

Research Article

A STUDY OF COOPERATIVE LEARNING APPROACH IN EFL CLASSROOM

Received: July 30, 2018

Revised: October 4, 2018

Accepted: December 8, 2018

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Abstract

This study was aimed at implementing a cooperative learning approach in an EFL classroom in order to determine whether or not this approach can be implemented to improve students' English knowledge in the "Sociological and Cultural Background of English-Speaking Countries" course. This investigation was conducted in Chiang Mai Rajabhat University, with 87 third-year students divided into two groups. The control group consisted of 45 third-year students majoring in English whereas the experimental group comprised of 42 third-year English major students. They enrolled in the course in the first and second sections respectively. The control group was provided an ordinary teaching method whereas the experimental group was conducted using a cooperative learning approach. The result revealed that the means of both groups indicate noticeable differences between the pretest and posttest mean scores. The posttest mean of the experimental group was lower than that of the control group. In other words, the cooperative learning approach was an inappropriate tool for teaching in the material. Subsequently, an interview was administered in order to elicit the students' opinions to reflect the root causes of the failure of implementing the cooperative learning approach found in this study. The investigation results pointed to three categories of problems namely, the students, the teaching strategy, and the teachers.

Keywords: Cooperative Learning Approach, Teaching Strategy, Socio-Cultural Background of English-Speaking Countries, EFL Classroom

Introduction

As Thailand is becoming more connected with many other countries due to globalization and as a member of ASEAN, English plays a crucial role not only as a lingua franca for communication but also as a means for classroom instruction. Furthermore, English is also the global language of trade and commerce. Consequently, the Thai Government had launched a new campaign as a way to improve the English language proficiency among Thai people with the goal of leveling language competencies with those of the neighboring countries (Hodal, 2012). Thus far successive governments have undertaken efforts to reform English education, and as a result a number of different teaching techniques have been introduced as key driving force for Thai learners to develop their English language skills.

One of the teaching strategies employed in the Thai educational system is the cooperative learning approach. According to Felder and Brent (1994), the cooperative learning refers to students working in teams on an assignment or a project under conditions in which certain criteria must be satisfied, and where individual team members are fully accountable for the complete content of the assignment or project. As cooperative learning involves small groups of students working together on an assigned task, the main strength of this approach is student-centered autonomous learning. It enhances student's individual learning rather than focusing on a class as a whole.

Regarding English instruction in Thailand, students ought to be exposed to both sociological and cultural background of English-speaking countries, and not only the language itself. Tavares and Cavalcanti (1966) mentioned that, culture and language were interrelated, and the language is used as a main medium through which culture is expressed. Therefore, bringing students closer to sociological and cultural studies of English speaking countries will help them to better understand the language, its background and usage. On the other hand, the notion of the sociological and cultural aspects of the English language along with understanding and presenting the western culture can prove to be very difficult and time consuming as Thai students are not cultural insiders. In terms of noticeable differences between Thai and western societies and their cultures, it is often very challenging for Thai students to become familiar with western societies, culture, and values. Western people stand for individualism, privacy, equality, time, and being direct and assertive (Marsden, 2006) whereas Thailand is constituted by a royal monarchy, a traditional culture founded based on Buddhism, a country that has never been colonized by Western powers. These factors can presumably result in significant cross-cultural misunderstandings, frustration and conflicts for Thai students when studying the sociological and cultural background of English-speaking Countries. Therefore, learning socio-cultural-elements for English language learners is complex and multi-faceted. Consequently, teachers should adopt teaching approaches to

mirror the ways students learned best which may be quite different from their students' learning preferences (Peacock, 2001).

With regard to learning English at Chiang Mai Rajabhat University (hereafter CMRU), all English major students are required to take the “Sociological and cultural background of English-speaking Countries” course. The mission of CMRU is to serve local communities consisting of those from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, and the majority of students are hill-tribe ethnic students who are from remote areas where educational goals are less of a focus. Thus, English is considered a third language alongside their mother tongues and the standard Thai language with major. Variances in historical backgrounds, sociological and cultural practices, as well as norms and languages. As a result, they are confronted with many such obstacles while studying the sociological and cultural studies of English-speaking countries.

