

Collaborative Learning Versus Traditional Learning Of English As A Foreign Language At The University Level

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ملخص:

تطرح هذه الدراسة مسارات التعليم والتدريس حيث لا يمكن اعتبار المدرس هو الجهة الوحيدة التي تزود الطلبة بالمعلومات، وإنما يقوم بجلبهم إلى المعرفة بدلا من تزويدهم بها. إن الهدف من هذا البحث يتمثل في دراسة فعالية تقنيات التحري الجماعي وتقنيات التعليم التعاوني.

وقد كشفت نتائج هذه الدراسة بأن الطلبة الجامعيين يستفيدون كثيرا عندما يخضعون إلى أساليب التعليم الجماعي، إذ يظهرون تعاونا إيجابيا. ومع ذلك، من الصعب القول بأن أسلوبا جديدا محددًا استعمل في أساليب التعليم والتدريس وثبت نجاحه أكثر من الآخر. وبناءا عليه، فإنه بالنسبة لتدريس الانجليزية كلغة أجنبية في الجامعة ينبغي إدماج كل من التعليم التعاوني وأساليب المراقبة في التدريس لإفادة كل المتعلمين.

Abstract:

In this study, I want to explore a vision of the learning and teaching processes where the teacher is no longer considered as the sole source of information. He brings students to knowledge instead of giving knowledge to them. My intention is to study the effectiveness of the Group Investigation technique; a Collaborative learning technique, combined with content-based instruction.

The outcomes of this research revealed that university students benefited more exposed to Collaborative Learning approaches in that they showed positive interdependence, personal accountability, social, personal and many other collaborative skills. However, it was difficult to say that any new approach used in the teaching/learning process is any more successful than another. It was then recommended that university EFL courses should integrate both the collaborative learning and the Teacher-controlled approaches to allow a maximum benefit to all learners..

INTRODUCTION:

The teaching of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) at the university level is an exciting task so long as most of the students who choose to pursue the learning of English typically have high intrinsic motivation. Yet the only challenge is to maintain such motivation.

To promote change at the university level, I conducted a research at the University of Batna, at which I taught an EFL First-year grammar course. I changed the program of the course from a grammar-oriented instructional program to a content-based instructional one. I used a "Teacher – Controlled" approach with one group and a "Collaborative Learning Approach" with another.

1- Statement of the problem:

Learners are registered in the department of English according to their results obtained in the baccalaureate exam. Among the modules they study in first year are grammars, written and oral expressions.

Over the years, teachers of the department of English have debated the following questions:

1. What is the typical profile of students in this course?
2. What has been accomplished linguistically?
3. Are the students improving their English in this course?
4. Are we fulfilling the objectives set by the course requirements?

When enrolled in studying English, our students did not regard it as an academic priority, they lacked motivation, they often skipped class, many seemed to be satisfied with the minimum passing grade, and they often complained about the workload. Our classrooms are, indeed, of mixed abilities but we find ourselves, as teachers, just working with one small group of students, the high-achieving ones. The other learners are most of the time quite. All they do is the learning by heart of the courses.

Most of the teachers' recommendations regarding their teaching of EFL stressed that the course should be theme-based, should better answer the needs and interests of the learners, should try to motivate learners to develop their language competencies, should expose them to information about Anglo phone communities, should find educational methods to

remedy the problem of the heterogeneity of students' language competence, and should give the students the tools to become autonomous learners.

2- Research questions:

In this study, three points should be mentioned:

- (1) Students linguistic achievement, taking into account their personal learning preferences as well as the teaching approach used in their class,
- (2) The teachers' and the students' opinions towards the students' achievement, their learning preference and the teaching approach, and
- (3) The benefits of using a collaborative learning approach at the university level.

Using collaborative techniques for the first time in this course raised issues that had to be taken into consideration when planning for this study. Some of central issues that needed to be dealt with are: Will most students benefit from the course and improve their linguistic competence? In a collaborative type classroom, will most students, regardless of their learning preference, be as motivated as if they were in teacher-controlled class? Will they improve their linguistic skills?

