

Collaborative Learning In and Outside the English Language Classroom Using ICT

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Abstract

Communicative language teaching (CLT) advocates student centered learning. In a student-centered classroom, students directly involve in discovery of knowledge through collaboration with their peers. Further students engage in experiential learning that is authentic, holistic, and challenging. Research shows that collaborative learning assists students to develop higher order thinking skills. The advancement of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) has provided numerous tools and opportunities for learning collaboratively both in and outside today's English language classroom. The teacher has to infuse collaborative opportunities to the students for effective instruction. In this context a study was conducted to examine the classroom practices of English language teachers in engineering colleges of Telangana State about the use of collaborative learning through ICT in and outside the classroom.

Questionnaires were administered, and semi-structured interviews were conducted with the teachers. Findings indicate that most of the teachers have a positive attitude towards the use of ICT. English language teachers feel that ICT has a potential in enhancing collaborative learning among the students and also helps in developing higher order thinking skills. This paper also suggests how teachers can make use of ICT outside the classroom for collaborative learning. Key terms: Information and Communication Technology, Collaborative learning and Constructivism.

Introduction

Today English language competency plays a crucial role both in academics and professional growth of all professional courses including Engineering since it is the medium of instruction in higher education and it is widely used as the medium of communication along with the regional language in most of the offices in India.

Majority of the Engineering students can cope with their academics with the English language proficiency they have because of the following reasons. Firstly, most of them possess a sound technical knowledge and creativity. Secondly, their technical subject teachers do not demand English language skills from them. Eventually they may complete the course but low

proficiency in English hampers their professional progress. Any company which recruits Engineering graduates looks for both sound technical knowledge and good spoken and written communication skills in English. Majority of them do not get good placements neither in the final year nor after the completion of the course. Besides, the world has become a global village and job opportunities are not just limited to India alone, thus competence in English is very important for the engineering students in India, not only for their academics but also for their professional life.

Today technology has become both a tool and tutor and provides an environment for effective teaching and learning in the language classrooms. The language teacher's job becomes much more challenging in the 21st century. They are required to use new techniques of teaching using technology not only to sustain the interest of the students but also to increase the employability of the students. Warschaver & Healey (1998) say with the advent of ICT, teachers are finding innovative ways to integrate technology into teaching to improve the quality of teaching and learning. With this background it is pertinent to explore the teaching-learning process of English in engineering colleges.

Sturgis (2008) states ICT has a large potential not only as an integrative and supplementary teaching and learning tool, but also as a powerful generator of knowledge which encourages active learning. Today's students have a rich wealth of information and resources at their finger-tips. All that the teacher has to do is to provide them with opportunities to use them. There is enormous potential for technology to support students at all levels. Teaching language using ICT need not be within a course, but can be used by the teacher to facilitate, enhance and extend students learning. ICT has provided the convenience for students to easily access materials from a variety of sources and to engage with those materials whenever and wherever they want to. Therefore, the use of technology enables students to engage in language-based tasks and also cultivates collaboration and creativity.

In a collaborative learning environment, knowledge is shared or transmitted among learners as they work towards common learning goals. Learners are not passive recipients but active in their process of knowledge acquisition as they participate in discussions, search for information and exchange opinions with their peers, knowledge is co-created and shared among peers, not owned by one particular learner after obtaining it from the course materials or instructor. Brookefield (1995) affirms that the learning process thus creates a bond among the learners as their knowledge construction depends on each other's contribution to the discussion. Hence collaborative learning processes assists students to develop higher order thinking skills and to achieve richer knowledge generation through shared goals, shared exploration and a shared process of meaning making.

While working collaboratively in a group, participants try to build new knowledge and solve problems together. In a shared problem-solving process, students who have partial but different information about the problem improve their understanding through interaction. In fact, the diversity of cognitive styles, heterogeneity of developing competencies, differences in experience and knowledge and multiple interests are strengths rather than weaknesses in collaborative learning.

Therefore, this paper attempts to find answers to the following issues:

1. How do English language teachers in Engineering College perceive using ICT to promote collaborative learning and what are their practices?
2. What kind of internet applications do the teachers use to engage students in collaborative activities?

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the teachers with the teachers before drafting the questionnaires in order to understand the English language teaching practices of the teachers. Next, questionnaires were administered to forty English language teachers working in engineering colleges in Telangana State.

Theoretical Background

Collaborative Learning and Constructivism

McConnell D (2000:8) states “Cooperative learning involves working together on some task or issue in a way that promotes individual learning through processes of collaboration in groups.” This type of learning has been called by various names: cooperative learning, collaborative learning, collective learning, learning communities, peer teaching, peer learning, or team learning. One thing which is common in these types of learning is they include group work. However, collaboration is much broader and considers the whole process of learning. Therefore, in this paper I will use the term collaborative learning to refer to all forms of learning groups mentioned earlier.

