

Strategies to Improve Student-Student Interaction in Senior High English Teaching in Western China*

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Classroom teaching interaction has been the research topic these years. This paper focuses on student-student interaction based on empirical studies of classroom interaction, including questionnaires, interviews, and lesson observations, finding that there are some pair work activities, but there are few group work activities in senior high English teaching in Western China for some reasons, such as large classes, exam-oriented education, etc. This research also suggests some communicative activities for teachers to adopt, such as jigsaw, information gap, topic discussion, debate, using group work in reading, peer writing conference, etc., aiming to cultivate students' collaborative learning and co-operative awareness. Teachers will change their teaching ideas and adopt flexible methods to increase students' talk time, using group work activities according to students' needs. By doing this, teachers can arouse students' motivation to learn and improve teaching and learning efficiency, and the goal is to promote their personal whole development.

Keywords: strategies, senior English teaching in Western China, student-student interaction, activities

Introduction

Several years ago, the author conducted an investigation in senior high graduate students from Western China about student-student interaction in English classroom teaching, finding that there was little student-student interaction. In these years, the author have been concerning about classroom interaction to see whether the situation mentioned above has changed or not. The author attended some English lessons to observe teachers' teaching behaviors, and she also interviewed some English teachers and students from different types of senior schools. The author finds that there is improvement in English teaching in teacher-student interaction in these years. There is pair work in some English classes, but there are few group work activities in senior high in Western China. From the interviews and lesson observation, the investigation shows that teacher-student interaction is still the main interactive form, and teachers sometimes use pair work, but seldom use group work, which corresponds with the students' answers who she interviewed. Because some teachers cannot meet the requirements of the *New National English Curriculum* in language and teaching ideas or abilities; some teachers may consider time consuming, and thinking group work may occupy much class time and it is not worth doing

* **Acknowledgements:** This research is based on the project: The Connection between University and Basic Education from the Perspective of key Qualities-Based on the Construction of English Teachers' Community (2017), No.336. Subsidized by Education Department of Sichuan Province.

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the activities; most of English classes are large classes including more than 50 students, so it is hard to conduct group work activities. College Entrance Exams still drive teachers to focus on exams and students' marks. The author believes there is still a long way to go to change such situations. This paper explores the reasons of little group work and the importance of student-student interaction in English teaching. It aims to advocate collaborative learning to improve students' cooperative awareness and learning effectiveness. Some specific teaching techniques and methods are put forward in order to enhance student-student interaction.

A Brief Review of Student-Student Interaction and Collaborative Learning

Student-Student Interaction

Johnson claims,

Student-student interaction can create opportunities for students to participate in less structured and more spontaneous language use, negotiate meaning, self-select when to participate, control the topic of discussion, and most important, draw on their own prior knowledge and interactive competencies to actively communicate with others. (Johnson, 2000, p. 116)

He also believed that constructive students-student interactions influence students' educational aspirations and achievement, develop social competences, and encourage taking on the perspectives of others. Other linguists, such as Slavin, Sharan, and Webb, each provides in-depth reviews of research that overwhelmingly conclude that cooperative learning tasks in small groups enhance students' academic achievement, self-esteem, relationships among students of different ethnic backgrounds, and positive attitudes toward school (Johnson, 2000, p. 115). Based on post hoc analysis, the results also indicated that among the three types of interactions, student-student interaction produced the highest effect on achievement outcomes (Borokhovskia, Tamim, Bernard, Abrami, & Sokolovskaya, 2012, pp. 311-329).

Collaborative Learning

Student-student interaction is closely related to collaborative learning. Collaborative learning is based on the model that knowledge can be created within a population where members actively interact by sharing experiences and take on asymmetric roles (Mitnik, Recabarren, Nussbaum, & Soto, 2009, pp. 330-342). Collaborative learning is rooted in Vygotsky's concept of learning called zone of proximal development (ZPD). In Vygotsky's definition of ZPD, he highlighted the importance of learning through communications and interactions with others rather than just through independent work (Vygotsky, 1978). Rather, collaborative learning encourages students to make progress on improving the situation as they work together when learning the theory, answering questions, or solving problems.

