Abstract

Language learning has always been looked upon as a process of close teacher-students collaboration and cooperation bearing its main idea of gaining communicative competence. Roles of teachers in language acquisition were always clear but changing times require adjustment to gradually altering students’ needs and expectations. The main aim of the paper is to find out to which extent the principles of collaborative learning are used at EFL classes at the Institute of Economics and Finance, Kazan Federal University, the attitude students have to collaborative practices and to prove that collaborative environment brings proficiency in language learning and establishes modeling of real-life situations among non-native speakers. In addition, the article reveals the role that teachers should preferably play at EFL lessons and the scenario they should develop basing on students' needs analysis which allows them to build a required synergy. The results gained by the authors rest on the survey carried out among English learning students at the Institute of Economics and Finance, Kazan Federal University.

Keywords: collaboration; collaborative learning; teacher-student interaction; EFL.

1. Introduction

One of the main problems that exists in the traditional system of education is a concept of rooted teacher-centered learning. In this concept the role of student is more of a passive rather than of an active learner. A student is defined as a consumer of given knowledge prepared and interpreted by the teacher who is almost in all cases acts as a dominant figure.

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Modern educational paradigm, which is dependent on the requirements the 21st century world has, highlights absolutely opposite concepts. It is currently characterized by the choice that is given to students, by the acceptance of students' needs and preferences, by the cooperation and collaboration both of peers and teachers. Development and the ability to use the received information in practice-oriented environments have become the basic criterion of students' knowledge acquisition. All this is based on student-centered educational concept which is collaborative learning a part of.

1.1. Main text

Collaboration is defined as 'working together to do a task and to achieve shared goals' (Collins English Dictionary, 2012). Collaborative learning is a comprehensive term for 'variety of educational approaches involving joint intellectual effort by students, or students and teachers together' (Smith, BL and MacGregor, JT, 1992). 'Collaborative learning points to cooperation between the teacher and the student and stands against the competitive system followed in a traditional classroom' (Dr. Ranee Kaur Banerjee, edited by: Noreen Gunnell, 2012). Those who 'work collaboratively can obtain greater resources, recognition and reward when facing competition for finite resources' (Wagner, Caroline S. and Loet Leydesdorff, 2005).

The concept of collaborative learning supposes that a teacher acts 'as a guide' (Simon, B., 1999) or as a 'facilitator of learning' (Kember, D., 1997) but not only as a supplier of information and a strict controller of completed tasks. Teacher is 'an authority (on the language and how to learn it) than on their being legally appointed a superior' (Widdowson, H.G. 1987). In a collaborative classroom students and teachers are treated as equal partners, they can 'actively interact by sharing experiences and take on asymmetry roles' (Mitnik, R., Recabarren, M., Nussbaum, M., Soto, A., 2009). They also 'capitalize on one another’s resources and skills (asking one another for information, evaluating one another’s ideas, monitoring one another’s work, etc.).' (Chiu, M. M., 2000, 2008).

The principles of collaborative learning can be successfully applied in EFL classroom bringing together language and personality development.

When we say "teacher-student collaboration" in EFL classrooms, we mean something more than just patterns of interaction they might have during the lessons. Collaboration includes atmosphere, the relations between the participants, their types of behavior, trust and honor, etc. As interaction deals mainly with technology of arranging, the structure and the ways of its implementation, the roles the participants possess. 'Classroom interaction is a form of institutional talk which is locally managed but cooperatively constructed speech exchange system' (Markee & Kasper, 2004).

The forms of interaction that can be used during EFL classes are diverse but all of them extremely important because they offer opportunities to create atmosphere for productive communication both inside and outside the classroom. In a group work students work in small groups on tasks that entail interaction: conveying information, for example, or group decision-making, while a teacher walks around, listening, intervenes little if at all. In a question and answer form students answer teacher's questions, make their own questions to peers; a teacher is an expert and observer. When working individually, students work on tasks independently, and a teacher gives a task or a set of tasks, walks around monitoring and assisting where necessary. If we consider a collaboration form, students do the same sort of tasks as in 'individual work', but work together, usually in pairs, trying to achieve the best possible results; a teacher may or may not intervene (consulting). If a student happens to act as a teacher, students create the tasks for quizzes and games, and the teacher consults on preparatory stage and participates in doing the tasks. In full-class interaction students debate a topic or do a language task as a class; a teacher may intervene occasionally to stimulate participation or to monitor.

