

PROMOTING COLLABORATIVE LEARNING TO FACILITATE COMMUNICATION AMONG CONGOLESE EFL LEARNERS

Mula Tshilumba Nestor

Junior Lecturer, Department of English-African Culture

Institut Supérieur Pédagogique de la Gombe Kinshasa, The Democratic Republic of Congo

ABSTRACT

This research paper addresses critical reading as a reading process in English as a foreign language class. It concentrates on a process in which learners should be actively exposed to question, judge, evaluate, understand texts in order to improve their reading skills. This process may be defined as a paramount process to be developed during the reading classes to help learners improving their comprehension skills through approaching texts with a critical eye.

This study investigates on developing critical reading through questioning some Kinshasa's EFL teachers and suggesting them to develop critical reading in an EFL reading class Program in order to let learners face different reading materials at school.

The findings of this investigation show that EFL teachers do not help EFL learners developing critical reading or do not give learners the opportunity of judging, questioning, evaluating and understanding texts' information. The Results also indicate that teachers are not always introducing critical reading to EFL learners to improve their reading and comprehension skills.

Keywords: Collaborative learning, Communication, group work, Effective comprehension.

INTRODUCTION

The Problem

Due to the current status of English as a global language of science, technology, and international relations, many countries including ours, the Democratic Republic of Congo consider the teaching of English a major educational priority (Crystal, 1997 and McKay, 2000). However, in Kinshasa, English as a Foreign Language (EFL) is often taught under unfavourable conditions, and, as a result, Kinshasa secondary school learners are not always competent English speakers.

Therefore, teachers of English are suggested to use methodologies which give all learners the opportunity to express themselves. In this regard, I have selected collaborative learning as an important method in achieving critical thinking and making all the learners able to achieve higher levels of learning and retain more information when they work together rather than individually, this applies to both facilitators of knowledge, the instructors, and the receivers of knowledge who are the learners.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This research mainly aims at helping to get the perception of Congolese EFL Secondary School teachers of English toward the use of Collaborative Learning. In order to elicit

answers from the targeted teachers and learners, we chose to conduct the research on the line of qualitative method.

The questions read as follow:

What is collaborative learning?

What is the importance of collaborative learning in teaching learning process?

How often do you give your learners the opportunity to speak English?

What can the teacher do to facilitate communication among learners?

What should the teacher do and not do to improve the quality of all the class interaction?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Definition of Collaborative learning

Collaborative learning has been developed mainly within a Social Constructivists' School of thought. One of the featured concepts underlying collaborative learning is Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development (Vygotsky, 1978). Collaborative learning facilitates learner's engagement "with more capable others (teachers, advanced peers, etc.), who provide assistance and guidance" (Oxford, 1997:444).

Collaborative learning is an approach to teaching and learning that requires learners to work together to deliberate, discuss, and create meaning. Smith and McGregor (1992) define the term collaborative learning as an "umbrella term for a variety of educational approaches involving joint intellectual effort by learners, or learners and teachers together". Usually, learners are working in groups of two or more, mutually searching for understanding, solutions, or meanings, or creating opportunities for interaction between them.

According to Dillenbourg (1999:1), collaborative learning is broadly defined as "a situation in which two or more people learn or attempt to learn something together," and more specifically as joint problem solving. In the other side, Roschelle and Teasley (1996) define collaboration more specifically as "mutual engagement of participants in a coordinated effort to solve a problem together".

Dillenbourg (1999:2) stated that, the broadest definition of 'collaborative learning' is that it is a situation in which two or more people learn or attempt to learn something together. Each element of this definition can be interpreted in the following different ways:

"Two or more" may be interpreted as a pair, a small group (3 to 5 learners), a class (20-30 learners), a community (a few hundreds or thousands of people), a society (several thousands or millions of people) and all intermediate levels.

"Learn something" may be interpreted as "follow a course", "study course material", "perform learning activities such as problem solving", "learn from lifelong work practice",

3. "Together" may be interpreted as different forms of interaction: face-to-face or computer mediated, synchronous or not, frequent in time or not, whether it is a truly joint effort or whether the labour is divided in a systematic way.

