in reading articles, language knowledge, CL activities and gives them feedback for improvement. Supplementary practice is the consolidation and extension of the knowledge learned in the classroom. In the form of Group Project, each group is required to create small argumentative papers or CET4 compositions together on the topic related to the unit theme.

Research Method

Sample of the Study

This project was carried out through a teaching experiment. In order not to affect the normal teaching schedule, two first-year classes majoring in business management and human resources management were chosen to participate in the research, with the human resources management class as the experimental class and the business management class as the control class. They were admitted to the university with the same National College Entrance Examination admission line. Before enrolling in this university, they were an average of 19 years old and had been learning English for 10 years. Both classes were housed on the same campus, exposed to the same surroundings, and made use of the same university resources. 56 people were in the experimental class and 55 people were in the control class out of a total of 111 participants. 5 students did not take CET4 written test due to personal reasons, and they were not included in the number of the participants in the investigation. A total of 106 students served as the statistics of all the scores of the project. The English scores ($t= 0.39$, $p= 0.70$) prior to treatment were calculated and compared using the Independent Samples Test. The findings revealed that there was no significant difference between the oral ratings. and the National College Entrance English Exam (NCEEE, $t= 0.87$, $p= 0.39$), indicating that the English level of the two classes were comparable.

Treatment

Both classes were offered comprehensive English courses, listening and speaking courses, using the same English textbooks. In this teaching experiment, Book One (Li, 2014) and Book Two (Li, 2014) were used as the teaching contents of *New College English Integrated Skills Course* published by Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press. According to the scores of NCEEE and the oral pre-test, the experimental class and control class were divided into low-, middle- and high-level learners, and then divided into 4-person groups with similar English level in each group. The teaching experiment was carried out in the participants' first academic year for 28 weeks and 24 sections, with an average of 80 minutes each section and a total of 32 hours. The experimental class conducted micro-class independent learning through the Black-board Teaching Platform, and carried out the CL-based flipped classroom model as presented above. However, the teacher-centred approach was adopted for the control class, and the teacher gave instruction on key words, text structures, cultural knowledge and related exercises. Students were asked to volunteer to share their ideas with the class or to respond to inquiries. Occasionally some communicative activities were carried out in random groups.

The experimental class and the control class had the same learning contents and teaching methods in the listening and speaking course. In class, the students logged on the coursebook teaching website (<http://202.192.168.56/npels>) to do listening exercises by themselves, submitting answers on the Internet and completing the test paper of each unit. Meanwhile, group discussions based on the unit topic were conducted and the students in groups took turns to speak in front of the teacher.

The CL-based flipped classroom model is an independent variable, and the students' English performance is a dependent variable. The teaching classroom environment is complex, and the experimental validity is affected by many factors. To improve the effectiveness of the experiments, it was ensured that the CL-based flipped classroom model was the only independent variable, that the two classes were not aware of their experimental or control condition, and that the two classes were taught by the same experienced teacher. Before the experiment, the students in the two classes were informed of its aim, and that the personal information they provided would be strictly confidential, and their names would not appear in the research report.

Instruments

The Oral Pre-test and Post-test

CET4 is a national examination chaired by the Ministry of Education of the Department of Higher Education, China, which can objectively and accurately reflect college students' English ability. It includes written and spoken English tests, and the written test is taken in mid-June and mid-December every year. Generally, all students take the written test, and only some of them take the spoken test. As only a few students in this study were willing to take the spoken test, in order to measure their oral skills, an oral test was designed for this study according to the format of the national spoken CET4. The same test questions were adopted for the pre-test and post-test (see the Appendix). The students' performances were assessed on the four aspects of the assessment scale of the spoken CET4: accuracy and range, utterance length and coherence, flexibility and appropriacy. Two qualified examiners were asked to listen to the recordings and evaluate the students' speaking abilities using an analytical scoring system. The students' test results were determined by the two assessors' average scores. The pre-test and post-test scores of 0.89 and 0.86, respectively, were utilised to calculate the credibility of the results using the Pearson correlation coefficient.

The Written CET4

Right after the one-year teaching experiment, the written CET4 was taken in mid-June. 106 students of the experimental class and the control class took this test, whose results were used to measure the changes of their general English level in listening, reading, writing and translating after the experiment.

Data Analysis and Results

To determine all English scores in this study, the Independent Sample Test was employed. The average and standard deviation were used to determine whether there was a significant difference between the experimental class and the control class in terms of speaking proficiency, T and P values will be reported and explained accordingly. Similarly, to explain whether the two classes had been significantly different in their general English level, the Independent Sample Test was also employed to analyze the scores of NCEEE and the written CET4.