Pair work and group work can be used to realize the learning goals of collaborative learning. Harmer (2000) believed, "in groups, students tend to participate more equally, and they are also able to experiment and use the language than they are in a whole-class arrangement" (p. 21). He also suggests that group work gives the students chances for independence and gives the teacher opportunities to work with individual students (Harmer, 2000, p. 21). Brown (2001) also pointed out, "small groups provide opportunities for student initiation, for face to face, give and take, for practice in negotiation of meaning, for extended conversational exchanges" (p. 173). In China, enhancement of student-student interaction is of great significance. Students can be motivated to voice their ideas, to improve their English learning interests, to construct and reconstruct their English knowledge by negotiating

meaning with their peers, as a result, to improve their English proficiency, to train their cooperative learning spirit, and to improve their personalities through pair work, group work, or other kinds of cooperative activities.

Research Methods

The research includes three parts: The first is questionnaires to investigate classroom interactions; the second is interviewing some senior high teachers and students about current student-student interaction situations in classroom teaching; the third part is the author's lesson observations of senior teachers' English teaching.

1. The participants are 150 students from different senior high schools in Sichuan Province in China, covering different levels of senior high schools in Western Sichuan. The students are from urban and rural areas, a few of whom are from remote and ethnic minority autonomous counties. Their ages are from 18-20 years old. These students are asked to answer the questionnaires about classroom interactions.

2. The author interviews six English teachers from different types of high schools by using semi-structure questions and open questions. The questions are as the follows:

(1) Do you have student-student interaction in your English teaching? If you have, what kinds of interactive modes do you use, e.g., pair work or group work? And how often do you use the interaction, often, seldom, etc.?

(2) If you do not adopt student-student interaction, will you please explain the reasons?

(3) What do other English teachers adopt student-student interaction according to your lesson observations?

3. The author attended some English lessons to observe teachers' use of student-student interactions.

Data Analyses and Findings

The Situation of Group Work

Table 1 shows us the situation of student-student interaction in English classes. Among 150 students, 43 say that there is no group work at all, occupying 28.67%. Only 9 (6.00%) students say that there is much group work. Ninety-eight (65.33%) students say that there is just a little interaction in English classes. The statistics above indicate that current English teaching lacks student-student interaction. Student-student interaction contains pair work, group work, etc., which refers to interactions between two or more students; they are free to talk, discuss some questions, or debate without much teacher's controlling.

Table 1

Teachers' Use of Group Work

Situation of group work	A little group work	Much group work	No group work
<i>N</i> = 150	98	9	43
Percentage (%)	65.33	6.00	28.67

Teachers' and Students' Talk Time

Table 2 shows that only 20 students (13%) say their talk time in class reaches or exceed two-thirds, while 51 students (34%) argue that their teachers' talking time is two-thirds of the class time. Forty-one (27.33%) of the students say only teachers talk in class, which means there is no teacher-student interaction and student-student interaction, no interaction at all in class. It indicates that teachers talk most of the time and students have inadequate opportunities to talk in class. Students' talk mainly includes answering teachers' questions. Students'

small amount of talk time (13.33%) shows that there is little active interaction between teachers and students and among students themselves.

Table 2

Teachers' and Students' Talk Time

Types of talk	Talk only by students	Two-thirds by teachers	Half by Ss/half by Tt	Talk only by teachers
<i>N</i> = 150	20	51	38	41
Percentage (%)	13.33	34	25.33	27.33

From data analysis of Table 1 and Table 2, it is concluded that there is student-student interaction, however, it is not adequate, which means there lacks negotiation of meaning between the students themselves, as students can correct their errors and learn something new from their peers through negotiation of meaning. Krashen (1985) believed that output can become comprehensible input to the speaker, since language production usually occurs during interaction and generates comprehensible input directed at the speaker (as cited in Johnson, K. E., 2000, p. 83). Lack of student-student interaction also means students cannot have the chance to discuss the problems that the teacher does not answer one by one. This directly causes rote learning and deficiency in reconstructing their English knowledge and eventually brings about low quality of students' English output, and thus hindered cooperative learning and students' cognitive development.