These three elements of the definition define the space of what is encountered under the label 'collaborative learning': pairs learning through intensive synchronous joint problem solving during one or two hours, groups of learners working together during a one-year course, communities of professionals developing a specific culture across generations, etc. I explore

this space along three dimensions: the scale of the collaborative situation (group size and time span), what is referred to as 'learning' and what is referred to as 'collaboration'.

In order to throw light on the preceding quotations, I understood that collaborative learning is an instructional method in which learners work in small groups toward a common goal. During the learning process, teachers move around the classroom listening and, when necessary, asking questions to help the learners in their thinking. Collaborative learning has a rich history in higher education. Indeed, collaborative learning situations require instructions, a physical setting, and other kinds of performance constraints.

It is worth noting that, these elements do not guarantee collaboration; they only make it more likely. Roschelle (1992) to her side, frames collaboration as an exercise in convergence or construction of shared meanings and notes that research on conversational analysis has identified features of interactions that enable participants to reach convergence through the construction, monitoring, and repairing of shared knowledge. She goes even further to say that, the words 'collaborative learning' describe a situation in which particular forms of interaction among people are expected to occur, which would trigger learning mechanisms, but there is no guarantee that the expected interactions will actually occur. Hence, a general concern is to develop ways to increase the probability that some types of interaction occur.

Tanner et al. (2003) argued that collaborative learning is also one of the best studied pedagogical strategies in the history of education, considering cooperative learning as its very well-studied type in which group activities are more structured and learners are assessed individually in addition to or instead of collaboratively.

Finally, collaborative learning activities vary widely, but most centre on learners' exploration or application of the course material, not simply the teacher's presentation or explication of the course material. Collaborative learning has been practiced and studied since the early 1900s. The principles are based on the theories of John Dewey (2009) in their collective work focusing on how learners' learning has led educators to develop more learner-focused learning environments that put learners at the centre of instruction. Vygotsky specifically stated that learning is a social act and must not be done in isolation (Vygotsky, 1980).

History of Collaborative Learning

Collaborative learning is rooted in Lev Vygotsky (1980)'s concept of learning called Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). Typically, there are tasks learners can accomplish and tasks learners cannot accomplish. Between these two areas is the Zone of Proximal Development, which is a category of things that a learner can learn but with the help of guidance. This ZPD gives guidance as to what set of skills a learner has that are in the process of maturation. In his definition of ZPD, Vygotsky highlighted the importance of learning through communication and interactions with peers rather than through independent work, (Vygotsky, 1987). This has made a way for the ideas of group learning, one of which being collaborative learning.

However, many researches demonstrate that collaborative learning dates back to at least the 1970s and finds support in many theories of learning, including sociocultural theory (Vygotsky, 1978), social interdependence theory (Johnson & Johnson, 2006), humanist

psychology (Maslow, 1968), social constructivism (Palincsar, 1998) and Multiple Intelligences Theory (Gardner, 1993).

Moreover, Dewey's 20th c's explorations into the social nature of learning and his advocacy of teaching through discussion and through hands-on problem solving; Elwin's social interdependence concepts and Deutsch's ideas on cooperation and competition can be seen as early seeds of the collaborative learning process. Interdependence is then described by Alpert (quoted in Dewey, 2009) among members as the "studied group dynamics" and "social psychology" and the later wrote about the reasons behind the success and failure of groups. To his side, Piaget (1954) talked about intellectual development as something that was fostered by social interaction and said "If you disagree with me about something, it causes disequilibrium in my world view and forces me to think again about my ideas", thus expanding and enhancing my experience and comprehension of my world, (Dillenbourg et al., 1996).

As a matter of fact, Vygotsky (1980) supported the idea of learning as a social process. According to his sociocultural theory, we learn first from our interactions on the social level and then carry that learning to our individual selves; and kept on saying that loosely speaking, these thought processes can be bundled under the theory of constructivism, which serves as the foundation of the structure we call collaborative learning, <http://www.brighthub.com/education/K.12/articles/75679.aspx> [accessed April 14,, 2016].

