Exploratory Research on the Change of Students' Communication Strategies in a Cooperative Learning EFL Class

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1. Introduction

Cooperative learning is a group activity organized so that learning is dependent on socially structured in groups, and in which each learner is held accountable for his or her own learning (Olsen & Kagan, 1992). In a cooperative learning EFL classes, the students will learn how to communicate with others in various ways, and then they will learn to fit into society.

On the other hand, communication means getting our message across, and it is also a continuous process of expression, interpretation, and negotiation of meaning (Savignon, 1983). However, focusing on meaning, the meaning we intend and the meaning we convey are often not the same (Savignon, 1983). Therefore, we can depend on symbolic representation in order to compensate for the gap, for example in written or spoken words, gestures, design, color, movement, or sound (Savignon, 1983). It can be said that these symbolic representations are a part of communication strategies.

On referring to the further studies mentioned above, the author verifies how cooperative learning was realized among the students, and then whether cooperative learning will have an influence on the changes of the students' communication strategies in the experimental classes. Then, the author will suggest the implications for further cooperative learning EFL teaching.

2. Literature review

2.1 Cooperative learning

Simply placing students in groups, and telling them to work together do not result in cooperative effort. According to Johnson and Johnson (1987), when teachers have real expertise in using cooperative learning, they will structure the following five essential components into instructional activities:

(1) *Positive interdependence*

Positive interdependence is the perception that students are linked with other group members in such a way that one student cannot succeed unless they all do (Johnson et al., 1990). In other words, each student will have responsibilities to help other group members in order to achieve the goal.

(2) *Face to face promotive interaction*

Once teachers establish positive interdependence, they need to maximize the opportunity for students to promote each other's success by helping, supporting, encouraging, and praising each other's efforts to learn (Johnson & Johnson, 1987).

(3) *Individual accountability*

Individual accountability exists when the performance of each individual student is assessed, and the results are given back to the group and the individual (Johnson & Johnson, 1987). It is important that the group members know who needs more assistance, support, and encouragement in completing the assignment. It is also important that group members know that they cannot "hitch hike" on the work of others.

(4) *Social skills*

Teachers must teach students some social skills like turn-taking, listening to other's opinion, self-assertion, compromising, and so on (Johnson et al., 1990).

(5) *Group processing*

Group processing exists when group members discuss how well they are achieving their goals, and maintaining effective working relationships (Johnson et al., 1990). Groups need to describe what members' actions are helpful and unhelpful, and make decisions about what behaviors to continue, or change.

However, some cooperative researchers suggest that it would be difficult to include the above elements in a class because of time management of the class.

Even if teachers attempt to include those elements in a class, some elements would be realized, but others would be neglected, because the teachers might not leave students enough time to do the activities including the other elements.

2.2 Communication strategies

Communication strategies are ways to express the meaning in a second foreign language, by a learner who has a limited command of the language (Richards et al., 1992). In trying to communicate, a learner may have to make up for a lack of knowledge of grammar, or vocabulary.

There are several categorized systems offering taxonomies of communication strategies. The following strategies can apply to any level of the language, that is, lexis, phonological, grammatical, or pragmatic (Tarone, 1977):

(1) *Avoidance*

Avoidance is a strategy that the learner gives up a topic, or abandons a specific message (Ellis & Barkhuizen, 2005).

(2) *Paraphrase*

Paraphrase is an expression of the meaning of a word or phrase using other words or phrase, often in an attempt to make the meaning easier to understand (Richards et al., 1992).

(3) *Conscious transfer*

Conscious transfer is the deliberate use of L1, for example, by literally translating an L1 expression (Ellis & Barkhuizen, 2005).

(4) *Appeals for assistance*

Appeals for assistance is asking for aid from the interlocutor either directly, for example, 'What do you call…?', or indirectly, for example rising intonation, pause, eye contact, and puzzled expression (Tarone, 1981).

(5) *Mime*

Mime is a movement of the face or body, which communicates meaning, such as nodding the head to mean agreement (Richards et al., 1992).