As the study of the cooperative learning approach has flourished, it has received significant attention from researchers in various fields (Chitmana, 2005; Cotter, 2007; Johnson & Johnson, 1999; Kotsopa, 2004; Phumpuang & Sittiwong, 2018; Richards & Rogers, 1986; Robert, 2008), The results reveal that students gain higher academic achievements, higher levels of critical thinking and deeper understanding of the subject matter, enhanced collaborative skills, more positive attitudes toward subject areas, and finally, better learning strategies. Furthermore, a number of scholars (Lyman et al., 1993; Santos-Rego & Perez-Dominguez, 1998; Nieto, 1996) have indicated that cooperative learning approach is best for implementing in groups with heterogeneous students. It not only encourages students to increase their academic achievement, but also to improve interracial attitudes, while promoting the value of respect for others in the classroom. Regarding the aforementioned benefit, this study therefore implemented the use of the cooperative learning approach in order to determine whether this strategy was effective in improving students' knowledge and their learning competence in the “Sociological and Cultural Background of English-speaking Countries” course at CMRU. If this was not the case, the problems encountered in employing the cooperative learning approach were to be investigated and revealed. Evaluating the types of problems that occurred during the intervention were key to keep the problem solving process on track, which would help in finding appropriate solutions for teaching English in a Thai context.

Objective of The Study

The aim of this study was to investigate whether the cooperative learning approach was effective in improving Thai ethnic students' achievements in the "Sociological and Cultural Background of English-speaking Countries" course.

Literature Review

The literature review consisted of three main aspects: defining culture, differences between Thai and American cultures and the cooperative learning approach.

1. Defining Culture

As Sapir (1921) defined, language does not exist apart from culture, that is, from the socially inherited assemblage of practices and beliefs that determines the texture of our lives. As a consequence, culture plays a crucial role in learning a language. According to Cohen (1992), culture is exceptionally tricky as it consists of numerous components including material, subjective (ideas and knowledge), and social culture. Abdallah-Preteille (2006, p. 475) also states that "...cultures can no longer be understood as independent entities, but need to be contextualized in terms of social, political and communication-based realities". However, Myers and Tan (2002) compare culture to a moving target while other theorists consider culture as an illusive phenomenon. This study therefore views culture as the way of life including history, aspects of religion, politics, social systems, structures of families and other intimate groups, technology, visual art and music of western people, particularly American and British.

2. Differences between Western and Thai cultures

As the present study focuses on learning sociological and cultural backgrounds of English-speaking countries of Thai students, especially American and British societies and their cultures, it is necessary to explore the different cultural characteristics for a better understanding, and in order to compare and contrast. According to Fieg and Mortlock (1989), the differences can be summarized in Table 1.

Table 1 The differences between Thai and American cultures

	Thai Culture	Western Culture
Social System	▪ collectivism	▪ individualism
Social relationship	▪ hierarchical	▪ egalitarian
Nature of culture	▪ tightness	▪ looseness
Conflict style	▪ indirect/avoidance	▪ direct/confrontation
Social status	▪ characteristics such as age, gender, and family determine social status	▪ people's status is based mainly on their own achievements, including education obtained and level of success realized in their line of work.
Emotion	▪ emotional control	▪ emotion is openly expressed
Communication	▪ indirect	▪ direct

3. Cooperative Learning Approach

The concept of cooperative learning is not a new phenomenon in Thailand. As previous works had employed this approach in their teaching strategies in various fields including mathematics, the Thai language, the English language, social sciences, as well as engineering, sciences, and computer science, it is one of the most notable approaches in education. Kagan (1994) defines cooperative learning as a teaching layout in which the learners get in pairs or small groups to work together in order to reach a particular goal. Five phases of cooperative learning can be listed as follows (Foyle, 1988).

