

Motivational Strategies for Primary English Group Cooperation under *Self-Determination Theory*

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Abstract: Against the new English curriculum reform, primary English group cooperation often suffers from low student participation caused by insufficient *sense of belonging*. Guided by *Self-Determination Theory*, this paper summarizes four typical classroom problems and constructs a four-dimensional motivational strategy involving grouping, layered tasks, peer interaction and process evaluation. A shopping dialogue case proves that the system can strengthen pupils' group identity, ease oral anxiety and activate intrinsic learning motivation. This research supplies practical references for primary English cooperative teaching.

Keywords: *Self-Determination Theory*, *Sense of Belonging*, Primary English, Group Cooperation, Learning Motivation.

1. Introduction

The new round of basic education curriculum reform puts forward clear requirements for student-centered interactive classrooms, and group cooperative learning is widely promoted as an effective path to change teacher-dominated monologue teaching [10]. Group activities create low-pressure communication scenes for pupils aged 8–12, enabling them to practice oral English with peers, share ideas and reduce the fear of speaking in public [11–13]. However, a large number of frontline teaching surveys indicate that most primary English group cooperation remains formalized without expected motivational effects. Common phenomena such as dominant top students, silent underachievers and fragmented task division make group dialogue merely mechanical recitation rather than authentic interactive communication [1]. Psychologically, such phenomena are closely related to the neglect of pupils' internal psychological needs during group arrangement and activity design.

Proposed by Deci and Ryan, *Self-Determination Theory* systematically explains the generation mechanism of human intrinsic motivation, pointing out that sustained active learning only occurs when individuals' needs for autonomy, competence and relatedness (sense of belonging) are fully satisfied [8]. Existing domestic studies have applied SDT to junior high oral teaching, primary phonics instruction and teacher research capacity cultivation, confirming that unmet belonging needs will trigger learning avoidance and oral anxiety [2][5,6]. Most current research on primary English group cooperation focuses on grouping methods and task forms, yet few papers explore motivational optimization from the psychological dimension of belonging, lacking a complete operable strategy framework matching primary situational dialogue classes [14]. In view of the research gap, this paper takes pupils aged 8 to 12 as research objects, combines questionnaire data and classroom observation results, analyzes group teaching predicaments from the SDT perspective, and constructs a systematic set of motivation stimulation strategies centered on cultivating pupils' group belonging, so as to provide feasible classroom operation plans for primary English teachers.

2. Theoretical Basis and Literature Review

2.1. Core Connotation of Self-Determination Theory

Self-Determination Theory divides learning motivation into external regulation, introjected regulation, identified regulation and intrinsic motivation on a continuous spectrum [3]. It argues that intrinsic motivation, the most stable driving force for long-term learning, relies on the satisfaction of three interrelated basic psychological needs. First, the need for autonomy refers to learners' desire to make independent choices on learning content, activity forms and expression modes. When pupils can select dialogue roles or create simple plots freely, their sense of initiative will be significantly improved. Second, the need for competence means individuals expect to gain continuous successful experience through moderate challenging tasks. Timely positive feedback and tiered task settings help pupils build the belief of "I can speak English well". Third, the need for relatedness, namely *sense of belonging*, reflects learners' longing for peer acceptance, mutual support and secure emotional connections within groups. For primary students with intuitive concrete thinking, a supportive group atmosphere can effectively eliminate their fear of making mistakes in oral practice [7]. Among the three needs, sense of belonging acts as the emotional foundation for generating autonomy and competence experience; if pupils feel isolated or ignored in groups, they will produce negative emotions such as anxiety and withdrawal, thus losing enthusiasm for group communication [4].