3. Research questions

The author set up the following research questions:

RQ1: How was cooperative learning was realized among the students in EFL class?

RQ2: Will cooperative learning change students' communication strategies in EFL class?

4. Method

4.1 Subjects

Subjects are freshmen of a Japanese national university (N=33; 27 males and 6 females). They belong to the faculties of engineering and agriculture. They took Pre-TOEFL before entering the university, because the university required all freshmen to take that test in order to judge their English ability, and then they will be divided into three classes: advanced, intermediate, and beginner's classes. The subjects in this study were judged at the intermediate level from the results of Pre-TOEFL.

In the experimental classes, the subjects were divided into eight groups by drawing lots, and then the groups had not been broken up until the end of the experimental classes. Then, on analyzing data, the author chose one group from the eight groups, and analyzed the interaction of the group students (the author will describe the group as Group A in this paper). The reason why he chose the group was that all members of the group had been attending the classes until the end of the experimental classes, and then the author could analyze the continuous students' data. Group A consists of five students, and there are 4 males and 1 female in the group. The author will refer to each male students as A1 to A4, and female student as A5 in this paper.

4.2 Material

The main topics of the experimental classes were related to the problems of nuclear power generation caused by the 3.11 Tohoku earthquake. These

topics were chosen form the textbook about Japan news written in English (Kimura, T., Sato, T., & Asai, Y. (2013). *Better Reading, Better Writing with NHK WORLD NEWS.* Tokyo: Nan'un-do.).

4.3 Procedure

The students took a total of eight cooperative learning EFL classes. In two of the experimental classes, the students carried out the poster session and the debate. They approached the problems of nuclear power generation caused by the 3.11 Tohoku earthquake in those ways (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: The procedure of the experimental classes
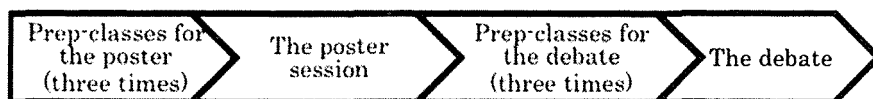
4.4 Data analysis

On analyzing the students' cooperative learning and communication strategies, the author analyzed them by transcribing these students' interaction, and analyzing video of the group.

5. Results and analyses

5.1 The students' cooperative learning

Table 1 shows what cooperative learning elements were realized among the observed students: positive interdependence (PI), face to face promotive interaction (FFPI), individual accountability (IA), social skills (SS), and group processing (GP).

As can be seen in Table 1, most of the elements were realized among the students through the process of the experimental classes. Some classes did not have the group processing phase because of the experimenter's time constraint.

Table 1: What cooperative learning elements were realized among the students

Dates of the class	The five cooperative learning elements				
	PI	FFPI	IA	SS	GP
5/22	○	○	○	○	
5/29	○	○	○	○	
6/5	○	○	○	○	
6/12	○	○	○	○	○
6/19	○	○	○	○	○
6/26	○	○	○	○	
7/3	○	○	○	○	○
7/10	○	○	○	○	○

However, some cooperative learning researchers suggest that it is actually difficult to offer the class that includes all cooperative learning elements to students because of the limitation of class time. If teachers focus on the activities in the class, there is a possibility that group-reviewing time would be sacrificed to some extent. Therefore, it could be said that the classes which did not have the group processing phase functioned nevertheless as cooperative learning.

Next, let us see how those elements were realized among the Group A students in the activities. Extract 1 represents a part of the Group A students' interaction in the poster session on June 12th, 2013. A1 was in trouble because he did not know how to say "*Seiji*" in English. Then, the other group member A2 helped A1 with saying "*Seiji*" in English.

Extract 1: Positive interdependence and face to face promotive interaction were realized between A1 and A2

A1: Topic one, new energy. New energy is ah Japanese new energy is talking and discuss about Japanese なんだっけ 政治 政治は

A2: えーと government

A1: あ government's took

Although A2 did not tell A1 correct meaning (i.e. not "government", but "politics"), it can be said that those students cooperated with each other in order to achieve the goal that they had to introduce listeners the topic they had learned. Therefore, the author considers that positive interdependence and face to face promotive interaction were realized between those students in terms of helping other group members in need.

