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The Importance of Implementing Collaborative Learning in the English as a Second Language (ESL) Classroom in Malaysia

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Abstract

The collaborative learning method makes the students depend on each other in their pursuit of knowledge and makes the learning process more meaningful and interesting. When students are learning in a group, they will not feel alone and isolated from the rest. When students are working in groups, they will be a part of a community whereby everyone will lend support to one another. This will provide the academic and social support in learning that students need. When students of different performance levels co-operate with each other in working towards achieving a desired goal, the students are not merely accountable for their own learning process but are also responsible for their peers' learning process as well. In other words, success will breed more success. The learning experience can be further enriched when the teaching method which is used takes into account the interests and motivation of the learners. Student motivation will be heightened as a result of collaborative learning. This is because the students will feel in charge and empowered in terms of their own learning process. This paper will discuss the present teaching and learning experiences in the Malaysian ESL classroom, the recommended model of the collaborative learning method that can be applied in the Malaysian ESL classroom, the significance of the collaborative learning method and its limitations.

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1. Introduction

Classrooms normally use the discussion method as a learning tool. Discussion tasks, when designed with great thought and care, are an effective learning tool that will lead to better understanding for the learner. These tasks will also generate meaningful interaction as well as promoting creative thought (Ngeow, 2004). According to Brown (2001) the learning experience can be enhanced when there is collaboration among learners. According to the Oxford dictionary (2010), the word collaboration actually originated from mid 19th century Latin *collaborare* 'work together' that refers to the action of working with someone to produce something. Hacker and Niederhauser (2000), as cited in Ngeow (2004), state that discussion tasks are one way of collaboration. This is why the teacher must invest careful thought into the design of instructional strategies to ensure effective learning takes place. There are numerous claims that small-group interaction in the classroom for language acquisition shows that collaborative work will reduce dependence on teachers and enhance the learners' ability to participate effectively in conversation. One of the

aims of communicative language teaching is to help develop the ability of the learner to become effective participants in conversation and the collaborative learning method helps to develop this particular ability (Hedge, 2000). This provides further support for the use of collaborative learning method in the ESL classroom because it will develop the students' communicative abilities.

When students are working in groups, they will be a part of a community whereby everyone will lend support to one another. This will provide the academic and social support in learning that students need (Tinto & Pusser, 2006). According to McCabe (2003), as cited by Wilmer (2008), most students are not equipped to handle the complex learning process on their own. This means that they will face a harder time adapting to the academic environment, unsure of their academic target and lack academic guidance. Most of them were not taught or trained on how to cope with pressure such as examinations or different learning methods that require students to be more independent in acquiring knowledge. Most of the students are also not certain about their goals in life and do not have anyone suitable that can serve as a mentor to them. Thus by incorporating the collaborative learning method, the students will be able to manage their learning better by having someone else to provide guidance and to rely on. According to Cabrera, Colbeck & Terenzini (2001), as cited in Chalmers (2008), the experiences faced by students in the classroom have a profound effect on the students' development such as cognitive and academic development. This is the reason that teachers have to ensure that students are exposed to a classroom environment that is not only conducive to learning but will also lead to further academic success. Collaborative learning is one such method that can have positive implications on the students. According to Minkler (2002), as cited by Wilmer (2008), one of the reasons is because it promotes a more active and responsible role on the part of the student. Collaborative learning makes the students depend on each other in their pursuit of knowledge and makes the learning process more meaningful and interesting. When students are learning in a group, they will not feel alone and isolated from the rest. The collaborative learning method provides the much needed social support for students. This is because learning occurs socially through group interactions like negotiation and sharing of ideas (Stahl, Koschman & Suthers, 2006).