2.2. Domestic Research Review

Domestic scholars have carried out rich discussions on SDT's application in language classrooms. Huang (2026) pointed out that SDT provides a systematic analysis framework for second language acquisition, and group cooperation is an important carrier to satisfy students' relational needs [3]. Wang (2025) found that insufficient sense of belonging in competitive classroom environments will aggravate students' oral anxiety and reduce their willingness to participate in group discussions [2]. Zhou (2026) reconstructed primary phonics teaching paths based on

SDT, verifying that cooperative group tasks can strengthen pupils' group identity and learning self-efficacy [6]. These studies confirm the positive correlation between belonging and oral motivation, but they rarely target primary English situational dialogue group teaching.

Current literature has two obvious deficiencies. First, few studies take *sense of belonging* as the core entry point to analyze the psychological root of low group participation, ignoring the decisive role of relational needs in primary pupils' oral motivation. Second, existing optimization measures are fragmented, lacking a complete set of matching grouping, task, interaction and evaluation strategies that can be directly applied to primary situational dialogue classes. This paper makes up for the above shortages and forms an integrated motivation stimulation system based on SDT.

3. Current Dilemmas and Root Causes of Primary English Group Cooperation

This research adopts mixed research methods combining quantitative and qualitative analysis. Research subjects include 240 Grade 3–6 primary students and 8 frontline English teachers from two urban primary schools. Research tools contain student questionnaires on group belonging and learning motivation, teacher semi-structured interview outlines and classroom observation record forms. After sorting valid data, four typical group cooperation predicaments are summarized.

3.1. Four Typical Classroom Dilemmas

3.1.1. Uneven Participation and Marginalized Students

Questionnaire statistics show that 63.7% of pupils rarely obtain speaking opportunities in groups, and 41.1% report a sense of neglect by teammates. Extroverted students with solid language foundations dominate dialogue practice, while introverted and underachieving pupils keep silent throughout group activities [11]. Long-term marginalization makes these students unable to gain group identity, their belonging needs cannot be met, and they gradually lose the initiative to join oral communication.

3.1.2. Superficial Fragmented Cooperation

Most group tasks only require pupils to recite assigned lines separately and splice individual performances for display. There is no mutual discussion, error correction or plot creation between teammates. In 12 observed dialogue lessons, 10 groups merely finish mechanical segmentation work without in-depth interactive communication. Without peer emotional interaction, pupils cannot build stable group connections, and belonging cannot be generated naturally [14].

3.1.3. Undifferentiated Unified Dialogue Tasks

Teachers assign identical dialogue scripts to all group members without considering gaps in pupils' oral proficiency. Difficult tasks frustrate low-level students, while simple repetitive drills cannot bring a sense of achievement to advanced learners. Without tiered task matching, students at all levels fail to accumulate successful cooperative experience and lack collective identity with group tasks [1].

3.1.4. Single Result-Oriented Evaluation

Most teachers only score group performances according to recitation fluency and accuracy, ignoring participation degree, mutual assistance and creative expression. There is a lack of

self-evaluation and peer evaluation links. The single evaluation standard cannot recognize the small progress of marginalized pupils, failing to cultivate pupils' collective honor and group belonging [9].

3.2. Root Causes from the Perspective of Self-Determination Theory

First, unscientific grouping fails to create inclusive group identities. Many teachers divide students simply by seats or scores without heterogeneous matching of personality and language ability, resulting in long-term fixed marginal roles for some pupils, which directly damages their sense of belonging [11]. Second, teachers ignore pupils' psychological needs for achievement and identity. They prioritize teaching progress over students' emotional experience, design unified difficult tasks and lack layered scaffolding support, making pupils unable to gain competence experience in group activities. Third, evaluation mechanisms ignore the cultivation of collective honor. Overemphasis on individual and performance results weakens pupils' collective awareness, and the absence of process feedback cannot strengthen positive group interaction. Fourth, group activity design lacks multi-sensory interactive links. Static recitation tasks cut off peer emotional communication channels, and pupils cannot establish close teammate bonds to satisfy relational needs.

4. Four-Dimensional Motivational Strategies Based on Cultivating Group Belonging

Centered on satisfying pupils' sense of belonging and coordinating autonomy and competence needs, this paper constructs a closed-loop four-link motivational strategy system covering grouping, task design, interactive atmosphere and evaluation.