In collaborative learning students take almost full responsibility for working together, build knowledge together, change and evolve together. Collaborative learning is based on the theory of constructivism. According to constructivists, who believe in the Vygotsky’s Social Development Theory (1978), learners play an active role in learning. The focus of teaching has been shifted from a teacher-centered environment of “transmitting” to a more collaborative student-centered learning environment where discovery and inquiry are key strategies for learning. Teachers’ role is to help students to construct meaning rather than provide the meaning they know or familiar with.

Research has shown that there are many benefits of engaging students in group tasks. Johnson and Johnson (1989) say collaborative learning extends beyond increased language learning to increased self-esteem. When students with different language competency levels are made to work together in small groups to achieve a common goal of learning students discuss their different views on a particular topic, they share their ideas. Further, they arrive at some mutually agreed upon or inter subjective, understanding. Both theories of constructivism and collaborative learning when blended together have great implications for language learning. The role of the teacher in collaborative learning environment is more challenging and because he/ she has to:

- Encourage active learning
- Ensure cooperation among students
- Design materials based on the needs of the students
- Facilitate learning for students with different learning abilities/styles
- Monitor students 'progress
- Provide feedback to the students

Further, collaborative learning provides the teacher with many opportunities to observe students interacting, explaining their reasoning, asking questions and discussing their ideas and concepts Cooper, et al., (1984). These are far more inclusive assessment methods than relying on written exams only Cross, K.P. & Angelo, T.A. (1993)

Findings and Discussion

1. Teachers opinion on the competency level of students
2. Teachers perception on using ICT in collaborative learning
3. Teachers classroom practices of using ICT
4. Teachers classroom practice of using ICT outside the English language classroom
5. Problems faced by the teachers while engaging the students in collaborative activities

1. Teachers opinion on the competency level of students

The competency level of students in English ranges from good to average because 3 out of 40 teachers stated that the competency level of the students was very good, 12 teachers said the students were good, 18 teachers opined that students were average and 7 teachers said the students were below average.

On the whole teachers opined that the competency level of the students was good to average because some of the students neither knew the rules nor could express themselves in English. Students with English medium background are more exposed to the language and their proficiency levels are better than the students from regional medium background.

2. Teachers perception on using ICT in collaborative learning

25 out of the 40 teachers felt that collaborative learning using ICT helps in developing the language skills of the students, 10 teachers opined that it helps to some extent and 5 teachers said that it was not helpful.

3. Teachers classroom practices of using ICT

All the teachers use the modules provided in the English Language laboratory. Apart from this the teachers use pictures, videos and power point presentations. From the data it is evident that teachers are using only a few tools to enhance learning. Most of them are unaware that ICT can be used outside the classroom also.

4. Teachers practice of using ICT outside the English language classroom

Only 3 teachers have stated that they use power point presentations (PPTs) outside the classroom. That is, they mail PPTs to the students and for assignment the students have to make a PPTs on a topics given by the teacher.

5. Problems faced by the teachers while engaging the students in collaborative activities

The problems expressed by most of the teachers are: Low proficiency in English language of most of the students, lack of motivation among students, insufficient time, large classes, lack of awareness of how to make use of ICT outside the classroom etc. Students from the English medium background who had some language proficiency benefit and find the activities to be challenging whereas; the students from the regional medium background had difficulties and were passive most of the time.

Conclusions & Suggestions

The findings indicate that teachers have a positive attitude towards the use of ICT. They felt that ICT can generate interest and provide opportunities to develop the student's communicative skills. ICT that teachers use in the classroom is restricted to Laboratory modules videos, pictures and PPTs. Most of them are unaware of the techniques of using ICT beyond the classroom.

The following are a few suggestions that a teacher can use to enhance collaborative learning outside the classroom.

a) Creating a WhatsApp / Facebook group for low proficiency students

Engineering students are at varying levels of abilities, skills and proficiency. Students with English medium background have an advantage over their fellow learners as they had added exposure to the language. Their proficiency levels are much better than their counterparts.

Whereas, students with regional medium background students find it difficult to cope with the demands made on them by the sudden change in the medium of instruction. When these students are made to work in groups, they lack self-confidence and develop anxiety about their performance. This problem of low proficiency becomes a constraint in students' participation in the group activities. Therefore, the teacher can help the students overcome their fears by creating a group using social networking sites like WhatsApp or Facebook. Supplementary tasks can be provided to the students according to the needs of the students. Individual feedback can also be provided to the students.

b) Need to organise a workshop for the teachers

Most of the teachers have limited knowledge of using ICT in the English language classroom. There is a need to organise a workshop on how internet technology can be used to support collaborative learning.

c) Electronic mail (Email)

Email is a good internet/web system to support collaborative learning. Teachers can send the assignments or additional materials through Email. As communication in Email is asynchronous discussions can be easily organised and followed.

d) Flipping the classroom

Experts say that flipping the classroom means that students gain first exposure to new materials outside of class, usually via reading or lecture videos, and then use class time to do the harder work of assimilating that knowledge through problem-solving, discussion or debates. A teacher can make use of social networking sites and post a video or reading material to the students and flip the classroom. The classroom time can be used to engage the students in collaborative activities.

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