At the core of constructivism is the idea that we learn from our own experiences; that learning is active; that we make meaning of the world around us from what we see, feel, hear, smell etc. and by asking questions, exploring new ideas and evaluating our existing knowledge. Every time we have a new experience, we try and fit it into what we already know. The new experience can either add to our knowledge of the world as we already know it or modify our perspective and give us a fresh belief (Vygotsky, 1980).

According to the above statement of constructivist, we are not passive absorbers of knowledge given to us by others but we are on the contrary, active contributors to the learning process, and this learning process is affected by the context of the experiences from which it began. Thus, learning is a social process, enhanced by our interpersonal relations and encounters. Accordingly, this teaching methodology owes its growing popularity to research in the 20th century that demonstrated the efficacy and longevity of learning when learners cooperate (or work together) with each other and with their instructor.

In fact, the origin of collaborative learning as a teaching methodology can be traced back to ancient civilizations and granted a new lease of life in the second half of the 20th century when research showed that learners learned faster and retained more when they became partners in the process of teaching and learning instead of remaining mere receivers of knowledge from their educators, (Vygotsky, 1986).

Varieties of Meanings for Collaboration

The term 'collaboration' is so far carefully avoided to be defined alone. However, I am now obliged to address this issue. The adjective 'collaborative' concerns four aspects of learning that are mentioned in the following lines:

A situation can be characterized as more or less collaborative for example; collaboration is more likely to occur between people with a similar status than between a boss and her employee or between a teacher and a pupil,

The interactions which do take place between the group members can be more or less collaborative (e.g. negotiation has a stronger collaborative flavour than giving instructions)

(3) Some learning mechanisms are more intrinsically collaborative (e.g. grounding has a stronger collaborative flavour than induction), even if, at a very fine level of analysis, learning mechanisms must be similar to those triggered in individual learning.

(4) The fourth element concerns the effects of collaborative learning, not because this element is used to define collaboration itself, but because the divergent views concerning how to measure the effects of collaborative learning participate in the terminological wilderness of this field.

Importance of Collaborative Learning

Collaborative learning not only allows learners to engage deeply with content but also helps learners build the interpersonal skills needed to be successful at schools and in careers. Johnson et al. (1993) stated that “collaborative learning provides learners the opportunity to develop social skills”. They further found that many of the outcomes expected as part of a collaborative learning activity corresponded with goals for learner content understanding and skill attainment.

Therefore, the strategies associated with collaborative learning such as role assignments, collaborative problem solving, task and group processing all build the social skills that learners need to be successful when working with others. Additionally, these skills are important in preparing learners for the world of work, where collaborative writing and problem-solving are key elements of many careers. There is a plethora of instructional and learning strategies that encourage learner’s collaboration, including peer teaching, peer learning, reciprocal learning, team learning, study circles, study groups, and so on, to name just a few (Johnson & Johnson, 1986). Collaborative inquiry, which combines many of the elements of learner collaboration just mentioned in the preceding lines, is a research-based strategy in which learners work together through various phases “of planning, reflection, and action as they explore an issue or question of importance to the group” (Goodnough, 2005:88). Indeed, collaborative inquiry brings together many perspectives to solve a problem, engaging learners in relevant learning around an authentic question. It allows learners to work together toward a common purpose to explore, make meaning, and understand the world around them (Lee et al., 2000).

However, the purpose of collaboration in an educational setting is to learn and unpack content together to develop a shared understanding. Harding (1993) points out that, “Collaborative learning approaches are based on the idea that learning must be a social act”. That is, it is through interaction that learning occurs. Hence, Johnson and Johnson (1986) similarly emphasize that “when learners and teachers talk and listen to each other; they gain a deeper understanding of the content and can develop the skills necessary to negotiate meaning throughout their lives”. Therefore, collaboration demands a shift from teacher-led instruction to instruction and learning that is designed by both teachers and learners.

