

Cooperative Learning in an English as a Second Language Classroom:

The Teacher's Role

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Original Stimulus

Teachers often implement some type of group work in the language classroom. While not all students enjoy working in groups, many find it beneficial as it is a chance to practice their skills and knowledge of language in a stress-free environment. Having the ability to collaborate with each other is one way to assure learner autonomy. When one student's success is interdependent with someone else's, he or she is generally more apt to participate and work with peers. Students in these situations are able to practice and perform specific tasks similar to real-world language exchanges, which allow students more preparation of communicating with language other than just writing and reading about grammar.

Throughout my observations in AL 6961 Practicum I, other experiences with language teaching, and just being in a classroom in general, I have had many opportunities to witness and be a part of group work. Generally, the examples of group work I have seen most recently in the language classrooms I have observed have been short, simple pair- or small-group activities that last a very short amount of time. While this type of language exchange and group work is important, I began to consider the different ways in which group work can be implemented more effectively and yield the most successful outcomes for the students involved.

The ideas and principles of cooperative learning are ones that might not be familiar to all teachers in language classrooms, but cooperative learning is a great way for students to become more familiar with group work and create an environment of interdependence. When students participate in cooperative learning, they take more control in their own learning and the learning of their classmates, which can be extremely effective. Smith (as cited in Barkley, Cross & Major, 2005) defined cooperative learning as "the instructional use of small groups so that students

work together to maximize their own and each other's learning" (p. 5). Richard-Amato also explains that cooperative learning helps to establish interdependence among students while working to achieve either individual or group goals and objectives (2010, p. 382). However, in this type of learning environment, it is important to consider still the role of the teacher as the instructor should ensure that students are getting the most out of their learning experiences.

Narrowed Topic-Focus

As the teacher is traditionally the center of instruction acting as the expert and authority in the classroom, this type of environment would require a very different, yet very specific type of leadership role from the teacher. The teacher cannot simply put students into groups, give them instructions about the project, and then have the students complete the task without any further guidance. Additionally, teachers cannot remain as the main resource for the students as they might normally be in a lesson involving teacher-centered instruction.

Considering the introduction and implementation of cooperative learning as a type of group work in an ESL classroom, specifically, an ESL high school, advanced intermediate-level, integrated skills course consisting of about 15-20 students who are 14-18 years old, my focus would reflect on how teachers should generally assume the role of leader when carrying out this specific type of task. The teacher's role would need to reflect on the students as to how they too should perform their tasks when completing a cooperative learning assignment, but further research would be needed to consider exactly how this role would be described.

Motivation

While studying to be a teacher of English education for native speakers, during a secondary classroom field-experience course at Colorado State University, I was introduced to the ideas and practice of cooperative learning in the classroom. I found it to be very intriguing

and potentially useful to add to my own teaching style since it appeared that most students seemed to excel at this type of group work activity, when I had remembered group work in high school to be generally quite unsatisfactory.

I observed a classroom where this teaching technique was used and it appeared that the students involved were aware that this type of learning ensures success for everyone involved, but only if all students participate. It encourages accountability amongst students and generally enhances overall group achievement. The students were taught that when they were working together, and really, teaching one another, they were more likely to retain the information. It helps students to develop strengths in areas of group work, oral communication and critical thinking.

Considering those ideas, I recently observed language classes where students were completing group work. I wondered if the teachers had ever encountered or used this type of teaching strategy. If this type of activity works well with native speakers in a classroom, I assume that it can also work well in a classroom of language learners, but only if the students have enough competency with the language to clearly communicate with their peers. The role that the teacher plays in the language classroom when facilitating cooperative learning might also be different from the role of a teacher in classroom where the students all use the same L1 and areas not focusing on developing new language skills.

Additionally, my plan for the future is to teach in a public school setting, preferably high school, with English language learners. As it is my goal to teach in this environment, I think viewing language learners at this age in these cooperative learning situations would help me to prepare for my own classroom. I would be able to witness whether or not certain activities or actions and decisions made by the teacher would be appropriate or not for these students at

different language levels and ages. Watching specifically for the teacher's role in these types of activities would give me more insight on how I would integrate cooperative learning into my own classroom.

