

THE CONCEPT OF COLLABORATIVE LEARNING IN THE ENGLISH CLASSROOM

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ABSTRACT

There have been tremendous changes in the field of education in the recent years and the concept of teaching and learning has taken new dimension due to the innovations that have been taking place in the field of education. In the modern education system, there is no room for the traditional and old-fashioned methods of teaching such as teacher-centered approach, lecture method and so on. As they have been replaced by many latest and modern methods and approaches that involve the students completely on the teaching and learning process by following student-centered approach, group and pair work, inductive method, project method, collaborative learning approach and so on, the students of the modern age have been actively participating in the classroom activities dynamically. As a result, the output is productive and the teachers' burden has been reduced drastically and they are just acting as facilitators and helping the students whenever and wherever they find any difficulty. Since collaborative learning encourages the students to learn in groups, the students participate in the group activities with a lot of interest and motivation as the topics are chosen according to the needs and interests of the students. In teaching English also, the teachers should always adopt collaborative teaching approach in their classrooms in order to involve the students in the teaching and learning activities and make the students solve the given problems on their own with the help of their group members.

In this paper, an attempt is being made to present how collaborative learning is implemented in the English classrooms. For this purpose, first of all, the definition of collaborative learning and the elements involved in collaborative learning are discussed in detail. Then the related research is also reviewed thoroughly. Later, this paper also discusses the group dynamics that contribute more to collaborative learning. This paper also gives some important recommendations for both the teachers as well as the students of English in improving their teaching and learning process. Finally, the teachers and students of English are suggested to make use of the collaborative learning approach in a useful way to make it success in the classroom.

Key words: Collaborative learning, group work, learning, students, teachers, teaching.

Introduction

Collaborative learning is a situation in which two or more people learn or attempt to learn something together. Unlike individual learning, people engaged in collaborative learning capitalize on one another's salt away and skills (asking one another for information, evaluating one another's ideas, monitoring one another's work, etc.). More specifically, collaborative learning is based on the sculpt that knowledge can be created within a population where limbs actively interact by sharing experiences and take on asymmetric roles. Put differently, collaborative learning refers to methodologies and environments in which learners slot in in a widespread task where each individual depends on and is accountable to each other. These include both face-to-face conversations and computer discussions (online forums, chat rooms, etc.). Methods for examining collaborative learning processes include conversation analysis and statistical discourse analysis. Not only the learners in groups but also the teachers are benefited by the extent to which collaborative learning is effective. Group work - its effectiveness and how the learners are affected by it are in many discussions these days. Whereas some teachers laud such collaborative efforts, there are some who do not and even have an unconstructive opinion on it. Both the parties have some valid and well-researched things to say and thus make their case, and this not only does not help but adds fuel to the hot ponder regarding the merits and the demerits of collaborative efforts. But the point to keep in mind is that there are always a myriad of variables at play which influence the results as to the advantages or the demerits of putting the collaborative techniques into practice. In a particular instance, for example, it may ease the process of learning to such an extent as to advocate it; and in another, it might yield such variable results as either bringing about insignificant effects, or even negative effects on the route of learning. The deciding of the method which yields the best results in learning is a very big problem, as because many classroom variables are inter-reliant, and manipulation of one variable result changes in many others; and thus, collaborative learning is not an all-time solution.

The Research

Collaborative learning has much research done on it. But the University of Minnesota's College of Education and Human Development is quite distinctive in this look upon. It is cranium up by professors Roger and David W. Johnson, who are siblings. The novelties in classroom collaborative learning have gone into the twenty-year research work they did and more than 80 studies are done in this area alone. The result of the study is that the collaborative approaches facilitate to a great extent the learning in the classroom, but there is a problem. It is that the dynamics of the grouping must be correct. This means that, even without direct lecturing, the teacher has a very vital role when it comes to collaborative learning in the classroom.

Johnson and Johnson conclude that there are five key components to successful collaboration in the classroom:

- Positive interdependence (each individual depends on and is accountable to the others—a built-in incentive to help, accept help, and root for others)
 - Individual accountability (each person in the group learns the material)
 - Promotive interaction (group members help one another, share information, offer clarifying explanations)
 - Social skills (leadership, communication)
 - Group processing (assessing how effectively they are working with one another)
- (University of Minnesota's College of Education and Human Development 2013)

It may appear that the above-mentioned principles of collaboration are banal, but how they are to be followed in the classroom is to be questioned

Group dynamics

Again within the classroom problem, which is wicked in itself, forming students into groups is another important thing. The way the teacher does this crucial thing will have far-reaching effects in the classroom. But still, it is disheartening to see how light-hearted the teachers are, sometimes regarding such an important thing as group work in the classroom. It is often that we see in education, some teacher who leaves the task of breaking into groups to the students. The teacher seems to think perhaps or make assumptions that the students are aware of how to break up themselves into groups for effective collaboration. This is especially the case in higher education. Assuming something that the students already have a certain amount of understanding and experience regarding collaboration is definitely bad. It is positively and self-evidently built on negative or wrong perceptions as far as group work is concerned. This is not only a blow to the results of collaboration but also severely unfair. Because, simply a past success in collaboration, for instance, having successfully worked in a primary school with the peers on an entirely unrelated craft or some such project does not mean nor guarantee a foundational understanding of the same concept when they come to higher classes. Still, it is quite common, in many classrooms, where the students are asked to break up into groups and start collaborative work with little instruction on the process.