Findings by Interviews and Observations

The interviews of six teachers from different schools show:

- (1) There are some pair work activities, but few group work activities, because of time limits, large classes, etc.
- (2) Most of the classes are still teacher-dominated, and the interactive modes are mostly teacher-student.
- (3) Those teachers who have participated in National-Training Programmes or those who are visiting scholars in the UK or other advanced countries are likely to use more pair work, group work, or other kinds of activities in English teaching.
- (4) Teachers will design some pair work or group work in open class (lesson for research).

The interviews of 10 students from different schools show: Most of the classes are still duck-feed, exercise-based, or exam-based because of National Matriculation English Test (NMET); some teachers occasionally use pair work or group work in English teaching.

The author's findings in observing some teachers' English lessons correspond with what the teachers and students interviewed say that there is little pair work and group work. Some teachers are still using traditional ways: explanation and tests; teaching is driven by exams.

Discussion**Reasons of Lacking Student-Student Interaction**

Exam-Oriented Education. Many examinations make students spend most of time preparing for different subjects' examinations. Students compete with each other for high marks and teachers of English in the same grade also become the competitors one another. And even different schools in the same level compete with one another. All the great efforts contribute to the College Entrance Examination. As English teachers are evaluated

through NMET, students spend most of time doing multiple-choice exercises. Exam-oriented teaching and learning greatly restrict interaction. And further more because there is no oral examination, they will not be concerned about communicating in English with each other, which greatly hinders students' development of communicative competence.

Large class. The statistics of Table 3 indicate that it is common to find 61 or 70 students and even more in one class. Sixty-two students (41.33%) in 150 say there are more than 70 students in their classes. The number is greatly beyond the criteria of 55 in one class set by Education Bureaus. A large class makes salient: How much learning can take place in a class of more than 60 or even 70. According to Locastro (1989), many teachers in all parts of the world from whom at least self-report data were collected claimed that having a large class prevented them from doing what they wanted to do to help learners make progress in developing their language proficiency.

Table 3

Class Sizes

Number of students	< 50	51-60	61-70	> 71
<i>N</i> = 150	16	32	40	62
Percentage (%)	10.67	21.33	26.67	41.33

Strategies of Improving Student-Student Interaction

Construction of student-student interaction. Many researchers warn that simply putting students in groups is not enough. Teachers must know two important factors: Namely, how learning goals are structured and how conflicts among students are managed (D. W. Johnson & R. T. Johnson, 1984). Johnson suggests that learning goals may be cooperative, competitive, or individualistic. A cooperative goal will promote positive collaborative interaction among students; a competitive goal promotes cautious and defensive student-student interaction; an individual goal allows for little or no student-student interaction. It is important for teachers to select an appropriate goal structure, besides; teachers must also manage the conflicts that are inevitable in student groups. If the cognitive conflicts among students can be managed effectively, students' learning motivation and their cognitive development will be improved a lot (Johnson, 2000, p. 112).

It is a challenging task for Chinese senior high school English teachers to put students in appropriate groups in large classes. Teachers should have a all-round understanding of teaching and learning goals required by the curriculum, teachers' own qualities to fulfill the tasks, students' individual differences, such as characters and personalities, students' English proficiency, and their abilities to be achieved, then they can set the teaching and learning goals, choose the suitable materials, and arrange appropriate groups to meet students' needs. The ultimate goal is to engage each student in learning process in communicative activities. Furthermore, teachers may meet many unexpected difficulties in actually setting groups and in the process of activities.

