

Enhancing students' language competencies through collaborative learning

Raziel Felix-Aguelo

Assumption College Thonburi

Abstract

Language competencies refer to the knowledge and abilities to use English in four inter-related skills: speaking, listening; reading, and writing. Collaborative learning is a type of instruction where learners are grouped together to work on an assignment, project, or task. To become competent in second language, one needs to actively use English in each of four modalities. Learning English is challenging to second language learners. Sometimes, some students feel demotivated and scared to use English during class discussions and recitations. This paper explores the students' attitude and perception towards collaborative learning in enhancing their language competencies. The primary method for this research is case study. Thirty grade 9 students within a single selected class were used as sample. The instruments used in data collection were questionnaire and semi-structured interviews. The finding shows that collaborative learning activities enhances the four skills of the students. The participants consider this approach motivational as they engage and interact with others. This indicates that students develop their language competencies as they rely to one another in doing meaningful language activities.

1. Introduction

There have been some noticeable changes in the way educators teach in classrooms. It is because of the new skills that are needed for the 21st century. The 21st century skills have been identified in the 20th century by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), and the European Commission. Care and Griffin (2014) cited that the Delors report in 1996 was the beginning of the UNESCO's 21st century competence learning discourse. The emphasis is on the four pillars of learning namely learning to know, learning to do, learning to be, and learning to live together.

Contrary to traditional teaching, teaching in the information age is a combination of knowledge, skills, attitude, values, and ethics. One of its aims is to help students master the content using collaborative learning. Berry (as cited in Rich, 2010) defines 21st Century Skills as a way of learning where students master content while producing, synthesizing, and evaluating information from a wide variety of subjects and sources with an understanding of and respect for diverse cultures. Students demonstrate the three Rs, but also the three Cs: creativity, communication, and collaboration.

At present, more and new jobs are created. Most of these jobs are too complex that can't be done by one person alone (Care and Griffin, 2014). Hence, researchers and educators have developed a new teaching methodology, which enhances the ability of learners to work in a group. It is called collaborative learning. It is believed that every learner has individual differences. Each person possesses different abilities, knowledge, skills, and experience. When these are shared and brainstorm with a group, a more meaningful and brighter idea will come out. James Surowiecki (as cited in "An Educator's Guide," n.d., p.19) states that, "under the right circumstances, groups are remarkably intelligent, and are often smarter than the smartest people in them." He underscores the importance of collaboration by remarking that "... a large group of diverse individuals will come up with better and more robust forecasts and make more intelligent decisions than even the most skilled 'decision maker.'"

Collaborative learning is allowing students to work together in a group but this is different with group activities such as cooperative learning. Long-Crowell (n.d.) explains that collaborative learning is like a jigsaw puzzle where each student is required to research one section of the material and then teach it to the other members of the group. Jigsaw activities are specifically structured so that the only access any member has to all of the information is through the work of other members. Whereas, cooperative learning or group work in the classroom is a process of putting people together with an expectation of pooled resources. In grouping, there is often an assumption that the resources are replicated amongst members, and that the analysis means that they first need to assign roles (Care, Griffin, 2015). In addition, Smith and Macgreggor (1992) enumerate other goals of education with the use of collaborative learning. These are involvement, cooperation and teamwork, and civic responsibility.

CL is an emerging instructional approach in teaching English to second language learners. The language competencies or four skills in English are equally important to help learners become competent with the language. However, some second language learners find reading, speaking, listening, and writing challenging skills to learn and use. In fact, speaking activities are sometimes perceived as ‘face-threatening and nerve-wrecking activities’ to some Thai students (Pattanpichet, 2011). Lombana (as cited in Luna & Ortiz, 2013) further states that writing is the most difficult to learn because it requires linguistic knowledge, cognitive, and socio-cultural aspect to convey its meaning. Williams describes reading comprehension as not an easy task and some learners do not benefit from reading for pleasure (as cited in Alqarni, 2015). Besides this, some learners are having problem with listening comprehension because teachers are too focused in teaching other skills (Hamouda, 2013).

Although there are many studies that describe collaborative approach as beneficial, the researcher would like to find out whether this approach is beneficial in enhancing the language competencies of the students.

2. Objectives

The purpose of this study is to investigate the attitude and perception towards learning English through collaborative learning of selected grade 9 students in Assumption College Thonburi.

The study addresses the following research questions/objectives:

1. What is the effect of using collaborative learning in the enhancement of students’ English language competencies?
2. What are the attitudes of the students towards collaborative learning?

3. Conceptual Framework

The input consists of selected students that were given meaningful activities through collaborative learning. In the process, students were given survey and questionnaire. In the output, students’ perception and attitude towards collaborative learning in enhancing their language competencies were analyzed.