- 1) In the “engagement” phase, the teacher sets the stage for the activity that is presented.
- 2) In the “exploration” phase, students work on the “initial exploration of ideas and information”.
- 3) In the “transformation” phase, students gather their thoughts about the information.
- 4) In the “presentation” phase, students present their information to the other students.
- 5) In the “reflection” phase, students analyze what they've learned and identify strengths and weaknesses in the learning process that they have gone through.

Beyond, the cooperative learning not only emphasizes the development of students' skills but also focuses on improving human relationships, the development of self-esteem, decision making, as well as students' social skills (Cohen, 1992). In this type of learning, the teacher plays a facilitator's role, specifying objectives, grouping students, and providing students activities, which are based on a cooperative learning approach for learning, monitoring group work, and for evaluating achievements and cooperation (Meixia Ding et al., 2007). Based on previous studies, there are a number of benefits to cooperative learning. Marjan and Seyed (2012) classify the advantages of this approach into four major

categories: namely: social benefits, psychological benefits, academic benefits, and alternate student and teacher assessment techniques.

In order to conduct successful cooperative learning, there are many strategies that can be considered. Teachers provide well-planned activities to encourage students in order to create productive learning. Brainstorming, discussing, group work, round robin, tea-party and so on are also used as techniques to motivate students in order to accomplish their assignments.

Research Methodology

The methodology of the research procedure included four major sections: participants of the study, research design, research instrument, and data collection and analysis.

1. Participants of the study

The participants of this study were divided into two groups: one control group and one experimental. The control group consisted of 45 third-year students whereas the experimental group was comprised of 42 third-year students. Both groups were English major students at CMRU. Who were enrolled in a core course related to the socio-cultural backgrounds of English-speaking countries in the first semester of 2015 academic year. The total number of the participants was 87.

2. Research Design

The research was based on a pretest-posttest control group design. Before participating in the course, both groups were required to take a pre-test in order to identify their familiarity with and background in western socio-cultural subjects, mainly those of American and British societies and their cultures. Subsequently, the control group was provided an ordinary teaching method using a course-book and supplementary materials. The textbook used in this investigation was a compilation of various sources with a particular focus on history of both England and the United States, the English reformation, The British Empire, World War Two, Civil Right Movement, Regions and Economy of England and the United States, as well as Races and Multiracialism in the United States, and finally, Sports and Entertainment in England and the United States. Furthermore, the cooperative learning approach was implemented within the experimental group at the classroom level. As cooperative learning promotes a shared sense of community, the teacher asked the students to arrange themselves into groups of six members in the “engagement” phase. Grouping was done based on social group with members who shared the same interests and activities, as they were required to meet one another in their free time for further discussion and planning. Henceforth, the students were assigned to work together on the same topics following the course-book. As Johnson et al. (2006) stated, students would gain their knowledge

through interaction within their groups, and there is no book provided. In the exploration phase, the students had to brainstorm in order to determine what information they needed to search for the topics assigned. After data-gathering activities, the students discussed a systematic way of organizing their information and shared their ideas with one another for knowledge construction in the transformation phase. All groups had to give their presentations in front of the class every week, following the topics in the course-book. Each presentation was allocated 25 minutes including 10 minutes for discussion in the presentation phase. After presenting, the students were asked questions regarding their presentation topics in order to measure their understanding of the concepts that were being presented by the teacher in the reflection phase. At the end of the course, a posttest was administered for both groups in order to compare their learning achievements. The pre- and post-tests were identical for both groups.

In order to gain an insight into the basis of this study, the research framework is presented in Figure 1.