Not only the purpose of collaboration, but also the process is to be defined clearly, and the teacher must be aware of the fact that the role group work plays in the classroom is one of leadership. Since the decisions are taken by the students, decisions pertaining to group membership, while breaking up into teams or groups are proved by research to be not so effective the teacher should be the designer of the group division. Most students look at groups just as a collection of individual students participating in the discussion of a topic to the completion of their work. It would sometimes also be that only one or some members do all the work while others idle away the time.

Many types of groups are there which can be constituted in a classroom. One of them being groups that stay together during the entire course time and do all the assignments together. Another is where a group is formed temporarily based on a principle set by the teacher the members of which will stay together only till the task at hand is finished and then broken. The end aim of the group does not matter: it is important to take into consideration, the

personal individual traits, and other individual facets and tenets of the classroom students. This indeed might be a hard task, but properly channelling the grouping dynamics by the efforts and principles of the teachers will facilitate and optimize the collaborative learning further. It would ease the task if the teacher has some background experience with regard to group dynamics.

Approaches, there are many, when it comes to assigning group work and establishing it. One of them is pairing the high performing and the low performing students in a proportionate ratio. The students with higher performance are expected to raise the performance of the others. The complaint here is that the students with high performance will lack in their original actual performance levels and this also gives the low performing students the chance to idle away the time. Another option is to group the students according to their performance levels, without any mix-up. Here too, mixed results are expected to turn up. The point here is, there is no method ready-made for grouping the students for collaborative learning. The task and the responsibility rest entirely on the shoulders of the teachers, who should recognize, and rightly so, that each and every individual class is different, and as such, the approach to group dynamics should be custom made.

Recommendations

- Teachers must take the time to assess the students in the classroom and attempt to determine which students will work best together. Admittedly, this is a recommendation that is impossible for anyone to execute perfectly, but with an understanding of group dynamics, experience in the classroom, trial and error, assessment techniques, and perhaps even teacher development programs it is possible to best guess optimal student work groups.
- Teachers, first and foremost, must contract with the students. Transparency of the intent, method, and desired outcomes is essential to all student work groups before work is started.
- Students have a responsibility to contract internally as well. The teacher may have to walk them through the process, but it may result in the same shared understanding as with the teacher/student contract.
- Keep trying. The classroom learning environment is a complex amalgamation of variables that are constantly influencing each other. There will not be a perfect answer from one year to the next or even one semester to the next.
- Teachers within and across academic institutions need to form a community of practice and share strategies on how to build student groups, contract with students, assess the results of collaboration, and anything else that may transform ineffectual group work to synergistic collaboration. (Marzano, 2003)

Since the concept of collaborative learning encourages the learners to learn in groups, the English language learners will surely develop their language skills enormously. As the teachers introduce the materials according to the needs and interests of the students, there is no doubt that the students will participate in the classroom activities with a lot of enthusiasm and zeal. As a result, the students learn a lot in groups. The teachers of English have to

introduce the collaborative learning approach in their classrooms regularly so that the learners will involve in doing the activities in groups by sharing their ideas with others and they also gain a lot of knowledge from the other members of the group. Even the average students also get motivated and contribute something to accomplish the task that has been given for them. Therefore, the teachers should always encourage the students to participate in the activities and they also help them by giving suggestions or assistance whenever they need. Furthermore, the teachers should act as facilitators and supervise the work of the learners. It is the duty of the teachers to motivate the students to complete their tasks and also guide them in completing the activities successfully. Therefore, the students should utilize the given opportunities and perform well in groups or pairs in completing the tasks that have been given by their teachers in the classroom. The role of teachers is more crucial in making the students doing the tasks that are given in the classroom successfully. The students should also participate in the activities with a lot of interest and enthusiasm in order to learn the skills of the English language. Therefore, the teachers and the students of English ought to work hard together in making the collaborative learning concept more successful in the English language classrooms.

Conclusion

The present paper has explored how collaborative learning has been implemented in the English classroom. For this purpose, first of all, the definition of collaborative learning and the elements involved in collaborative learning have been discussed in detail. Then the related research has been reviewed. Later, this paper has also discussed the group dynamics that contribute more to collaborative learning. This paper has also given some important recommendations for both the teachers as well as the students of English in improving their teaching and learning process. Finally, the teachers and students of English have been suggested to make use of the collaborative learning approach in a useful way to make it success in the classroom.

A collaborative approach to learning inside the classroom results in lasting results by enhancing and facilitating the efficiency of the students. Even though the students, in the past times, might have worked in groups collaborating with each other, it might not mean that they are fully aware of the potential of the collaborative approach to learning nor that they are able by themselves, unassisted by a teacher to work out the most efficient group dynamics. It is the duty of the teacher, not only to teach the students the subject, but it is also their duty to teach the methods of learning as well, and how to follow them. It is not a one-size-fits-all approach when it comes to collaboration. Thus, a proper understanding of the group dynamics on the part of the teacher, and the teaching and implication of the same in the classroom is what guarantees to get to the next level in learning.

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