

# Using Blind Box Grouping in College English Classes for Students Upgrading from Junior College

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**Abstract:** Group teaching has been identified as a pedagogical strategy that has the potential to enhance students' interest in learning, strengthen motivation and improve achievement. It has been implemented in numerous aspects of college English teaching. However, the existing research mainly focuses on the feasibility and effectiveness of grouping, with less attention being devoted to the methodological aspects of grouping itself. Drawing inspiration from the mystery and uncertainty feature of blind boxes attractive to young people, this study designed a blind box grouping teaching mode for college English, with the specific learning characteristics of university students upgrading from junior college in mind. After two semesters' practice, the findings suggest that this approach can effectively stimulate students' interest in learning, enhance their enthusiasm and initiative in learning English, and consequently improve their achievement in English class. Moreover, the results of questionnaire surveys and students' evaluation of teachers consistently indicate that this method is well accepted and warmly welcomed by students. It is hoped that this study may enlighten future exploration and innovation of group teaching methodologies in English as foreign language classes.

**Keywords:** Blind Box; Grouping; University Students Upgrading from Junior College; College English

## 1. Introduction

In China, the term "upgrading to undergraduate" has two distinct meanings: firstly, the upgrading of junior college students or higher vocational college students to university students; and secondly, the upgrading of higher vocational colleges to universities [1]. In this study, it refers to junior

college students or higher vocational college students upgrading to university students. The characteristics of these students include an overall weakness in English proficiency, lack of effective learning strategies, and a paucity of interest in English study, which results in a low classroom participation rate. However, these students demonstrate a strong willingness to learn, a strong desire to achieve higher marks in English class, and a robust sense of competition. Meantime, these students, like their peers, possess a sense of curiosity, a pursuit of novelty and excitement. They value adaptability and autonomy, and are averse to coercion and constraints; they prefer to engage in experiential learning, and disapprove of didactic teaching and inculcation [2]. Therefore, teachers may make good use of the strengths of these students in teaching English as a foreign language classes.

Group teaching, also known as "cooperative learning", has been shown to have a significant impact on enhancing students' English-learning abilities, application skills and communication skills. Furthermore, group teaching has been demonstrated to spark students' interest in learning and improve their learning motivation [3-5]. Group teaching constitutes a pivotal component of college English instruction and has been employed in various aspects of college English, including vocabulary, reading, listening and speaking, writing etc. The 2020 edition of College English Curriculum Guidelines proposes that "College English courses can be taught by using task-based, cooperative, project-based, inquiry-based teaching methods to form a teaching norm that is mainly characterised by teachers' guidance and inspiration and students' active participation" [6]. However, existing studies have predominantly investigated the feasibility and effectiveness of the grouping model in English language teaching from a theoretical standpoint, with comparatively less attention being paid to the

grouping method itself, i.e. the manner in which groups are formed to achieve specific teaching objectives. In this study, we explored an attractive and exciting blind box grouping method in English as a foreign language classes for students upgrading from junior college, with a view to stimulate their interest and mobilize their positive emotions in English learning thus to improve learning achievements.

## **2. Blind Box Grouping**

The concept of blind box can be traced back to Japanese fukubukuro, which refers to small boxes with identical packaging but varying styles of dolls or film peripherals inside. In English, these boxes are commonly referred to as mini figures, blind boxes, or mystery boxes. Since consumers are unable to see the contents of the box until it is opened, it has its name “blind box” [7]. The dolls contained within these boxes are typically inspired by characters from popular anime or video game franchises, and the packaging is designed to be intriguing and mysterious, fostering an element of surprise and excitement. The main consumers of blind boxes are people in Generation Z, i.e. the millennial generation born between 1995 and 2009. The allure of blind boxes for these consumers extends beyond the mere presence of the dolls within the packaging. It also encompasses the element of surprise and the satisfaction derived from the process of opening the box, which adds an element of thrill and anticipation to the experience. It is the uncertainty and mystery feature of the blind box that has made it surge in popularity [8].

Blind box grouping refers to a kind of random grouping method adopted by the author in English teaching practice. This approach draws inspiration from the unpredictability of the contents of blind boxes and the element of mystery and freshness associated with the drawing process of blind boxes. The objective is to stimulate positive emotions among students prior to class and foster a conducive and enjoyable atmosphere for English language learning. The term “blind box grouping” comes from students’ feedback on the grouping activity in a questionnaire survey conducted at the end of the term. Some of them stated that “(Through this approach) I can get familiar with more classmates, and each

time the process of grouping is a bit like opening a blind box” and “(Through this approach) I get to know with classmates who I don’t know very well, and each time I can be matched with different teammates, just like opening a blind box!”

