

**Chinese Students' Perceptions of Cooperative Learning in
Finland**

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Spring 2015

**Master's Degree Programme in Education
Faculty of Education
University of Jyväskylä**

ABSTRACT

Zhang Ying. Chinese Students' Perceptions of Cooperative Learning in Finland. Master's thesis. Faculty of Education, University of Jyväskylä. 2015. 56 pages.

International students from China continue to have a strong presence in European tertiary institutions, however, only a limited number of studies can be found about their learning experiences and their perceptions towards western educational practices. How Chinese students in Finland perceive cooperative learning is the focus of this study, while different education cultures between China and Finland is identified as the dominant element that may determine students' beliefs and their choices of coping strategies when confronting challenges during cooperative learning practice. Qualitative data from 10 participants were collected through interviews conducted in Chinese. Based on participants' responses, relevant themes were categorized in order to better answer the research questions.

Findings demonstrated obvious differences between Chinese and Finnish education cultures in regard with teacher-student relationship, teaching model, classroom interaction, and emphasis on examinations. In general, nearly all students held positive beliefs towards the learning practices in Finland, in which students are given more freedom and respect. All 10 participants regarded cooperative learning as beneficial and invaluable in enlightening and expanding their minds, promoting motivation in learning, deepening their understanding, and promoting socialization despite several weaknesses including misunderstandings caused by cultural differences, low efficiency and time conflicts. When faced with conflicts or disagreements, they tended to be non-confrontational and compromised whereas for the academic or language barriers, almost all participants tried to be active and sought for help directly.

Key words: cooperative learning education culture coping mechanism

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1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of the study

With the increasingly interactive global development, cooperation is regarded as a fundamental concern in education around the world. A great number of studies related to cooperative learning and its effect on students' achievements have been conducted in recent years (Slavin 1991, 1995, 1996; Hämäläinen, 2008; Panitz, 1999; Watkins, et al., 2007; Johnson & Johnson 1999, 2007) Positive effects of cooperative learning have been identified as helping students in deepening thoughts, improving critical thinking, being creative, building healthy relationship with group members (Johnson & Johnson, 1999) as well as gaining tolerance and appreciation of differences among diverse individuals (Slavin, 1996; Johnson & Johnson 2007; Watkins, et al., 2007). Therefore, cooperative learning is seen as an effective teaching method that not only helps students academically, but socially and psychologically as well.

The first studies in cooperative learning were conducted in the early days of 20th century and they have been persistent and prevalent since the early 1970's (Slavin, 1995). Hundreds of studies on achievement effects of cooperative learning have taken place in every major subject, at all grade levels, in all types of schools in many countries and an increasing number of teachers and professors are also reported trying to implement cooperative learning practices in their classrooms (Slavin, 1995). Unfortunately, researches show that cooperative learning rarely exists at any level of education in China (Phuong-Mai; Terlouw Pilot, 2005), meaning that the majority of Chinese educational institutes today still rely on traditional teacher-centered educational approach, which may cause difficulties for those who choose to continue their tertiary education in other countries, where cooperative learning is regarded as one of the main learning activities.

It is well known that cultural values have a great impact on educational system and teaching practices of that country (Phuong-Mai; Terlouw & Pilot, 2005, Li, Remedios & Clarke, 2010). Confucian culture in China emphasizes a lot about the social need for harmony with moral virtues as the prerequisite (Hui, 2005). Due to the inherited Confucian

value, teachers as the authority in the classroom still remain common in most Chinese higher education institutions. Students in most cases dare not to ask questions and are not allowed to interact with their peers in the classroom, which is seen as being respectful to teachers. Teachers expect to have their classroom with little noise and conflicts should be avoided all the time, even during academic activities (Phuong-Mai; Terlouw & Pilot, 2005). Students are told to be silent even during class break. ‘A pin drop should be heard in the classroom’ is what most Chinese teachers’ expectation. In addition, examination is still sustained and highly emphasized. Students are required to memorize the materials as much as they can within limited time period, which results in little time allotted to other learning activities. Therefore, teaching practices in China are more often described as teacher-centered and Chinese students as seen as passive recipients of knowledge.

With the complexity of different educational cultures, there is a need for educators and teachers to understand the learning cultures from other countries so that misunderstandings and conflicts could be possibly reduced or even avoided. This study identified the difference between Chinese and Finnish learning cultures, how Chinese students perceive cooperative learning in Finnish tertiary settings, what kinds of difficulties they may encounter when engaging in cooperative learning with peers from different cultural backgrounds and coping strategies they may employ when dealing with difficulties.

1.2 Rationale of the study

1.2.1 Increasing number of Chinese students in Finland

Internationality is crucial to the fields of education and culture (Publications of the Ministry of Education, Finland 2009). The rapid global cooperation between countries has brought an increasing number of students to study overseas. Education at a Glance (2013) annual statistics indicate that over the past three decades, the number of students accepted outside their home countries has risen dramatically from 0.8 million worldwide in 1975 to 4.3 million in 2011, a more than fivefold increase. In absolute figures, the largest numbers of international students are from China. In terms of geographical area, Europe is the top destination. In the period of 1999-2012, the number of Chinese tertiary students enrolled in

Finland more than tripled, from less than 600 in 1999 to more than 2000 in 2012. Specifically in Jyväskylä, the number of Chinese students has increased enormously as well and it mirrored the globe trend. Therefore, it is necessary for Finnish educators and teachers to understand Chinese students' perceptions of Finnish educational practice, which is significant in reducing misunderstandings between teachers and students and adjusting teaching practices accordingly.

1.2.2 International programme as a challenge in Finnish higher education

The number of International Degree Programmes has increased rapidly in Europe during the last ten years, from only 560 English-taught master's programmes (in non-English-speaking European countries) in 2002 to more than 5000 in 2012, and a similar trend can be found in Finland as well (Välilä, et. al., 2013). Välilä, et. al. (2013) revealed that Finland currently belongs to one of the top ten non-English-speaking European countries that offer the most English-taught master's programmes. Statistics in the Publication of the Ministry of Education in Finland (2009) advocated that by 2015, the number of non-Finnish degree students should be raised considerably and higher education institutions become genuinely international study and work communities. However, several studies demonstrate that internationalisation in Finnish higher education is still at a lower level compared with other European countries (Publications of the Ministry of Education, Finland 2009). One of the key weaknesses is the insufficient attention paid to the cultural difference of non-Finnish students (p.15).

Student mobility increases the awareness of culture difference needed for working in international education communities (Publications of the Ministry of Education, Finland 2009). International programmes should take seriously the challenge of familiarizing their international students with the differences in cultures and learning styles (Välilä, et. al., 2013). Teachers in international programmes not only have to acquire sufficient professional knowledge and proficient English language skill, but also need to gain intercultural awareness to understand different cultural backgrounds and learning habits (p.27). Extra attention has to be paid if students have difficulties in some learning activities such as learning in small groups. Therefore, the research on Chinese students' perceptions of studying in Finland is an important resource in promoting teachers' intercultural

competence in their teaching practice.

1.2.3 Difficulties and misunderstandings Chinese students may encounter

To Chinese students, different educational cultures seem to be the main barrier when studying abroad (Sun & Chen, 1997, Hui, 2005). Different perceptions towards the roles of teachers and students, attitudes towards examinations and conceptualisations of different learning practices may contribute to misunderstandings between Chinese students and foreign teachers (Hui, 2005). Researches indicate that Chinese students in other countries may experience difficulties when learning in small groups (Ruble & Zhang, 2013). Interacting with others may be stressful to them because of different teaching approaches, language barriers and lack of communication skills, which is attributed to the effects of different cultural backgrounds (Hui, 2005). In Finland, particularly, the large number of Chinese students is required to adapt to the new tertiary settings in a short time, involving cooperative learning with their peers who may come from different educational cultures. This learning activity may be unfamiliar to some Chinese students, especially for those who have never studied abroad before.

There is a lack of studies concerning international Chinese students in Finnish higher education institutions. Therefore, teachers in Finnish can barely know what learning experiences they have and what learning difficulties Chinese students may encounter when studying in Finland. The research on the Chinese student group in this sense can provide an opportunity for Finnish teachers to better understand Chinese educational culture and Chinese students' learning habits and therefore sufficient resources can be reserved for improving counselling services to support their studies.

1.3 Purpose of the study

The purpose of this study is to identify the selected sample of Chinese students who are studying in the University of Jyväskylä regarding their perceptions of cooperative learning. This study mainly concerns Chinese students' perceptions regarding the difference of

Chinese and Finnish learning cultures, Chinese students' experience of cooperative learning when they are studying in Finland and coping strategies when encountered difficulties in cooperative learning practice. Findings of this study may contribute knowledge about Chinese learning cultures, Chinese students' learning habits and therefore promote the implementation of guidance and counseling among Chinese students in Finland.

1.4 Research questions

Specifically, the following research questions guide the study.

1. What kind of differences between Finnish and Chinese learning cultures have Chinese students perceived when they are studying in Finland?
2. How do Chinese students perceived cooperative learning practice when they are studying in Finland?
 - a. What benefits or problems have Chinese students encountered when engaging in cooperative learning practice?
 - b. If Chinese students encountered difficulties during cooperative learning practice, what kinds of coping strategies have they employed?