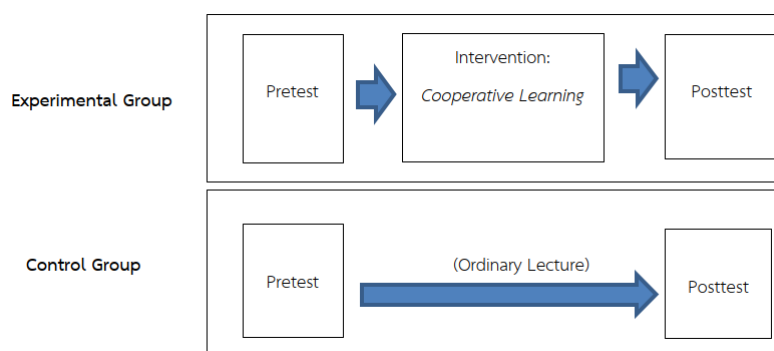


Figure 1: The research framework of the current study

3. Research Instrument

In order to enhance students' knowledge in the socio-cultural studies of western countries, the cooperative learning approach was administered. The pre- and post-tests included 20 questions related to the topics specified in the course. They were divided into 2 parts: 15 questions for the knowledge and 5 questions for comprehension of the western socio-cultural background. The questions were of three types: yes-no questions, wh-questions, and informative questions. The first 15 questions were designed in terms of yes-no questions, and wh-questions were crafted as such to evaluate the students' knowledge of the contents to be taught in the class, whereas the remainder were designed in the form of informative questions, which were used to assess the students' comprehension, to combine language abilities with knowledge and skills of different contexts.

4. Data collection and analysis

The investigation was conducted with two classes during the 16 weeks of this particular core course in the “Socio-cultural Backgrounds of English-speaking Countries”. The cooperative learning approach was implemented for the experimental group while the control group was provided an ordinary lecture. The strategies used to facilitate the cooperative learning in this study were brainstorming, group work and discussion. The pre-tests and post-tests took place in the exam period prior and following the instruction. Subsequently, the researcher compared the students’ achievements regarding the knowledge and background of the western socio-cultural subjects between the experimental and control groups, utilizing the mean and percentages. If the mean of the experimental group was lower than the mean of the control group, an interview was conducted in order to elicit the root causes of the failure occurred, besides the in-class observation. During the interview process, the experimental group was asked to answer questions individually. The data from interviews were obtained through informal and conversational methods in order to give the students an opportunity to report their experience while implementing the cooperative learning approach. Therefore, the researcher was able to easily obtain detailed and in-depth data. The conversations were recorded by a digital voice/audio recorder. Afterwards, the interview data was scrutinized in order to identify the root causes for the failure.

Findings

The comparison of learning achievements regarding the western socio-cultural knowledge from the pretest and posttest between the control and experimental groups were then analyzed by the mean and percentage. using a computer application that provides data statistical analysis. The results are shown in Table 2.

Table 2 Comparison of knowledge achievements regarding sociological and cultural studies of English speaking countries from the pretest and posttest between the control and experimental groups

Group	N	\bar{X} of pretest			\bar{X} of posttest		
		Part 1 (75 pts)	Part 2 (50 pts)	Total (125 pts)	Part 1 (75 pts)	Part 2 (50 pts)	Total (125 pts)
Control group (without using the cooperative learning approach)	45	0.44 (0.59%)	0 (0%)	0.44 (0.35%)	59.20 (78.93%)	20.18 (40.35%)	79.38 (63.50%)
Experimental group (using the cooperative learning approach)	42	0.40 (0.54%)	0 (0%)	0.40 (0.32%)	32.50 (43.33%)	10.33 (20.67%)	42.83 (34.27%)

Table 2 presents the comparison of learning achievements regarding sociological and cultural studies of English-speaking countries from the pretest and posttest between the control and experimental groups. The pretest mean of the control group was 0.44 whereas the pretest mean of the experimental group was 0.40. The difference between the pretest mean of the experimental group and the pretest mean of the control group was 0.04. It can be concluded that both groups had no knowledge of the sociological and cultural background of English-speaking countries. After taking the posttest, the posttest mean of the control group was 79.38 while the posttest mean of the experimental group was 42.83. The difference between the posttest means of the control group and the experimental group was 36.55. It can be stated that both approaches significantly enhanced the students' knowledge regarding the socio-cultural backgrounds of English-speaking countries.

Surprisingly, the posttest mean of the control group was much higher than the posttest mean of the experimental group. Based on the interviews and observations, three factors can be offered to explain the root causes for this failure.

