

The Role of Collaborative Language Learning (CLL) in Enhancing Problem-Solving Skills

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ABSTRACT

Collaborative Language Learning (CLL) plays a very important role in the teaching learning process. It is one of the approaches that enhance the learners' problem-solving skills. It serves as a practice ground especially for learners who are introverts since they are given the opportunity to communicate and interact with their peers. CLL also plays a pivotal role in professional courses today. Hence, this paper will attempt to look at how CLL benefit learners pursuing their professional studies.

Introduction

With the emergence of ESP in the 1960's, the approach to teaching English changed drastically. There has been a paradigm shift from a teacher-centred to learner-centred classroom. Professional courses came under the purview of ESP and hence, it was felt that these courses should have a separate English curriculum tailored according to the requirements of the course. For example, a separate English curriculum was developed for each of these professional courses such as English for nurses, English for doctors, English for engineers, English for social work, English for management studies and so on.

According to Munby (1978), the most important reason for emergence of ESP is the spread of higher and further education, especially in terms of English for Science and Technology (EST). Here, the required knowledge is available mostly in English.

Another reason for the growing demand of ESP is the 'obvious attraction to the client or learner' (p.3) since he is able to do his job or studies in a better and more specific manner rather than courses in General English or general literary English.

Due to the above factors, ESP gained momentum and a number of strategies emerged to make English learning more effective. Based on the needs analysis, experts developed strategies to enable learners to communicate effectively in the English language and one of the strategies developed was learning the language collaboratively with peers as well as teachers (Jianchang, 2011). This strategy proved to be effective and hence, teachers started adopting this strategy in the ESP classroom especially to enhance learners' problem-solving skills. Since then Collaborative Language Learning (CLL) became a popular strategy in the teaching-learning process.

Definition

To begin with, there is no specific definition of Collaborative Language Learning. However, researchers are attempting to define this concept from different points of view. According to the Oxford dictionary (2001), collaborative means to work jointly or to come together. Hence, Pastor & Perry (2010) defines Collaborative learning as “a teaching approach which enhances maturity, experience and social communication in an academic environment while discouraging passivity, repetition and individuality”. As defined by Reagan, Fox and Bleich (1994), collaboration is an underlying social orientation in which the participants share a general sense of purpose and orientation, and a discernible set of roles. Under this definition, adult learners become a community of people who bring in their own experiences to the classroom and interact on things that really matter. McInnerney & Robert (2004) defines collaborative learning as “a method that implies working in a group of two or more to achieve a common goal, while respecting each individual’s contribution to the whole.”

Hence, in collaborative language learning, students are given the freedom to develop their own learning strategies and select their own objectives according to their interest. In addition, they are responsible for what they learn and how they gain knowledge of a topic. Therefore, collaboration can be broadly understood as “...the mutual engagement of participants in a coordinated effort to solve the problem together” (Roschelle & Teasley, 1995:70).

An interest in the potentials and contribution of CLL encouraged me to find out its application and results in a group of students. Hence, a study was undertaken on twenty undergraduate students pursuing Social Work Studies and Management Studies.

Objectives of the Study

The objectives of this study were:

- To enable learners to think independently and then collaborate with others to solve problems using problem solving task and activities
- To enable learners to develop critical thinking skills for solving a problem
- To enable learners to become more engaged in the learning process by sharing ideas in pairs/groups
- To promote healthy competition among learners
- To build learners’ confidence level

Research Design for the Study

The participants for the study were twenty learners pursuing their studies in the field of Social Work and Management studies. These two courses were selected since learners in the said field will require problem-solving skills in their day-to-day profession. They will have to apply the technical skills that they have learned in order to solve a problem.

The methodology for this study was an experimental study whereby learners were

divided in two groups – Control Group and Experiment Group.

The tool for this study was a Pre-test and a Post-test. These tests were administered to both the Control and Experiment groups.

Control Group:

Pre-Test: For the pre-test, the researcher took common topics related to the students' field of study. The topics were first discussed with the teachers in charge of the departments.

To conduct the pre-test, the researcher lectured an entire week on the topics chosen. This did not involve any intervention such as activities or group work. Learners were required to pay attention to the content/information given to them through the lectures.

At the end of week 1, learners were given an individual test based on the information given. The content for the test were Case Studies which required learners to apply the skills that they have learnt in order to solve the problems.

Post-Test: In order to authenticate the findings that Collaborative Language Learning has an impact on learning as a whole, the researcher administered a group test to the Control Group as well. The researcher divided the learners into two groups.

The researcher incorporated the collaborative methods by assigning tasks to each group. Using the same common topics, learners were asked to work in groups. The

activity given to the groups was each group had to write a story related to the topics which have been discussed. They were given time to think and discuss. At the end of the class, each group came up with interesting and creative stories. The groups could also apply the technical skills that they have learned. At the end of week 2, the Post-test was administered. For the Post-test, case studies similar to the individual test were given to the learners.

Experiment Group:

Pre-Test: For the Experiment Group, the same procedure was followed whereby no intervention was made in the first week. An individual test was administered at the end of week 1.

Post-Test: For the Post-test, learners were divided into two groups. The intervention was done after division of groups and Collaborative Language Learning was incorporated in the classroom. After a week, a group test was administered.

Findings of the Study

From the analysis of the data collected, one can conclude that Collaborative Language Learning (CLL) does have an impact on the way students learn in the classroom. When students were given individual work, they found it difficult to come up with a solution since they could not discuss with their peers. From the quantitative perspective, it has been proved that students learn better collaboratively. However, it is also important to interpret the qualitative aspect as well.

In order to find out the reasons for the above analysis, the researcher made a few observations in week 1, before the individual test was administered. Since the lecture method was adopted in this particular week, the students looked tired and bored. Some of them were restless and wanted to lie down on their benches, while some were stretching and yawning signaling to the teacher that they were bored. Some let out sighs and even told the teacher that they were tired.

However, in week 2, when the students were divided into groups and given tasks, it was observed that they were motivated and actively involved. The discussions flowed and students could come up with interesting and relevant answers. To support the observations, the researcher informally interviewed the students after both the tests had been administered. The responses from the students revealed the positive impact of collaborative learning.

When the students were asked as to how they felt during the lectures, their responses were in-line with the observations that the researcher made. They were 'bored', 'tired' and 'not interesting'. However, when asked about group work, they were very passionate with the responses and specifically told the researcher that they 'like to learn from one another', 'like to share ideas' and 'does not feel scared to share ideas because they are among friends'. These responses given by the students prove that Collaborative Language Learning does contribute positively to learning. It builds the confidence level of learners since they are

working together and feelings such as insecurity and failure is reduced to a great extent.

In addition, the respective teachers of the departments were impressed when they were shown the group test responses. They did not expect that these students who are 'slow learners' would outdo themselves while working in groups.

According to the group test papers, these students had the ability to use their technical skills and could apply them to the case studies in order to solve the problems.

From the above, the researcher can also mention that grouping plays a significant role in Collaborative Language Learning. Grouping should not be done according to skills, abilities and interest but heterogeneous grouping of learners will spark interest in the learners irrespective of whether a learner is considered 'bright' or 'weak'. The advantage of heterogeneous grouping is that the 'weaker' ones will learn from the 'brighter' ones since they will have to participate in the discussions (Tinzmann, 1990).

Conclusion

To conclude, it can be said that Collaborative Language Learning plays an important role in the teaching learning process. Apart from helping learners solve problems, it also builds the confidence of learners and helps them become critical thinkers.

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