Activities available in senior classroom instruction. Teachers should carefully organize pair work and group work to overcome some of their disadvantages like noises, especially in large classes, veering away from the point of an exercise, or talking about something else in pair work. As Harmer suggests, teachers must also choose better tasks and plan tasks carefully to arouse students' interests; teachers should set appropriate groups to engage each student in the activities (Harmer, 2001, pp. 117-118). It is a basic skill for English teachers to be able to prepare, set up, and run a single classroom activity, for example a game, a communication task, or a discussion.

Before a lesson, teachers should plan the activities carefully. Scrivener (2002, p. 29) had useful insights about planning an activity. He proposed to familiarize the material and the activity; to try the activity yourself before class; to imagine how it will look in class; and to decide the steps that will be involved in class. Some activities can be used in teaching.

Jigsaw task is a cooperative learning technique, in which the teacher divides an article or the content to be discussed into small parts and delegates only one part of the task to each group. After group discussion, a student in each group is chosen as a speaker to present the remarks on the issue in turn. In a jigsaw task, students will negotiate for meaning because of the information gap. Information gap activities make the participants exchange information to find a solution. Information gap activities are frequently designed for pairs, pairs interview, pairs compare: This is to ask groups of students to fill the grid dictation. There are also some other activities, such as collecting stamps, planning a holiday, survival activity, or whole class puzzle, etc. Drama and role-play are good ways to get students using English (Scrivener, 2002, p. 64). Besides, group discussion and topic debate can be used to promote student-student interaction.

Application of group work in teaching reading. Rivers suggests using the text to facilitate interaction. He claimed in promoting interaction with the text teachers should provide a meaningful context by discussing related topics to aid with inferencing from the text, use the message of the text as a point of departure for discussion rather than the syntactic features, and develop meaning from the text cooperatively by using a problem-solving approach whereby students offer a variety of answers. In interactive reading activities, he suggested that students be given the opportunity to relate their own lives, activities, interests and concerns to what is being read; teachers should stimulate work in groups, where students have the opportunity to work together and learn from each other. He also argued even within large classes, provision should be made for some small-group interaction or at least inter-student discussion as well as for individual reading (Rivers, 2000, pp. 73-74). There are many advantages to doing this: Small-group work on a reading task can stimulate student participation; it provides students opportunities to learn how to work harmoniously with others; it encourages open-mindedness about other students' ideas; students become inquirers or investigators learning from their peers' successful strategies for extracting meaning and interpreting content; and students receive much more attention to their individual problems and feel more personally involved than in large groups. In China's senior schools teaching, the text is the focus, so interactive teaching is necessary to improve students' reading comprehension.

Peer writing Conference. According to Johnson (2000, p. 124), during peer-writing conference in student-student interaction, students share their written texts with one another and are encouraged to use exploratory talk as they discuss the ideas expressed in their own and their peer's texts. It is a model of cooperative learning, and students exchange roles as readers and writers. As readers, they assume a teacher type of role, offering suggestions, voicing an opinion, or requesting clarification from the writer. As writers, they respond to readers' queries, formulate their ideas based on the readers' reactions to their texts. This method provides students with equal opportunities to initiate, state their opinion. Students help one another and make good progress together. In China, teachers can try the method. Traditionally, each Chinese student writes his/her compositions himself/herself without discussing with his/her peers, as a result, some mistakes or errors cannot be found by him/her. Even if he/she finds out the errors, he/she does not know the reasons and the ways to correct them, for learning cannot be improved a lot without negotiating meaning with peers.

Conclusion

The research finds that there lacks of student-student interaction in senior English teaching in Western China. This phenomenon will hinder the cultivation of students' collaborative learning spirit. In future teaching, we advocate that teachers will try their best to overcome the objective problems they met, which is the influence of large class and exam-oriented education. Some communicative activities are suggested to promote effective student-student interaction, e.g., jigsaw task, information gap, group discussion, topic debate and use of group work in teaching reading, use of peer writing conference to increase interaction among students, etc. The goal is to cultivate students' cooperative awareness and their thinking abilities and to improve the efficiency of English teaching and learning.

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