Consequently, this collaboration between learner and teacher plays a critical role in helping learners reflect and engage in their own learning experiences. The constructivist learning movement is one current example of efforts to increase the amount of collaboration between learner and teacher occurring in the classroom. Moreover, Mayer (2004:14) defines constructivist learning as an “active process in which learners are active sense makers who seek to build coherent and organized knowledge”.

The above statement in the quotation demonstrates that, learners construct their learning, with the teacher serving as a guide or facilitator. The teacher does not function in a purely didactic or lecturing role. Neo and Neo (2009) found that constructivism helps learners develop problem-solving skills, critical thinking, and creative skills and apply them in meaningful ways.

Absolutely, the principle of this technique in language teaching is the foundation of collaborative learning. The research conducted by Vygotsky (1980) and Jerome Bruner (1985) indicates that collaborative learning environments are one of the necessities for learning. Slavin (1989) supports that students and teachers learn more, are more engaged, and feel like they get more out of their classes when working in a collaborative environment. Totten et al. (1991) found that those involved in collaborative learning understand content at deeper levels and have higher rates of achievement and retention than learners who work alone. In this view collaborative learning gives learners opportunities to internalize their learning.

Three key ideas in sociocultural theory are the importance of language in cognitive development, the role of scaffolding assistance provided by others, such as teachers and peers, and the ZPD, the idea that learners learn best when learning tasks are neither too easy nor too difficult. Collaborative learning helps with all the three of these ideas: when peers discuss, elaborate, debate and explain to each other, they are using language to scaffold for each other, and this scaffolding can bring into learners' ZPDs tasks that might otherwise have been too difficult, as well as providing a challenge to high achieving learners for whom the tasks might otherwise have been too easy, in that, the scaffolding can take place in a person.

According to Gokhale (1995) “Collaborative learning is very important in achieving critical thinking”. He goes on arguing that individuals are able to achieve higher levels of learning and retain more information when they work in a group rather than individually, this applies to both the facilitators of knowledge, the instructors, and the receivers of knowledge, the learners.

Effects of Collaborative Earning

While making research on this topic, I have found that, most research on collaborative learning has attempted to measure its effects, generally through some individual pre-test or post-test gained with respect to task performance. Some more specific effects have been described in terms of conceptual change (Roschelle, 1992) or increased self-regulation, (Blaye, 1988). The choice of these dependent variables leads to two methodological issues.

The first issue could be stated in the following way: 'effects of what?' As it appears from the previous lines, a collaborative learning situation includes a variety of contexts and interactions. Talking about the effect of such a broadly defined term would be as meaningless

as talking about the benefit of taking a medicine for example, without specifying which one. One should not talk about the effects of collaborative learning in general, but more specifically about the effects of particular categories of interactions (Dillenbourg et al, 1995). As a matter of fact, this implies controlling a priori which types of interactions will occur, as in some experiments on explanation presented previously, or analyzing some posteriori which interactions did actually take place during collaboration, as in the study of dialogue which can be criticized for being too qualitative, leading to few conclusions, while the former can be attacked for their poor ecological validity. Both studies reflect however an important trend, that is, researchers no longer (or should not) treat collaboration as a 'black box', but zoom in the collaborative interactions in order to gain better understanding of the underlying mechanisms. In this context, collaborative learning environments are very interesting tools since they enable both a detailed clarification of all interactions and careful design of the empirical situation.

The second methodological issue concerns the mode of evaluation. The effects of collaborative learning are often assessed by individual task performance measures. It has been objected that a more valid assessment would be to measure group performance. Moreover, this 'validity' can be understood in practical terms. That is, more and more professionals in the field have to collaborate and it is an important goal for any educational institution to improve the learners' performance in collaborative situations (Perkins, 1993).

Perkins (1993) goes further saying that, the validity issue has also a theoretical side: from the distributed cognition viewpoint, assessing group work through individual performance would be as meaningless as assessing a painter without his brush. Therefore, within the group evaluation approach, one may verify whether the performance of a specific group has increased or assess if group members developed some generic ability to collaborate that they could re-use in other groups. Moreover, the existence of this hypothetical ability to collaborate, although intuitively shared by many teachers and learners, remains however to be established, at least in cognitive science and in educational setting.