1.5 Significance of the study

An understanding of the Chinese students' perceptions of cooperative learning in Finland has the potential to contribute to knowledge about Chinese learning culture. It may help Finnish educators to bridge the gaps between Chinese and Finnish educational cultures, and therefore reduce intercultural misunderstandings between Chinese students and Finnish teachers. The study in this sense helps teachers in Finnish higher education institutions promote intercultural competence and therefore implement their teaching approaches accordingly.

The research of Chinese students' perceptions towards cooperative learning promotes an understanding of Chinese culture and in turn benefits Chinese students as well. Support and counselling programme related to learning difficulties may be better developed and

suiting to Chinese students in order to make sure that they are able to integrate in the Finnish education smoothly.

1.6 Organization of the study

The information in Chapter one explain the background of the study, research questions, purpose as well as the significance of the study. Chapter 2 provides the theoretical framework of the study relating to the difference between Chinese and western educational cultures, introduction of cooperative learning and its benefits. The literature review also comprises coping mechanism and its significance in dealing with cooperative learning. Chapter 3 mainly outlines the research methodology and research design in detail as well as the procedures used to collect and analyze the data. Chapter 4 presents the analysis of the findings and chapter 5 reports relevance of the study, limitations and implications for further research.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

The purpose of this literature review is to provide a theoretical basis of this study. The review of this literature starts by introducing the traditional Chinese learning culture, outlining the core value, inherited imperial civil service examination and the paradigm of China's pedagogy. The review continues with the comparison of western learning culture, specified in the core value of western learning philosophy, classroom interaction and teaching model, and then narrowed down to Finnish educational practice. The next section of this chapter focuses on cooperative learning, consisting of a brief introduction, four basic elements of cooperative learning and its positive effects. The review is finished with an overview of coping mechanism, and its significance in cooperative learning setting.

2.1 Chinese learning culture

Cultural diversity has been identified as significantly associated with education. As an integral part of culture, Chinese education has largely developed from and shaped by traditional Chinese culture, which is characterized as collectivism and 'filial piety'---loyalty and obedience within a family and social context (Jarvis, et. al, 2003). In traditional Chinese culture, the spirit of Confucianism was the center (Gu, 2006). It can be said that Chinese education was deeply inherited and development from the Confucian culture (p.169).

2.1.1 Core values of Chinese education

The importance of education has been valued dating back to ancient China. It was explicitly stated in *The Record of Learning* (475B.C.-221B.C.) (cited in Gu, 2006) that Chinese education in ancient times was considered to be prioritized in the founding of a nation and in the governance of people (古之王者建国君民，教学为先). It advocated cultivating one's ethics and moral characters and developing one's temperament, including emperors and ordinary people in order to make emperors becomes wise and populace become

obedient (p.170). Chinese education is deeply inherited from Confucianism, with the ‘Three Cardinal Guides (ruler guides subject, father guides son and husband guides wife) and Five Constant Virtues (benevolence, justice, courtesy, wisdom, and honesty)’ as its core value (Chun Qiu Fan Lu). Therefore, one should learn how to conduct oneself in society before he starts to acquire knowledge (Gu, 2006).

The ultimate educational objective of Confucianism was claimed to cultivate ‘sage’ or ‘Junzi’, a man with supreme virtue and authority among people of wisdom, virtue, and ability (Gu, 2006; Li & Wegerif, 2013). It is believed that becoming a ‘sage’ or ‘Junzi’ was the supreme realm of education that one should spend his whole life to pursue (Li, 2013). Therefore, putting ethics above material gains and prioritizing humanities above natural sciences became the educational tradition in ancient China (Gu, 2006). In addition, the Confucian culture also laid much emphasize on respecting families as a unit (Ho, 2006). Children are taught to think of themselves as a member of ‘we’ and family’s honor should be always put in the first place (Phuong-Mai, Terlouw & Pilot, 2005).

The positive impact of the educational tradition is that Chinese people always put education in the first place. They believed that moral education helped people nurturing noble characters as well as good habits (Cai, 2005). However, the prevalence of Confucianism somewhat confined people thoughts as well (Gong, 2010; Li & Wegerif, 2013; Xu, 2013). Confucianism praised highly on collectivism and unity, which deemphasized individuality and thus suppressed people’s creativity and innovative spirits to some extent (Li & Wegerif, 2013). It is said by some scholars that education in the past few thousand years in China could be summarized as ‘obedience’ (Gu, 2006).

2.1.2 Imperial civil service examination

One significant character of ancient Chinese education is the establishment of the imperial civil service examination, with the Confucian classic as the main content (Gu, 2006). The examination system existed for more than 1000 years, established in Sui Dynasty (581 AD to 618 AD) and abolished in 1905 by Qing Dynasty under the pressure of some leading Chinese intellectuals who were influenced by Western science and technology (Hui, 2005). The examination was held by feudal rulers, aiming at selecting loyal scholar-officials (Wang, 2013). China’s traditional values contained in the orthodox Confucianism is fully

reflected and tested through the imperial civil service examinations (Ho, 2006).

With the prevalence of the examination, ordinary people could have chance to become scholar-officials and thus change their social status by outperforming others in the examination (Gu, 2006). That could be one of the reasons why education gained much attention in ancient China. However, it may also have negative impacts even on modern societies. On the one hand, the goal of the education to cultivate scholar-officials, sage, or 'Junzi' actually served the needs of the feudal government (Gu, 2006). It was developed as a tool for rulers to control people's mind (Xu, 2013). On the other hand, the lack of natural science and applied technology resulted in hindering the development of modern science and isolating people from reality and being self-centered (Gu, 2006). Moreover, people regarded education as the only means of changing their social status, which might result in 'education based on exams' (Wang, 2013), especially since the 'eight-legged' essay was advocated in Ming Dynasty, students were requested to paid much attention on essay writing and they learned the knowledge without understanding the meaning (Du & Fan, 2006).

Although the Chinese civil service examination was abolished about a hundred years ago, the weight of examinations in Chinese education has not reduced (Hui, 2005). The present National College Entrance Examination which takes place every July since 1977 serves nearly the same function as the traditional Chinese civil service examination (p.30), meaning that Chinese students nowadays still need to try every effort to obtain a distinction in the examination.

2.1.3 Pedagogies in ancient China

Studies show that varied and diversified pedagogies were implemented in Ancient China (Gu, 2006). Based on the *Analects of Confucius*, it was clear to see that Confucian advocated self-reflection by learning from others (Tong, 1980; Li, 2013). In *The Analects of Confucius* (cited in Tong, 1980), it was recorded that "Asking everything that you do not understand (子入太庙每事问)". "Be active and fond of learning and do not feel ashamed to pick up knowledge even from the inferiors (敏而好学，不耻下问)". "Two minds are always better than one (三人行必有我师)". In addition, Confucius also made it clear the

importance of self-reflection. He stated: “I examine myself three times a day (吾日三省吾身)”. He advocated that men of virtue should not always talk and he praised those who are slow of speech but quick in action (纳于言而敏于行) (Tong, 1980). Therefore, encouraging children to ‘digest’ knowledge by ‘thinking and reflecting internally’ was one of the main goals of the teaching pedagogy in ancient China (Li, 2013). The idea was that one should engage in silent inner comprehension before engaging in active outer dialogue (p.29).

Another characteristic of traditional Chinese pedagogies was putting the outcome of knowledge transmission above the process of learning (Gu, 2006). The Confucius ‘Four Books’ and ‘Five Classics’ were the only materials of the examination (Jiang, 2011). Students were requested to memorize all relevant annotations without combining theories with practice (Gu, 2006; Jiang, 2011). This ‘identifying talents based on examination’ pedagogy had a profound impact even on today’s education (Shen, 1996). With the huge pressure of the National College Entrance Examination, students are forced to become ‘exam talents’, prioritizing results of the examinations without deeply comprehending the meaning of the knowledge (p.177).

To sum up, many aspects of the Chinese tradition learning culture stem from Confucianism, and have a deep influence on contemporary Chinese education. Moral education is still highly valued nowadays. Small children are encouraged to recite ‘Three-Character Scripture’, which covers a lot about morality and they are told to respect their teachers, who are regarded as the only authority of the classroom. In addition, most of the students still attach much importance on the result of examinations, rather than exploring the meanings of the knowledge as well as being creative and innovative. Therefore, the traditional Chinese learning culture, with the core value of Confucianism may have a great impact on students who are studying in western countries, where individuality and personality is highly praised.

2.2 Western learning cultures

2.2.1 Core value of western learning philosophy

Compared with ancient Chinese education culture, which emphasizes a lot about collectivism, western countries attach much on individualism (Shkodriani & Gibbons; 1995; Wu & Rubin, 2000; Kim, 2005; Hassan & Jamaludin, 2010). Individualism is grounded in Western culture and can be traced back over two and a half thousand years (Jarvis, 2013). The ethos of individualism indicate that every individual should be independent and autonomous (Wu & Rubin, 2000). The interest of individual is regarded as the guiding principle of individualistic culture (p.152). In the Individualist culture, personal accomplishments such as important discoveries, innovations, great artistic or humanitarian achievements and all actions that make an individual stand out are highly appreciated (Gorodnichenko & Roland, 2012).