Layman (2006) highlighted a North Carolina State University study that assessed changes in advanced undergraduate students' perceptions of pair programming and collaboration. Information such as student personality types, learning styles, and other characteristics were gathered. The findings of the study found that most students showed a stronger preference to work with another student, believed that pairing made them more organized, and believed that pairing saved time on homework assignments. However students who were predominantly reflective learners and introverts disliked the collaborative learning method. The primary reasons for disliking pair programming were having un-cooperative partners and problems in scheduling meeting times outside the classroom. According to Hedge (2000) some students that are less passive might also find it hard to work in groups because assertiveness is much needed in face-to face interaction. Risk-taking and the possibility of domination of the group work by some individuals are also viewed as disadvantage in the implementation of collaborative learning. However in another study conducted by Wilmer (2009), having supportive relationships with each other in a classroom has yielded positive results. This is because being among others and getting support is important in the development of an individual. No man is an island after all.

Collaborative learning has already been applied in many classrooms since the late 1980s (Brufee, 2000). It is not merely grouping students to work together. There are several important elements involved such as negotiation and shared meaning. Group interactions will enhance the learning process because learning occurs socially (Stahl, Koschman & Suthers, 2006).

According to Van Boxtel, Van der Linden & Kanselaar (2000) one of the positive results of collaborative learning is that students will actively interact with each other socially which will stimulate the elaboration of conceptual knowledge. Through collaborative learning, students will verbalise their understanding. This means that a more coherent explanation can be derived as a result of social interaction between the students. Furthermore, it is the best way to prevent the teachers from giving too much information or answers to the students and to facilitate reasoning by asking questions (Sonmez, 2004). This leads to knowledge being actively constructed through the exchange of ideas.

In the present technological advanced era, the collaborative learning approach has been applied in many ways. One of them is computer-supported collaborative learning in higher education that is a shift from the traditional face-to-face group work (Roberts, 2005). In another study by Daradoumis & Marques (2000) the collaborative learning method is used. This particular study focused on a distance education course that is developed and taught in a virtual learning environment. The aim is to facilitate interaction among students and also between tutor and students through the Web. Some of the findings of the study show that by incorporating collaborative learning it will improve the study and learning of the subject matter, increase interest of the students in the subject matter and also increase a positive attitude and social interaction.

In addition, studies have shown that when the learning process is done in a fun yet educational way, learners will learn better (Khairiyah & Mimi, 2003). This is because active learning enhances the students' level of understanding and thus leads to improved results for the students. It is imperative that the teacher creates a conducive and non-threatening classroom environment that will evoke and retain the interest of learners. A non-threatening environment can be fostered through the collaborative learning method. In this kind of environment, students will not be under pressure and they will be eager to participate in discussions. Seng (2006) found that collaborative learning would increase the chances of academic success. It is also found that when there are fun and interesting communicative activities in the classroom, the students enjoyed working in groups (Seng, 2006). Therefore it makes sense to implement a learning method such as the collaborative learning method that will facilitate and not impede the learning process of the learners. Since there are numerous benefits that show collaborative learning will provide a variety of advantages to students, it is safe to deduce it as an effective tool in the classroom.

1.1. The Present Teaching Experience of Malaysian Teachers

Being exposed to a poor learning environment that is not conducive to language acquisition and lack of infrastructure also affect students' ability to acquire and master the English language. To make matters worse, in the rural areas in Malaysia most schools do not even have English teachers because most teachers are extremely reluctant to be posted to these areas and prefer to be teaching students in the bigger and more cosmopolitan cities (Chok, 2007). Chok further added that this is evident in the low number of teachers serving the rural areas which is a mere 15,000 teachers out of the 320,000 teachers in Malaysia.

According to Hamidah (2005) even when teachers are available, the teachers themselves are not proficient users of English. This is simply a case of the blind leading the blind. This is a somewhat frustrating situation for the teachers and also students as stated by Mohd Sofi (2002) as cited in Munir (2009). Some teachers in Malaysia were persuaded to teach English because of a lack of English teachers in a particular school. These teachers were initially trained to teach another subject but because of a lack of English teachers, they had to go through a 14-week English Conversion Course in one of the teacher training colleges (Abdul Rashid, Sabariah and Shaik Malik, 2006). Obviously 14 weeks is not enough to master any language. This resulted in teachers who are not proficient users of English, unmotivated and unhappy to teach English. Another consequence is that the students will be less proficient in English. With the above stated scenario affecting teachers in Malaysia, is it any wonder the students are also adversely affected?