1. The students

As the students were assigned the key roles in the classroom in a cooperative learning environment, the classroom was very noisy or chaotic. Without the leadership of the teacher, the students did not seem to be very eager and interested in learning. Talking during class, chatting with friends online and disruptions were common. All signs that the students were not engaged in learning reflect that they lacked responsibility for their own learning.

Furthermore, having little knowledge of English vocabulary, and lacking reading, writing and comprehension skills led to difficulties in finding useful information. The students sought a resolution by seeking related articles in Thai, instead. Subsequently, they used Google translation in order to translate from Thai into English without correcting the errors. During presentations, the students concentrated only on their topics. They memorized their dialogues and presented them in groups in front of the class. Each student focused on his/her speech, and he/she did not pay attention to other groups. As the students spent most of their time memorizing, they did not listen to the concepts being presented in front of the classroom. Consequently, they possessed no other concepts or information that could be shared. That is the reason why the cooperative learning approach failed to be affective in the course of this study.

Furthermore, working in groups can lead to arguments. Due to lack of social skills, participants did not know how to work in groups, which ultimately led to social conflicts. Some students preferred to work independently in order to avoid group discussions over divisive conflicts and power struggles. Also, one or two members did the work, while the other members talked amongst each other,

and did not pay attention to their work. Additionally, those talented members of the group came up with all the answers, dictated the group, or worked separately, ignoring other group members' ideas.

The students who preferred to work independently, stated that only a few members worked, while others refused to participate. However, all group members enjoyed the same grades, which appeared to be unfair.

2. Teaching Strategy

Thai students have been familiar with teacher-centered learning for a long time and therefore, they are not encouraged or motivated to express and share their thoughts and to questions in class. In this approach, teachers demand students to be quiet, and during the lessons, students are told to sit still and to copy notes from the board into their notebooks. Teachers did not give much opportunity to students to participate and ask questions. Thus, students do not get a chance to discuss and to draw their own conclusions. Students are supposed to follow teacher's instructions and consequently, students have become less confident.

Following the implementation of the cooperative learning approach, the students continued to keep quiet due to lack of self-confidence and as a result of being shy during discussions. No student attempted to volunteer to answer the questions or to discuss respective concepts presented in class. They avoided contributing to the discussions although they knew the answers. As a result, there was no construction of shared knowledge occurring. Furthermore, since a teacher-centered learning has been prominent for such long time, students tend to resort to a "rote-learning" system where they learn their knowledge by memorizing concepts and ideas. As a result, they lack analytical and critical abilities as well as those logical thinking skills which prevent them to actively participate in class activities and to learn the necessary academic and social skills.

Additionally, as the cooperative learning approach allocates time for self-learning during group discussions, students may become overwhelmed by the volume of information available. Most students stated they preferred the ordinary learning method, even though it appeared to become boring for students' learning and did not involve the students throughout the process. They thought the ordinary learning method helped them to learn quickly in the classroom. They immediately received what they needed by asking teachers questions in case they experience problems in class. Unlike the cooperative learning approach, the students had to interact with their group mates and help one another to complete tasks which often took much time to discuss and process.

3. The teachers

As Thailand is a developing country, Thai teachers face great deal of challenges which have contributed to difficulties in teaching English. In CMRU, the obstacles that were detected, throughout this study, were that teachers' had heavy teaching loads, they were often undertrained, along with large class size and inadequate knowledge of the course being taught.

Due to the fact that the University is committed to lead and serve the local communities, the number of students' enrollment is often very high. As a result, each class consists of more than 40 students. Due to the large class size, each group had to deliver their presentations within strict time constraints. Consequently, they did not have enough time for group discussions and for teachers' reflection on those issues. Without a reflection phase, students receive no feedback from their peers or the teacher to evaluate their understanding of the subject matter and to create shared understanding of the existing knowledge in the classroom.

In addition, each teacher was assigned to teach at least 12 hours of class-time every week, do extra responsibilities as an academic advisor, to lead the committee of academic activities, attend seminars or conferences, as well to conduct research, and to do administrative work regarding the qualification framework for Thailand's higher education system. Due to the heavy burden of work, the teachers did not have sufficient time to prepare and conduct a well-organized teaching method. With inadequate training and lack of proper knowledge regarding whatever learning method being implemented, the teachers were able to only apply their partial understanding in the classroom which led to negative results and a failed attempt to fully utilize the cooperative learning approach.