All the above stated forms of interaction constitute the entire process of collaboration performed in different types either teacher-student, student-student, small group or entire classroom.

The appropriate and highly effective collaboration is possible when:
- both/all participants can motivate each other;
- students/teachers get active development in all spheres (communicative skills, personal qualities, teamwork qualities, etc);
- there is always a positive rapport;
- the topics to work on are interesting;
- all participants speak respectively;
- each step of collaborative work is monitored,
- difficulties and misunderstandings are eliminated;
- it blocks the appearance of psychological barrier of the students acquiring a foreign language;
- the duties and roles are allocated accordingly;
- there is trust and mutual help but not a hostile competition, a confrontation or a strict obeying of rules;
- goals and instructions are set clearly.

The department of foreign languages for economics, business and finance which the researches are a part of, use the practices of collaborative techniques, which appear in the following:
- each year students' needs analysis is held, on the basis of which teachers are able to meet students' language requirements;
- students are diagnosed on the type of activities that appeals to them. It helps to construct language lessons in appropriate way;
- students are sometimes given responsibility to act as a teacher at EFL lessons. This technique motivates them and strengthens collaborative nature of the lessons;
- peer-assessment is widely used. This component acts as an incentive for students to complete tasks properly, encourages and motivates them for further progress;
- the usage of online learning platform "Moodle" allows to interact in a number of ways, like 'message boards and group wiki pages to real time streaming video and collaborative assignments and presentations' (Kratz H. 2011).

An EFL classroom is absolutely different from other classrooms, because of the aims it strives for. The main aim is to get communicative competence that is in its turn can't be achieved without several components, in particular: proper guidance, facilitation, motivation and collaboration. Of course, teachers and students have different expectations. Teachers want their students to freely speak a foreign language, complete all tasks with enthusiasm, interact with peers and learn from them, think critically and creatively. For these purposes teachers employ different tasks for student-student interaction, in particular: discussions, brainstorming, simulations, role-plays, case studies, debates, skits. Our teaching experience shows that there has been a shift in students' expectations. More and more students take additional courses, are eager to collaborate with their teachers via electronic sources of communication, they look at their teachers as at facilitators or tutors rather than at superiors. On the other hand, some students "expect teacher to be able to keep order in class; teacher should explain and give assignments, teacher should be able to explain and clarify different problem" (Sulich, 2003 from Janowski). To identify what roles teachers should preferably have at EFL classes was a part of current research.

Penny Ur (1996) gives her viewpoint on the relationships and roles teachers might have with adult students. They are as follows (where the first is teacher's role and the second one appeals to students): 'authority - subjects to authority; assessor-assessed; transmitter- receivers; motivator - people to be motivated; activator - people to be activated; counselor - clients; seller of service - buyers of service, resource - users'( Ur P., 1996). Teachers have to be able to adapt their roles to the changing students’ needs and to the requirements of the curriculum and the syllabus of the subject. Sometimes 'it can seem as if the role of teachers has grown immensely; they are now expected to be tech-savvy, computer literate and at the cutting edge of education. On the other hand, it can seem as if technology makes the traditional role of the teacher largely obsolete. This, however, is not quite true; rather, teachers must keep their traditional devotion to students and hands-on interaction while teaching students how to navigate their 21st century world.' (Lee Flamand, 2013). Harmer, J. (2007) also states that 'it makes more sense to describe different teacher roles in more detail and say what they are useful for, rather than make value judgments about their effectiveness in terms of their ‘facilitator’ credentials' (Harmer, J. (2007).

