THE BENEFITS OF COOPERATIVE LEARNING

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Abstract: *Teaching English is a challenging profession not only because English is not our mother tongue but mainly because the students we teach are more advanced and skilled than some decades ago and the new methods and techniques we use at class have to be more integrative and interactive to arouse and maintain their interest. Teaching English in vocational universities also asks for specialized knowledge obtained through both academic study and practical experience, where our students passed certain requirements and met certain standards. Their level of proficiency in English is also assessed by a further linguistic certification as our students will be professionals with shared goals, values and practices. In order to get a professional development of English language we need to have a comprehensive understanding of what competences and expertise in language our students need. What essential skills, knowledge, values, attitudes and goals do they need in order to become skilled professionals and how can these be acquired? This paper tries to explore cooperative learning as a means of maximizing students' learning.*

Keywords: cooperative learning; collaborative learning; group work; pedagogical content; interpersonal skill

Introduction

Cooperative learning means the use of small instructional groups so that students work together to maximize their own and each other's learning. This approach has demonstrated that well planned and performed the classes of English based on cooperative learning lead to true achievements and positive relationships among students. These classes actually are both cooperative and collaborative and imply small groups that work together to solve different problems but at the same time students also improve their communication abilities. In short, it is active learning that involves groups of students working together on a task. Thus, the students have the feeling that they actively participate in the class, that they have a genuine contribution to the topic discussed. The emphasis is on their ability to express themselves in terms of the assignment they had to prepare.

1. Literature

Cooperative learning is a type of group work and is defined as the instructional use of small groups to promote students working together to maximize their own and each other's learning (Johnson, et al., 2008).

Over the years, the teachers have tried to reach effectiveness in teaching having at hand many concepts of good teaching, pedagogical approaches, techniques and methods. Starting from teaching seen as a teacher-controlled and directed process to the teacher as a

facilitator, from the ability to form interpersonal relations with students to making room for their individual learner creativity and independent learning, the teachers try different techniques to make their classes more approachable as the number of students in class grew constantly. We are challenged to learn how to carry out a lesson fluently and comprehensively in English, how to choose the best topics that are of real help for our students' future professions. The question we try to answer is this: what is the content knowledge that the teachers need to know about when they teach (including what they know about language teaching itself).

According to Richards and Rodgers, (2001) applied linguistics generated the body of specialized academic knowledge and theory that provided the foundation of new approaches to language teaching. On the other hand, in language teaching, disciplinary knowledge is necessary as it is the knowledge that is essential to teach specialized disciplines that is acquired by special training.

The knowledge that provides a basis for language teaching is *pedagogical content* knowledge as being the one that is drawn from the study of language teaching and language learning itself. Lightbown and Spada (2006) or Halliday (2004, offered models of language analysis belonging to the field of disciplinary knowledge, while Parrott (2000) concentrated on the pedagogical content knowledge. Information and communication technology (ICT) has become essential in the contemporary society; no matter if we are at work or at home we use the internet, the e-mail, face book or other ways of modern communication. TIC is part of our daily life. Even if the teacher does not use these communication means in class the students most certainly will use these modern means of information as support for learning or homework. Along with the development of technology we should also get the ability to incorporate and integrate technology into

teaching. Reinders (2009: 231) points out that depending on the teacher's level of technological expertise, this could involve 'being able to first, *use* a certain technology; second, being able to *create* materials and activities using that technology: and third, being able to *teach* with technology.' The use of technology in teaching becomes more important in present times because teachers also have to be able to keep up with the technological knowledge of their students. As Reinders (2009: 236) suggests " the challenge for teachers will be more one of helping learners develop the skills to deal successfully with the increased control and independence that technology demands."