The next extract represents a part of the scene of the English debate on July 10th, 2013. It was the question and answer period when another group student (O1) asked a question to the Group A students. Although A1 would ask O1 to restate the question more specifically, he stopped asking that halfway because he did not think of English expressions. At that time, other Group A students helped A1 immediately.

Extract 2: Positive interdependence and face to face promotive interaction were realized among the Group A students

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1 O1: えーと What's えー kind of alternative and renewable energy to keep
2   lives by now? Before 3.11.
3 A1: Please one more say ah
4 A3: 具体的に (helped B1)
5 A4: Concrete, concrete (helped B1)
6 A1: Concretely

A1 could ask O1 to restate the question more specifically due to the assistance from other Group B members. On the other hand, A3 and A4 might think that helping A1 would lead their group to success. Therefore, it can be said that positive interdependence and face to face promotive interaction were realized among the Group A students.

Although the author included some extracts that showed cooperative learning was realized among the Group A students, he found that the same cooperative learning was also realized among the other students from the analyses of students' interaction. Moreover, positive interdependence and face to face promotive interaction were realized among the students especially in the group-exchange activity like the poster session, and the English debate.

The author considers that each student's accountability for the group to succeed might have influence on realizing those elements in such activities.

5.2 The students' communication strategies

The following tables show what communication strategies the Group A students used in the activities where the students communicated with each other in English (*Note.* the abbreviations in the tables represent as follows: avoidance (A), paraphrase (P), conscious transfer (CT), appeals for assistance (AFA), and mime (M)).

Table 2: The communication strategies Group A students used in the poster session on June 12th, 2013

	The communication strategies				
Group A students	A	P	CT	AFA	M
A1	○	○	○	○	○
A2					
A3			○		
A4	○		○	○	○
A5					

Table 3: The communication strategies Group A students used in the English debate on June 19th, 2013

	The communication strategies				
Group A students	A	P	CT	AFA	M
A1	○		○		
A2			○	○	
A3		○	○	○	
A4	‒	‒	‒	‒	‒
A5	○		○	○	

Table 4: The communication strategies Group A students used in the English debate on July 3rd, 2013

Group A students	The communication strategies				
	A	P	CT	AFA	M
A1	–	–	–	–	–
A2	–	–	–	–	–
A3			○	○	
A4			○	○	
A5	–	–	–	–	–

Table 5: The communication strategies Group A students used in the English debate on July 10th, 2013

Group A students	The communication strategies				
	A	P	CT	AFA	M
A1					
A2					
A3					
A4					
A5					

As can be seen in the above tables, the Group A students did not gradually use the communication strategies as the experimental classes progressed. Moreover, the author found that the students did not especially use the communication strategies to use puzzled expressions (appeals for assistance), to give up stating the opinions (avoidance), and to tell the ideas in Japanese (conscious transfer).

Next, let us see how the Group A students used those communication strategies in the activities in detail. On analyzing the students' interaction, the author will focus on A5, who often had the difficulties in expressing the opinions in English, but improved her speaking skills until the end of the experimental classes. The following extract shows a part of the scene where A3 and A5 discussed what university entrance examinations should be

abolished in the English debate implemented on June 19th, 2013. In the following extract, A5 asked a question to A3.

Extract 3: A5 used avoidance, conscious transfer, and appeals for assistance in
          the English debate

A1: Are there any questions?
A5: (silence) んと えーと Do you think that えーと the person えーと the
     person なんだろう (AFA) the person They didn't want to enter enter 学
     部 (CT)
A3: うん うん
A5: Enter 学部 (CT) the university? 分かんない (A) (silence) 全然通じてない
     よね

A5 tried to express what she wanted to say in English with showing appeals for assistance (AFA) (see l.3). Then, although A5 attempted to ask a question to A3 in English, she translated an unknown word into Japanese ("*Gakubu*" means the departments at universities) (see l.3~4). Moreover, A5 tried to ask the question to A3 by using the words translated into Japanese, but she gave up asking the question (see l.6). Perhaps, A5 might not know the expressions to express what she wanted to say in English any more at that time.

