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Collaboration and Supporting Interaction for FL Learners

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Abstract: ***Most methods of teaching depend on individual work. The current study aims at investigating improving speaking skills through collaborative learning. The study is to familiarize EFL teachers with collaborative learning techniques and ask them to encourage learners to practice these techniques. The study is to test six hypotheses and answer four questions.The study followed the analytical descriptive method. Data was collected and organized as a theoretical part. A questionnaire is used as a practical part. Analysis arrived at the results that: EL teachers are not familiar with collaborative learning techniques, those teachers are affected by traditional methods used to teach them, students do not take group work seriously and these techniques lead to a noticeable progress in speaking skills. Consequently, the study recommends that: Collaborative learning should be part of teacher training program, teachers should train students to practice collaborative work and course designers should devote enough time for collaborative learning.***

Keywords: collaboration; collaborative learning; speaking; EFL

1. Introduction

In their way to convey their message, FL teachers attempted many ways resulting in a variety of techniques. Freeman (2000) classified three categories: traditional, modern and progressive. One of those modern techniques is applying collaborative learning strategies in FL teaching. The idea of collaboration in LL is essentially concerned with the organization of institutionalized learning. To its advocates, learners participation is a pre-condition for effective learning. This is proved by the observation that when learners succeed in developing the ability to contribute in discussions, they don't only become better language learners but they also develop as more responsible and critical members of the community.

The major role of the teacher in collaborative learning is to develop a sense of contribution in his students so as to take an active role in their learning. But McGrath (2000) argues that developing this sense requires a well-trained teacher. So, the initial step is to pave the way for education and the pre-service and in-service preparation programs; through which teachers acquire the necessary and required experience to apply these techniques.

This study is carried out to show how collaborative learning as a classroom technique enables EFL learners to improve Speaking skills. The study also aims at solving problems that confront learners and teachers when dealing with group activities in the classroom.

2. Statement of the Problem

It has been observed that group and pair work is ignored by many EFL teachers. The study is an attempt to draw EL teachers' attention, to use "collaborative learning" at different educational levels as a current concept and considered effective by its advocates.

3. Hypotheses

The purpose of this study is to test the following hypotheses:

1) Most of the English language teachers have no idea about effective collaborative learning.
2) Collaborative learning techniques are not regularly used in EFL classes.
3) Ther is no enough material for practicing group and pair work.
4) Most students do not enjoy working in groups and pairs .
5) Collaborative learning techniques lead to better performance in EFL classes.
6) Collaborative learning facilitates EFL learners' 0ral interaction .

4. Limitation of the Study

The study is limited to university lecturers, students and EL teachers at different levels in Gezira Province -Sudan. The scope of the research is limited to familiarize EL teachers with collaborative learning techniques, encourage them to avoid traditionalism and develop group activities and techniques in ELT.

5. Literature Review

Before discussing the issue, data about related topics should be reviewed. Here Speaking and collaboration should be defined and analyzed.

Speaking

Generally, speaking is the productive skill that refers to production of speech sounds. Florecz (1999:1) states "*speaking is the interactive process of constructing meanings that involve producing, receiving and processing information".*

Of all the four skill, language is what native speakers say and not what they ought to say. Knowing language connects with speaking.Vr (1996:120) states

"*speaking seems initially the most important: People who Know a language are referred to as speakers of that language*
as ifspeaking included all other kinds of knowing and may if not most foreign language learners are primarily interested in
learning to speak"

Speaking situations:

According to Carol,J (1995:15);" *there are three kinds of speaking situations in which we find ourselves: interactive, partially interactive and non-interactive".*

He explains the idea saying that : Interactive speaking situations include face- to face conversations and telephone calls, in which we are alternately listening and speaking, and in which we will have a chance to ask for clarification, repetition or slower speech from our conversation partner. Some speaking situations are partially interactive, such as when giving a speech to a live audience, where the conversation is that the audience does not interrupt the speech. The speaker nevertheless can see the audience and judge from the expression on their faces and body language whether or not he or she is being understood. Some few speaking situations may be totally non-interactive , such as when recording a speech for a radio broadcast.