If the teachers master the technology available and are also experienced both in knowledge and teaching, we notice the so-called 'improvisational teaching' that is but a flexibility in teaching. According to Borg (2009: 163-171) this style of teaching is met with the expert teachers that have had years of teaching and good results who:

✓ have a wide range of routines and strategies that they can use;

✓ are willing to move away from established procedures and use their own solutions and are more willing to improvise;

✓ learn to automatize the routines associated with managing the class and focus on content;

✓ improvise more than novice teachers – they make greater use of interactive- decision making as a source of their improvisational performance;

✓ have more carefully developed teaching plan on which to base their practical classroom decisions;

✓ pay more attention to language issues than novice teachers;

✓ are able to anticipate problems and have procedures available to deal with them;

✓ carry out needed phases more efficiently, spending less time on them;

✓ relate things that happen to the bigger picture, seeing them not in the

context of a particular lesson, being easy at making connections to other topics already studied;

✓ distinguish between significant and unimportant issues that arise.

Teaching is a process influenced by the classroom context, the teacher's general and specific academic goals, the teacher's beliefs and values, the learners' motivations and reactions to the lesson, and the teacher's management of critical moments during a lesson.

Both teachers and students should be aware that the overall character of a language class is created, developed, and maintained by everyone in the room as Senior, (2006: 200) stated.

As we do not have the expertise in specialized disciplines in our work as language teachers we often collaborate with other teachers in order to better understand the nature of the specialized knowledge we teach, to share knowledge and skills, and highlight the potentials that team work and group collaboration can bring about.

According to Johnston (2009) and Richards and Farrell, (2005) new roles are created for teachers and this collaboration can take a number of different forms such as:

o *Collaboration with fellow teachers*. This often involves a focus on teaching issues and concerns, such as use of the textbook, development of tests, course and seminar planning.

o *Collaboration with university colleagues*. This may involve collaborative inquiry into specialized or exploration of teaching and learning strategies.

2. Collaborative or cooperative learning

Collaborative and cooperative learning are seen differently by theoreticians: some use both terms as the same while others make a difference between these two terms:

Collaborative learning is seen as a method of teaching and learning in which students get together into teams to explore a significant question or create a meaningful project.

Cooperative learning is considered to be a specific kind of collaborative learning as students work together in small groups on a structured activity. They are individually accountable for their work, and the work of the group as a whole is also assessed as Cynthia J. Brame stresses in *Group work: Using cooperative learning groups effectively*. No matter what name we use when we refer to this approach be it: cooperative learning, collaborative learning, collective learning, learning communities, peer teaching, peer learning, or team learning what is important is that they have *group work* in common. Actually, collaboration is more than co-operation as it contains the whole process of learning while cooperative learning is meant to facilitate the accomplishment of a specific goal through students working together in groups. Cooperation and collaboration may seem to overlap, but in the cooperative learning, the teacher still controls most of what is going on in the class. The advantages of this approach, no matter how we call it, was stressed by many researchers who have reported that students working in small groups tend to learn more of what is being taught and retain the information for a longer period; at the same time, the students seem to be more satisfied with their classes as they do not passively receive knowledge from the teacher thus teaching becoming a transaction between all the parties in the learning process. (Beckman, 1990; Chickering & Gamson, 1991; Goodsell, et al. 1992).

Robert Slavin (1989) believed that if we want collaborative learning to be effective, we should assess both "group goals" and "individual accountability". He defines cooperative learning as "instructional programs in which students work in small groups to help one another master academic content." also suggesting that cooperative learning has the potential "to capitalize on the developmental

characteristics of adolescents in order to harness their peer orientation, enthusiasm, activity, and craving for independence within a safe structure, the underlying concept requires all students to work together and be responsible for each other's learning".

Johnson (Johnson, et al., 2008) called group work as cooperative learning, and defined it as the instructional use of small groups to promote students working together "to maximize their own and each other's learning" . It is characterized by positive interdependence, where students perceive that better performance by individuals produces better performance by the entire group. It can be formal or informal being also adaptable, working in small and large classes and across disciplines, as well as one of the most effective teaching approaches available to college instructors.

3. Cooperative learning techniques

Slavin (1994) argues that there are various methods for implementing cooperative learning techniques into classes of all subject areas and grade levels.
When we decide to use group based activities and ask the students to work together to complete a joint task or assignment we can use (Johnson et al., 2014) suggestions to make these groups work well. Thus, the teacher should:

• define the learning objectives for the activity and assign students to groups;

• make sure that the groups are typically heterogeneous, and pay attention to the skills that are needed for success in the task;

• assign specific roles to the students, communicate the assessment criteria and the types of skills that will be needed;

• play an active role during the groups' work, monitoring the work and evaluating group and individual performance;

• encourage groups to give their best, to use each individual potential to achieve the set objective.