In an attempt to deal with these issues, the following are our research questions:

1. Is there a difference in linguistic achievement for the Group Investigation (GI) and the Teacher – controlled (GI) groups?
2. Are there differences in linguistic achievement by group (GI and TC) and learner type (Cooperative, Competitive, Individualist)?
3. Are there differences in student perception of their own achievement according to?
 - a- Groups (GI versus TC), and
 - b- Learners preferences
4. How successful was the course overall in the view of:
 - a- The teacher
 - b- The students
5. Is the collaborative learning approach generally effective in these English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classes at the University level?

The research questions were based on the findings that collaborative learning enhances students' motivation to learn (Slavin, 1990; Sharan & Sharan, 1992), and that students' participation in pair and small-group work following collaborative learning principles facilitates Foreign language acquisition along with subject-matter mastery (McGroarty, 1991).

This study, is an attempt to narrow the gap between theory and practice in that its findings regarding achievement and formal grammar instruction, the use of a mixture of teaching strategies, the benefits of collaborative learning at the university level in EFL classes, help on the one hand, to further understand Foreign language acquisition, and on the other hand, to allow change in English as a Foreign Language classes in universities.

3- Methodology

I conducted my research with First year (EFL) learners at Batna University during the academic year (2003-2004). Action research was used to study the benefits of Group investigation (GI) as a collaborative learning technique, by comparing students' linguistic achievement, taking into account their learning preferences.

I taught both groups concurrently using both approaches: the Group Investigation (GI) approach with one group and the Teacher-Controlled approach (TC) with the other. (GI) involved self directed student groups researching and presenting topics.

The underlying teaching strategy of the courses was communicative and used a content-based instructional approach in the sense that it used content (the country of England) to develop English language proficiency.

To achieve my goal qualitative and quantitative data collection were undertaken. I used several instruments measuring students' linguistic achievement, their learning preferences, and their responses to the teaching approaches used. The Learning Preference Scale developed by Owens and Straton (1980) was used. The students' linguistic achievement was analyzed by oral and written testing of their use of English interrogatives both at the beginning and at the end of the course. The students' and the teacher's reflections and opinions were analyzed through journals, interviews and course evaluations.

4- Background

a- The Communicative Approach

The communicative approach is based on the assumption that language is a tool that allows communication and social interaction between the individuals and societies and that learning the language is an active process (Germain, 1991, 1993; Germain & Leblanc, 1982; Littlewood, 1981, 1984; McGroarty, 1993). Because one of the goals of many of today's generation of second language (L2) learners is to be able to communicate and to function in the target language (Trottier & Greer, 1992), interaction among students has become an important strategy used by second language (L2) teachers (Rivers, 1987). Consequently, in the classroom, the focus has been on helping learners to develop communicative functions such as how to ask questions, how to greet someone, how to argue a point of view, and how to negotiate rather than to teach them grammatical points in a traditional manner.

The teaching of a particular subject matter using the Foreign Language as the language of instruction is a good example of a communicative approach. It has been studied and applied also at the university level (Edwards, Wesche, Krashen, Clément, & Kruidenier, 1984). Having mentioned this example, we will further discuss content-based instruction.

a1- Content – based instruction

A considerable amount of information has been presented on the objectives and the efficiency of content – based language instruction at the university level. Content-based, discipline-based, theme-based Foreign language across the curriculum, and sheltered courses are the labels given to different programs of the same nature that have been experimented within university foreign language programs (Wesche, 1993; Crandall, 1993).

The use of content-based instruction is compatible with any teaching approach. In a teacher-controlled class, the instructor would select the material to read and would structure the class as he or she would see fit. In a collaborative learning class, the students would be involved in a more active way with the content of the course.

b- Collaborative Learning

Collaborative learning (hereafter, "CL") is a structured form of group learning. It is a teaching approach which consists of organizing class activities, using small groups where learners work together towards a more academic goal. In small groups, learners are encouraged to share ideas, help each other by putting their resources together, sharing and explaining their findings, justifying their points of view, and commenting on one another's findings and giving their points of view. Through CL, students develop group interdependences individual responsibilities, and social skills. Stevahn, Bennett and Rolheiser (1995) summarized the five basic principles of collaborative learning namely:

- a- Positive interdependence. In a group situation, the students depend on each other to be able to complete the activity.
- b- Personal accountability. They are accountable for their own work.
- c- Face to face interaction. They have to interact with the rest of the group and share their findings.
- d- Social skills. They acquire social and collaborative skills.
- e- Analysis of process. They analyze and evaluate the process they used to complete their work.