1.2. The Present Learning Experience of Malaysian Students

Many students in particular are inhibited about using the English language in their daily conversation and especially in the classroom in front of all their peers. This inhibition is mainly due to the Asian culture that does not promote assertiveness and outspokenness (Cheng, 2000). According to Abdullah & Ady (2010) this is evident among Universiti Teknologi Malaysia (UTM) students in their reluctance to communicate in the English language. Norlida & Puteri (2004) state that the education system is also partly to be blamed because teachers in primary and secondary schools mainly use the 'chalk and talk' method that merely requires the students to absorb what is being taught and does not engage the latter to give feedback or participate in discussions. Thus, this teaching that is mostly teacher-centred is actually conditioning the students to become less assertive and passive. In general, Asian students are a product of a more passive learning environment (Cao, 2011). Malaysian students are not an exception. According to Ziegahn (2002) the influence of culture should not be underestimated because the way people communicate depends on cultural variables such as nationality, ethnicity, race and so forth. Thus it is safe to deduce that Asian students just communicate differently than others.

In Malaysia, students are faced with an exam-oriented environment. This is especially so in most Asian countries such as Japan whereby attaining the highest academic achievement is viewed as the *coup d'état* of one's academic life (Rosmanith, 2007). Japanese education is also referred as a high-achieving model whereby the Japanese students usually perform better than others on major international tests such as those by the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA), and the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development's (OECD) Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) (Tsuneyoshi, 2004).

Most students do not use the English language frequently, especially students in the rural areas (Abdullah & Yew, 2010). In the case of a university in Malaysia where a majority of students learning English, especially those from East Asia and Southeast Asia, are passive and are not prone to be the active participants in class (Campbell, 2007). This kind of attitude is not really helping these learners in learning the English language.

Fung (2010) had stated that a majority of Malaysian students are exposed to the rote learning concept. Fung states that rote learning in Malaysia is also known as 'spoon-feeding'. This term denotes the idea that this kind of learning is teacher-dependent and students are merely recipients of knowledge. This will definitely not help the students in the future. The students must become more independent learners.

Due to some of the challenges mentioned previously, it is not surprising to know that many Malaysian graduates find it almost near impossible to gain employment because they lack the necessary skills to communicate with others and use it adequately in their professional life (Abdul Razak, 2005). Norhartini (2007) further states that a lack of communication skills reduces their chances for professional success and poses an obstacle in the quest to go up the career ladder. In addition, Howell (2001) stated that a lot of students are not adequately prepared for college-level work and learning from the academic or psychological perspective. These are just some of the reasons for the rising unemployment rate in Malaysia. According to the Department of Statistics Malaysia (2010), the current unemployment rate has risen from 2.9% in October 2010 to 3.1% in November 2010.

Therefore, it is imperative that the way the students learn the English language be re-evaluated. Thus if individuals expect to see an improvement in the way they learn or expect to see the fruits of their labour, they should all change their approach in acquiring English. Thus, it is recommended that a model of collaborative learning be applied in the English language classroom in Malaysia to provide an alternative method that will enhance learning.

2. A Model of Collaborative Learning That Can Be Applied in The English Language Classroom in Malaysia

The following is a recommended model of collaborative learning that can be applied in the English language classroom in Malaysia.

2.1 *The teacher serves a guide or moderator*

The teacher must relinquish a certain level of control over the students. The students must be given the freedom to generate solutions and recommendations. The teacher will give constructive feedback on the progress of each group. It is best that the teacher meets with each group and observe their group discussion. The teacher only steps in when she sees that the group has been sidetracked from their real goal. Ideally, the students must not be provided with too much information but instead be actively encouraged to construct their own knowledge. The teacher is not wholly responsible for the learning process of the students.