According to John Dewey, a well-known American philosopher, psychologist and educational reformer, western education promoted the development of individuality, equality, and democracy (Danforth, 2008). He advocated the use of inquiry and active engagement in the classroom (Smith & Hu, 2013). Youths are encouraged to be independent, to make decisions on their own and to believe that they themselves are the best judge of what they want to be and should be (Shkodriani & Gibbons, 1995). Each individual is regarded as equally competent to analyze, criticize, argue, and construct new knowledge and they exhibit highly self-disclosure (Wu & Rubin, 2000).

2.2.2 Western classroom and creativity

Unlike traditional Chinese education that emphasizes too much about rote memorization and examinations, creativity is highly praised in western classrooms (Kim, 2005; Zhao, 2013). Creativity is about creating possibilities and exploring multiple sources of inspiration; it focuses more on the process of learning rather than its solution (Zhao, 2013). The western educational system encourages the exercise of creativity by providing an environment that promotes free and open discussion (Kim, 2005). The effort to promote creativity includes giving students opportunities to inquire, explore, experiment, and accomplish open-ended tasks (p.343).

Instead of teacher-centered teaching method in China, students' interests in western countries are fully considered and respected. They are seen as active learners in the classroom, where a lot of students' participations and group discussions are involved

(Hassan & Jamaludin, 2010). Students are encouraged and motivated to take part in their learning process, being responsible for their own actions, solving problems on their own, speaking their minds in group discussions and questioning their teachers (Al-Issa, 2005). Education development in the West includes creative thinking skill, problem solving skill and communication skill which have been integrated well in the western philosophy (Hassan & Jamaludin, 2010). It can be said that the main objective of the western education is to comprehensively develop students' learning potentials and nurture their independence and creativity (Li & Huang, 2013).

2.2.3 Teaching approaches in western countries

Teachers in western countries tend to encourage directness, openness and innovation (Al-Issa, 2005). They are regarded as facilitators or counselors to the students (Hassan & Jamaludin, 2010; Chen, 2011). Instead of being the only authority in most of the eastern classrooms, teachers in the West are responsible for helping and guiding the students along with their own learning paces rather than always telling them what to do (Hassan & Jamaludin, 2010). Watkins (2000) stated that a good teacher is usually characterized as 'one who is able to arouse students' interests, give clear explanations, use effective instructional methods, and organize a range of learning activities', which are considered as the 'teaching skills' necessary in typical western teacher education .

In addition, students and teachers in the West have equal position in the classroom. It is believed that student-teacher relationship in western countries is more open than that in eastern countries and the students are more willing to talk to their teachers (Hassan & Jamaludin, 2010). Students are less concerned about hierarchical positions and they are encouraged to challenge the authorities (Wu & Rubin, 2000; Chen, 2011). Western teachers expect questions to be asked by students during the process of learning to fill in gaps in their knowledge (Watkins, 2000).

2.2.4 Finnish way of teaching and learning

Municipalities, school administrators and teachers in Finland enjoy an enviable degree of autonomy since the education reform in 1990s (Aho, Pitkanen, & Sahlberg, 2006). The 1994 National Framework Curriculum for the Comprehensive School provided schools and

teachers with more freedom to design their own optimal teaching methods in a way that would enhance teaching and learning (Berry & Sahlberg 2006; Aho, Pitkanen, & Sahlberg, 2006).

Students' experiences are regarded as significant in Finnish schools. The Finnish education policy and national curriculum guidelines encourage teachers to seek alternatives to traditional teacher-centered pedagogies with the aim of getting the student to 'work on their own initiative and interest' (Berry & Sahlberg 2006). Since 1990s, Finnish teacher education started transactional models emphasizing children's active role as a co-creator of knowledge (Hytönen, 2008). In a Finnish classroom, it is rare to see a teacher standing in front of a classroom lecturing students for 45 minutes. Instead, there are a lot of interactions among students and between students and the teacher. Students are free to speak out their views during class and choose to work alone or with their peers in small groups. Insufficient literature is available to support this statement; however, what little there could also give some hints. Voogt & Helena (2005), after conducting a case study from two Finnish upper comprehensive schools, claimed that though not very structured, an open atmosphere is created where students in the classrooms are encouraged to interact with their peers and not to be silent. The teachers are not very much challenged to experiment with new approaches (p.13). In addition, The Finnish comprehensive school system is practically free from external tests; instead, descriptive assessments and feedback are often used (Berry & Sahlberg 2006). Therefore, more freedom is given not only to teachers to plan curriculum beyond tests or exams but also to students to learn to know and learn to do (p. 131).

The learning atmosphere in Finnish higher education institutions is rather flexible and loose, and it has demonstrated education policies in Finland, which is, flexible learning environment with broad learning and creativity (Sahlberg, 2007). Parpala and Lindblom-Ylänne in their study (2007) described that the implementation of different teaching methods is praised by Finnish university teachers. Most of the teachers regard various teaching practices, for example, the combination of group discussion and brainstorming as the ideal teaching method (p.363). Moreover, the interaction and discussion among students and between students and teachers is also highly emphasized by Finnish university teachers. The ideal situation in the classroom is when there is fruitful conversations and

active participation. Students are formed into small groups and the teacher, as the instructor, not only guide the students, but think together with them as well (Parpala & Lindblom-Ylänne, 2007).

2.3 Cooperative learning Practices

2.3.1 Introduction of cooperative learning

Research on cooperative learning is one of the greatest successful stories in the history of educational research and by far the most frequent objective of this research is to determine the effects of cooperative learning on student achievement (Slavin, 1995). Compared with traditional classrooms, where students are expected to work independently and to compete for good grades, teachers' approval and recognition (Slavin, 1996), cooperative learning, on the contrary, shares the idea that students work together to learn and are responsible for one another's learning as well as their own (Slavin, 1996; Slavin, 1991). A widely used definition of cooperative learning describes it as a joint construction of shared meaning, understanding and knowledge through group activities, where the participants are committed to, or engaged in shared goals (Hämäläinen, 2008). The participants are expected to solve complex problems by joining forces, contributing each team member's views and resources in a shared work space (Hämäläinen, 2008 in Weinberger, 2003). The result is that the group is more than a sum of its parts and all students perform better academically than they would if they work alone (Johnson & Johnson, 1999).

2.3.2 Elements of cooperative learning

Five elements including positive interdependence, individual accountability, face-to-face interaction, social skills as well as group processing are regarded as essential in cooperative learning practice (Johnson & Johnson, 1999; Johnson & Johnson, 2007; Johnson & Johnson, 2009). Positive interdependence means that everyone in the group is bound together, sharing resources and opinions to maximize the learning results of all members (Johnson & Johnson, 2007, p. 23). The second element is individual accountability. In order

to make each one a stronger individual and perform a higher learning result, every group member needs to know his or her strengths and weaknesses and be responsible for his or her fair share (p. 23). The third essential element is face-to-face interaction, meaning that everyone in the group supports and assists each other to reach their common goal (p.24). The fourth element is that working cooperatively requires everyone such interpersonal skills as communication, conflict management, etc. (p. 24). Finally, every group member needs to know how well the group work is progressing, what have to be changed, if there exist difficulties or misunderstandings among group members, etc. (p. 24).

2.3.3 Positive learning outcomes of cooperative learning

The researches show that cooperative learning method generally work equally well for all types of students (Slavin, 1996), and it has positive benefits into categories such as academic benefits, social benefits and psychological benefits (Panitz, 1999).

Academic benefits

According to Vygotsky (1978 cited in Watkins, et al., 2007), new knowledge and ideas develop in a context of dialogue. Compared with traditional classroom, where little time is given for academic activities, the cooperative learning paradigm allows students to discuss, debate and clarify their understanding of what they have learned (Panitz, 1999). In addition, researchers indicate that cooperative learning tends to result in higher academic achievement and greater long-term retention of what has been learned (Johnson & Johnson, 2007). Studies show that the process of explanation to other group members during cooperative learning challenges one to make him-or herself clear, which in turn, enhance his or her own understanding (Watkins, et al., 2007). Instead of passively listening to the teachers, students in cooperative learning are given opportunities to actively engage in the learning process (Panitz, 1999) and therefore results in more frequent use of critical thinking, problem-solving and meta-cognitive skills, more willingness to take on difficult tasks and persist in working toward goal accomplishment, more intrinsic motivation, greater transformation of learning from one situation to another, and much more time on tasks (Johnson & Johnson, 1999).

Social benefits

Social scientists have long advocated cooperative learning as a means of ensuring positive interpersonal relations among group members (Slavin, 1996), even among students from different ethnics, cultures, languages, social classes, abilities and gender groups (Johnson & Johnson, 1989 cited in Johnson & Johnson, 2007). The process of providing comparable explanations in the shared context creates a pleasurable situation and thus the interpersonal relations start to grow (Watkins, et al., 2007). As the relationship becomes more positive, there are corresponding improvements in productivity, morale, feelings of personal commitment and responsibility to do the assigned work, willingness to take on and persist in completing difficult tasks, and commitment to peers' success and growth (Johnson & Johnson, 1999). The positive relationship promoted by cooperative learning is regarded as the heart of the learning community which may increase integration into school life, reduce the incongruence between students' interests and needs, and increase membership in schools (Tinto, 1993 cited in Johnson & Johnson, 2007). In addition, classroom resembles real life social and employment situations (Watkins, et al., 2007). The interdependent roles assigned in cooperative classrooms often model societal and work-related roles that students will encounter in real life (Panitz, 1999). Therefore, cooperative learning establishes a social wide atmosphere.