In an L2 classroom, working in groups, having students jointly write up a dialogue, doing exercises in pairs, and searching for a project have been common practices at all levels; primary secondary and post-secondary. Group work and (CL) are distinguished by the fact that (CL) *"has developed a set of principles and methods intended for use over extended periods as major elements of classroom organization and instruction"* (Slavin, 1990, p. xi).

Vygotsky, a developmental theorist and researcher, influenced some of the current research of collaboration among students and teachers. His principal idea is that intellectual functioning is the product of our social history, and language is the key mode by which we learn our cultures and through which we organize our verbal thinking and regulate our actions. Children learn such higher functioning from interacting with the adults and other children around them.

According to Vygotsky (1987), children learn when they engage in activities and dialogue with others, usually adults or more capable peers. Children gradually internalise this dialogue so that it becomes inner speech, the means by which they direct their own behaviour and thinking. Vygotsky (1987) and Slavin (1993) noted that children interacting toward a common goal tend to regulate each other's actions. In this sense he argued: "*Students are capable of performing at higher intellectual levels when asked to work in collaborative situations than when asked to work individually.*" (p. 25)

Bruner (1986) and Slavin (1993), like Vygotsky, emphasized much on the role of language communication in the development of knowledge and understanding. Bruner's main idea is that children's language and learning development takes place through the processes of social interaction.

b1- Outcomes of the Collaborative Learning Approach

- Achievement

A review of classroom research conducted by Slavin (1993) indicated the effects of Collaborative Learning on achievement. He specifically looked at practical applications of cooperative learning methods in elementary and secondary schools. In this sense he showed that 68 studies met the stringent research requirements he had set for his review, and 72% of those studies showed a positive effect of cooperative learning on achievement; 12% favored control groups. One aspect of his findings is that Collaborative Learning methods vary widely in achievement effects however all of them are effective techniques for increasing student achievement. Group Investigation for example (Slavin, 1990), (Gagné, 1992), (Johnson & Johnson, 1997) has not been studied sufficiently to compare the findings with other techniques, but as Slavin points out, its potential positive effects cannot be discounted.

Positive Interdependence

Other benefits for the learners have been found in using Collaborative Learning in the classroom. For example, in a small group activity, because students work toward one common goal, they have a vested interest in working together. They find ways to complete the work to the best of their ability, and within time limits by using each other's expertise. This

phenomenon, called positive interdependence, becomes crucial for the success of the group (Gagné, 1992; Johnson & Johnson 1997; Slavin, 1990).

- Individual Accountability

Ultimately each student is asked by the instructor to display the knowledge acquired from the group activity. This knowledge is tested and evaluated through the performance of oral presentations or through individual evaluation. This individual accountability for one's own achievement instills in each student a personal sense of responsibility (e.g., Slavin, 1990).

It is obvious, thus, that collaborative learning situations generally offer a better learning environment for language acquisition. What should be emphasized in this study is that a learner-centred method should proceed in a moderate, adaptive pace.

b2- Collaborative Learning at the University Level

Collaborative learning has been studied for the first time at the primary and secondary levels. However, Johnson and Johnson (1997) reviewed a number of studies examining individual learning in collaborative settings at a university level; these studies did not include second-language learning. The authors found that: "*over 120 studies have compared the relative efficacy of cooperative, competitive, and individualistic learning on individual achievement*" (p. 17). Their findings provide good evidence that Collaborative Learning promotes greater individual achievement than do competitive or individualist effort. The authors gave five reasons related to the research on Collaborative Learning (CL) at the university level: 1) *CL has a rich history of theory, research, and practice.*