2.2 *Conduct a suitable assessment of the progress of students*

Besides that, the teacher should document or record the progress of each group and provide either a verbal assessment or written one to each group. By providing a verbal assessment on the progress of each group, this will help the students to become aware of their weaknesses and also to ask questions to the teacher on ways to improve themselves. A verbal response is more suitable for speaking activities because the teacher can provide immediate feedback. This will provide an opportunity to the teacher and students to actively engage in discussion whereby a prompt response and a more detailed explanation can be given to the students. On the other hand, a written assessment will give the teacher more time to reflect on the strengths and weaknesses of the students and writing tasks are more suited for this kind of assessment. This will also help the teacher to construct a better response that will help the latter to improve. The students can also reflect on their mistakes by taking their time reading the written assessment of the teacher. It is hoped that both types of assessment will help each group to identify their strengths and weaknesses in the long run. The teacher should also assess each group periodically.

2.3 *Define the goals of a particular activity*

The teacher must explain to each group about the goals of a particular activity. In order to achieve a certain goal, all of the group members must discuss in depth with one another on the most suitable way that will help in achieving a specific outcome. During this discussion, the group members will be able to identify the objectives of their task. Each group member will constantly remind one another of the goals and this will help the group to complete their task in a collective manner. Each group will be given a deadline to complete the given task.

2.4 *A chance to contribute ideas*

When students work in groups, this will give each student the opportunity to contribute his or her own idea and help facilitate the exchange of opinions and ideas. In this way, the students will be encouraged to be more objective and democratic in coming to a decision. This is opposed to working alone whereby there is no chance for an exchange of ideas and usually the ideas being generated will be limited in thought and creativity. Besides that, when the students are working in a group, they will be among their own peer group. Being in a group of people that are of the same age will lessen any feelings of anxiety as compared to being with people who are older than them. The students will be less inhibited to express their ideas and also will be more receptive to their peers' feedback because they are from the same age group. Shyness in expressing views will eventually dissipate because the students gain confidence in communicating their ideas. Normally Malaysian students will feel more comfortable if they are working in a group. This is because the responsibility of completing a task and the risk of dealing with any form of embarrassment due to a mistake will be reduced. When the students are working in a group, the anxiety level will be reduced because they will bear the responsibility together.

2.5 *Fostering a positive network*

Group members will give positive feedback when their peers contribute any ideas. This will also help foster a co-operative spirit among the group members and teach them to be less individualistic. The Asian student works best in a group because of the Asian culture itself that encourages working and living within a community as opposed to being individualistic. It is vital to realize that not everyone has the same kind of intelligence and aptitude. It is best that each group member be assigned to a particular task that is best suited to his or her own ability. In this way, the student will hone his skill and become more knowledgeable. This will help motivate the student to complete the task which results in a sense of accomplishment and gives a boost of confidence at the end of the day for a job well done. For instance, it is imperative to identify students that like to communicate verbally and later assign them to the task of giving a presentation. Those that like to do research and are good at writing will be given the task of completing the written report and so forth.

2.6 Real time interaction

Working in groups will encourage the students to interact with each other because they feel that they are an integral part of a group or a community of people. Nothing surpasses human contact. Being around other people gives a certain vibe or energy that instantly revives dull senses. This is opposed to having no interaction at all whereby students might tend to feel isolated and neglected, feel that they are unable to affect a change in the outcome and in the end lose the motivation to complete a task.

2.7 Promoting a positive social Environment

When a group member sees that the rest of the group is busily doing their task, this will serve as a prime motivator in completing a given task. Furthermore, when they are interacting with each other they will further sharpen their communication skill and acquire other positive social skills, such as being confident, friendly and co-operative. They will also learn that any negative behaviour and attitudes will be counterproductive because it will not be tolerated by the rest and will only hamper their efforts in completing a task.

2.8 Encouraging a responsible attitude

In order to achieve the goals of a group, each group must be made aware that the success or failure of the group hinges on the effort of each individual. This means that each person will be responsible for his or her own individual task. The group members must also be made aware that each of them has a significant role to play in the group and that each individual will contribute to the completion of a given task.

