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Collaborative Learning: An Antidote for Unheard Voices in Language Classrooms

Dr. S. Usha Menon and Dr. C. Alamelu

Confronting Mixed Ability Classes

Classrooms anywhere in the world are made up of groups of students who differ from one another in their intellectual, physical and emotional constitution. These result in disparity in learning styles and learning speeds, leading to heterogeneous classrooms comprising mixed ability students with variations in motivation and comprehension levels. This is reflected in the poor performance by slow learners leading to a general feeling among them that their voices, though feeble, are most often unheard. This universal phenomenon poses a variety of challenges on an everyday basis to teachers about how different learner- needs can be met and also how the

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slow learners can be motivated to become participative, interactive and active learners. This issue of confronting mixed ability classes is approached from various angles by educators by using a variety of educational methods and approaches to actualize improvement in students' achievements. One such productive method is Collaborative Learning (CL).

What is CL?

Collaborative learning is a process of learning where the exploration and construction of knowledge ensues through meaningful interaction among learners. This is accomplished by forming a team of students, working in pairs or groups, to realize the objective of solving and completing a task or a problem. Similar thoughts are reflected in the explanation by Roschelle & Behrend (1995), "Collaboration is the process of building and maintaining a shared conception of a problem."

The adoption of CL has potentially transformed the traditional classrooms into a vibrant center of participative learning, with wider scope for positive influence, through interaction amongst students. Collaborative classrooms are characterized by a learner focused environment and the critical and encouraging feature here is that the teacher acts as a facilitator to guide the intellectual experiences of the students. The students with different levels of ability learn from each other. The differences between traditional and collaborative classrooms are vividly encapsulated by practitioners by examining the differences between them and taking into account the enormous advantages of CL for accomplishing meaningful learning.

Traditional classrooms vs. Collaborative classrooms

Traditional	Collaborative
No interdependence	Positive interdependence
No individual accountability	Individual accountability
Homogeneous	Heterogeneous
One appointed leader	Shared leadership
Responsibility only for self	Shared responsibility for one another
Social skills not a focus	Social skills necessary for task completion
No group processing	Groups process their effectiveness
Teacher/tutor does not focus on group functioning	Teacher/tutor observes and intervenes

Better Learning Outcome in CL

The above differences documented by practitioners of CL reveal that adoption of CL results in better learning outcome by inducing amongst the students a drive to learn. In order to ensure the success of CL, teachers ought to incorporate certain principles in a mixed ability classroom to realize the objective of learning. As cited by Johnson, Johnson, and Smith (1991) the principles are:

- Positive interdependence- Team members are obliged to rely on one another to achieve the goal.
- Individual accountability -All students in a group are held accountable for doing their share of the work and for mastery of all materials to be learned.
- Appropriate use of collaborative skills -Students are encouraged and helped to develop and practice trust-building, leadership, decision-making, communication, and conflict management skills.

A resourceful teacher always tries to make use of innovative tools and riveting methods to motivate students with lower self esteem and limited language knowledge and to get them

involved in classroom activities. Such classes end up being as interesting and engaging as possible for all the students. Teachers are vested with a great responsibility to systematically structure outcome based learning activities for students and incorporate dynamism to deal with mixed ability classes.

CL for Unheard Voices

While evaluating the success of learning, the core issue that has to be questioned is the learners' improvement in language efficiency, particularly speaking skills. The success of any teaching methodology can be gauged by analyzing how the problems of learning are addressed to optimize learning, especially in a mixed ability classroom. In this context CL is advocated and justified as it has got tremendous potential to maximize learning.

Methodology

The success of CL depends on proper implementation of activities, for which the classroom can be managed as pairs or groups. The composition of the groups can be based on either the similarities or differences amongst the members of the group. The group can also vary depending on the components of the task. The theorists of CL have formulated innumerable frame works to incorporate activities, for transforming the slow learners into dynamic and enterprising learners and for improving their oral performance. Some frame works are Think – pair-share, Three – step interview , Drill - review pairs, Brain storming, Structured problem solving, Send a problem, Team expectations, Double entry journal , Guided reciprocal questioning and so on.

A pair activity frame work - Think – pair – share, and a group activity frame work - Three step interview , can be exploited in a mixed ability classroom where the slow learners will be motivated to participate in the learning process and achieve optimum learning. The modalities of conducting these activities enable these students' voices to be heard.

Think -Pair-Share

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The teacher gives the topics to the students who are given time to think independently and then they pair with their neighbour and discuss. This is followed by reporting the outcome of their discussion to the whole class. This activity demands the process of analyzing and synthesizing and proposing probable multiple solutions. It helps students to realize their level of knowledge and to improve it by interacting amongst themselves without having the anxiety of being ridiculed. Sample activities and procedure for conducting are:

Procedure

Step -1 Give participants time to think and jot down points.

Step -2 Allow them to pair with neighbour and share their individual thoughts.

Step -3 Make the pairs to choose major ideas to share with the entire group.

Activity One - Deducing Issues

Topics like the following can trigger students' critical thinking and analytical reasoning ability:

- Rural development
- Water crisis
- Global warming

Activity Two – Inference

Images representing abstract ideas can be given to the students who will have to infer the theme, then interpret and finally evaluate. The images can be:

1. Downloaded from the internet
2. News paper / magazine picture cuttings.

Three - Step Interview

In this frame work, the activities are designed for groups consisting of three students; each takes up the role of interviewer, responder and reviewer. The roles are rotated and the process continues to complete the activity. This activity improves the listening skills, questioning skills and higher order thinking skills and develops team spirit as well.

Procedure

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Step -1 Allow participants to establishing rapport with one another.

Step -2 Make students gather information during the process.

Step -3 Ensure that the group shares the information gathered.

Activity One – Linking Content

Issues which have the scope for analysis and comparison can be selected. The activities that could be given here may be an analysis of a film which the students have to assess with regard to its social relevance and super impose and relate the content to the current affairs.

Activity Two - Critical Analysis of Choices

Topics that need to be analysed and understood and that require selection of best option can be a valuable source of teaching material.

- Will business and ethics go hand in hand?
- Is development of a nation in the hands of politicians or citizens?

Positive Effects

The main objective of employing CL in a mixed ability classroom is to improve the communication skills of slow learners. They are motivated to counteract anxiety and heighten attention which results in creating positive and new learning experience. As students are convinced that their voices are also heard in the classroom, they participate actively. Apart from this, there are a wide range of positive effects that make learning a gratifying experience. It promotes personality development, enhances social skills and improves thinking skills.

Conclusion

In mixed ability classrooms, the slow learners are not comfortable as they suffer from low self esteem. This problem is further worsened by the attitude of teachers. In many cases, the syllabus and teaching style does little to alter this predicament. Adopting CL is thus proved to be an antidote for this problem. It ensures overcoming language anxiety and guarantees learner autonomy to a great extent. Students learn better and more quickly which has a cascading and

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cyclic spinoff in improving their self esteem which in turn has a positive effect on learning. Emanating from the classroom, this collaborative process continues outside class leading to acquisition of an invaluable life-long skill.

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