2) *The research on CL has validity and generalizability rarely found in the education literature.*

3) *CL affects many different instructional outcomes simultaneously.*

4) *Quite a bit is known about the essential components that make it work, and*

5) *CL creates learning opportunities that do not exist when students work competitively or individually".* (p. 18)

Indeed, proponents of collaborative learning claim that the active exchange of ideas within small groups increases interest among the participants and there is persuasive evidence that cooperative teams achieve at higher levels of thought and retain information longer than students who work quietly as individuals. The shared learning gives

students an opportunity to engage in discussion, take responsibility for their own learning, and thus become critical thinkers.

c- Learning preferences

It is true that individuals learn differently, and this is the case for Foreign language learning. Some students may be shy, analytically oriented, learning best by studying grammar drills for example and by analyzing sentences. In contrast, other students may be sociable, extroverted, wishing to avoid grammar drills and being quite content to understand the meaning of a sentence without knowing the meaning of every word. It is valuable to discover the learning style of a student in order to better understand cognitive, affective and behavioral aspects of the student (Oxford & Ehrman,1990).

d- Traditional learning (Teacher-controlled approach)

The teacher-controlled approach is more traditional compared to the collaborative learning approach. The teaching that occurs in the classroom is based on the teacher's decisions. The teacher determines the content of the course, chooses the topics to be studied, and the readings to be done. Although group work is one of many strategies that can be used in a teacher controlled type class, the work is done most of the time with the whole class. The students depend on the teacher more than in the collaborative type classroom (Germain, 1993). Harasim et al. (1995) provided us with a significant comparison between the collaborative and the traditional approaches to teaching namely, the teacher – controlled approach:

We should then help students who are accustomed to a teacher-fronted classroom to accept a change in classroom organization so they may gain the benefits of being at the centre of the learning process.

All in all, making our learners work collaboratively in the classroom does not rely on preset formulas or magical recipes; rather, it requires simply involving students in the teaching process.

Figure 1: Collaborative versus traditional approaches to teaching

	COLLABORATIVE	TRADITIONAL
Role of Instructor	Goal-Setter Instructional Designer Facilitator Resource Model Learner	Teacher Evaluator
Class structure	Students in Groups from 2 to whole class	Individual students seated in rows
Text	Contributions generated by students and teacher in addition to textbooks	Commercial textbooks and published works
Audience	Student writing to each other	Students writing only for the instructor
Lecturing	Student-centred approach based on discussion of issues and questions raised by students	Formal lessons (e.g., grammar and rhetoric)
Revision	An ongoing process based on feedback from group members	Suggestions given by instructor after completed paper has been submitted
Evaluation	Evaluated by class members, including the instructor	Evaluated by instructor alone
Collaboration	Students work with peers guided and advised by instructor	Students work alone or with instructor only

SOURCE : HARASIM LINDA ET AL., LEARNING NETWORKS: A FIELD GUIDE TO TEACHING AND LEARNING ONLINE THE MIT PRESS, CAMBRIDGE MASS. AND LONDON, 1995, P. 3

5- Findings and discussion

Based on comparing the scores obtained at the beginning of the course with those of the end of the course, both groups showed a significant gain in their use of oral yes-no questions, and yes-no and wh-questions combined. The (TC) group showed also a significant gain in their use of written yes-no questions. Overall, neither group improved more than the other, linguistically.

The results of the above analyzes provide evidence related to two of the questions posed above :

- 1- *Whether students improved significantly in their use of interrogatives during the period of this course, and*
- 2 - *Whether one group showed more improvement than the other.*

Based on the data presented through students' journals, interviews and course evaluation questionnaires, I would provide an answer to the third research question:

- 3-*Whether there are differences in students perceptions of their own achievement according to groups and learners' preferences.*

Students of the (GI) group perceive themselves as not having improved their oral and written skills. The (TC) students seemed to perceive their achievement in more positive way. Both groups perceived high achievement in terms of learning content. In terms of the students' learning preference, the conclusion I would put forth is that in the (TC) group the students felt that their learning style was more in harmony with the teaching approach than did the (GI) group. A number of (GI) students made comments about not liking to work in groups. Nevertheless, at the end of the course, they said that they benefited from the course and from working in groups.