　　However, the improvements of A5's English speaking skill were confirmed in the English debate implemented on July 10th, 2013. The statement was "Japan should continue to use nuclear power generation", and then Group A was in the negative side at that time. In the following extract, A5 asked a question to one of the affirmative side (O2).

Extract 4: A5 asked a question to O2

A5: I have a question about んと How much is nu いや nuclear power
     generation cheaper than other power generations?
O2: One more please.
A5: えと How much is えー nuclear power generation cheaper than other
     power generations?

A5 could ask the question to O2 with correct grammar (see 1.1~2 & 1.4~5). Although the length of the statement A5 said was not so long, she seemed to have confidence to speak English more than before from the video observation.

Although the author described a few samples of the Group A students' interaction, all Group A students could interact with the competitors in English, and nobody gave up stating the opinions halfway in the end of the experimental classes. To be honest, the experimenter did not give special instructions to those students. It can be considered that the students were conscious about their own weak points of English performance, and they might make efforts to improve their English performance by themselves, or sometimes by the group mates' help in out of class.

6. Conclusion and imprecations

On verifying the students' cooperative learning and communication strategies, the author chose one from eight groups as a sample, and then he analyzed their interaction.

On verifying the students' cooperative learning, the author found that most of the cooperative elements were realized among the students. The frequencies of positive interdependence and face to face promotive interaction were especially high in the group-exchange activities like the poster session and the English debate. Referring to that point, the author considered that the cohesion of the group members would be enhanced in such activities, and each student's accountability for the group to succeed might have influence on realizing those elements.

The author expects that positive interdependence and face to face promotive interaction will especially promote the students' learning. That is because even a less competent learner may be able to succeed in a task due to assistance by other group members. For example, a student who is in trouble because he does not know what to say in English can receive support from other group members, and then he can decide what to say in English, and may eventually achieve the goal of task.

On the other hand, on analyzing the students' communication strategies, the author found that the students did not gradually use avoidance, conscious

transfer, and appeals for assistance as the experimental classes processed. Referring to that point, the author considers that cooperative learning may also have an influence on decreasing the frequency of using those communication strategies. In other words, it can be considered that even less competent students will be able to achieve the goal to interact with others in English by the assistance from other group members.

However, through analyzing the students' interaction, the author found that many students had the difficulties in telling others their thoughts or opinions because they did not know how to express these in English. In other words, they could not think of what words or phrases to use in order to express their thoughts and opinions. It is the best way that the teacher teaches such students the appropriate expressions, but the activities in the experimental classes were classified into open-ended tasks; in other words, each of the students had different thoughts and opinions, so they had to use different words and phrases depending on these. Referring to those problems, the author would like to suggest that the teachers listen carefully to students' interaction as much as possible during the activities. Moreover they can correct students' needs with questionnaire in the end of class, and teach the expressions which the students want to know at the next class little by little, too.

Although the author showed the samples of only one group, it could be said that cooperative learning had an influence on the changes of the students' communication strategies in EFL class from the reasons mentioned above. The author believes that cooperative learning has a lot of possibilities to promote students' learning, and cooperative learning will be necessary for English learning in order to enable students to learn English more practically. The author will continue to seek for other possibilities that he could not discover in this study from now on.

7. Limitations

Although the author observed and analyzed the Group A students' interaction when he analyzed the change of the students' communicative strategies, he could not always observe and analyze every student's interaction regularly because of an equipment problem. The experimenter

prepared a fixed-point camera for the group, but there were some cases where some of the group students moved to another desks depending on the activities in the experimental classes. Therefore, he could not precisely verify how their communication strategies changed through the experimental classes.

（注）本稿は修士論文「Exploratory Research on the Change of the Students' Language Learning Beliefs and Communication Strategies in a Cooperative Learning EFL Class」の一部である。

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