

Preface

The study presented in this book investigated the use of collaborative learning (henceforth CL) in two Chinese Higher Education (HE) English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms. Its theoretical framework integrated theories from Vygotsky's socio-cultural theory of mind, second language acquisition (SLA) and the affective domain of motivation. The research focused on students' engagement, learning preferences and motivation. It also explored the participants' attitudes and perceptions. In view of the hitherto rare use of CL in Chinese HE EFL classrooms, this research also explored issues relating to CL task design, implementation, and aspects of CL evaluation relevant to that context.

A 12-week teaching intervention was therefore conducted in which six types of CL tasks, either self-designed or adapted, were integrated into the formal English teaching classes. Sixty participants were recruited from one of the leading foreign language teaching universities in China, using non-probability purposive sampling method as a case study. Specific research methods included classroom observation, questionnaires, students' learning journals, focus group interviews, and motivation tests, data from which were used to triangulate perspectives and findings.

The results suggested the overall effectiveness of CL in facilitating students' English learning in the context under investigation. Positive outcomes ranged from students' internal psychological change to the wider development of lifelong learning skills. The results also indicated that CL helped significantly in enhancing students' engagement. It was very important that participants were found to be good listeners and not to interrupt peers during the whole flow of talk, and interestingly, rarely did they ask for help from their English teacher during CL. The influence of CL also extended to students' learning motivation, where students were much more motivated to learn English and became more willing to assimilate into the English language community. More affirmative attitudes toward their course and English teacher also emerged. Negative reports were mainly concerned with students' already formed learning habits, the traditional grammar-oriented exams, and students' language deficiencies, which affected the effectiveness of CL. The occurrence of pseudo groups, the use of L1 to mediate L2 learning, and peer relationships were emergent findings, and seemed to influence the success or otherwise of CL

implementation, all of which have been presented and explained in detail in the main text. Recommendations and guidelines for Chinese EFL teachers to further promote the application of CL and ways to revitalize language teaching in HE are also proposed, as are evidence-based proposals for modifications to a CL approach to make it better “fit” for a Chinese teaching context.

Investigating Chinese HE EFL Classrooms
Using Collaborative Learning to Enhance Learning

Lin, L.

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