4. Research Methodology

4.1 Population or Sample Design

The population of this study is made up of selected grade 9 students. This case study is conducted in Assumption College Thonburi. This small scale research used one complete class with thirty students. The findings of this case study can’t represent the perception and attitude towards collaborative learning in learning English of all grade 9 students in the school. However, the findings can be used for further studies that is relevant to English language teaching and collaborative learning.

4.2 Measurement and Data Collection

In order to collect data, the researcher planned meaningful activities that were related to the lessons/topic set by the school at the beginning of the school year. She also gave and explained the meaningful activities to students after each discussion on selected topics. The four language competencies were covered in all collaborative learning activities.

An example of collaborative reading activity that was used in this research was the Gallery Walk. The first part of this activity was group reading. The class was grouped into five members. There were nine stations in this activity. This was equivalent to nine passages. Each member of the group was given different sets of questions. Each group were instructed to spend 10-15 minutes to read one passage. They were instructed to move from one station to another every 10-15 minutes. Each group were assigned to read three passages. The second part of the activity was group discussion. Each member had to explain the answer on the questions assigned to them. Since they had different questions each member had to listen to their groupmates in order to fully understand the passages. Individual quiz was given afterwards.

The same pattern of procedure was given in one listening activity. They were grouped and each member was given different sets of questions. An allotted time was given for group discussion to give the students the opportunity to explain the answers to the questions assigned to each of them. A multiple-choice quiz was given afterwards.

A survey task was used in the writing and speaking activities. The class was grouped into five with six members each. There were three parts of the survey. First, all members of the group were instructed to answer all the questions in the survey. The leader of the group asked the questions. The members were asked to answer the questions in complete sentences. The groups were instructed to get the percentage of the responses. The second stage of this activity was pair activity. The three parts of the survey were given to three pairs of each group. They had to make a graph based on the survey. They were also asked to make an interpretation of the graph as their writing activity. For the speaking activity, each group presented and explained their graphs in front of the class.

Before the end of the semester, the researcher distributed survey and questionnaire to the students. The researcher used a questionnaire and a survey as measurement tools, which was conducted in September 2016. The researcher used a four-point Likert scale to find out the level of subject's attitude and perception towards learning English through cooperative learning ranging from strongly agree (4), agree (3), disagree (2), and strongly disagree (1). There were 12 questions in the survey. The second part was a paper-and-pencil type of questionnaire. The students were given four questions to answer. They were used to obtain data from students' perception toward collaborative learning in English class. Both tools were given to the subjects before their final exam.

5. Results

This section reports the findings from the survey and questionnaire given to students. Firstly, data from the students' survey were presented in the form of table below.

Table 1. Data from Student Survey

Items	1 Strongly Disagree	2 Disagree	3 Agree	4 Strongly Agree	Remark
1. This approach helps me learn English easily.	0%	3.3%	80%	16.7%	Agree
2. This approach makes learning English more interesting.	0%	3.3%	63.3%	33.3%	Agree
3. It enhances my communication skills.	0%	6.7%	63.3%	30%	Agree
4. This approach helps me gain more knowledge through working in a team.	0%	0%	66.7%	33.3%	Agree
5. I become more participative in my English class through this approach.	0%	3.3%	66.7%	26.6%	Agree
6. This approach makes me understand the working process.	0%	10%	60%	30%	Agree
7. This approach helps me become more confident in doing speaking activities by participating in sharing information, making decisions, and solving problems.	0%	16.7%	46.7%	36.7%	Agree
8. Collaborative learning can improve my writing skills through working in a team.	0%	10%	63.3%	26.7%	Agree
9. Collaborative learning helps me gain a deeper understanding of the text.	0%	10%	60%	30%	Agree
10. This approach helps me grasp more ideas from listening activities more clearly.	0%	13.3%	66.7%	20%	Agree
11. It's a waste of time explaining things to my groupmates.	16.7%	66.7%	16.7%	0%	Disagree
12. It's difficult to actively involve my group members in group activities.	13.3%	36.7%	36.7%	13.3%	Neutral

The table shows the students' views on collaborative learning. The survey is divided into 3 groups: general benefits in learning English language, specific benefits in 4 language competencies, and negative aspects of collaborative learning. Items 1-6 represent general benefits of learning English through collaborative learning. Items 7-10 represent specific benefits in four language competencies where no. 7 is about reading skills, no. 8 for writing skills, no. 9 for reading skills, and no. 10 for listening skills. In addition, items 11 and 12 represent the negative aspects of collaborative learning. Students' views were rated using Likert scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 4 (strongly agree). To interpret the students' views, responses are combined into two categories. 'Strongly disagree' and 'disagree' are categorized as 'disagree', whereas 'strongly agree' and 'agree' are under 'agree.' All the items are interpreted either 'agree' or 'disagree' based on the majority of the responses.