To make the whole class collaborate effectively is a real challenge for teachers. The EFL classroom bring together different types of students, some of them are introverts being always shy, another ones, on the contrary, are too talkative and enthusiastic. So, we admit, that teachers along with the roles described above, have to be observers of their students (identifying the types of learners). This, in its turn, will help teachers to become researches to be able to find adequate techniques and teaching methods in teaching these particular kind of learners. Only if teachers are involved in the process of permanent research they could achieve complete teacher-student collaboration.
2. Method

The aim of the research was to find out to which extent the principles of collaborative learning are used at EFL classes at the Institute of Economics and Finance, Kazan Federal University and the attitude students have to collaborative practices.

The survey was organized at the beginning of the academic year 2013-2014 (3d week) to help teachers of English model and structure their lesson plans according to the needs and preferences of the students and so, increase the quality of language education. 69 students who completed the questionnaire were first-year students. There were diagnosed because they already had language learning experience both at high school and university and could compare them. They were surveyed anonymously.

The questionnaire comprised 13 questions with variants of answers to choose from and was originated by the researches. All questions of the questionnaire were arranged in a logical way. There were 2 types of questions: closed questions requiring the students to circle 'yes' or 'no' answer and open question which supposed students to choose the variant which appeals to them.

The researchers were eager to know some general background information like: how long students have been studying English (Q 1); what their language proficiency level is (Q 2); if students have additional practice of the language outside the classroom (Q3); what motivates students to study English (Q 5), etc.

Along with this, it was planned to find answers for the questions specifically suited to the aim of the research, like: the most effective way of acquiring a language (Q6); the importance of teacher-student, student-student collaboration during the lessons (Q 7); the forms of interaction they have during the classes (Q 8); how their teacher acts while students collaborate with each other (Q 9); the possible roles of teachers, that make studying process effective and productive (Q 10); (Q11) is designed to find out if teacher always gives clear explanations organizing students' interaction; (Q 12) is devoted to know how helpful the teacher is; (Q 13) concerns positive atmosphere and rapport in the classroom.

3. Results

The data analysis of written responses to the survey questions employed a basic qualitative enquiry technique. The answers were counted and written opposite the questions in percentage received.

Of the 69 students who completed the questionnaire, 2 (2,9%) had elementary level, 10 (14,5%) - pre-intermediate students, 35 were intermediate students (50,7%) and 22 (31,8%)- upper-intermediate students. This data allowed us to rely on them in investigating the issue because productive collaboration is possible in the classroom where students have that language level which allows them to interact with the peers freely not too often addressing to their teacher. Moreover, 66 students (95,6%) admitted that they practice English outside the classroom (Q 3). Some students specified their answers writing that they chat in social nets with their foreign friends, watch video, use Skype system for studies, study at online courses, read books. It gave us positive idea that students could interact with their peers outside the classroom and could bring some techniques of that interaction to an EFL classroom.

68 (98,5%) of students assumed the importance of teacher-student/student-student collaboration during EFL classes. 1 (1,4%) student thought that collaboration is important with a teacher only but not with the peers. This fact shows the reliability on the teacher as on the exact, authorized source of information. But the decision is quite wrong as interacting with each other students share their experience and as a rule understand and remember the studied issue better.

It was proved that there had been a great shift in students understanding the best forms of acquiring a foreign language. Students no longer interested in monotonous reading or completing grammar exercises, they understand the necessity of interactive procedures and fulfilment of creative tasks. 51 students (73,9 %) agreed that the best form to acquire a language is to use it in completing different creative tasks as skits, role play, simulations where teacher's role isn't dominant. 12 (17,3%) students responded that they acquire better when there is a mixture of traditional tasks (question-and-answer, reading aloud) with creativity oriented tasks.

Though, 6 (8,7%) students chose the variant when teacher explains the rules and the way the tasks are to be completed and students simply follow the model, copy it in the copy-book, etc. The answer was chosen by students
who have pre-intermediate and elementary level of English and they might still feel dependent on teacher's explanations and are orientated to strict auditing of targets.