RESEARCH DESIGN

Research design is a technical plan which helps researchers to achieve her/his goal. It is worth noting that this work aims at knowing some reasons why some Kinshasa 5th and 6th forms EFL learners are not competent English speakers. For English language teaching aims to facilitate communication between teacher and his learners. That is English is to be taught in order to be spoken by learners inside as well as outside of the classroom. Therefore, this research paper investigates on how collaborative learning is handled by teachers and learners during the teaching and learning process for the improvement of the communicative competence in a foreign language classroom.

In fact, this research paper puts a particular attention on the social interdependence, individual accountability, personal responsibility, and group self-evaluating. Indeed, cognitivists such as Vygostky (1980) and Johnson and Johnson (1986) are of the opinion that working together with peers improves their Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) in which there are different types of relations that are developed and that lead them to autonomous learning. So far as this work is concerned, no test has been administrated to the research

subjects; this is the case of qualitative research which is defined by Ngongo (1999:147) as a centred multi-method implying a natural and interpretative approach in the study of its object. That is to say, the qualitative researcher studies things in its natural environment, and strive to give them sense or interpret the phenomena in terms of significance that people bring there.

RESEARCH METHOD

This section deals with the research methodology adopted in order to conduct the research. Only qualitative research is used for investigating on this research. We tested interviewed sixteen secondary school teachers of English from different schools in Kinshasa, DR Congo. There were four interview questions which guided me to bring out the teachers' perception toward the use of Collaborative Learning. The use of the qualitative method helped me to get a clearer insight into the issue.

PARTICIPANTS

In this research, all the English teachers in some schools of Kinshasa make up the population. But since it is impossible to include them all in the research, I had to resort to a sample.

In fact, the researcher must decide the way of selecting a sample or what is popularly known as the sample design. Therefore, a sample design is a definite plan determined before any data are actually collected for obtaining a sample from the given population. Thus, Chastain (1984:13) asserts that in order to collect the requisite data for any research problem; the research has to sample the population concerned.

The EFL teachers' ideas on the perception of the use of Collaborative Learning in their schools. To get the teachers' perception, we interviewed forty-three (43) secondary school teachers. Among the interviewees, thirty-two (32) were male and eleven (11) were female. All of them hold a BA degree in English. They had more than 5 years of teaching experience. The range of their age was 25-50 years. They came from different social backgrounds and have been teaching English in different schools. The reason behind choosing these teachers was to get various views of their different backgrounds in teaching contexts. Their perception toward the use Collaborative Learning would be the great contribution to the improvement of the teaching of English as Foreign language.

INSTRUMENTS

The following questions helped me to understand the perception of teachers of English in Kinshasa toward the use of Collaborative Learning. They were open-ended questions and read as follows:

What is collaborative learning?

What is the importance of collaborative learning in teaching learning process?

How often do you give your learners the opportunity to speak English?

What can the teacher do to facilitate communication among learners?

What should the teacher do and not do to improve the quality of all the class interaction?

PROCEDURE

As the research was to be conducted with teachers of English, I collected the data from sixteen (16) of them from different secondary schools in Kinshasa. I exchanged and discussed a great deal with these teachers about the investigation, especially as regards rationale, research problem and goal of the study. I spent three weeks for data collection from the teachers involved in this research.

DATA PROCESSING

After collecting the data, every interview was transcribed verbatim, analyzed and interpreted. I had to listen again and again to the interviewee in order to have a perfect grasp of all the ideas and transcribe them word for word. The overall opinion was taken into account in the analysis of the qualitative result. After coding and reading, several themes emerged from the interview. However, since I had to deal with different views, it took quite some time to analyze the data and draw a conclusion.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

This part presents the results of the research. As there are sixteen teachers on whom the research study has been conducted, I will discuss their perceptions as collected from the above questions. After taking the investigations I have gathered a lot of ideas about their perception that will be discussed one by one. As five questions helped my investigation to bring out the teachers' perception towards the use of Collaborative Learning, I will discuss the results based on their answers in order to come out with the conclusion.