Psychological benefits

Several studies have analyzed the relationship between cooperative learning and psychological health (Slavin, 1996, Johnson & Johnson, 2007, Panitz, 1999). Students in cooperative learning classes have been found to have more positive feelings about themselves than do students in traditional classes (Slavin, 1996) in promoting basic self-acceptance, freedom from conditional acceptance, and seeing oneself positively compared to peers (Johnson & Johnson, 2007). Students share their success with their group members, and therefore enhance both the individual's and the group's self-esteem (Panitz, 1999). In addition, cooperative efforts with caring people tend to increase personal ego-strength, self-confidence, independence, and autonomy (Johnson & Johnson, 1999). The more individual work cooperatively, the more they see themselves as worthwhile and as

having value and the more autonomous and independent they tend to be (p.73).

2.4 Coping mechanism

Although cooperative learning has been confirmed as supportive to students' construction of knowledge, possible problems may also be unavoidable, especially in cross-cultural context, for instance, disagreement or conflicts among group members. Therefore, one dimension may come into play in the context of cooperative learning, which is, how students cope with their difficulties during cooperation.

2.4.1 Introduction of coping mechanism

According to Compas, et al. (2001), coping refers to the process of adaptation to the changing environment. It is well-known defined as 'the person's constantly changing cognitive and behavioral efforts to manage specific external and/or internal demands that are appraised as taxing or exceeding the person's resources' (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984 cited in Folkman, et al., 1986). Coping mechanism is regarded as a dynamic process that may change in reaction to the unfamiliar or stressful external environment (Compas, et. al., 2001).

A large number of literatures regarding coping mechanism focuses on two dimensions: emotional-focused coping, which 'regulates stressful emotions', and problem-focused coping, which 'modifies the circumstance creating the harm, threat, or challenge' (Folkman, et al., 1986). The problem-focused coping is accomplished by changing the external environment in order to make the distress less painful (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984 in Pincus & Friedman, 2004), for example, seeking useful information or finding out solutions to solve the conflicts. Emotion-focused coping, on the other hand, involves such responses as expressing one's emotions, seeking emotional support from others, or trying to avoid the source of stress (Pincus & Friedman, 2004).

2.4.2 Coping mechanism in cooperative learning context

To be specific in cross cultural educational setting, students from different countries

practice coping mechanisms so as to eliminate or minimize stress and conflicts that may be raised during cooperative learning. Students who exercise problem-focused mechanism are goal-oriented. They prefer to actively confront difficulties and find solutions to tackle the problems immediately in order to have the problems solved in no time. In cooperative learning settings, to be specific, such strategies may include communicating with other group members, coming up with alternative proposals if disagreement appears, etc. Emotion-focused coping, by contrast, means to alleviate stress or deal with problems in a more indirect way, for instance, seeking support from the teacher if an agreement cannot be reached among group members, being silent when encountered difficulties, etc.

Certain difficulties that Chinese students may encounter when engaging cooperative learning including unfamiliar learning environment and teaching approach, cultural difference, lack of communication skill, etc. Therefore, the analysis of coping mechanism is significant for Chinese students in Finland to get through those challenges.

3 METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study is to identify Chinese students who are studying in Finland, with regard to their perceptions about cooperative learning. To be specific, this study aims to explore (a) perceptions of differences between Chinese and Finnish education cultures; (b) how Chinese students perceive cooperative learning when they are studying in Finland.

3.1 Research design

In the empirical part of this study, a qualitative approach was employed using a semi-structured interview among Chinese international students in Finland. Qualitative research was used rather than quantitative because of the following four reasons. Firstly, little has been studied about Chinese students' perceptions on cooperative learning in Finland. Creswell (2007) stated that unlike quantitative research, which focuses on predetermined information from the literature or relies on results from other research studies, qualitative research is often used to explore a problem or issue sensitive to people or places. Qualitative research is more like coming up with or generating new hypotheses and theories (Johnson & Christensen 2012), which fits for the topic of this study. Secondly, qualitative methodology is appropriate because data is collected in a natural setting rather than a contrived situation (Creswell, 2007; Creswell, 2009), in this study, face-to-face interviews between the researcher and participants. What is more, in a quantitative study, researchers always attempt to avoid human bias whenever possible, therefore, studying the phenomena that are of interest to them 'from a distance' (Johnson & Christensen, 2012). However, in qualitative study, the researcher tries to make sense of what he or she interviews or observes from the participants' viewpoints (p.36), which suits well with the research questions in this study. Last but not least, qualitative research is selected when a complex and detailed understanding of the issue is needed (Creswell, 2007). Therefore, the researcher in this study is able to discover detailed information about how Chinese students perceive cooperative learning in Finland through in-depth interviews.

3.2 Role of the researcher

In qualitative research, the role of the researcher is regarded as the key instrument to collect data through examining documents, observing behavior, or interviewing participants (Creswell, 2009). Due to the researcher's identity of being a Chinese student in the University of Jyväskylä for more than a year, she has experienced many cooperative learning practices with peers inside and outside the classroom, which therefore, brings certain biases to this study. In order to address bias in interpreting data, member checking was employed during data collection. The researcher commences this study with the perspective that Chinese students who are studying in Finland may find cooperative learning quite novel to them, especially at the beginning of their study lives. Therefore, the researcher questions what perceptions they hold about cooperative learning, what difficulties or benefits they may encounter when engaging in cooperative learning and what coping strategies they may employ when dealing with difficulties.

3.3 Participants

Ten Chinese students from the University of Jyväskylä volunteered to take part in this research. The main rationale for selecting them to join this research is that all participants have experienced cooperative learning during their study in the university. The sample selected comprised 6 female students and 4 male students from different programmes including Intercultural Communication, Educational Leadership, Nano Science, International Business & Entrepreneurship, Psychology, Information System, and Education. Different disciplines were taken into consideration to reduce possible bias from a certain faculty in order to make this study more objective. Lengths of studying in Finland range from one month to 3 years. One of these participants had oversea studying experience in Australia and Singapore before. Detailed information about the participants is listed in table 1 below.

Volunteers were selected mainly through social contact of the researcher, who is also a student in the University of Jyväskylä. Furthermore, the university mailing list was also

used to send invitations to Chinese students. The invitation described shortly the purpose of the research, length of the interviews, terms of confidentiality and requirements for participants and the final participants was selected from those who met the purpose of the study best.

TABLE 1 Demographic information of participants.

Participants	Gender	Field of study	Length of study in Finland	Overseas experience
1	female	Intercultural Communication	1.5 years	no
2	female	Educational Leadership	1 month	no
3	female	Educational Leadership	1 month	no
4	female	Nano Science	1.5 years	no
5	male	International Business & Entrepreneurship	1 month	Australia & Singapore
6	female	Educational Leadership	1.5 years	no
7	male	Psychology	2 years	no
8	male	Information System	3 years	no
9	male	Education	3 months	no
10	female	Education	6 months	no

3.4 Data collection

Data for this study was collected through semi-structured interviews. Interview was used as the data collection method because this research aims to explore the views, experiences and beliefs of individuals on specific issues (P. Gill, et al., 2008), which cannot be obtained

through other data collection methods, such as observation, document, etc. The interviews were held either in participants' home or in the university, making sure that each interview could be able to progress well in a comfortable setting. The whole data collection period lasted for around 8 weeks. Each interview took approximately 30 to 45 minutes and all the interviews were conducted in Chinese, making it easier for participants to express their opinions and for the researcher to transcribe. During the interviews, the researcher took notes for better transcription. All the interviews were audiotaped for precision and easier transcription with the participants' permissions.

The first part of the interview asked for background information of the participants, including study programme, years of study in Finland, and overseas experience. The second part was comprised of 7 interview questions concerning: 1) perceptions of different learning cultures between China and Finland, 2) perceptions of cooperative learning practice, which consists of two subcategories as a) benefits or problems Chinese students perceive about cooperative learning, and b) coping strategies employed when engaging in cooperative learning. In the first category of *different learning cultures*, the interview questions include: "Is there any difference between Chinese and Finnish learning environment?" "Have you had any experience of cooperative learning when you were studying in China?" and "Have you had any experience of cooperative learning when you are studying in Finland?" In the second category of *perceptions of cooperative learning*, the first subcategory of *benefits or problems of cooperative learning* comprises interview questions such as "Describe one cooperative learning experience in details when you are studying in Finland." "What is your attitude towards cooperative learning? Is it helpful to your study?" "Do you think that you have a good interaction with your group members?" In the second subcategory of *coping strategies*, the interview questions contain "Have you encountered any difficulties when engaging in cooperative learning? If so, how did you deal with those difficulties?"