Micro Skills:

Like the others, speaking is more complicated skill than it seems at first and involves more than just pronouncing words. As micro-skills for speaking, Carol,J recommends the speaker to:

1) Pronounce the distinctive sounds of a language clearly enough so that people can distinguish them. This includes making tonal distinctions.
2) Use stress and rhythmic patterns, and intonation patterns of a language clearly enough so that people can understand what is said.
3) Use the correct form of words. This may mean, for example, changes in tense, case or gender.
4) Put words together in correct word order.
5) Use vocabulary appropriately.
6) Use register or language variety that is appropriate to the situation and the relationship to the conversation partner.
7) Make the discourse hang together so that people can follow.

Speaking Activities:

Certain requirements are to be there when looking for better learning by using activities. To apply this for speaking, some suggestions are given. These include the following:

1) Learners talk a lot
2) Participation is even.
3) Motivation is high.
4) Language is of an acceptable level. Ur (1996:120)

Problems with Speaking Activities:

Joining learners in speaking activities involves many problems. These include:

1) Inhibition: learners worry about making mistakes in class, feel afraid of criticizing and appear shy.
2) Nothing to say: learners have no motive to express themselves and even to participate in speech as they are not interested and have nothing to say.
3) Participation;only one participant can talk at a timeif he is to be heard; and in a large group this seems that each one will have only little talking time or not at all.
4) Mother-tongue use: In classes where all, or a number of, the learners share the same mother-tongue, they may tend to use it; because it is easier . (Ur (1996:121).

Solving the Problems:

To solve the above mentioned problems, Ur (1996:121) suggested the following:

1) Use group work. "*this increase the sheer amount of learner talk going on in a limited period of time and also lowers the inhibition of learners".*
2) Base the activity on easy language:
   The level of language needed for a discussion should be lower than that used in intensive language learning activities.
3) Make a careful choice of a topic; "*on the whole, the clearer the purpose of the discussion, the more motivated participant"*
4) Give some instructions or training in discussion skills.
5) Keep students speaking the target language.

Collaboration:

The Business Dictionary.Com shows the following three definitions for 'collaboration'

1) General: Cooperative arrangement in which two or more parties work jointly towards a common goal.
2) Knowledge management (KM): effective method of transferring 'know how' among individuals, therefore critical to creating and sustaining a competitive advantage.
3) Negotiations: conflict resolution strategy that uses both assertiveness and cooperation to seek solutions advantageous to all parties.

According to (Online Dictionary- 11th edition) collaboration is working with each other to do a task and to achieve shared goals.

Collaborative learning:

Itrefers to the act of giving students an opportunity to work with others, so they do some work in groups or pairs.
According to (Johnson and Smith 1991:12)

"various names have been given to this form of teaching and there is some distinction among these: collaborative learning, cooperative learning, collective learning, team learning, learning communities, reciprocal learning

Benefits of Using Collaborative Learning:

Some benefits are expected when applying collaborative learning. Johnson (1989) and Pantiz (1999)show the benefits of collaborative learning in four categories :

1) Social benefits as follows:
   - Collaborative learning helps develop social support system for learners.
   - It leads to build diversity understanding among students and staff.
   - It establishes a positive atmosphere for modeling and practicing cooperation.

- It develops learning communities.

2) Psychological benefits as follows:
   - Student-centered instruction increases student self esteem.
   - Cooperation reduces anxiety.
   - Collaborative learning develops positive attitudes towards teachers.
3) Academic benefits as follows:
   - It promotes critical thinking skills.
   - It involves students actively in the learning process.
   - It models appropriate problem solving techniques.
   - It is helpful in motivating students in specific curriculum.
   - Classroom results are improved.
4) Alternative assessment techniques

Methodology of the study

This study employs both the descriptive and experimental approaches. It introduces the population and study sample showing some of their characteristics and education .It also shows the instruments used for collecting the required data for this study. This is followed by testing validity and reliability of these instruments and data analysis techniques.

The procedure of data collection is the usual procedure followed in questionnaires and checklists. The validity of this instrument is approved by 6 TEFL experts, and reliability is estimated by Pearson Correlation Formula. The questionnaire was administered to (460) EL teachers at different education levels. But only (300) respondents are picked out and used for data analysis (excluding alternatives, 1-2 years of experience and incomplete copies).

Population of the Study

The population of this study is EL teachers and learners at different levels of education in Sudan. The researcher chose Gezira Province as it is available to communicate with the subjects during observing student-teachers at teaching practice term. The study covers schools and colleges.