FINDINGS

On the definition of Collaborative learning

The analysis of the above question shows that out of forty-three (43) teachers, twenty-three (23) about 53% define CL as the fact of working together in order to achieve the same; eight (8) or 19% said that it is a learning that consists with interaction, and seven (7) teachers about 16% said that it is an individual learning, while five (5) teachers about 12% said it is a learning in team.

On the importance of Collaborative teaching

The analysis of this question shows that, 14 teachers out of forty-three about 32% said that CL strengthens learners to work together; twelve (12) teachers about 28% said that CL facilitates interactive learning; nine (9) teachers out of forty-three about 21% said that CL increases learners' learning competence, and eight (8) teachers about 19% said that CL helps learners build interpersonal skills needed to be successful at school as well as in career.

On the frequency of giving opportunity to learners to speak

Out of this question, twenty-two (22) teachers out of forty-three (43) about 51% said that they always give their learners the opportunity to speak English in their language classes; nine (9) teachers about 21% said that they often do; eight (8) teachers about 19% said that they usually do so; and four (4) teachers said that they never give the opportunity to speak in the classroom.

On what teacher can do to facilitate communication among learners

On this question, the analysis shows that fourteen (14) learners or 28% of the learners said that to facilitate communication among all the learners, teacher can create an environment which is purely communicative; thirteen (13) about 26% said that the teacher can just explain the materials clearly, that is, if the learners have understood the materials; twelve (12) learners or 24% of the population concerned said that teacher can create a communicative environment or explain materials clearly but if he does not give the opportunity to practice the language he is not facilitating communication; and the remaining eleven (11) learners said that teacher can use also authentic materials.

On what should teacher should or not do to improve the quality of the class interaction

The analysis of this question shows teachers' answers in the way that: twenty-one learners (21) out of forty-three (43) or 48% of the population investigated (learners) said the teacher should encourage learners to use the language from time to time; fourteen (14) learners or 28% said that the teacher should first love his profession in any circumstance and do what he is supposed to do; ten (10) learners about 20% said that the teacher should teach materials based on the learners' needs; and five (5) learners only about 10% said the teacher should teach for the communicative purpose because language is taught to be used in communication.

CONCLUSION

This research paper has tried to advice EFL teachers on the use of collaborative learning which is an educational approach to teaching and learning involving groups of learners working together to solve a problem, complete a task, or create a product. In the CL, learners are challenged both socially and emotionally as they listen to different perspectives, and are required to articulate and defend their ideas. In so doing, the learners begin to create their own unique conceptual frameworks and not rely solely on an expert's or a text's framework. This, simply because, learners have the opportunity to converse with peers, present and defend ideas, exchange diverse beliefs, question other conceptual frameworks, and are actively engaged (Srinivas, 2011). CL classrooms are natural places to learn using self-assessment because decisions about materials and group performance are shared, learners feel free to express doubts, feelings of success, remaining questions, and uncertainties than when they are evaluated only by a teacher; and learners learn to evaluate their own learning from their experiences with group evaluation.

The investigation of this research paper shows that, in one hand among the selected teachers, forty-three (43) out of sixty (60) responded to the questionnaire and among them, only almost fourteen (14) teachers out of forty-three or 33% of the population involved in this research have notions in collaborative learning approach, and twenty-nine (29) teachers about 67% are not aware of the concept understudy. Concerning the application of the concept 'collaborative learning', twenty (20) teachers out of forty-three (43) or 47% of the population involved are aware of the use of collaborative learning in EFL classes. In the other hand, among the fifty (50) selected learners only fifteen (15) learners out of fifty (50) or 30% have the opportunity to use English in the classroom and can communicate in it; and thirty-five

(35) learners about 70% do not have the opportunity to practice English and are not able to communicate in English.

All in all, the work has been concentrated on the use of collaborative learning approach in EFL classes which helps learners to construct their knowledge, and to be responsible of their learning. It is helpful by the way that it provides an active participation for all the learners at the same time; for CL is considered as a means to maximize learners' language practice opportunities, as learners work together to fulfil a common goal by using the basic language skills.

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