Oral Proficiency

The average score of the oral pre-test for the experimental class was extremely similar to that of the control class, as can be seen in Table 1, according to the statistical findings of the independent sample T test. There was no discernible difference, according to $T=0.39$ and $p=0.70$ (> 0.05). In other words, the speaking level of the two classes was comparable prior to the experiment.

Table 1

Results obtained from the Independent Samples Test in the oral pre-test

Oral Proficiency	Groups	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std.	T	P
					Error Mean		
	EC	55	9.12	0.82	0.11	0.39	0.70
	CC	51	9.06	0.62	0.09		

According to the oral post-test findings in Table 2 below, the experimental class's average score is greater than the control class's ($12.92 > 11.89$), $t=7.6$ and $p=0.00$ (< 0.05), showing that the two classes have significant differences in oral proficiency scores; on average, the experimental class reached B+ in four levels of the spoken CET4, while the control class was B (in the spoken CET4, 12.5-13.4 falls into B+, and 11-12.4 is B). It can be seen that the CL-based flipped classroom model had a positive effect on improving the students' oral proficiency.

Table 2

Results obtained from the Independent Samples Test in the oral post-test

Oral Proficiency	Groups	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std.	T	P
					Error Mean		
	EC	55	12.92	0.68	0.09	7.60	0.00
	NC	51	11.89	0.70	0.10		

General English Proficiency

As shown in Table 3, the average score of the general proficiency in the National College Entrance English Exam (NCEEE) of the experimental class was very close to that of the control class. $T= 0.87$, $P=0.39$ (> 0.05). This shows that there was no significant difference between the two classes before the intervention.

Table 3
Results obtained from the Independent Samples Test in NCEEE

NCEEE	Groups	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	T	P
	EC	55	112.06	12.47	1.68	0.87	0.39
CC	51	110.08	11.02	1.54			

As presented in Table 4, the mean score of the written CET4 in the experimental class was slightly higher than that of the control class (441.15>424.14), T=1.54, and P=0.13 (> 0.05), indicating that the two classes were not significantly different in the written CET4 results. Despite this, as shown in Table 5, 34 students, 61.8% in the experimental class reached the pass score (425 or over) of the written CET4, while only 26 students, 50.9% did in the control class, with the former at 10.9% higher.

Table 4
Results obtained from the Independent Samples Test in the written CET4

General English Proficiency	Groups	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	T	P
	EC	55	441.15	53.90	7.27	1.54	0.13
CC	51	424.14	59.28	8.30			

Table 5
The pass rate in the written CET4

Pass rate	Groups	N	Pass number (425 or over)	Pass rate	Pass rate difference
	EC	55	34	61.8%	10.9%
	CC	51	26	50.9%	

Discussion and Pedagogical Implications

Compared with the control class, the experimental class had made greater progress in the oral English level after the experiment. Although the written CET4 scores of the two classes were not significantly different, the pass rate in the experimental class was higher than that in the control class. That is to say, the CL-based flipped classroom model is conducive to improving the English level of college students. The students received formal language training before entering the university with certain vocabulary and language knowledge. In the form of CL, the flipped classroom model provided them

with opportunities to jointly complete communicative tasks inside and outside the classroom, thus promoting the internalization of their language input and output.

Firstly, the students had more opportunities to practice English and thus increased their oral output. Before class the students learned knowledge points independently and cooperated with their members to prepare for some tasks. This shortened the instruction time and increased the practice time in class. More importantly, CL activities were structured, and they could give each student opportunities to interact with their peers. For example, Jigsaw was used for each member in the group to be responsible for the recitation of a certain part of the text to form the main idea of the text. Each member must understand the text, get prepared for the required content, and communicate with the members to ensure that they could form the main idea of the text. In class the students retold the text in groups, and at the same period 25% students of the class were talking. That means that 100% students participated in language practice, and as a result, language output was much more than in the teacher-centred classroom. At present, large classes are common in the College English course, and the time spent on communicative activities is reduced after the teacher answers the students' questions in class. Even if the classroom is "flipped", the knowledge internalization process is difficult to meet the standards of personalized and deep learning (Lou & Chen, 2017). The CL-based teaching model in this study seemed to break the limitations of the flipped classroom language practice and create opportunities for each student to apply their language knowledge. Through cooperative communication and presentations, the students could fully participate in classroom activities and increase their oral output.