In terms of specific operation, blind box grouping entails the teacher designing and making “blind boxes” prior to class for the purpose of checking revision or previewing. These boxes typically take the form of small slips of paper, among which a student draws one piece when he or she arrives at the classroom. They then locate the other members of their group in the class according to the prompts or requirements on the slips of paper. The content of each note is unique, and collectively, they form a complete set for each group member. For example, in a group of four students, there will be four small notes, each containing either the spelling of a word, or its English definition and part of speech, or extended collocations with blanks, or an example sentence from the textbook with this word missing. The students who draw the last two slips are tasked to fill in the blanks before locating the members of their group. The formation of learning groups in this manner ensures that they participate in classroom activities as a group. This grouping method has the advantage of avoiding the situation of decreased participation of other students due to the fixation of students responsible for reporting in each group as the course progresses. At the same time, the uncertainty and mystery brought about by the process of drawing lots in each class will effectively stimulate students’ participation and help to improve the classroom learning effect.

## **3. Rationale for Blind Box Grouping**

Humanistic learning theory provides a theoretical foundation for blind box grouping. The humanistic learning theory, as represented by A. H. Maslow and C. R. Rogers, posits that emotion and internal drive underpin cognition. The theory emphasises the importance of studying students’ internal psychological worlds, including cognition, emotion, interest, motivation, and potential intelligence, in the process of teaching and learning. It advocates an approach that involves putting oneself in the

students' shoes to facilitate their engagement in learning [9]. According to this theory, teachers should create a relaxed and pleasant learning atmosphere to stimulate students' motivation. The use of blind-box grouping can effectively stimulate students' interest and augment their intrinsic motivation to learn through an enjoyable drawing process and suitably challenging content design, thereby ensuring that the students derive a sense of fulfilment from the learning process.

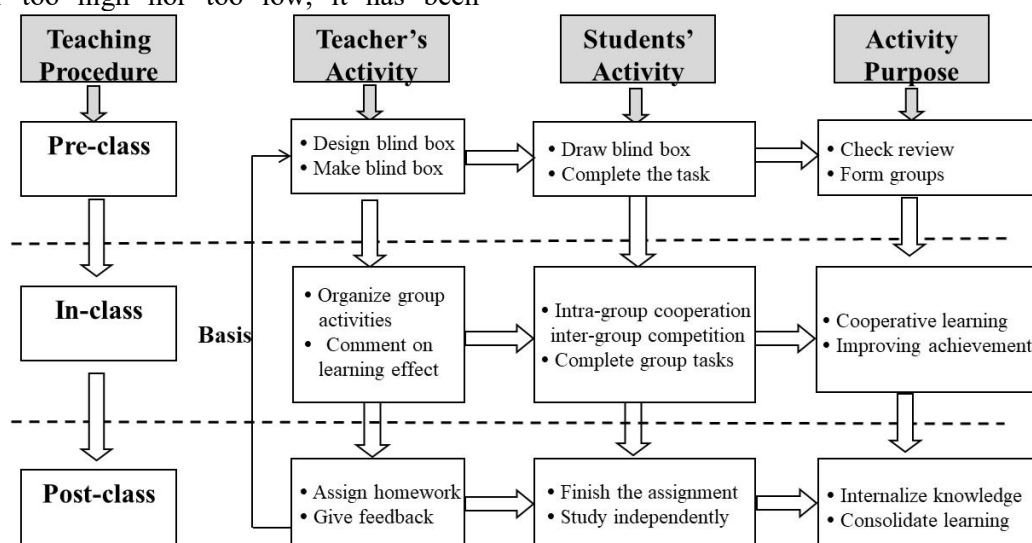
The Affective Filter Hypothesis (AFH) proposed by American linguist S. D. Krashen (1985) provides another theoretical foundation for blind box grouping. This hypothesis posits that affective factors function as a filter on language input, thereby influencing the rate of language acquisition. The potential impact of affective factors on language learning is multifaceted, encompassing factors such as motivation, self-confidence, and anxiety levels of learners [10]. When learners possess strong motivation and self-confidence, and their emotions are relaxed and their anxiety is neither too high nor too low, it has been

demonstrated that this can facilitate language acquisition. In other words, foreign language learners with positive attitudes are more effective in language acquisition than learners with negative attitudes. The implementation of blind box grouping has been shown to engender a relaxing learning atmosphere for students through the uncertainty of the content in the blind box and the freshness of drawing the box. This has the potential to stimulate their interest in learning and reduce their learning anxiety.

#### 4. Application of Blind Box Grouping in College English Teaching

##### 4.1 Design

The effective implementation of any teaching method needs to depend on a systematic teaching design. Blind box grouping, as a “teacher-oriented, student-centered” teaching mode, is no exception to this fundamental principle. The overall teaching design is illustrated in Figure 1.