4.2 Sample

(300) EL teachers participate in this study. (160) respondents are graduates of education colleges (53.3%), (61) are graduates of education and arts colleges (23.3%) whereas (79) are graduates of arts. (23.4 %).(241) are male (83.3%), whereas 59 are female (16.7%). The age of the respondents ranges between (27-63) with an average age of 45 years. Their experience ranges between (3-36) with an average experience of 19.5 years.

For the purposes of this study, the participants fall within two groups: EL teachers and EL learners .The first group (teachers) is divided into two groups based on the level they teach .They include school teachers (230) and university lecturers (70).

The second group includes 2000 EL learners at different levels .1400 study at schools and 600 are university student's.From the intermediate schools, the researcher chose 450 students to participate in the current study, from the secondary schools they are 950. University students study either Arts (200) or Education (400)

Instruments:

To collect data for the current study,a questionnaire was used.

The questionnaire:

A questionnaire is a famous data collection tool with great advantages, so a restricted closed-form questionnaire of checking an item from a list of suggested responses is designed. Best and Kahn (1986:167) argued that:

The closed questionnaire is entirely satisfactory. It is easy to fill out, takes little time, keeps the respondent on the subject, is relatively objective and is fairly easy to tabulate and analyze.

It is of four sections . The first section concerned the personal information of the respondents, e.g. age; experience; sex and whether the respondent has an idea about collaborative learning. The second section investigated teacher's education at school and tertiary levels and the methods used to teach him/her English .The third section traced EL teacher's role during the lesson to explore his/her recent performance; method s/he uses in teaching English language .The Last section dealt with EL teachers evaluation and expectations of applying collaborative learning techniques to see if the process of group and pair work can lead to positive results in EFL classes .

Validity of the questionnaire:

To achieve content validity for the instruments used in the current study; the preliminary version was submitted to six experts in TEFL field for evaluation. They helped in the choice and refinement of the questions. They offered fruitful insights and comments. Their points were taken into consideration; some items were modified or omitted and others were added. So, the final version appears as shown below in "Appendix 1"

Reliability

Thorndike and Hagen (1977), cited in Bandai (2007), stated that reliability refers to the degree to which test scores are free from measurement error. Best and Kahn (1986:154) declare that reliability or stability of a test is usually expressed as a correlation coefficient. This relates to:

1) Stability over time (test-retest) that the scores on a test will be highly correlated with scores on a second administration of the test to the same subjects at a later date.
2) Stability over item samples that the scores on a test will be highly correlated with scores on an alternative form of the test.

The questionnaire was administered to a group of 28 EL teachers to respond to it.The score for each subject (X) and the mean score ($\bar{x}$) is (88.0), then the standard deviation is calculated ($So+$) using the standard score formula (Kiess: 2002:381).

$$Sx=\sqrt{\frac{\sum(X-\bar{x})^2}{N}}=\frac{\sum(X-88.0)^2}{28}=\frac{194}{28}=2.63$$

After a month, the questionnaire was reorganized in an alternative form: the arrangement of the multiple choices in sections A; B; and C are changed, and the five point-scale table in section C. ranges from not at all (5) to every lesson (1); and in section D it ranges from strongly disagree (5) to strongly agree (1). Then it is administered to the same group (*N*). The score for each subject (*Y*) and the mean score ($\bar{y}$) was (86.0), then the standard deviation is calculated (*Sx*) using the standard score formula (Kiess: 2002:381):

$$Sy = \sqrt{\frac{\sum (Y-\bar{y})^2}{N}} = \frac{\sum (Y-86.0)^2}{28} = \frac{255}{28} = 3.02$$

The standard deviation of the first responses on the questionnaire (S_X) is correlated with the standard deviation of responses on the second administration (S_Y). The correlation coefficient ($\acute{r}$) is calculated using Pearson Correlation Formula (Kiess: 2002:381), by converting (*X*) scores and (*Y*) scores into standard scores ($\check{z}X$), ($\check{z}Y$) (Table 3.8):

$$\check{Z}X = \frac{X-\bar{x}}{S_X} = \frac{X-88}{2.63} = 6.01$$

$$\check{Z}Y = \frac{Y-\bar{y}}{S_Y} = \frac{Y-86}{3.02} = 4.08$$

$$\acute{r} = \frac{\sum (\check{z}X \times \check{z}Y)}{N} = +\frac{24.52}{28} = 0.875 = 0.88$$

The correlation coefficient is (0.88). Kiess (2002:369) and Abu Hattab&Sadiq ((2005:252) proved that as long as the score approximates to (+1), it indicates that the correlation between the two variables is strong. Results indicate that the questionnaire is valid and reliable.