2.9 Pride and satisfaction for a completed task

When a group has successfully completed a task, the feeling of pride and overall satisfaction is shared by all the group members. This will further enhance the feeling of teamwork among them. They should also be made aware that the strength of each team member will only serve to complement the others and that the culmination of all their strengths is integral to the academic success of the group.

2.10 Analysis or assessment of a completed task

After the completion of any given task, each group will analyse the results of a completed task. This is to identify or assess the strengths and weaknesses of the group. During the post-mortem session, each group must analyse the reasons or causes of a certain problem and identify the steps in improving the current situation. The group must find effective and practical solutions and to unanimously agree on the best way to resolve or improve a particular problem.

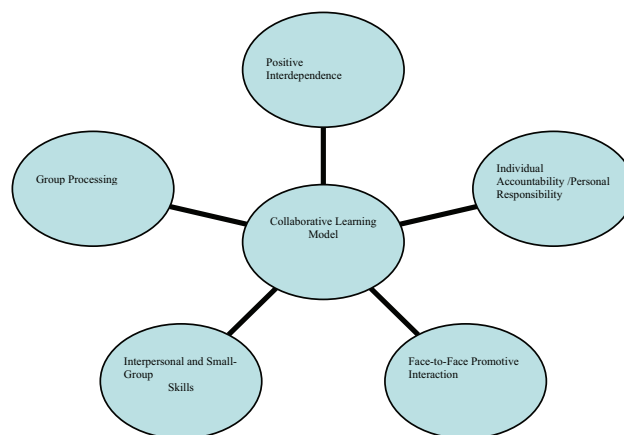


Fig. 1

Above is a framework by Johnson & Johnson (1994) on cooperative or collaborative learning. Based on this framework cooperative learning situations designed correctly have five key components. Firstly, positive interdependence whereby each individual depends on and is accountable to the others—a built-in incentive to help, accept help, and support others.

The second component is individual accountability whereby each person in the group learns the material. Next is promotive interaction and this is when group members help each other, exchange information, offer clarifying explanations. The fourth is developing social skills where students develop leadership and communication skills. The final component is group processing whereby they assess how effectively they are working with one another.

The Johnsons discovered that collaborative learning has many positive results. Their research reveals that cooperative learning improves the efforts of students to achieve. Not only does the level of intrinsic motivation of the students increase but their external motivation also increases. As a result, the students tend to work harder, the levels of achievement rises, material is retained longer than usual, a higher-level of reasoning is used because there is more group interaction and socialization. Thus, the interpersonal relationships of the students also greatly improved because the interaction among them creates a strong and close bond whereby with both able-bodied students and students with disabilities, groups with students of different ethnic backgrounds, and groups with both genders are able to cooperate with one another for the greater good. Increased levels of self-esteem, self-efficacy, and confidence also rose. Besides that, the students were found to have developed a newfound respect for the teachers, the learning process and also developed interest and enthusiasm in the subject they are studying.

3. The significance of collaborative learning

Although there are certain limitations to the collaborative learning approach, there are still a great many advantages of a model of collaborative learning (as stated previously) when it is applied in the English language classroom in Malaysia. Furthermore Overtoom (2001) adds that collaborative learning can actually enhance one's employability skills because it promotes active learning and self-discovery. These traits are particularly useful and high in demand among prospective employers.

Proponents of collaborative learning have long sing the praises of its numerous benefits especially in enhancing the learning process among students. According to Hedge (2000) when students of different performance levels co-operate with each other in working towards achieving a desired goal, the students are not merely accountable for their own learning process but are also responsible for their peers' learning process as well. In other words, success will breed more success.