Furthermore, as the course "Sociological and Cultural Background of English-speaking Countries" places emphasis on sociological and cultural backgrounds of Britain and the United States, a native speaker is considered the best choice because he/she is a cultural insider. Due to a small number of foreign teachers working at CMRU, they are assigned to teach speaking and listening courses where students need to learn from native speaker teachers. Therefore, a Thai teacher is usually selected to conduct this course, instead. As a cultural outsider, he/she exhibits inadequate knowledge in this field. Consequently, the teacher could not share ideas with or give feedback to the students, bringing about the failure of applying the cooperative learning approach in this course.

Discussion

Comparing the post-test mean scores between the control and experimental groups, it is found that the posttest mean score of the control group was higher than that of the experimental group. There is no denying that cooperative learning is a pedagogical practice that has attracted much attention over the past three decades due to the large body of research that indicates students gain both academic and social competencies, when they have the opportunity to interact with others to accomplish shared goals (Johnson & Johnson, 2002; Lou et al., 1996; Slavin, 1994). Similarly, previous research in Thailand (Duangjai, 2008; Gomasatitd, 1997; Praphruetkij, 2001; Unchai, 2008; Yenchabok, 2007) However, this study found a number of issues arose when implementing the cooperative learning method into this classroom environment. The findings were unable to support previous research results, however, the outcome of the study pointed to new guidelines in respect to the effectiveness of implementing cooperative learning method. These guidelines are summarized as follow: Firstly, teachers should modify cooperative learning method to fit their goals and classroom conditions. As Renslow (2015) mentioned, it is often challenging for teachers to create a cooperative learning environment that benefit students because of the complexity of the components involved in cooperative learning. Consequently, teachers ought to be properly trained in order to incorporate this approach into their classroom environment. Thus, teachers ought to have a good understanding of the processes and outcomes, and to investigate the different combination of strategies to meet students' needs in order to make the cooperative learning method successful.

Secondly, students themselves are key to creating a successful cooperative learning. Group participation needs to have a sense of individual accountability (Roger & Johnson, 2009). This means that they should realize that they are all in the same boat. If the boat sinks, everybody will parish, and that the team should work together to reach the land safely. Thirdly, as the teacher-centered learning has been implemented in Thai educational system for a long time, students are more familiar with “spoon-feeding” style of teaching and thus focus on memorization, which makes them passive learners. Without extending students' skills and ideas, they lack self-initiative, critical thinking and social skills, as well as the courage to question teachers as authorities in a learning context (Swatevacharkul, 2014). When teachers place their students into groups, they rarely engage them in group discussions and activities. They seem working in groups by sitting together, not working cooperatively. That's why the teachers in this study experienced issues of under-socialization.

The three items mentioned above appear to be to the root causes for the failure of the implementation of cooperative learning in English classes in Thailand. The finding in this investigation supports the perspectives of Baines et al. (2008); Gillies (2008); Gillies and Boyle (2006), stating that

teachers did experience difficulties implementing cooperative learning. This study is in line with Robyn and Michael (2010). They found a number of difficulties encountered when implementing the cooperative learning in their classes. Those Issues included students socializing during group activities and not working or, managing their time effectively, along with lack of willingness to properly prepare for assigned tasks. Moreover, in the process of implementing a cooperative approach, the composition of groups, the type of tasks assigned, the required social skills, and the assessment of the learning that occurred in the group are important issues to be considered. As Dickinson (1987) mentioned, the development of learner's autonomy does not solely depend on learners in developing countries, especially in student-centered classrooms, but the guidance of teachers is still to be needed. Therefore, shifting from an ordinary learning, which is a teacher-centered style, to a cooperative learning, which focuses on the student is rather a difficult transition. However, a shift in the Thai educational system is possible through careful preparation and a complete shift in both teachers' and students' roles, as well as through adjustments to the type of instructions and by implementing effective teaching methods.

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