Data Analysis Techniques
Normally, in a questionnaire, responses are classified into categories according to the nature ofitem and the hypotheses discussed by the research. In the current study the responses are classified and coded into numerical data. The data are tabulated analyzed. The same is done for the items of the checklist.

6. Results

Analysis of the questionnaire questions show the results of the study.The following section provides analysis of the responses to the questionnaire questions.

Analysis of the questionnaire

Question One :(Have you any idea about collaborative learning techniques?
The result shows that (64.9%) have no idea about the term. On the other hand (79.2%) of the university lecturers (57 out of 70) have some idea about the term. This result proves that school teachers lack exposure to the innovative in the field of FLT. **Question Two**: (Have you attended seminars or workshops on "collaborative learning?)

The result proves that the majority of the target group (87.7%) hasn't attended a seminar/workshop on collaborative learning techniques.

Question Three: What were the methods used to teach you English?
This question investigates EL teacher's education at schools and tertiary levels. It explores the methods used to teach the subjects EL. According to the classification of Nunan and Lamb (2000) and by referring to Freeman (2000) the methods used to teach the respondents EL at colleges are classified into three categories: the traditional, the modern and the progressive, to investigate traditionalism during their study at colleges.

The results show that the traditional methods had been dominant when respondents were taught EL at schools and collegesthat (69.6%) of the respondents were taught EL in traditional methods.

Question Four (How do you practice activities during the lesson?)
According to Freeman (2000) the techniques of practicing activities are classified into two categories: traditional techniques and modern progressive techniques. The results prove that most of the respondents (73.8%) were practicing activities traditionally; individually and as a class during their study at school and tertiary level.

Question Five (Which method do you use to teach EL?)
According to the classification of Brown (2000: 67); the methods are classified into three categories: the traditional, the modern and the progressive methods. The results show that EL teachers are affected by the methods that were used to teach them EL during their study at schools and tertiary levels . Most of the respondents (62.9%) use the old traditional methods in ELT.

Question Six (Which techniques do you use with students for language practice?)
By referring to Freeman (2000) the techniques are classified into two categories: traditional techniques; modern and progressive techniques.

The result proves that most of the respondents (64.7%) use the traditional techniques to practice various pieces of the EL.

Question Seven: (How often do you use collaborative learning techniques?)
Nearly all participants respond to this question (294). The missed number is (6) school teachers. Szabo: 2000:21). The question is accompanied by five alternatives according to Lickert five - points scale, scored from (5: every lesson); (4: weekly); (3: every 2 week); (2: every month) to (1: not at all).

The result shows that collaborative learning techniques are used every lesson by only (10.8%) of the respondents, whereas (30.8%) show that they rarely use the progressive techniques. It is apparent that the respondents are in favor of the traditional techniques.

Section Two
Here the focus is on testing the results of applying collaborative learning .So responses for (7)questions are analyzed**.**

Question One:
(Has collaborative learning a positive influence on students' standards?)
Of 300 subjects, 264 say "Yes" . This represents 89% of the total. The remaining 36 say "to some extent". This is 11%. No one rejects the idea. So this is a good evidence that the techniques are helpful.

Question Two:
(Do group discussions and assignments help students be communicative?)
The responses to this question show the following results: 264(88%) answer 'yes', 36 (12%) say 'to some extent' and no one says 'no'.

Question Three:
(Does working in groups facilitate producing fluent and accurate utterances?)
When the targeted subjects received the copy, their responses were as follows: 195 (65%) say 'yes', 93(31%) say 'to some extent' and 12 (4%) say 'no'. work. In addition to that, time tables do not provide enough time for group work.

7. Discussion of the Results

EL teachers Knowledge of collaborative learning techniques:
The results provethat scarcely any of the target group (12.3%) has got the opportunity of attending a seminar on collaborative learning techniques. Research on teacher training confirms that periodical seminars; symposium and conferences on ELT can treat deficiencies in teacher education. They are considered as complementary to what the teacher study at colleges. Moreover they contribute in qualifying teachers who are graduates of other specializations.

EL teachers Education
The results show that only (22.9%) of the target group were taught EL in modern methods and hardly any of them (7.4%) were taught it in progressive methods. The results show that only (26.2%) practice the activities in pairs and groups.