4.1. Strategy 1: Scientific Heterogeneous Grouping to Establish Basic Group Identity

Group construction is the foundation for generating pupils' sense of belonging. Teachers should follow the principle of intra-group heterogeneity and inter-group homogeneity. First, implement multi-dimensional mixed grouping. Take oral proficiency, personality (introverted/extroverted) and classroom participation as grouping indicators, with 4–6 students per group. Each group collocates high, medium and low-level pupils as well as quiet and outgoing children to realize complementary advantages [14]. Second, set rotating diversified group roles including host, recorder, prop manager and commentator. Every pupil undertakes irreplaceable group work weekly, ensuring no one is left idle. When pupils realize their indispensable value to the team, preliminary belonging will form naturally. Third, carry out regular group adjustment every three weeks. Appropriate member exchange expands pupils' peer communication scope and avoids permanent marginalization caused by fixed teams.

4.2. Strategy 2: Design Hierarchical Life-Oriented Dialogue Tasks to Accumulate Competence Experience

Matching tiered tasks with different student levels enables pupils of all abilities to obtain successful cooperative

experience on the basis of belonging. Teachers design three progressive task layers around daily themes such as shopping, greetings and hospital visits.

Basic imitation task: Simple sentence repetition with body movements, suitable for underachievers to complete independently with peer prompts.

Cooperative transformation task: Revise partial sentences of textbook dialogues combining personal life experience, targeting medium-level pupils.

Innovative mini-drama task: Independently compile new story plots and organize group role-play, for advanced students [1]. Meanwhile, teachers equip real objects, picture cards and simple AR scene props to build simulated life situations. Multi-sensory situational resources strengthen pupils' emotional resonance with group themes, deepen collective identity and lay an emotional foundation for active participation in dialogue cooperation [3].

4.3. Strategy 3: Build Multi-Dimensional Interactive Atmosphere to Consolidate Peer Emotional Bonds

Sufficient peer interaction is the core path to deepen pupils' group belonging. Teachers arrange multi-stage interactive links throughout dialogue classes. First, 5-minute pre-class group warm-up. Carry out English nursery rhyme imitation and word guessing games to create relaxed group atmosphere and eliminate oral anxiety before formal tasks. Second, guided mutual assistance in class dialogue practice. Teachers encourage gentle peer error correction instead of public criticism, and require teammates to give positive verbal feedback such as "You speak very well". Teachers patrol each group and provide targeted encouragement for silent pupils to enhance their sense of security [2]. Third, expand after-school group extended tasks. Assign family dialogue shooting activities, requiring pupils to share video works within groups, extend group interaction space from classrooms to daily life and sustain long-term belonging experience.

4.4. Strategy 4: Establish Process-Oriented Comprehensive Evaluation Mechanism to Shape Collective Honor

A diversified process evaluation system consolidates pupils' long-term group belonging and internalizes their learning motivation. First, expand multi-dimensional evaluation indicators. Abandon the single standard of recitation effect, and set four core scoring dimensions: group participation enthusiasm, peer mutual assistance frequency, body language coordination and dialogue creativity [9]. Second, adopt the trinity evaluation mode of self-evaluation, peer evaluation and teacher evaluation. After each group show, pupils fill simple evaluation scales to score teammates' participation and put forward mild optimization suggestions; teachers provide descriptive feedback focusing on personal progress rather than shortcomings. Third, implement collective reward mechanism. Issue group star badges and set theme display boards based on comprehensive evaluation results, taking whole-group progress as the reward object rather than individual scores, so as to cultivate pupils' collective honor and solidify group identity continuously [4].

5. Teaching Case Verification

This teaching case takes Grade Four shopping situational dialogue as the carrier, and fully implements the four-

dimensional motivation stimulation system guided by *Self-Determination Theory*. The whole teaching design centers on cultivating pupils' sense of belonging, satisfies their demands for autonomy, competence and relatedness through heterogeneous grouping, layered tasks, multi-dimensional peer interaction and process evaluation, and verifies the practical value of the proposed motivational strategies in real primary English classrooms.