**Figure 1. Overall Design of Blind Box Grouping**

As illustrated in Figure 1, the highlight of blind box grouping is the way of forming groups before class. The subsequent classroom activities, characterised by intra-group collaboration and inter-group competition, are designed to stimulate learning interest and enhance learning motivation through diverse methods like offering bonus marks. The role of the teacher evolves from that of a sole instructor to that of an organiser of activities, a facilitator of group discussions, an assessor of learning outcomes, and a resolver of key issues,

thereby actualising the advocated “teacher-oriented, student-centered” teaching modality.

##### 4.2 Implementation

The use of blind-box grouping in teaching English as a foreign language class is presented through a case study in the course College English III for class 2022 of university students upgrading from junior college, taking the reading teaching of Unit Three as an example. The textbook employed in this book was “Experiencing

English Integrated Coursebook 3” published by Higher Education Press. The reading text in the third unit was “Bathtub Battleships from Ivorydale”. In accordance with the above comprehensive teaching design, the specific organisation and implementation of this grouping model are in the following steps.

Firstly, the teacher designed and made “blind boxes”. The blind boxes were designed with the number of people needed in each group for this classroom activity in mind. Since the reading circle method was intended to be used to teach reading in small groups, each group required four members, so every four blind boxes formed a set. The content of the blind boxes was aimed to examine students’ pre-learning of the key vocabulary words in the text. The vocabulary selected for assessment comprises seven key words from the text, with each word’s assessment indicators encompassing spelling, part of speech and Chinese translation, common collocations, and example sentences. For instance, one set of blind boxes contain the word “campaign”, “yundong *n./v.*”, “launch a \_\_\_\_”, and an English example sentence “The goal of a political \_\_\_\_ is to put a candidate in office” respectively. Each indicator point is made into a blind box, the four indicator points of the same word constitute a set of blind boxes, and the four students who draw a set of blind boxes form a group in later classroom learning.

Secondly, students drew blind boxes and completed the mini-task in the blind box. The teacher printed the seven sets of blind boxes and cut them into slips of paper of similar size, which are then put on the desks upside down prior to the commencement of the class. Upon arrival in the classroom, students drew a slip of paper at random and looked for students in the class who had drawn the same set of blind boxes. The easier match was between the two blind boxes containing spelling and common collocations, and the more difficult match was between the blind boxes containing English example sentences. As a result, students who drew the easier blind boxes often felt very lucky and were particularly curious about which of their teammates drew the example sentences. At this point, the lucky student would often offer to help those who drew the examples to fill in the word. The first three teams to locate all the members in the shortest

time were awarded the initial bonus point.

Next, each group finished classroom learning activities, forming a learning mode of intra-group cooperation and inter-group competition. The teacher’s teaching procedure included leading in, overall reading, detailed reading, language learning, thematic discussion and so on, each of which set the corresponding task. For example, in the teaching of “Bathtub Battleships from Ivorydale”, the task set in the leading in part was to watch an English short video of the history of Procter & Gamble and answered the corresponding questions, with the group that provided the correct answers being awarded extra points. For another example, in the detailed reading session, the teacher would first guide the students to divide the passage into three parts, with each part assigned specific tasks. Four members of each group would be assigned the roles of the reader, the questioner, the speaker and the language master to complete the study of relevant paragraphs in each part. The reader was tasked to read aloud the corresponding paragraphs to the whole group; the questioner gathered the doubts of in the group and was ready to ask questions to the other groups; the language master was responsible for explaining the language points related to vocabulary and long and difficult sentences in the part; and the spokesman took the responsibility to answer questions put forward by other groups. While the students were working in small groups, the teacher kept moving around, answering questions and solving problems of each group. The last stage of this kind of classroom learning was the spokesman of each group answering questions asked by other groups. Additional marks were awarded to the groups that demonstrated proficiency and critical thinking.

Finally, the teacher gave feedback on each group’s performance and allocated after-class tasks before the end of the class. Concurrently, the additional points accumulated by each student were documented in the scorebook. The visibility of instant rewards has been demonstrated to influence students’ motivation, prompting them to exert greater effort and engage in self-directed learning initiatives.

### 4.3 Assessment

The assessment of College English courses in our university is composed of two parts:



process assessment and summative assessment. Blind-box grouping, as a form of group teaching, focuses on students' learning process and learning attitude, especially classroom performance. After each class, all the members in the first three groups with the highest performance will be awarded additional points for excellent classroom performance. At the end of the semester, the points accumulated by students in group cooperation and competition will be multiplied by the relevant coefficients as part of the process assessment.