Literature Review

To further describe the teacher's role, a lesson involving cooperative learning will be broken down into four major streams of research about classroom instruction: the design and planning of a lesson, the way in which the lesson is introduced, time management throughout the lesson and how learning is monitored or checked. The specific characteristics of the teacher as the leader in this type of lesson will also be discussed.

Designing and Planning a Cooperative Learning Task

First, while students are in control of their own learning, it is important for teachers to remember that there still needs to be structure within the classroom and within the task itself. Teachers must structure the learning tasks so that students can actively participate and work towards successful outcomes for the entirety of the assignment. Barkley, Cross and Major (2005) explained multiple considerations that teachers need to remember when creating this type of lesson plan for their students. Teachers need to create a relevant task that matches students' abilities and skill levels; the students need to maintain interdependence while also being ensured individual accountability. The activities need to be planned well enough so that each phase of the lesson is prepared to ensure maximum student success (p. 56).

Richard-Amato (2010) listed multiple facets of cooperative learning projects that enabled students to be the most successful. Some of these aspects are important steps to be considered when creating lesson plans involving cooperative learning. For example, the lessons must be well-organized; equal roles are given to all students; and tasks are given that engage student

interest (p. 385). Again, all of these things can be planned by teachers when creating the lesson plan.

Introducing the Lesson

In the initial introduction of a cooperative learning task, the teacher needs to give as structured directions as possible, so that students are more likely to realize the importance of their own roles when participating. It also allows for less confusion as the lesson progresses. Johnson, Johnson and Smith (as cited in Barkley, Cross & Major, 2005) explained that there are certain ways teachers should introduce a lesson to the students. Some of the main goals included explaining the activity so that students can have an idea of what the finished product should be; clarifying the objectives for students so that they can see not only how the activity relates to class goals, but also how they are benefitting from completing the task; outlining the procedures of a cooperative learning task so students are aware of what they should be doing for the entire duration of the assignment – having written instructions is a good way for students to understand more clearly and always have a reminder as to what they should be doing; giving students examples so they have a better idea of what they should be creating; reminding students of rules for group work to eliminate problems; setting time limits makes sure students pace themselves; checking for understanding before the task has begun, and allowing students to ask questions for clarification are ways to ensure all students and teacher are on the same page (pp. 69-70).

Wharton and Race (2000) also mentioned the importance of making sure learners know what to do before (and possibly during) a task for group work: “State the goal of the activity clearly and give staged instructions...you could also write them on the board” (p. 22). For example, before students begin working on an assignment, it would be beneficial to both give them a handout of their tasks, as well as writing main points on the board as the directions are

explained. As the students are working, checking in to see if they are on task and completing the steps as directed would ensure success. If the teacher wanted to maintain less of a leadership role in this example, having students designated with roles to check the direction list would also be an option.

Time Management

Considering specifically the idea of time management for students in groups, the teacher needs to be specific about setting limits and deadlines for students. Barkley, Cross and Major (2005) explained that there are two different time estimates to give students, a lower estimate and a higher one. For example, if students think that they have less time to do something, they might work “quickly and efficiently, and the time limit can always be extended” (p. 70). Although, if students are given a lot of time to do something, they might “take time to be more reflexive” (p. 70). The teacher needs to be clear when setting time limits for students. Teachers might consider the ‘Time Management Matrix’ as introduced by Covey (as cited in Dörnyei & Murphey, 2003) to increase students personal effectiveness when dealing with time related issues (p. 9-11). This table allows students (and teachers) to consider both the importance and the urgency of completing a task or assignment. If students consider different parts of a task to be more important and will probably take more time (like research) they might start them earlier and spend more time on them. If they think something might be less important for them to spend a lot of time doing (creating a title page for their work) they can consider completing that task later or towards the end of the activity.