Validity of this study was conducted during the process of transcription by means of member checking. Johnson & Christensen (2012) considered 'validation' in qualitative research to be an attempt to assess the 'accuracy of the findings'. Through member checking, the researcher is able to solicit participants' views of the credibility of the findings and interpretations, which is considered to be 'the most critical technique for

establishing credibility' (Johnson, & Christensen, 2012). Therefore, the researcher sent back the final report or specific descriptions to participants in order to make them correct possible mistakes and judge the accuracy of the account.

3.5 Data analysis

Followed by data collection, the next step was the transcription and categorization of the data based on the answers of the participants. The whole process of data transcription did not take too much time, approximately an hour per person due to the fact that there was no language barrier between the researcher and participants. Relevant themes were then developed from the transcriptions. The data of this study was analyzed inductively, beginning with the raw data consisting of multiple sources of information and then broadening to several specific themes (Johnson, & Christensen 2012). To facilitate this, the researcher continuously moved back and forth between pieces of information, writing down key words on the margin, and then grouped the margin notes into different subthemes and themes. The whole coding process was about the collapse of former themes and the establishment of new themes.

3.6 Ethical issues

A qualitative researcher faces many ethical issues during data collection, data analysis and dissemination of qualitative reports (Johnson, & Christensen 2012). The researcher should always keep in mind to protect the confidentiality of participants. To ensure confidentiality, any names or other identifiable information were not included in the data, only numbers were assigned to each participant (e.g. participant 1, participant 2). During the process of interviews, participants were advised of the right to cease participation at any time if they felt uncomfortable. Once the data were collected, they were stored on the researcher's home computer and only the researcher had the right access it. Interviews and notations were protected and kept archived indefinitely for possible future use.

4 Findings

This qualitative study is designed to examine Chinese students' perceptions of cooperative learning when they are studying in Finland. Cooperative learning has been regarded as effective in promoting students' learning, with cultural element as a vital factor that shapes students' values towards academic activities. Characters of learning in China, with Confucianism as dominant culture, include teacher-centered approach, lack of interaction and exam-orientation. In western collectivism culture, on the contrary, students are highly respected and motivated to stand out, question and argue with the teacher and peers. Accordingly, cultural difference should be adequately addressed to understand Chinese students' perceptions on cooperative learning. Ten individual interviews were conducted and analyzed in this study. This chapter presents the results of the data to answer the research questions and appropriated themes subthemes are emerged related to each research question. The data collected from this research study is used to answer the following questions:

1. What kind of differences between Finnish and Chinese learning cultures have Chinese students perceived when they are studying in Finland?
2. How do Chinese students perceived cooperative learning practice when they are studying in Finland?
 - a. What benefits or problems have Chinese students encountered when engaging in cooperative learning practice?
 - b. If they encountered difficulties during cooperative learning practice, what kinds of coping strategies have Chinese students employed?

4.1 Research question 1: Differences between Finnish and Chinese learning cultures

The perceptions of differences towards learning cultures between Finland and China are categorized as four key elements: teacher-student relationship, teaching model, classroom

interaction, and emphasis on examinations. Based on the participants' responses, the following themes are identified as listed in Table 2.

TABLE 2 Summary of perceptions of learning cultures between China and Finland

	In China	Number	In Finland	Number
Teacher-student relationship	Teacher as the authority	9	Be equal with the students	10
	No distance	1		
Teaching model	Traditional	10	Open	8
			Not as active as they expected	2
Classroom interaction	Almost none	10	Group work & discussion	8
			Not quite much	2
Emphasis on examinations	Too much	7	Not important	10
	Not quite much	3		

4.1.1 Teacher-student relationship

As shown in Table 2, all ten participants indicated that the teacher-student relationship in Finland is more relaxing and flexible than that in China. *Free, friendly, open* and *equal* were what participants mostly used when describing the teacher-student relationship in Finland. “We are free to address our teachers with their first names” “Teachers here are more like friends to us, we are free to ask whatever came into our minds.” Whereas when it comes to Chinese teachers, nine out of ten participants indicated that the teacher is the authority of the classroom and students need to respect their teacher all the time. Participant 4 stated that:

I did not have the courage to express my ideas in front of the teachers when I was in China. But in Finland, I am the one who ask questions all the time. Teachers here are nice and friendly, and there is no distance between the teacher and students. I feel like I am more respected by Finnish teachers and peers, which encourages me to express my inner feelings and come up with different opinions.

Participant 3, a master degree student in the University of Jyväskylä, who has already got a master degree in China, compared the master programmes in Finland and China, stating that:

Professors in China are so arrogant. It seems that they know quite a lot, but are unwilling to share with you. I could barely see my professor when I was doing master's degree in China, maybe

once or twice every year because he had works in other places. Every time we met, we didn't discuss any academic works, but instead, just having dinners together and talking about some daily routines. I felt like everyone in my group tried all means to please the professor, which left me ignored sometimes. I only met my professor several times before I submitted my master's thesis.

But when asked how she feels in Finland, she said that professors and teachers are very friendly, and they are willing to answer every question she asked, without showing the expressions that why she asks such silly questions. Another participant (participant 10) also mentioned that she felt more relaxed talking with foreign teachers when she was in China. But when being with Chinese teachers, she had to be careful not to say something wrong or improper.

However, there is one participant (participant 7) who gave the total opposite opinions. He felt that the teacher-student relationship in Finland seems not as close as he had experienced with his professors in China. He stated that:

In Chinese culture, we have the tradition that *a teacher for a day is a father for a lifetime*. The teacher in China is more like a parent to the students, meaning that they not only have to take care of the students' academic studies, but their daily lives as well. I remember when I was doing my master's degree in China, besides teaching me how to do my academic works, my professor also taught me how to become mature and be a good person. My feeling for him mixed with a sort of filial respect. After I come to Finland, I feel like the relationship with my professor becomes more democratic, especially in the second year, I only meet him if I have some questions about my studies or I need some suggestions about my thesis.

When asked why they feel the difference of the teacher-student relationship between Finland and China, four participants mentioned cultural difference. "Chinese culture has been deeply inherited by Confucianism, meaning that we need to follow the principles of being courteous and filial, and that is the reason we need to respect our teachers." Participant 5, who has been studied in Singapore and Australia before, pointed out that "it is not just the difference between China and Finland. The difference can be extended to the East and the West. The concept of Confucianism influenced not only Chinese culture but many other eastern countries as well. That is why I experienced a lot difference between Singapore and Australia as well."

4.1.2 Teaching model

When it comes to the teaching model, eight out of ten participants stated that they experienced a lot difference in Finnish classroom than the time they were in China. *Active learning, student-oriented, motivation, diversity, feedback mechanism* are what they have experienced in Finnish classroom. On the contrary, all participants indicated that Chinese education is the typical spoon-feeding education, which is rigid, passive and teacher-oriented.

Free and relaxing versus strictness

Four participants mentioned that when they are having classes in Finland, they do not have to stick to the chair for the whole 90 minutes. They are free to go to the toilet, drink a cup of coffee, or even have some breakfast in the middle of the class, which can be regarded as disrespectful to the teacher in China.

In Finland, I am completely free during the class. I can go outside whenever I want and I can eat or drink in the class. The teacher doesn't say anything because he or she can understand. But when I was in China, even drinking water was forbidden during the class because we had to respect the teachers. If they didn't drink in the class, neither did we. But the situation is getting better in Chinese universities. (Participant 3)

Student-orientated versus teacher-oriented

Another difference that some participants mentioned is that teachers in Finland consider a lot about students' needs. The classroom atmosphere is rather relaxing and informal in a sense that you have enough time to question, argue and discuss with the teacher and peers. Teachers' teaching plan always follows the students' learning pace. Teachers in Finland encourage students to be active in learning. In China, on the contrary, the teacher is always the main character in the classroom. Students have little choice but passively receive the knowledge from the teacher. They study not for interests, but for exams, high ranking universities and good jobs.

In Finland, I can interrupt the teacher whenever I want and discuss with him or her in the middle of the class. The teacher has his or her teaching plan as well, but it does not matter that much if he or she cannot finish it. But in China, teachers have to follow the syllabus strictly, which results in little time given to the students. If something you do not understand, you are told to ask questions after class. (Participant 6)

Teachers in Finland require us to have a study plan before starting our studies, for example, what kind of study objectives you want to achieve within a certain period of time. Students' initiative is highly valued, meaning that we are responsible for our own studies. The teacher here is more like a facilitator. I found it much practical and motivating than completely following the teacher. Another character that I cannot find in Chinese classroom is the feedback mechanism. There might some teachers giving feedback to students in China, most of which are rather superficial. (Participant 4)

However, one participant (participant 10) pointed out that this kind of free-style Finnish teaching model made her confused sometimes since she had no idea what to do next. She is used to be led by the teacher all the time. But she also admitted that Finnish way of teaching and learning is a good way to develop students' self-learning ability and divergent thinking. She stated that:

Studying in Finland involves too much self-study ability. I was lost in the very beginning because I was used to the Chinese teaching style that everything was organized by the teacher.

Diversity versus uniformity

Some other participants focus more on the difference of teaching methods between Finnish and Chinese education. They suggest that teachers in Finland try not to be stuck in front of the classroom, but instead, to inspire students' learning interests through different classroom activities.