#### **4.4 Effect**

The author employed blind box grouping method in the English as foreign language classes of 2022 and 2023 respectively in the first semester of university students upgrading from junior college. The benefits of this pedagogical approach include stimulating students' interest in learning, enhancing their motivation to learn, and consequently improving the teaching effect, which can be shown in students' attendance, classroom participation and improvement of academic performance. With regard to class attendance, students rarely arrive late, and many arrive quite early to participate in the "blind box" grouping activities. Some students even enter the classroom with strong expectations and inquire with the teacher about the way of grouping for the day. Furthermore, students' participation rate and "head-up rate" (meaning students raising their heads to listen to the instruction attentively) in the classroom have been significantly improved, and they actively strive for points for their group.

Moreover, the grouping method has been well accepted and warmly welcomed by students. The results of a questionnaire survey conducted by Questionnaire Star (an online survey website) on two classes of 2022 revealed that 78.72% of students expressed satisfaction with or strong preference for this grouping method. In the interview of the benefits of this method, high frequency words cited by students include motivation, cooperation ability, communication, and active learning. Here are some comments articulated by the interviewees: "Promote learning, improve motivation to learn, and more willingness to participate in classroom activities"; "It brings more communication with classmates, and the point system can

motivate"; "It can give us chance to work with different classmates"; "Each time there is a new discovery, stimulate the interest of learning". The results of the students' evaluation of courses in classes of 2023 scored 92.729 points. Among the indicators, the one that scored 93.27 was "The teacher uses various teaching methods to help me learn effectively and improve my learning effect", which confirms the students' satisfaction with the teaching mode from another angle.

#### **4.5 Reflection**

Firstly, focus on the systematic design of blind-box grouping. Just as blind box products are usually launched in series, blind box grouping also needs to be designed systematically. In the two semesters' grouping practice of the study, the author systematically designed different grouping methods with the same goal of examining and improving students' vocabulary accumulation. The content in the boxes examined vocabulary spelling, vocabulary use, vocabulary expansion, vocabulary identification, vocabulary collocation and other aspects. Each lesson is centred on one of these aspects and blind boxes are designed to test students' revision or preparation for vocabulary learning. By the end of the semester, students will be able to master at least the spelling, use and expansion of the key words in each unit of the textbook, thus achieving the goal of integrating the fragmented learning in each lesson into systematic vocabulary learning.

Secondly, pay attention to the overall teaching design. Just as the blind box can establish high customer stickiness and brand dependence through attracting precise consumer groups at the early stage, developing IP resources vertically and combining wild field horizontally at middle stage, and well-planning marketing activities at the later stage [11], the blind box grouping, as a kind of grouping, is just the beginning of mobilising the students' learning moods, and is a preparation for the classroom teaching. While the method can achieve multiple purposes, such as facilitating ice-breaking activities prior to class, assessing the efficacy of revision or pre-study, and organising classroom activities in advance, it constitutes merely a fraction of the preliminary stage of classroom teaching activities. To enhance the efficiency of classroom teaching

and promote students' English language learning as a whole, the content and form design of the activities at the middle stage must be considered, including the appropriate challenge of the content and mobility of the roles; What's more, subsequent feedback and incentives at the later stage should also be taken into consideration, such as timely feedback, extra points and praise, and incentives, etc. The ultimate effectiveness of teaching and learning depends on the smooth implementation of all aspects of the overall teaching design.

Thirdly, make timely adjustments in accordance with the specific learning situation. Since no grouping method can be applied to teaching practice without modification, this grouping method is particularly suitable for new students who have just entered university and are not yet familiar with each other. As some students reported in interviews, this method can help them "promote the relationship with classmates", "increase familiarity of classmates", "get to know classmates quickly", etc. In such cases, the grouping method can cater to the needs of students by simultaneously addressing their curiosity in English learning and getting to know classmates. However, as students become more acquainted with each other and even express a preference for studying with acquaintances, it becomes imperative to adjust the grouping method and introduce appropriate amount of fixed grouping.

## 5. Conclusion

Two semesters' teaching practice has proven that the blind-box grouping method is helpful in fostering a relaxing and enjoyable learning atmosphere, strengthening students' motivation and stimulating their initiative in English language learning. Meantime, it is also beneficial in improving their cooperation and communication skills. However, it is important to note that this grouping method does have certain shortcomings. For instance, if the content of the blind box is too challenging, it may be time consuming before class, indicating that teachers develop a comprehensive understanding of their students' overall abilities and take control of the difficulty of contents. Moreover, the activities after drawing the group and the division of tasks within the group must be

meticulously designed to ensure full participation. It is hoped that the attempt made in this paper can provide some reference and enlightenment for other teachers and researchers.

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