



## The influence of learner strategies on oral presentations: A comparison between group and individual performance

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### ARTICLE INFO

#### Article history:

Available online 28 May 2011

#### Keywords:

Learner strategy  
Oral presentation  
Cooperative learning  
EAP  
EFL

### ABSTRACT

Cooperative learning has frequently been used in language classrooms, from in-class task-based group work to group presentations. Research suggests that cooperative learning provides mutual support, as well as successful and effective learning outcomes of tasks. The present research addressed a number of problems discovered in group oral presentations in an EAP context where cooperative learning is the core of the course. As learning is strongly related to strategies or approaches adopted to facilitate one's comprehension and production of the target language, the purposes of the present study were to investigate the use and influence of learner strategies in cooperative and individual learning, and the benefits of cooperative learning in improving students' English speaking ability.

Fifty-two, third-year French major college students taking the Professional English Course at a college in Taiwan participated in the study. All participants were required to give oral presentations on the topics taught in class. Research methods included questionnaires, interviews, and oral assessments. The findings showed that, first, certain learner strategies had positive impacts on the students' language performance in the two types of presentation and second, that group oral presentation had the greatest influence on improving students' speaking ability, while other forms of cooperative learning activities enhanced their motivation for learning.

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### 1. Introduction

In the past few decades, cooperative learning has been promoted in language classrooms as a way of increasing learning and teaching efficiency, learner motivation, and communication and collaboration between learners. Learning with peers provides learners with plenty of opportunities to practise the target language via the exchange of ideas. As the saying goes, 'Two heads are better than one.' The benefits of cooperative learning appear to override those of individual learning. In particular, research has suggested that cooperative learning is beneficial to Asian learners who are influenced by Confucianism, in the sense that it alleviates their anxiety and concern about 'face' when learning with peers (Flowerdew, 1998; Hofstede, 1980). As a result, cooperative learning has become an important approach used by many teachers.

The success or failure of cooperative learning, however, can be influenced by a great number of variables, ranging from language input and output, interaction, and sociocultural elements to individual differences and affective factors. My initial interest in conducting this research resulted from an unsuccessful and problematic cooperative EAP classroom in a college in Taiwan. The students who took the English course had to give oral presentations in groups twice a semester. Owing to the large size of classes in this college (more than 50 students in a class unit), presentation in groups is frequently used in order to improve the efficiency of teaching and learning. In the present case, the students had taken their French major courses

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together over the past two years (four semesters), and had gained the experience of giving oral presentations at least once or twice every semester. They thus had regular group members to work with; that is, they were familiar with each other in terms of personality and learning styles, at least to a certain degree. In their third year of study, they were taught by the researcher, and several problems were discovered during their group oral presentations. Whereas recent research has focused primarily on the positive effects of the cooperative learning of small-scale tasks or activities carried out in the language classroom, the present study explores the problems occurring at various stages of group oral presentations. Since choices of learner strategies are closely related to how learners comprehend and produce the target language (Cohen, 1998; Griffiths, 2007), it is worth investigating the application of learner strategies in group and individual presentations, and the influence of learner strategies on the students' language performance in both types of presentation. Students' performance in individual presentations could serve as a benchmark to compare performance in group presentations. In addition, the extent to which the type of cooperative learning activity encourages and benefits oral ability is also explored. It is hoped that the results will shed light on problems occurring in oral presentations in an EAP context, and provide EFL teachers with a better understanding of the learning process and the development of English speaking ability in the two types of oral presentation.

## 2. Cooperative learning in EAP contexts

Cooperative learning by definition relates to the amount of group support; the degree to which individual members of a group need to learn from each other's strengths and weaknesses to develop an achievable goal and to exhibit their skills (McCafferty, Jacobs, & Iddings, 2006, pp. 4–5). The term cooperative learning is often used interchangeably with collaborative learning; the former tends to be used with primary and secondary learners, the latter with older learners. Sharan and Sharan (1992), however, considering the teacher's influence on student–student interaction in class, suggest that cooperative learning is more general and allows students a great deal of control over such matters as topic selection, communication with group members and the process of collaboration. In their definition, collaboration is seen as a process generating cooperative learning. Other studies also note that cooperative learning activities are associated with gains in achievement, higher-level thinking and self-esteem (Cohen, 1994; Johnson & Johnson, 1989; Sharan, 1980; Slavin, 1995). In the present study, the nature of the group work investigated was closely related to this broader, more general, sense of cooperative learning. Therefore the term 'cooperative learning' was used in preference to collaboration.

According to Jacobs and McCafferty (2006), cooperative learning is connected to second language learning and teaching in seven interrelated areas: the input hypothesis, the interaction hypothesis, the output hypothesis, sociocultural theory, content-based instruction, individual differences and affective factors. The input hypothesis suggests that second language acquisition is driven by language input, that is, listening and reading. The outcome of language input is, however, unobservable unless it is shown through output or other forms of observable interaction. Swain (1993; also see Jacobs & McCafferty, 2006, p. 20) notes that output facilitates language acquisition in terms of "promoting fluency via meaningful language use, pushing learners to engage in syntactic processing of language, and promoting opportunities for feedback from others". In cooperative learning, speaking or writing meaningful language fluently, whereby learners have to interact and negotiate with each other to accomplish a task, is highly valued. Learners in the present study needed to read extensively in and after class and to cooperate in order to accomplish a goal (i.e., oral presentations). During the process of cooperation, learners utilized their own cultural background, each other, artefacts for communication and the environment to create a physical and mental learning space in a particular sociocultural context.

In addition, individual differences, learner autonomy, and affective factors also determine group dynamics, atmosphere, interactions and success. For many years, Chinese students have been labeled 'silent' and 'reticent' in the language classroom (Flowerdew, 1998; Zhang & Head, 2010). Flowerdew (1998), in her research on the effect of cultural differences on group work, discovered that group work is a suitable strategy for Chinese students who tend to be silent because of concern over 'face'. Cooperative learning diminishes their apprehension and uncertainty. In Japan, Joritz-Nakagawa (2006) conducted research on the use of cooperative learning to accomplish a term project in a group of Japanese university students, noting, as did Flowerdew, that cooperative learning increased learner motivation and willingness to participate in class. In order to involve students in interaction, Dörnyei and Malderez (1997) emphasized the importance of the dynamics of group learning in shaping the L2 learning process. They suggested that group work can help change learners' behavior and attitudes, building confidence and a cohesive relationship through the quantity and quality of interaction between members. Although there are many advantages of cooperative learning, learning with group members is different from independent or individual learning in the sense that multidimensional factors involved in learning with peers can influence students' choice of learning strategies and linguistic performance. This again is a reason for investigating learner strategies and language performance in cooperative and independent learning.

Nevertheless, group work is not without its difficulties. Long (1977, p. 289), for example, stated that although bigger groups offer more problem-solving resources, an increase in size brings extra problems of intra-group organization and communication. Jacobs (1988, p. 97), in his study of university students' group activities in Thailand, found that groups did not necessarily cooperate equally and a lack of cooperation led to complaints, arguments, and group dysfunction. Dörnyei and Malderez (1997) indicated that individuals in groups may behave differently than they would outside the group. Group oral presentation, unlike conventional in-class group discussion, tasks, or activities, thus requires the careful organization of materials, cooperation among group members, and a lucid presentation. The differences in learning outcomes between group and individual work remain unknown.

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