Secondly, all of the students with different English levels seemed to benefit from this teaching model. The Vygotsky (1978) Cognitive Development Theory emphasizes the importance of social interaction for individual learning and cognitive development, which has been extended and applied to the social-cultural theory of second language acquisition. As discussed by Shrum & Glisan (2000), when a learner receives help from experts (such as a teacher) or more capable peers, it facilitates second language acquisition. During the interaction with peers, the peers are either experts or beginners. Ellis (2003) argues that the Zone of Proximal Development is a major concept of the socio-cultural theory, noting that this concept can explain why learners cannot express some language structures by themselves, but can do it with the help from others. In this study, perhaps low-level learners gained guidance and help from peers with better English levels, and thus making progress. According to Cognitive

Elaboration Theory, if learners want to keep the information in memory and connect the existing information in memory, they must have some cognitive reorganization of the learning materials. The crucial strategy is to explain the course material to others. According to some research on the interactive elements of CL and conventional instruction, Cohen (1994) observed that the students' accomplishments in these studies were related to their thorough justifications. In this study, high-level learners seemed to have benefited from CL activities who were responsible for providing help and language interpretations for learners with low levels. Based on many empirical studies on language improvement due to interaction, Mackey (2007:100) notes that when learners have the opportunity to negotiate the meaning of intelligible input, accept feedback and modify their output, they will have a desirable result.

Thirdly, the students' interest in learning was somewhat sparked by the assessment procedure. The assessment strategy of combining summative evaluation (70%) and formative evaluation (30%) was implemented by both the experimental class and the control class. The formative evaluation of the control class included 30% for classroom performance, 20% for attendance and 50% for assignments. Different from the control class, the formative evaluation of the experimental class included 10% for independent learning, 20% for CL, 30% for classroom performance, 20% for tests and 20% for assignments. The two classes had the same summative evaluation including final oral English and written examinations. It is generally believed that there is a lack of motivation and interest in English learning among college students in China. The formative evaluation adopted in this experiment may have motivated the students to learn more actively on their own initiative.

Fourthly, learning was aided by group processing. Positive interdependence is specifically regarded as the first and most significant component of CL, enabling pupils to understand that individual goals can only be attained if all members' goals are attained (Johnson et al., 1994). Each participant must comprehend the assigned task in order to work toward the shared objective, and they must make an effort to guarantee that the rest of the group does as well. The individual growth of each group member is essential to its success. They are accountable to both the other members and their own studies. In this study, after CL activities were completed, group processing was conducted to summarize what had been done well and point out what needed to be improved to form a learning atmosphere of mutual support and cooperation.

However, with the CL-based flipped classroom style of instruction, some challenges arose due to traditional classroom culture, poor

independent learning ability, switch to Chinese, insufficient feedback, learning objectives and other classroom issues. Firstly, the National College Entrance Exams had generally exposed the students to the teacher-fronted format before they entered the university, whereas the CL-based flipped classroom model is a student-centered approach, requiring them to take charge of and be more autonomous in their own learning. It was likely that some students could have difficulty studying the learning material by themselves and preparing for the in-class CL activities. It took time for them to adjust themselves to such student-centred cooperative learning activities. Next, it is argued that students sharing a common first language tend to use it during pair/group work activities in the EFL context (e.g., Naughton, 2006). This would cause collaborative efforts to have unforeseen consequences. In this study, CL exercises were designed so that students would be expected to interact in English, but when they ran out of words to express themselves, they would instead converse in a kind of mixed English and native language that they could understand. Additionally, the CL communicative tasks allowed the students to communicate in groups while using the language. They unconsciously produced some incorrect linguistic elements. Due to the short class period, there wasn't enough time for timely corrective feedback or other forms of form-focused instruction to assist the students in increasing their accuracy. In addition, to pass CET4 was not a component of the assessment of their degree, and in their first year, it was not a pressing issue for them, which is likely why they did not put much effort into their English studies. These issues may help explain why the CL-based flipped classroom model did not generate a great impact on the students' general proficiency.

Concluding Remarks

The flipped classroom approach is novel. The flipped classroom style based on CL can encourage students to learn independently and provide them with more output opportunities, thus improving their English proficiency. It is hoped that this study will provide reference for the effective implementation of the current flipped classroom model in the EFL context.

Limitations and Further Studies

The study had certain constraints because it was conducted in an actual classroom, which is a usual practice for studies into second language interaction. The small sample size was one of its limitations. There were several uncontrollable external variables in this experiment with intact

classes. Because they are done in settings similar to those typically encountered in educational contexts, studies utilising intact classes are “more likely to have external validity” (Seliger & Shohamy, 1989:149). The results may only be extrapolated to comparable universities in China because the trial was limited to a single university.

Due to the fact that many factors affect language learning in actual classroom settings, data need to be collected from larger samples for analysis to confirm the trends reflected in the study. The participants were from Human Resources Management and Business Management. The features of English learning among students with different degrees vary, hence it is advised that in subsequent studies, students from different majors be selected to explore the effects of the CL-based flipped classroom model on English proficiency. Also, this teaching model encourages students to learn on their own initiative. This may help them enhance their independent learning ability and master their English learning strategies, which will have lifelong benefits. It would be worthwhile to investigate whether this teaching model has a positive effect on these aspects.

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