The evidence of carrying out the collaborative learning is the usage of diverse forms of interaction during the EFL lessons. 46 (66,6%) students proved that teachers use all types and forms of interaction (group work (both large and small), pair work, entire class interaction) and act as active collaborators as well. It gives reason to perceive that teachers care of how students learn and what they will learn. Involvement in different types of interaction will bring adequate return in the long run. 14 (20,3 %) confessed that their teacher prefers to use some of the forms like pair work and entire class interaction. It shows that the teacher either ignores other forms of interaction or bases on her observations of the group of students found out the mentioned forms to be more effective with this types of learners. 9 students (13%) stated that interaction is organized by chance and from time to time. If classroom interaction is ignored it means that students might not get enough of communicative practice during the lesson.

In question 9 the majority of respondents (63(91,3%)) admitted that their teacher always occupies the role of the facilitator while students collaborate with their peers. Facilitator one 'who fosters learner autonomy (where students not only learn on their own, but also take responsibility for that learning) through the use of group work and pair work and by acting as more of a resource than a transmitter of knowledge' (Harmer, J., 2007). It appeals to the principles of student-centered approach, which means that teachers are to encourage students' to discover the topic by themselves using coordinating and monitoring methods. 2 (2,9%) opted for teacher as an assessor. 1(1,4%) confessed that the teacher acts as a prompter. All these roles have to be performed by teachers who use collaborative learning concept. The thing is that it's better if teachers use different roles adapting them to students' needs in concrete situations and with different kinds of work.

In question 10 the majority of students 25 (36,3%) opted for a tutor. Tutoring has a lot to do with guidance, assisting students to complete the task providing competent advice or recommendation. An inspiring person ranked the 2nd place (20 (29%). A participant takes the third place 12 (17,4%) as most frequently mentioned role of a teacher. Then comes advisor with 5 (7,3%). 2 (2,9%) have voted for a controller and an expert equally. Only 1 (1,4%) have responded in favor of a resource and an organizer. So, teachers have to turn a simple, routine task into an interesting project.

64 students (92,7%) - teacher always gives clear explanations; 5 students (7,3%) - "sometimes". 67 students (97,1%) students stated that their teacher is always helpful and 2 students (2,9%) opted for "sometimes" (Q 12).

Finally, the answers for the last question were as follows: 65 (94,2%) respondents proved to always have positive atmosphere in the classroom and 4 (5,6%) chose "sometimes".

4. Discussion and conclusion

This paper reveals the importance of teacher-student and student-student collaboration during EFL classes and its influence on high quality of language acquisition. The results of current research show that both teachers and students opt for collaboration inside and outside the classroom. Although, there are teachers who ignore different types of interaction in the classroom giving favor to one single form of interaction that, of course, effect language learning. Along with this, the research shows that the majority of teachers collaborate with their students acting as participants and facilitators creating positive and sound rapport in the classroom. It is believed that the results presented to our colleagues of the department of foreign languages for economics, business and finance would be of practical importance and would also help them to develop new conceptions of in-the-class and out-of-class interactions and build a desired synergy.

In this paper by collaborative learning we understand an educational approach involving joint intellectual effort by students or students and teachers together. It holds great promise for enhancing student learning and adding vitality to education (Smith &MacGregor, 1991). During the collaborative process, the successful achievements of one person amuse the intellectual passions and enthusiasm of others. Often, a fact expressed by one individual can become a common intellectual possession instead of fading away in isolation (Johnson, Johnson, & Smith, 1991) (in Mickie A. Puksa, 1999).

The current study was focused on effective collaboration between a teacher and students for the latter's to acquire better communicative skill. This is confirmed by the results obtained from the analysis of data gathered from
students’ questionnaire. Moreover, it was proved that collaborative learning aims not only at better language acquisition but at upbringing a competitive personality by means of foreign language. It creates proper conditions for natural language acquisition, which allows to set in motion creative capabilities of students, encourage their individual growth, increase the emotional tone of the educational process. Thus, an educational process is made up of informal verbal communication between a teacher and students, students with each other, and requires reframing of the very teacher personality, who starts taking the position of psychotherapist in an educational process.

References


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