6.3 Subjects Recent Practice of EL

The results show that (32.1%) use the modern methods in their ELT practice and only (5.0%) use the progressive methods. It is proved that (23.5%) adopt the modern EL teacher role and make (20.5%) of their students take the modern role. Hardly any of the respondents (7.6%) act the EL teacher progressive role and make (3.0%) of their students act The results prove that only (24.5%) use the modern techniques toevaluate students' performance and few (13.6%) use the progressive techniques. This result can be interpreted by referring to Solano-Flores and Trumbull (2003) study. They argued that practices in the evaluating of EL learners are often driven by policies rather than by theory.

Effectiveness of Collaborative Learning:
It seems that all EL learners agree on the effectiveness of collaborative learning techniques. The results show that 89% of EL learners consider these techniques as useful in EFL classes. Most teachers say that the positive influence of these techniques are clear in students' works. This proves that these techniques are helpful in EFL classes. The results show that most EL teachers think that group work helps enrich thinking in English. Moreover, EL learners tend to master all writing process while joining their groups and working on various problems. Collaborative learning strategies are also effective in the field of oral interaction. The results prove that none of the subjects reject the idea that collaborative learning techniques help students be communicative and most EL teachers think that collaborative learning strategies help EL learners be fluent and produce accurate utterances. This is due to continuous discussions, exchanging experiences and attempting to correct errors within groups.

8. Findings

The responses obtained from the questionnaire and the check list have shown the following findings:
1) EL teachers are not familiar with collaborative learning techniques during their study or training.
2) Those teachers are affected by the experience of ELT at their schools and tertiary education. They practice the teacher traditional role.So incorporating "collaborative learning strategies" into the methodology courses should be considered.
3) EL teacher education and lack of opportunities to interact; locally or internationally in order to exchange current conceptions in the field of FLT make EL teachers apply the traditional methods; techniques and activities in their practice, consequently they may not be able to enrich students' knowledge with the EL skills and elements.
4) Collaborative learning techniques lead to noticeable progress in oral and verbal interaction in EFL classes.
5) Students don't take working in groups seriously.
6) Most students don't enjoy working in groups and lack motivation to do so.
7) Coursebooks don't provide enough material for group work and EL teachers don't take the issue as a key to FL teachers.

9. Recommendations

The study introduces some recommendations. It is hoped that they are applicable in the field of ELT. These are:
1) The concepts of collaboration should be in the centre of both pre-service and in-service FL teacher education programs.
2) FL teacher education programs should be restructured by extending student teaching; integrating field experience components into their coursework and developing collaborative relationship between teacher education departments and other colleges and departments.
3) The aim of FL teacher training courses should be to develop teachers who are researchers not just technicians and deliverers of the syllabus. So teaching

methodology can reflect curriculum goals, and teachers' experience in turn contributes to the process of curriculum renewal.

4) EL teachers should motivate their students and show patience in order to train them and improve language production and use.
5) Syllabus designers have to devote enough time for collaboration supplemented with a variety of activities for practicing group and pair work.

Appendix 1
Interview Questions
Section One : Personal information
1-Name (optional) …….
2-Nationality : ……..…….
3- Age: ……...
4-Sex: ……
5-years of experience
a. 1-2 b. 3-5 c. more than 5

Section Two: Teacher Education
6-Colledge of graduation:
a. Arts b. Education c. Other

7-Do you have any idea about collaborative learning techniques?
a. some idea b. no idea

8-have you attended seminars or workshops on collaborative learning?
a. yes b. no

9-What were the methods used to teach you English?
a. traditional b. modern c. progressive

10-How do you practice activities during the lesson?
a. individually b. in pairs and groups

Section Three: Current Practice of ELT:
11-Which methods do you use to teach FL?
a. traditional b. modern c. progressive

12-Which techniques do you use for language practice?
a. individually b. in pairs and groups

13-how often do you use collaborative learning techniques?
a. every lesson b. weekly c. every2weeks.
d. every month e. not at all

Section Four: Evaluation of collaborative learning
14-Has collaborative learning a positive influence on students' performance?
a. yes b. to some extent c. no

15-Do group discussions and activities help students be communicative?
a. yes b. to some extent c. no

16-Does working in groups facilitate producing fluent and accurate utterances?
a. yes b. to some extent c. no

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