To conclude, the (TC) group had a more positive perception of their achievement compared to the (GI) group and they felt that their learning style was more compatible than the (GI) students felt in their group.

To answer the fourth research question which deals with:

- 4- *Whether the course overall was successful in the view of the teacher and students.*

According to the teacher's observations, the collaborative learning approach was effective in EFL classes at the university level, although collaborative learning necessitated to orient students to this new manner of learning. Meanwhile, the (GI) group gained skills that the (TC) group did not, specifically with respect to working together.

Even though many students were ill-prepared to learn under the collaborative model, their views revealed their strong motivation relative to

the content of the course, yet, they generally did not recognize their linguistic improvement. The central point in the fifth research question emphasizes on :

5- Whether the collaborative learning approach is generally effective in these English as a Foreign language (EFL) classes at the university level.

The findings of this study suggest that the students experienced tensions and contradictions about collaborative learning in both their opinions and their interactions. The interview data revealed that individual students had conflicting views of collaborative learning within themselves. On the one hand, they liked working in groups in EFL classes because it made learning easier and less threatening. They could share the work load and do the work faster. They could have more ideas and do the work better. In addition. They could have more chances to practice English with other students in groups. On the other hand, they disliked working in groups because it was sometimes hard to get consensus, especially when some group members stuck to their own ideas. When they had different ideas, they spent longer time deciding which one(s) to choose, and they did not always agree with each other. Groups sometimes got too noisy and difficult to organize. Group members did not always do their part of the job. Moreover, some felt that they could not demonstrate individual ability to the teacher, and, therefore, could not get better marks for their part of the work. In addition. they felt that they spoke too much of their first language in groups...etc

In my view, the collaborative learning approach is effective in Foreign language classes at the university level. My observations led me to conclude that the (GI) approach had advantages that were not seen with the (TC) group: positive interdependence; personal responsibility; and enhanced social, personal and collaborative skills are some of the benefits I noted in my journal. Based on the findings, it was however difficult to say whether any new approach used in the teaching/learning process is any more successful than another. It was hence recommended that university EFL courses should integrate both the collaborative learning and the Teacher - controlled approaches to benefit all learners.

Conclusion:

The use of content-based instruction at the university level has been frequently researched; however, the Collaborative learning approach in a content-based instruction EFL class has not been adequately studied. The present study will bring further understanding of the advantages and disadvantages of content-based teaching and learning at the university level. This case study has discussed aspects of Linguistic achievement when using content for the purpose of learning a language. Many questions have been raised regarding linguistic achievement and the formal teaching of grammar, and definite answers to them will depend on future research. It was noticed that students become disillusioned and uninterested after spending one year at the university. I think that this phenomenon is due partly to the content of the language courses offered at the university and also to the teaching methods that are applied. Teachers within the English Department have made attempts recently to modernize their teaching methods and their methodology. This effort arose in response to satisfying the students' needs. However, changes at the university in general seem to be occurring slowly. Generally speaking, research can facilitate and guide change.

The present study has allowed the evaluation of outcomes when using the Collaborative Learning approach at the university level. These outcomes include, among others, positive interdependence, personal accountability, social, personal and collaborative skills and show that university level students can also benefit from these outcomes when exposed to Collaborative learning approaches.

Post-secondary education has changed in the last decade. Students expect and demand that university programs prepare them for productive professional lives; they look for programs with clear applications to jobs in their areas of interest, programs that will teach them a variety of skills required. Universities, aware of the changing needs of the students, want to maintain programs that stimulate the intellectual growth needed, but simultaneously prepare their students for the new requirements of society in the information age. To match the requirements of society, future citizens need first, to develop personal, social, and collaborative skills. Second, all persons need to acquire higher degrees of autonomy in their learning. This study has opened discussion about using Collaborative learning techniques in the university classroom; it has begun investigation into ways to teach students the skills they need: to learn collaboratively, and function autonomously.

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