Teachers here focus more on the integration of the knowledge, meaning that group discussion, brainstorming, as well as some card games are implemented during the class to lead students to transfer the knowledge from textbooks to real lives, for example, using the theories of the book to explain a very practical phenomenon. (Participant 7)

There are two participants, however, who said that they didn't experience any differences regarding Finnish and Chinese teaching models, or at least not as obvious as they expected.

The only difference I have experienced after I came to Finland is that we are free to leave in the middle of the class. But with regard to teaching and learning, I haven't found too much difference. (Participant 8)

Participant 10, who has studied in Australia and Singapore before, stated that:

I can feel that more freedom is given to students in Finland than in China. We can interrupt the teacher as we want to. But the learning experience here is not as active and interesting as I expected. The teacher still spends most of the time lecturing, leaving us little time to discuss with each other. I think maybe it is because most Finnish people are shy, not as open as other western people, for example, Australians.

2.4.3 Classroom interaction

When asked about the difference of classroom interaction, eight participants indicated that there are much more debates and discussions in Finnish classrooms than the time they were in China.

Teacher-student interaction

Almost all participants indicated that they are free to discuss with the teacher whenever they want in Finnish classroom and the teacher actually encourage students to do so in order to deepen their thoughts. But in China, it is rare to see someone debate with the teacher during the class.

I find that most of my classmates are quite active here. It is very common to see someone interrupt and question the teacher, and then comes to a heated discussion between them. If someone comes up with a different opinion, he or she just says it out loud and then participates in the discussion. In China, few students dare to question the teacher in the middle of the class. They seem very trust in the teacher. Everything from the teacher is absolutely correct, which results in few interactions between the teacher and students during the class. (Participant 2)

Participant 6 stated that sometimes they did have the so-called ‘question asking & answering’ session with the teacher in China, though it was not as effective as it should be. She stated that:

The questions that students ask are supposed to be spontaneous. They ask questions with the progress of what they have been told from the teacher and then all students participate in the discussion. That is what the classroom interaction should be, like what I have experienced in Finland. In China, however, questions are always planned beforehand by the teacher, for example, when and what should be asked and how long this question should be discussed and solved.

One possible reason that may explain the obvious difference of teacher-student interaction between Chinese and Finnish classroom is the language barrier. As participant 10 indicated, western students are better at English than Chinese roughly, thus are more eager to speak out. Besides, cultural impact should be another explanation. Chinese people regard neutral, politeness and modesty as human virtues. Therefore, most students do not dare to interrupt the teacher in the middle of the class even if they have some questions. They would rather wait until the class ends and then come to the teacher individually.

There might be some discussions going on between the teacher and students in Chinese classroom, but students including me seem dislike someone asking questions all the time. They feel that he or she keeps asking questions to show off their talents or to attract the teacher's attention. (Participant 3)

As participant 3 mentioned, students are actually allowed to ask questions in China. But if he or she keeps talking, the teacher may stop him or her in order to continue the teaching plan. Plus, other students may not have interests listening to what he or she is talking about. If someone is too active in the classroom, he or she will be seen as a special person. In order not to be too special, many students choose to be silent even if they know the answer of the question.

Student-student interaction

Nearly all participants stated that they have got much more chances to cooperate with other students inside and outside the classroom in Finland than the time they were in China. Some participants who come to Finland for just a month mentioned that they have cooperative learning in almost every class. Group works or group discussions can be found every day in every class, working together for a single word, an abstract concept, or even the whole book. Participant 6 emphasized that unlike Chinese schools where teachers organize everything in the class even when they implement some student activities occasionally, students in Finland are given freedom to do the work themselves. She stated that:

We decide whom we would like to be group with in most cases, but have to be multicultural of course. The teacher just gives us a topic and we need to find relevant information and discuss with each other. Based on the given topic, we decide how to proceed, whether or not apply what we

have learned during the class.

When asked about the situation in China, however, four participants said that they had little or no cooperative learning experience before.

I didn't not know what cooperative learning really means when I was in China. There might some students asking questions individually after class. But during the class, the teacher took up most of the time. Sometimes, we were required to do homework together, but only in rare cases, and we did not take it seriously. (Participant 5)

Some participants mentioned that they had a few group discussions only in foreign teachers' class, but the learning results were not as effective as they expected. As participant 4 mentioned, students had little initiative in group works because the teacher always decided everything, for instance, how to carry out an experiment step by step, what should be done at this point. Students just needed to follow the instructions, which left them little freedom to think independently.

Others stated that the implementation of so-called western teaching method is of little efficiency in China. Some schools are now trying to pay more attention to inspiring students' creativity under the pressure of education reform. However, the result appears to be far more satisfactory.

There were some group discussions in the oral-English course. After several minutes of shallow discussion in English, we started gossiping in Chinese. We didn't see the point of having group discussions since it seemed not helpful to our studies. (Participant 3)

Each group member was supposed to have equal task in a group work; it was not always the case though when I was in China. If someone was good at writing, for example, others would convince him or her to write the whole paper and sign the group's name. The so-called group work was of rather low efficiency. I felt like it was a waste of my time. (Participant 1)

According to participant 3, the possible reasons why cooperative learning in China is not as effective as in western countries could be the lack of encouragement from the teacher. In the Confucianism culture, teachers tend to criticize about students' performance rather than

giving praises, which they think is helpful for stimulating students to make more progress, but may discourage students' activeness. Therefore, even if someone gets a rough idea, he or she barely receives any approvals from the teacher. In addition, some participants indicated that Chinese teachers are reluctant to implement learning practices mainly because of Chinese educational culture. With the pressure of the National Entrance Examination, the teacher and students regard high-ranking university as their primary goal instead of gaining practical skills. It is the Chinese national syllabus that constrains students from being active. As participant stated:

Cooperating with other students is invaluable in enlightening students' thinking and broadening our train of thoughts, but may not be as efficient as traditional teacher-centered learning when confronted with test-driven curriculum.

There are, however, two participants pointing out that they didn't feel too much difference between Finnish and Chinese education in regard with classroom interaction. One participant (participant 4) said that students here, especially Finnish students, are almost as quite as Chinese students and they do not like asking questions in the class. Another participant (participant 8), pointed out that he didn't see too much difference between Finnish and Chinese classroom, both of which are relatively quiet, though students in Finland seem slightly more active.

2.4.4 Emphasis on examinations

Another respect about the difference between Finnish and Chinese education is the emphasis on examinations. All participants indicated that they have more pressure studying in China because too much emphasis has been placed on exams. Chinese students are rather serious about the exams and spend much of their spare time on them. But when referred to Finnish education, they all feel that exams seem not that important. Even if there are some exams sometimes, students do not care much about the results, at least not as much as Chinese students do.

In China, almost every subject has an exam. Actually, most of the college students have to pull all-nighter before the exam, which is useless for knowledge absorption. But in Finland, we do not

have many exams, but doing presentations or writing essays instead. For me, I feel like I am more motivated to explore activeness, think hard and attend discussion in class, just like what I am doing now in Finland. (Participant 4)

Some participants mentioned that examination is by no means the only way of evaluating students' study results in Finland. Accomplishing one course does not just mean to pass the exam or finish the assignment, but more importantly, to obtain knowledge or skills in certain field.

Finland is not a place that values competition, scores therefore is not the only way of evaluation. Teachers here focus more on motivating students to express their own ideas by letting students to elaborate their feelings after reading a book or constructing an essay based on a certain topic. There is no absolute right or wrong answers. Everything we write is valued as long as it is reasonable. In China, however, we answer the questions as we are taught by our teachers and we are always graded point by point in the exams. Expressing our own ideas may result in failing the exam. (Participant 6)

4.2 Research question 2: Perceptions towards cooperative learning

Cooperative learning in this study basically referred to group discussions and group works inside the classroom and group assignments outside the classroom. Participants are asked how they perceived cooperative learning when they are studying in Finland, what benefits and difficulties they have encountered when engaging in cooperative learning practice and how they dealt with those difficulties. Data show that nearly all participants thought cooperative learning as necessary and invaluable in their learning process, though some pointed out that cooperating with others could also be problematic in some perspectives. Based on participants' responses, the following categories are identified as listed in Table 3.

TABLE 3 Summary of perceptions of cooperative learning

Categories	Subcategories
Positive aspects of cooperative learning	Mind enlightening and expanding Promoting motivation in learning Socialization

Negative aspects of cooperative learning

Misunderstanding caused by cultural difference
Low efficiency
Time conflicts

Coping strategies

Avoidance
Help seeking

4.2.1 Positive aspects of cooperative learning

All participants stated that cooperative learning is beneficial to students in one way or another. Cooperating with others keep everyone involved and thus gives them a desire to learn. By implementing cooperative learning practice, learning process is transformed from teacher-oriented to student-oriented, which provides students with more autonomy in learning.

Mind enlightening and expanding

Participants throughout the interviews emphasized the excitement about brainstorming when engaged in cooperative learning. According to some participants, they preferred cooperative learning a lot because it is a chance to acquire more information that cannot be achieved alone.