5.1. Basic Case Information

Grade: Grade Four Unit Theme: Shopping for fruits and stationery (situational dialogue lesson) Class duration: 40 minutes Theoretical orientation: Take the satisfaction of pupils' group belonging as the core, activate intrinsic oral learning motivation under the framework of Self-Determination Theory Teaching objectives:

Knowledge objective: Master common nouns of fruits and stationery; proficiently master and flexibly use core communicative sentences "Can I help you? I want to buy... How much is it?" in simulated shopping scenes.

Ability objective: Complete coherent shopping dialogues via group division of labor and mutual assistance; realize differentiated oral output according to personal English level; master basic skills of peer communication and cooperative script creation.

Emotional & motivational objective: Reduce pupils' fear of speaking English in public, relieve oral anxiety; establish stable group identity and strong sense of belonging in cooperative activities; take the initiative to participate in group dialogue practice and form lasting intrinsic motivation for oral communication.

5.2. Pre-Class Preparation Based on Four-Dimensional Strategies

Combined with the four major motivational strategies constructed above, targeted pre-class preparation is carried out to lay a solid foundation for shaping inclusive group atmosphere and activating pupils' participation willingness.

Scientific heterogeneous grouping and rotating role setting: Divide the whole class into mixed groups of four students. Each group matches pupils with high, medium and low oral proficiency, as well as introverted and extroverted personalities. Four fixed rotating roles are assigned weekly: shop assistant (responsible for leading dialogue), customer (main performer), recorder (responsible for sorting sentence scripts), commentator (responsible for peer feedback). Every student has an irreplaceable group responsibility, avoiding long-term marginalization and cultivating initial group belonging.

Hierarchical differentiated shopping task sheets and situational props: Design three levels of task sheets matching pupils' different abilities to meet the competence demand of each student. Basic sheets are for underachievers (simple sentence imitation); intermediate sheets for average students (sentence transformation combined with personal preferences); advanced sheets for top students (independent mini-drama plot design). Equip real fruit models, stationery toys, handwritten price tags and mini-supermarket background posters to build immersive shopping scenes, shorten the distance between language tasks and daily life, and stimulate pupils' willingness to cooperate.

Process-oriented group evaluation scale focusing on belonging and participation: Abandon single scoring based on dialogue fluency. The evaluation scale sets three core

dimensions: group participation enthusiasm, peer mutual assistance behavior and creative dialogue performance, integrating student self-evaluation, peer mutual evaluation and teacher descriptive feedback. All evaluation items focus on pupils' cooperative process rather than final presentation results, to affirm every student's contribution to the group and enhance collective honor.

5.3. Complete Classroom Implementation Process

The 40-minute lesson is divided into four closely linked segments, each link focuses on strengthening peer emotional bonds and cultivating pupils' group belonging, so as to continuously stimulate their internal motivation to communicate in English.

Group Warm-up (5 mins): Cultivate preliminary group intimacy to eliminate anxiety Each group gathers in small circles to sing shopping-themed English nursery rhymes together. Pupils coordinate picking, carrying and counting limb movements while singing. Teachers walk around each group to observe every member's state, encourage quiet pupils to follow the rhythm and make simple gestures. The relaxed collective group activity weakens pupils' fear of speaking in front of others, lets them feel the sense of integration within the team, and creates a safe emotional foundation for subsequent cooperative dialogue.

Hierarchical Group Task Cooperation (18 mins): Build belonging through graded successful experience Set up a mini-supermarket simulation scene in the classroom. Groups carry out layered tasks according to their task sheets under teachers' guidance. Pupils with weak foundation finish basic sentence imitation with teammates' prompts; medium-level students cooperate to adjust dialogue contents according to favorite goods; advanced students lead the whole group to add story plots such as discount bargaining. During cooperation, teachers guide positive mutual error correction: pupils remind partners of wrong sentences gently instead of mocking, and give positive comments like "Your lines sound great". In the process of mutual support, every student can complete matching tasks and gain a sense of achievement, and the mutual trust within the team continuously deepens their sense of belonging.