Advocates of collaborative learning acknowledges the fact that when there is an active exchange of differing views and opinions, this will not merely produce students who become critical thinkers but will also result in students having a heightened interest in the subject matter being discussed. There is conclusive evidence that students engaging in collaborative learning will possess and exhibit higher or sophisticated levels of thought and also be able to retain information longer than students who do not engage in such learning activities or prefer to work in isolation. According to Scribner and Scribner (2001), even students such as the Mexican-American that were expected to fail can become a huge success if a suitable learning approach is implemented. This is evident in high performing schools that serve Mexican-American students. In this study it clearly shows that when students are actively encouraged to interact with each other and participate in collaborative learning activities, excellence was the end result. This shows that once students feel empowered to change their circumstance, they will feel more motivated to progress.

It is also important to emphasise on staff training. When there is adequate training experience and exposure to a vast range of teaching strategies, the teachers can become more effective mediums of knowledge (Sheldon, 2004). Since the teachers are the role models to the students, it is crucial that the former be well-trained to be able to serve the latter better in terms of encouraging them to pursue knowledge. Moreover Ziegahn (2002) claims that learning can be further enriched when the teaching method that is used takes into account the interests and motivation of the learners. Student motivation will be heightened as a result of collaborative learning. This is because the students will feel in charge and empowered in terms of their own learning process.

4. The Limitations of Collaborative Learning

Although there are many advantages in collaborative learning, there also appears some limitations to it. Some of the limitations are outlined as the following:

4.1 The teacher/ instructor will face difficulty in merely being a guide

Most teachers in Malaysia have been trained to be the authoritative figure whereby the students will merely listen and absorb what is being taught. Therefore some teachers who hold dear the traditional teaching method will find it hard to relinquish control over the class. This will lead to a rejection of the collaborative learning method whereby students are supposed to become more autonomous learners.

4.2 The students will face difficulty in being independent thinkers

Most Asian students, such as Malaysian students have mostly been 'spoon-fed' with information. The students are taught to memorise vast amounts of information and replicate the answers in the examinations, which is an example of lower-order

thinking skills. This is opposed to higher-order thinking skills whereby students are encouraged to be independent thinkers and to be able to construct knowledge on their own.

4.3 *Some students will feel intimidated to voice their opinions*

Some students with low self-esteem will be intimidated in expressing their views because they believe that their ideas are not as good as their peers. This will lead to the dominance of the other group members who are more confident and bolder in expressing their views. There is also a possibility that the more shy and timid group members will simply be overshadowed by the more assertive and confident ones.

4.4 *Some students with an anti-social attitude will find it challenging to interact with others*

Due to a difference in socio-economic status and also experience in life, some students have developed an anti-social attitude that will only have detrimental effects in the long run. The attitude of an individual is often quite difficult to change overnight and will usually change after a certain period of time. Thus, when there are students who behave negatively, the rest will also be affected because there will be a communication breakdown. Another effect is that the given task cannot be completed successfully.

4.5 *Encouraging an irresponsible attitude*

Some individuals find it is difficult to function as a group and to be responsible for their own learning. These students who are lazy and unmotivated will simply rely heavily on their other peers who are hardworking and full of initiative. This will lead to a complacent and irresponsible attitude among some of the other group members who expect to get a free ride. Besides that, this will lead to a lot of discontentment among the other industrious group members who have been doing more than their fair share of work.

4.6 *Developing a sense of denial over an unfinished task*

After the failure of a certain task, some irresponsible group members will put the blame on others and deny any responsibility. This will lead to more dissatisfaction among some of the group members because their peers do not want to be held accountable for the failure of a given task.

4.7 *Facing difficulties in working as a group*

According to Neuman & Bekerman (2000), a society that encourages individualism will face resistance when forced to work as a group. This is particularly so when the collaborative learning method is to be implemented. Students will face difficulties in working together to achieve a desired outcome if they were raised to be individualistic.

5. Conclusion

It can be concluded that the old adage that ‘two heads are better than one’ rings true in the case of collaborative learning. Previous studies have shown that this particular learning method is beneficial in more ways than one. It is hoped that teachers will incorporate more of collaborative learning activities into their lessons. Time and time again it has been proven that learners, especially, will reap its benefits. Thus, it is imperative that measures are taken to include the collaborative learning approach in the classroom activities.

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