Cooperating with other students helps us understand a specific issue from different perspectives. Since we are from different countries and with different educational backgrounds, by sharing and listening to others' opinions, you realize that this problem can be solved by more than one way. It is really helpful for broadening our minds and improving our language skills. (Participant 10)

The importance of cooperative learning as a means to reinforce what has been learned was clearly seen by participant 3, who illustrated that the after-class small group discussion always enlightened her about what she had just learned during the class. The group works forced her to think more and seek more relevant information in order to be a part of the conversation. According to participant 2, working cooperatively, learning is much easier. Three heads are better than one. Sometimes, one can never accomplish a perfect job than

working together with others. She stated that:

Once I was preparing a presentation with three other students, we had no idea how to start at first. Thanks to one group member who had relevant knowledge, he pointed out a clear idea of how to progress. Then, the task was divided into four parts and each of us was assigned a specific job. From PowerPoint design to content modification, everyone was actively involved, and we presented a satisfied work at last.

Participant 7, who had never have any experience of cooperative learning in China, emphasized the great impact that the first cooperation brought to him throughout the interview.

I was shocked the time I saw our work! We discussed and brainstormed together. I had a quick thought about how the work should be started and progressed. But when the work was done, it was far beyond my expectation. It was fantastic! I would never accomplish such fabulous job by myself. But with others' contributions, we made it!

Each individual has his or her own strengths, for example, some have excellent leadership skill whereas others may be able to think or react quickly. Working cooperatively therefore is able to make works much easier and provide students a chance to learn from others. According to participant 2, her preference for cooperative learning is attributed to her perception that working in groups is helpful for comprehending abstract concepts. She stated that:

Some articles and books regarding education philosophy or psychology are quite hard to understand. It could be a big task even for English-native speakers, not to mention I am a Chinese and have little relevant knowledge. It was very often that I needed to read an article three or four times and still felt confused about part of the materials. But when I was with other students, especially when there were one or two native speakers, their comprehensions about the articles could possibly solve my confusions and deepened my thoughts.

Promoting motivation in learning

Many participants mentioned that working with others is a highly efficient learning method since the learning process is driven by students themselves instead of the teacher. More space and freedom is given to students to seek what they are really interested in. As participant 3 referred, students actually learn few from the teacher if he or she keeps talking

until the end of the class. But when working with others, everyone is able to be involved in active thinking. The usefulness of cooperative learning participant 3 found is clearly illustrated below:

This is my first time experiencing cooperative learning in a real sense. I am passionate about cooperating and discussing with others. I found that every group member has his or her unique idea. Plus the teacher tries to put different students into a group, making sure that we have a fresh experience every time. It is an efficient way of knowledge acquisition because we can never learn everything from the teacher of his or her own.

The feelings some participants expressed about cooperative learning is a sense of fully exploring their activeness. As participant 5 mentioned, he needs to read more in order to find interesting cases and share them with the group members. Being responsible to the group gives him more initiative to learn. Participant 4 stated that studying together gives her much confidence in front of others. “Being a member of the team, I become more eager to ask questions and not feel ashamed.”

The value of cooperative learning participant 1 perceived is not limited to cooperating inside the classroom. She found the after-class reading group is very necessary. In her opinion, reading and learning together makes learning much more interesting and easier. She stated that:

We have reading circles after class. We read individually, discuss together and write the essays together. What impresses me most about the reading circle is that if I read a book with peers, I do not need to read the whole book but choose the part that interests me the most. Therefore, I have much more time spending on the parts I found interesting and learn the other parts from my group members.

By comparing with Chinese traditional teaching model, participant 7 clearly pointed out the apparent advantages of cooperative learning. Learning is not just for tests and good grades, but more importantly, knowledge acquisition. Learning is not always dreary, but can be creative as well. He stated that:

Compared with what I have experienced before in China, where the teaching model is rather simple in a sense that every course is followed by an exam and the teacher seldom evoke students’ interest in learning but cram everything that could be tested in the exam into their heads, my attitude towards learning is completely changed now. Through various cooperative learning

practices, I have the initiative fully engage in active thinking and brainstorming. I enjoy this activity a lot because I am able to perform the leading role during learning process.

According to these participants, learning process can be achieved in such a way that everyone is able to actively engaged. The implementation of cooperative learning practice allows students to improve their participation and make everyone feels important.

Socialization

What participant 9 expressed about the usefulness of cooperative learning is that he is able to socialize with other people and making new friends. He stated that:

Different people have different personalities. Every time we are required to study in small groups, I try to form group with different students from different countries. Learning cooperatively is not only beneficial to coming up with more ideas, but helpful for creating lifelong associations.

He pointed out that for many Chinese, they have no idea how to communicate and interact with others in a community. They feel comfortable only when being around families and friends and they refuse to get to know new people. But after graduation, everyone has no choice but to start socializing with different kinds of people and working together with them. Therefore, the cooperative learning practice in that sense is beneficial for our social lives in the future.

In summary, the findings indicate that the interactions among students inside and outside the classroom are perceived essential as learning become exciting and easier. The active participation in cooperative learning gives them opportunities to be the leading character in the learning process. Plus, they are really learning something for themselves rather than to simply pass the exams or get the credits.

4.2.2 Problematic aspects of cooperative learning

Apart from the effectiveness of cooperative learning that all participants proved, several problematic aspects were also raised. Problems include cultural difference, low efficiency and time conflicts.

Misunderstanding caused by cultural difference

Some participants mentioned the influence of cultural difference on cooperative learning. As some participants indicated, Chinese culture is regarded as collectivism with Confucian-heritage as the dominant cultural concept whereas Finland is a representative of the individualistic culture. Therefore, students from Europe are more likely to speak out and argue with others while Chinese students tend to avoid confrontation with unfamiliar people and thus maybe reluctant to participate in communicative activities, like cooperative learning.

The notion of cooperative learning is quite unfamiliar to me at first. My biggest problem at that time was that I had no idea what to say, especially when confronted with people I didn't know, therefore being isolated in discussion. I think for Chinese students, we have a common problem that we don't know how to argue with others' opinions. The 5000 years of Chinese culture teach us to be silent and respectful, which results in going along with others' ideas all the time. (Participant 7)

The influence of the teacher-centered instructional method on Chinese students' participation of cooperative learning also pointed out by participant 3, who stated that:

I remember the first time I was participating in group discussion after I came to Finland. Everyone was active and talked quite a lot. When it came my turn, however, I could only pop out several words. It really was a striking. I admire those who are able to talk expansively.

When asked the possible reasons of not being able to actively involved. She replied to me that language could be a problem, but besides that, Chinese traditional teaching model is the fundamental reason. She had never engaged in any active thinking when she was in China. The teacher-oriented approach has been inherited from ancient times. Students take it for granted that the teacher is the ultimate. The inflexible teaching method has simplified her minds and decreased her creativity. The complete passive learning model has turned her to a 'tape recorder'.

Another concern about cooperative learning is that putting students with different cultural backgrounds in a group may cause conflicts as well. As participant 2 indicated, if the group members are all from Asian, where the cultures are quite similar to one another, an agreement could be easily reached during the discussion. If not, however, chances of

raising conflicts could be increased.

It is quite annoying when someone says something I dislike, something sensitive. I feel uncomfortable hearing others gossiping about China in the process of group work. I remember once the other group members were talking about the relationship between Taiwan and mainland China, I didn't say a word later on in the discussion.

"I feel that some of my classmates have prejudice against Chinese students", participant 2 mentioned later on. The feeling of being ignored made her far away from interaction. "I don't want to talk to those who give offence to me".

Language barrier is also raised by the majority as an obstacle during cooperative learning. They believe that it is their insufficient command of English that hamper their participation of cooperative learning. As participant 4 mentioned, language could be the biggest problem. It is not easy for one to fully express him- or herself accurately using a second language. She stated that:

At the beginning of working cooperatively, I found that sometimes I could not completely make myself clear, and sometimes I was not able to entirely get others' points. I think it is the same to some other non-English speaking students as well. The different levels of English proficiency has made cooperative learning difficult.

Language as a disadvantage during cooperative learning practice is also mentioned by participant 10, who found out that compared with Asian, European students are obviously more active in the classroom discussion. Their English speaking skills are better than Asian students, and thus are able to illustrate a deeper understanding.

Low efficiency

Another equally problem of cooperative learning is perceived as low efficiency. As participant 8 stated, the learning result was not as satisfactory as he expected when he was working with others, sometimes even worse than learning by himself.

Because of time conflicts and long distance, we prefer to discuss on line and work through Google Drive, which could easily results in shallow discussion and isolated works. It is like the assignment is divided into several separately parts and everyone is responsible for one. We barely discuss face to face, just post messages on line and write our parts individually, then come to our final group work. We don't know what the others write and if they are relevant to ours.

The opposition to cooperative learning was also expressed by participant 7, who indicated that simply putting several students together is not true cooperative learning. If someone has to spend 20 minutes to acquire some information from others that he or she is able to achieve within 5 minutes on his or her own, then what is the point of learning together? He illustrated that:

During our discussion, I found an interesting phenomenon that once someone got an idea, others would simply follow his or her thoughts without mind expansion. Everyone in the small group is supposed to be independent and equal. The ideal cooperative learning practice should be that each group member comes up with his or her own idea and we discuss and decide which one is the most reasonable one. In reality, however, our minds are quite narrowed. If working cooperatively turns out to be a compromise, then would lose its effectiveness.