It is clear from the figure that, most of the items in the survey revealed 'agree' responses. Respondents agreed that CL is beneficial in enhancing their communicative skills. Just over 80% of them believed that CL helped them enhance their speaking skills. Ninety percent of the students viewed this approach as helpful in improving their writing skills. Moreover, 90% of the respondents recognized the importance of this approach in understanding the meaning of text. Nearly 90% of the students regarded this approach useful in listening and grasping the ideas clearly. Item 18 indicated a 'disagree' response where students agree that using CL in the classroom is not a waste of time. Surprisingly, item no. 12 got an equally divided agree and disagree responses from the respondents.

A. Data from Student Questionnaire

The data from the questionnaire show the perceptions, advantages, kinds of participation, and the problems the students get from collaborative learning.

Regarding the role of collaborative learning, it is interesting to see that students perceived collaborative learning in general as a very useful approach. For students, CL was an interactive approach in which members worked together to learn something. In fact, the students believed that they understood the lessons better when they work as a team. This is corroborated with what Hammond, Austin, Orcutt, and Rosso (2001) discuss about John Dewey's concept of education as a social process wherein learners interact best in a rich environment. When students were asked about their perception about this approach, it is evident that their views were positive. Data are shown below.

This approach is beneficial because we finish a task in a shorter period of time.

This approach is fun and interesting.

I pay more attention to our lesson. It doesn't make me sleepy.

It's better to work together. We discuss ideas together.

I learn more when I work with my friends.

If we enjoy the lesson, we understand it better.

I pay more attention to my teacher so as to complete the task.

This approach helps me to think more and work harder.

I learn teamwork in this approach.

I learn to listen to opinion of others.

I understand the lessons better.

Based on the concept of Zone of Proximal Development, Vygotsky emphasizes the role of culture and language in developing students' thinking (Hammond, et.al, 2001). The active facilitation of a teacher and participation of the students in group activities can help develop new idea and skills. This is evident on the students' responses wherein they see CL as beneficial in language learning. They revealed that they became more participative in their English class. More importantly, they gained more knowledge in English and their four skills were enhanced. Some of their comments were:

I learn new English words while working with my groupmates.

It develops my reading, writing, listening, and speaking skills.

It helps me to be more confident in using English language.

We learn more English activities when we work together.

This approach helps me learn English easily.

Active participation is the key component of CL approach. It is through working together that learning objectives are achieved. Aside from the specific task that each member was assigned to do in the CL activities in their English class, the students made extra participation in the group. The third question asked focus students to identify the kinds of participation they contributed in their groups. Some of their comments were:

I shared new vocabulary words to the group.

I shared ideas on how to do the task.

I prepared the PowerPoint presentation.

I wrote the final output.

I decorated our final output.

I'm usually the leader. I tried to help others.

However, several responses were identified as major problems in doing collaborative learning. Division of labor and managing time are some of the major problems. Other point that emerged is the individual differences of the students. They found it difficult to work with

other members because their ideas were not congruent with others. Looking into the ZPD concept, Vygotsky emphasizes the importance of “scaffolding” to help the students learn in a systematic way (Hammond, et.al., 2001) Therefore, teacher should know how to assist their students properly to avoid these problems. Some of their comments were:

It's hard to divide the work. Sometimes I work the most difficult part alone.

Some of my groupmates do not want me to help them.

Because of our differences, it's difficult for us to agree on something.

It's difficult to manage our time.

Some of my groupmates don't want to do their task unless we tell them to.

Sometimes our group work is affected when one of our members don't follow instructions.

6. Conclusion and Discussion

The study reveals the following:

1. The majority of the students in this survey believed that collaborative learning enhanced their language competencies. Nearly all of the students had positive perception towards CL approach. In fact, they perceived they became more participative in the classroom. They also believed they learned more in their English class by doing meaningful activities using the CL approach.
2. The participants recognized the usefulness of collaborative learning in their English class and they had a positive attitude towards learning English using this approach.

7. Suggestions

In light of the results and conclusion, the researcher would like to recommend the following:

1. ESL teachers can use collaborative learning in making meaningful, fun, and interactive activities in and outside classrooms.
2. One of the problems of doing this approach is time management. It is suggested that teachers should make a time frame and explain it to students before doing a task to guide them in each part of the activity. Providing an ample time for each activity helps students to enjoy it and to avoid rushing the task.
3. Division of labor among group members is also a big problem. In fact, some students do the most difficult part of activities alone. In order to avoid this, the teacher should know the students' abilities well to properly group them in different activities.
4. Future researchers can use this as a reference for future studies with a larger sample size.

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