On the other hand, we also should have in view the elements identified by the cooperative learning researchers David and Roger Johnson (1991). By face-to-face interaction students are promoting each others' learning through face-to-face activities where they discuss and explain assignment topics with each other. The get positive interdependence as they have the sense that they are 'in this together,' feeling that each member's individual effort will not only help him, but the whole group. They never forget that each student is accountable for their own contribution to the group. Using collaborative skills students learn not only the subject matter, but interpersonal skills such as skills of communication, leadership, and conflict management and how to work in teams. During the activity they use reciprocal questioning as well to fulfill their task. Each member of a team is responsible thus creating an atmosphere of achievement, the ultimate success being based on a single and very important principle, namely, students must be taught how to participate in a group situation.

4. Group-based activities

We use this approach not only for seminars but also for courses. At the beginning of the semester each group of students is given a particular topic/s to find information about. It is their responsibility to make up the work groups, to decide on the spokesperson/s to present the information found. They like it as they feel as part of the teaching process; they become *teachers* for their colleagues. We find that the students involved in this activity recall better and for a longer period of time the issues they looked up. The activity is a success and attractive to students if their degree of engagement is high, the extent to which their information shape the lesson, the ability to present the subject-matter from a teacher's perspective and the ability

of the teacher to integrate their information in the overall course. It is difficult to do this activity if the students are not interested in the topics suggested by the teachers, if you do not give them clear requirements, if you do not suggest the paper and on-line resources and indicate what issues they should be prepared to speak about and ways you are going to evaluate their work. At first, they are tempted to collect a vast quantity of information, not always qualitative data, but step by step, they learn how to manage the task given. The benefits of this cooperation among students can be seen immediately:

✓ the students who cooperate with each other also tend to understand and like each other more.

✓ they have more opportunities for developing critical thinking skills and show a significant improvement in those thinking skills.

✓ they improve their oral communication skills.

✓ when their work is valued by their colleagues , their individual self-esteem and respect increase.

When students know in advance what is to be taught, have additional information about a specific topic it is easier to interact by reciprocal questions: either the students that were not involved in this task can ask for more information or to clarify a certain issue or the teacher can also ask lesson-specific questions such as: What do you think...? What would have happened if...? Is there a connection between this issue and..?

Over the years we noticed the benefits of cooperative, collaborative learning. By involving the students in the exchange of ideas, debases or support of own ideas/opinions there is an increase of the interest in the learning-teaching process. By involving them into this process we make them more responsible, we make them think critically and retain the information for a longer period of time. They really find themselves as active participants in the lesson as they can intervene whenever they feel like if they have something worth sharing. It is so awarding for the teacher when a student or the teacher comes up with relevant information to hear the students say:" Oh, how interesting! I didn't know that!"

When it comes to English language acquisition the students become more confident in speaking the language in the first place-when one has something important to share he/she does not think first if the grammar or vocabulary is good being eager to present the information. They also learn new ways of solving certain tasks by simply observing how their mates solve the problems. The fact that they are a group and their group work is evaluated they know that they should contribute to their success equally. As long as we remember the words of Ken Blanchard (2007) "Anything worth doing does not have to be done perfectly—at first", our work at class (that of teachers and students) will be a success as a group of individuals working together as a team can do better work and reach better decisions.

Conclusion

Besides developing certain linguistic skills, cooperative learning is efficient when students of different linguistic levels work together to solve a task. They learn to organize themselves within the group, to divide the tasks equally among them, to depict the best student/students to present their work or answer possible questions, to rely on each other to come up with a final successful *product*. And what is most important they learn to be confident in their English competences as good communicators not only on a person-to-person basis but in front of an audience as well. If the cooperative learning is correctly implemented , with groops of working students that learn together and not compete with each other then learning will be effective and efficient.

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