Checking for Learning and Understanding

One way teachers can check for understanding before students have a chance to begin working is to “ask a learner to explain the instructions in their own words” (Wharton & Race,

2000, p. 22). Having students repeat the directions back to the class using their own vocabulary and language is a good way for teachers to check for students' understanding when giving instructions. Another way teachers can check for understanding from the students is to negotiate meaning. Long (as cited in Richard-Amato, 2010) listed three different ways to achieve understanding during meaning negotiation: confirmation checks, clarification requests, and comprehension checks; a confirmation check occurs when the learner restates what has been said; a clarification request is used to clarify a specific point of an utterance; and a comprehension check is used to ensure that comprehension has occurred (p. 44). Teachers can use these tips and teach them to students as well so that the students can use them when receiving instructions, during a lesson, or when working with their peers in cooperative learning activities.

Finally, as mentioned above, Barkley, Cross and Major (2005) explained that during the instruction stage of the activity, it is important for teachers to check for understanding from the students and allow them to ask questions to clarify any points that still might be confusing in the lesson plan (p. 70). Asking students to rephrase the directions, or steps of the task, would allow the teacher and students the chance to recognize if further explanation is needed. It might also be beneficial if students had the opportunity to ask questions throughout the explanation of the task and instructions rather than waiting until the end.

Characteristics of the Teacher as the Leader

Dörnyei and Murphey (2003) offered multiple types of leadership roles and styles that teachers may acquire in the classroom. They exhibit particular phases of leadership based on different theorists. As cited by Dörnyei and Murphey (2003), Heron's system of facilitation is discussed and the modes of facilitation of the teacher are listed, containing the role of the teacher in cooperative mode, which is explained as the teacher sharing "the power and the

responsibilities with the group, prompting members to be more self-directing” (p. 96). This role can be considered for not only the teacher, but also the students participating in the cooperative learning task. It seems that the teacher, in a cooperative learning task, is still there to facilitate and help students, it is important for the students to be more self-directing, and in the end, take more control of their learning.

Research Question(s)

After conducting this research about the different ways for teachers to be involved with the learning process and perform the of role of leader in a cooperative learning task, it would be vital to witness this type of situation and lesson in actual learning environments. Because it would be both instructive and enlightening to see students as they are participating in the task and how the teacher makes decisions about when to intervene and when to watch the students engage with one another and be more autonomous in regards to their own learning. As I have viewed cooperative learning in an L1 classroom, I would be interested to see the differences between that environment and one where students are studying a second language, therefore, my research question is:

In an ESL high school, advanced intermediate-level, integrated skills course consisting of about 15-20 students who are 14-18 years old, what is the teacher's role in cooperative learning (when it is carried out in the classroom)?

This research question will also address potential mishaps of the cooperative learning assignment if the teacher's role is not adhered to.

Methodology

Type of Data

The type of data that I would be most interested in using for my research would be that involving different groups of students, i.e. different levels, different numbers of students, the type of skills being addressed in the task, the activities that the students are participating in, and the types of students involved (specifically, ESL).

Context

As I plan to teach in the US, the context could vary as far as number of students, the ability levels, and the tasks and skills involved in the lesson, but I would be focusing on secondary-aged students in an ESL environment.

Data Collection

The ways in which I plan to collect my data will include video-taped class meetings, interviews from both students and other teachers, surveys from the students and teachers, and examples of group work that has been completed by the students using the method of cooperative learning. I suppose it would also be necessary then to collect some examples of work when the students completed similar tasks, but working alone or in pairs, rather than in cooperative learning groups to see different outcomes of the learning tasks based on the process of the assignment.

In conclusion, I believe creating different ways for students to learn and interact with the materials, language, and one another is important in the development of communicative competence for students in an L2 classroom. Carrying out my own research in the area of cooperative learning would give me a better understanding of the processes involved and how the teacher and student can ultimately benefit from this type of instruction. As a new teacher, it would be beneficial for my own practices to be able to witness the teacher's role in cooperative learning since I plan to use this technique when teaching and seeing experienced teachers

interacting with and instructing with their students in this type of learning environment would allow me more insight on cooperative learning as a whole.

References

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