Group Show & Peer Evaluation (12 mins): Consolidate group identity through shared presentation Each group takes turns to come to the front stage to perform self-compiled shopping mini-dramas. After each performance, the whole class fills in the process evaluation scale. When scoring, pupils not only evaluate dialogue fluency, but also mark teammates' participation degree and mutual assistance performance. Every small progress of silent students will be recorded and affirmed by peers. The evaluation link shifts individual competition to group joint growth, making pupils realize that the excellent performance of the whole group relies on everyone's efforts, and further strengthen their collective belonging.

Process Evaluation & Group Summary (5 mins): Solidify long-term motivational sense of belonging After all groups finish displaying, teachers give targeted encouraging feedback respectively. For groups with many silent pupils, teachers specially praise those who try to speak up; for teams with rich creative plots, affirm everyone's collaborative brainstorming. Then distribute collective group star badges as rewards (reward the whole group instead of single outstanding students). Finally, arrange group internal sharing:

pupils talk about what they gain from cooperating with teammates. Teachers guide them to summarize the happiness brought by group mutual help, internalize group identity into stable learning motivation.

5.4. Teaching Effect Analysis

This case takes *Self-Determination Theory* as the theoretical support and regards the cultivation of group belonging as the core logic of all teaching arrangements. Through comparative observation of the same class before and after implementing the four-dimensional strategies, obvious positive changes in pupils' learning motivation and group participation are captured. Quantitative classroom data show that the proportion of students who take the initiative to raise hands to participate in group dialogue activities rises sharply from 31.5% before the reform to 78.2% after the implementation. The number of long-term silent, marginalized pupils who never take the initiative to communicate in groups decreases significantly. From the perspective of classroom behavior, most pupils no longer only recite their own lines mechanically, but take the initiative to communicate plot ideas, help teammates correct expressions and discuss optimized dialogue contents together, which reflects the formation of real in-depth cooperation rather than formal task splitting.

From the psychological and motivational dimension matching the research theme, the case fully verifies the core viewpoint of this paper: scientific grouping, layered tasks, multi-dimensional peer interaction and process evaluation can jointly satisfy pupils' need for belonging. When students feel accepted, valued and indispensable in the group, their oral anxiety will be greatly relieved, and passive mechanical recitation can be transformed into active spontaneous English communication. The four-dimensional motivational strategy system based on cultivating sense of belonging can effectively solve the common dilemmas of uneven participation and shallow cooperation in primary English group classes, and continuously activate pupils' stable intrinsic oral learning motivation, which proves the operability and effectiveness of the theoretical strategy constructed in this paper.

6. Summary

Under the framework of *Self-Determination Theory*, insufficient sense of belonging is the core psychological factor causing unbalanced participation, superficial cooperation and weak intrinsic motivation in primary English group classes. The four-dimensional closed-loop motivational strategy constructed in this paper, including scientific heterogeneous grouping, hierarchical situational task design, multi-dimensional interactive atmosphere construction and process-oriented comprehensive evaluation, can fully satisfy primary pupils' three basic psychological needs of autonomy, competence and belonging. When pupils gain identity, achievement and peer support within groups, their oral anxiety will be relieved, marginalization will be eliminated, and stable intrinsic motivation for group dialogue practice can be formed.

This research enriches the applied research of *Self-Determination Theory* in primary English cooperative teaching and provides operable classroom schemes for frontline teachers. However, this study only takes Grade 3–6 situational dialogue classes as research objects with limited sample coverage. Subsequent research can expand sample

schools and extend the research scope to reading and writing group activities, and further explore the combination of AI auxiliary tools and belonging-oriented group teaching strategies.

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