The fact of overly depending on others during the process of cooperative learning was also perceived as problematic to participant 6, who stated that:

I was expecting to be supplemented or corrected when I said something, but instead, the others just kept nodding and said yes. There was limited interaction and deep analysis, which made me feel that I was completely right, though I knew it was not the case.

The low efficiency of cooperative learning may also be caused by the irresponsible group members, as some participants indicated. Cooperative learning requires everyone to contribute to the completion of assignments, though it is not always the case.

Working in a group is of little use if some group members are not responsible. It is rather annoying if somebody does not do the work he or she is assigned. I don't want to work with that kind of persons. Those who don't do their parts does not deserve the credits. (participant 6)

Time conflict

Nearly half participants rated time conflict as the primary problem when doing cooperative works.

The major difficulty I think is to find a proper time that suits every group member. It is even more difficult when we are from different faculties. Sometimes, I didn't feel like thinking or writing

something, but I had to force myself to study in order to match others' time schedule. (Participant 5)

“The biggest challenge of cooperative learning is to fix the timing issue since everyone has his or her own schedule even in the same faculty.” Participant 9 indicated. “To solve this problem, a common free time could be considered given to all students to engage in cooperative learning. There is no class during that time, making it much easier for everyone who has been assigned group works to meet up. That common free time therefore can be called the ‘group work time’.

4.2.3 Coping strategies in the process of cooperative learning

One significant theme that emerges from participants' interviews is the coping mechanism to deal with difficulties or problems they encountered during cooperative learning. They perceived those strategies as necessary in adapting to this new learning approach. Difficulties they mentioned including misunderstandings or disagreements among group members, language-related challenges, being unprepared speaking in front of unfamiliar students, etc.

Avoidance

When asked how they overcome the problems they have during cooperative learning, the majority indicated that when faced with conflicts caused by misunderstandings or disagreements, they tend to adopt indirect and non-confrontational style to ease the tension in order to keep a good relationship with their classmates, which is referred to as emotional focused coping. Possible solutions include separation from the group, avoidance or tolerance. According to participant 9, conflicts happened occasionally if different opinions could not be compromised. He held the belief that nothing is important than keeping the study group harmony.

Learning should be prioritized rather than making conflicts. Since no one's past is exactly like anyone else's, no two people see alike. Being in the same group, we are bonded together. Therefore, even if someone says something inappropriate, it is hard for me to say 'no' straightforwardly, but instead, using a typical Chinese subtle way to let him or her know my thoughts. If they declined my suggestions, I would not insist then.

Participant 9 pointed out that he would try not to be in the same group with too demanding persons, but if he had to, then kept a distance from him or her. Anyway he would rather remain being polite and tolerant than being aggressive. Similar perception was also expressed by participant 2, who perceived that even if she sensed the tension, she would just keep silent.

If someone mentioned something that made me feel uncomfortable during group discussion, I would not say it out loud but keep away from the conversation and turn to other group members, asking them to transfer what they had been discussed. When confronted with conflicts, I prefer to use indirect approach and avoid making conflicts.

Participant 7 mentioned that there is no need to think hard in which way to resolve the problems. He stated that:

The reason I found cooperative learning practice hard to be involved in is because of my insufficient English language ability. But with the time pass by, my English speaking skill has been improved naturally through communicating with foreigners, making it easier to verbalize my inner thoughts. Therefore, if one is able to be a part of the conversation, then learning in a group will not be a problem.

Participant 7 admitted that disagreement might happen sometimes, but he is not an assertive person and it is fine by him to follow others' suggestions. Anyway, he didn't give it too much thought and thought it as a big issue.

Help-seeking

If the problems are language-related or task-related, however, most of the participants tend to say it out directly, that is to say, to adopt the problem-focused coping strategy. As participant 3 stated, she could not express herself well in English at first, but the more she talked and asked questions, the more she found that speaking in English in front of others was not a big deal and there was no need to be ashamed of.

If I could not understand what they were saying, I would directly ask them to repeat or speak slowly. If it failed again then, writing it down or using body language would be another option. I need to have the problems solved right away. (Participant 3)

The perception that participant 3 expressed was also agreed by participant 4, who viewed the problem focused coping as necessary in dealing with the difficulties and improving social skills.

When encountered difficulties, I would rather confront them straightforwardly and instantly. I tried not to keep off my weaknesses, for instance, language deficiency. So, I keep asking questions whenever needed and being around native speakers in order to improve my language skill. Being honest and brave to my problems and then seeking ways to quickly adapt to the new environment is my way to deal with the difficulties. (Participant 4)

4.3 Summary

In conclusion, this study focused on Chinese students' perceptions of cooperative learning with education culture as dominant determinant. The study findings demonstrate significant cultural gaps between Confucian-heritage and western individualism, which results in differences between Chinese and Finnish education, specifically in teacher-student relationship, teaching model, classroom interaction and emphasis on examinations. Almost all participants indicated that unlike the traditional teacher-centered learning in China that students have to respect and follow teachers' instructions all the time, Finnish way of learning is more motivating and inspiring that students are given more freedom to speak out, question, and argue with the teacher or peers. Data reveal that most of the participants are favor of the Finnish education.

In general, cooperative learning is supported by all participants as necessary in enlightening and expanding their minds, promoting motivation in learning, deepening their understanding, and socialization, though some weaknesses are also pointed out that may hinder their interaction with other group members, for example, misunderstanding caused by cultural difference, low efficiency, and time conflicts. As to coping mechanism during the process of cooperative learning, nearly all participants tend to be intermediary and compromising when faced with conflict. However, most try to be active and turn for help if they have academic confusions or language difficulties.

5. DISCUSSION

5.1 Relevance of this study

The objective of this research study is to identify cooperative learning as a teaching approach among Chinese students, aiming to answer the questions surrounding differences among Finnish and Chinese learning cultures, how they perceive cooperative learning as a novel teaching method and coping mechanisms employed by those who encountered difficulties during cooperative learning practice.

Upon completing this study, it is easy to find out that education culture play a key role in understanding Chinese students' perceptions of cooperative learning. Confucianism still exerts a great influence on Chinese students. Firstly, the rigid hierarchy between the teacher and students results in little or no interaction in Chinese classroom. Students' not daring to say their minds out loud in the middle of the class is seen as an act to show their respect to the teacher. In addition, Children are taught to be modest and not showing off their talents all the time, which can be another reason that explains the silence of the Chinese classroom. Furthermore, with the National Entrance Examination as the only criteria to select talented students for higher education, it is not easy for the teachers and students to think about other creative educational activities. As some participant mentioned: "it is impossible and of little value for Chinese schools to implement cooperative learning practice if the exam-oriented education module cannot be changed".

Therefore, because of the profound impact of traditional Chinese education, most of the Chinese students regard cooperative learning as a rather unfamiliar learning practice that they may encounter such difficulties as lack of communication skill, language barrier, etc. They had no idea how to debate and argue with others because they have already used to be fed by the teachers. In addition, almost all participants tend to employed non-confrontational coping strategies to avoid making conflicts during cooperative learning, which also reflected the fact Chinese students have been deeply influenced by Confucius culture that being intermediately and roundabout rather that straightforward when encountered disagreements.

5.2 Limitations and implications

The first limitation of this study is the number of participants involved since only 10 students are randomly assigned to participate in this study. Although detailed information is collected using face-to-face interviews, the focus should also be on the quantity of the participants. The study result is rather limited in a sense that a comprehensive picture cannot be obtained from such a small group. Furthermore, several variables have been considered in this study including participants' gender, field of study, length of study in Finland, and overseas experience, other elements should also be paid attention to, for instance, campus environment, teachers' preference, etc., which might also influence students' perceptions of cooperative learning.

Another limitation of this research is the limited research literature regarding cooperative learning practice in Finland. The only study that the researcher found is concerning Finnish education reform, which indicates that Finnish schools encourage such creative and innovative educational practice as cooperative learning in each level of the Finnish education, however, there is no thorough and detailed statistics showing how this learning strategy is implemented. Therefore, further research is needed in order to make a comprehensive comparison between Finnish and Chinese educational practice. There is more extensive research literature on 'collaborative learning' in Finland.

The study indicates that teachers and educators who are aware of the cultural difference are much easier to support Chinese students in adapting to the new academic life. According to the participants' responses, teachers can assist their students through providing more English language classes, encouraging them to speak out and having more conversations with them. In addition, based on participants' perceptions towards cooperative learning, proper adjustments should be done by schools and teachers in order to make cooperative learning more effective. For instance, the teacher has to think about how to make the study group diversity while eliminating cultural conflicts, how to make every student more engaged in cooperative learning, what can be done to reduce time conflicts, etc. The understanding of Chinese students' perceptions of cooperative learning will be helpful for teachers to design a more meaningful and high effective teaching strategy.

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APPENDICES: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Is there any difference between Chinese and Finnish learning environment? If so, describe them in details.
2. Have you had any experience with cooperative learning when you were studying in China?
3. Have you had any experience with cooperative learning when you are studying in Finland?
4. Describe your experience of cooperative learning in details.
5. What is your attitude towards cooperative learning? Is it helpful to your study? Explain.
6. Do you think that you have a good interaction with your group member? Explain.
7. Have you encountered any difficulties when engaging in cooperative learning? If so, how did you deal with those difficulties? Please describe.