

AN INSIGHT INTO COOPERATIVE LANGUAGE LEARNING

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ABSTRACT

Every species in this world are linked to one another through a medium that helps them understand and respond positively or negatively to the environment. These species use their senses to communicate through odors, sounds and non-verbal behaviours. Similarly, humans, being the superior of all living beings, are blessed with a brilliant form of medium to communicate. We call it the language, which is, in fact, as old as human evolution. Language helps us generate our feelings into appropriate forms of meaningful words, thereby providing an opportunity for the listener to grasp our intention, expectation and purpose of our communication. It allows us to share and transform abstract feelings into easily understandable ideas. Society can never exist without meaningful communication exchanges. In order to maintain and lead an optimistic lifestyle, we must use language in a socially acceptable and contextually suitable way. Hence, language learning is viewed as an art that should be learnt artistically. Learning a language is a challenge. It is a field filled with constant changes and surprising outcomes. It is a common belief of many researchers and educators that to acquire mastery over a language that we are trying to learn; we have to live in an environment in which the target language is used. Unless we are regularly exposed to a particular target language, it is impossible to develop competence in it. This paper aims to explore the benefits of learning a language in an effective manner using the Cooperative Language Learning (CLL) technique.

Keywords: language acquisition, language learning, language teaching, communication, cooperative language learning

INTRODUCTION

The field of English language teaching has a rich history of language experiments involving a variety of teaching methodologies. The goal of all these different approaches and methods was common, ultimately to attain language competency. The sole purpose of every language learner is to improve their language ability. No matter what country or what society or culture we belong to, we are in a necessity to enrich our expertise in English.

English has attained the status of an international language and has become the most appropriate and acceptable language in every field. To survive in the modern world, one has to have an abundant knowledge of communicating in English. Looking closely at the progression of English language learning, we come across several exciting approaches and methods that constantly keep changing and expanding their perspectives.

As far as English language teaching is concerned, an approach or method has limitations taking external factors like audience, content, etc. One way which may have proved successful in a particular situation might not be adaptable for another environment. Thus, it is natural to come across several approaches to language learning. All these methods have contributed something to the growth of the field without a doubt.

LANGUAGE LEARNING / ACQUISITION

English has become the world's dominant language, gaining international status. We are naturally left to a condition in which knowledge of English has become vital in every field. To face this competitive world, we have no other way than to establish a strong understanding of English. It is essential to develop communication competency, which can only be achieved through regular practice in the target language.

Language learning is different from language acquisition in many ways. Learning is the process of gaining knowledge and experience through conscious efforts. When it comes to learning a second language, there are so many obstacles. Learning a second language is complicated and requires extra effort, whereas the mother tongue or first language is acquired automatically with less or no effort. Children develop the mother tongue through imitation, which is best achieved through exposure to the language. Under an excellent first language speaking environment, language acquisition takes place naturally.

Learners are unaware of the process when language acquisition occurs in them. They have no idea about what and how they are learning. They never sit and learn the grammar or vocabulary in

acquisition. It is entirely automatic and subconscious. But, language learning is a conscious attempt to understand, rectify the mistakes, and finally know how to use it properly. Language could be learnt successfully through good exposure, regular practice and keen interest. Only when a person has enough time, interest and exercise to keep using the target language, they would be able to grasp the language appropriately and communicate with confidence.

COOPERATIVE LANGUAGE LEARNING (CLL)

Cooperative language learning (CLL) or Collaborative Learning (CL) is one of the many methods which stresses that language learning could be better attained through working in teams or cooperative groups. It holds a remarkable idea that by working in pairs or groups, learners learn better by getting an opportunity to discuss the concept among themselves, support and motivate each other in the learning process, face difficulties as a team and sort out a solution through combined effort.

The speciality of learning in cooperative groups is that students get an opportunity to mingle well, participate confidently and team up to produce productive results. Another vital thing to be noted in a cooperative environment is that students have the liberty to act independent and comfortable, unlike the traditional setting where a strict and teacher-centred atmosphere is maintained.

Cooperative or collaborative learning essentially involves students learning from each other in groups. But it is not the group configuration that makes cooperative learning distinctive; it is the way that students and teachers work together that is important (Larsen - Freeman 2000).

This method of learning allows the learners to develop their social skills so that they can depend on each other to overcome their learning problems independently. This exercise enables them to prepare for real-life challenges where they could employ cooperative strategies successfully.

Cooperative learning is different from ordinary group tasks. In cooperative learning, students develop a positive attitude toward one another, avoiding competitiveness. It does not matter who learns well or which group succeeds; the only thing that matters in this context is how far as a team they have managed to attain the common goal.

In cooperative language learning, there are no opponents; members work as a team to achieve common goals. The idea behind the concept is that every member is responsible for the success or failure of the group. Each group member has to contribute something and take concern over their group mates from time to time, checking that all members participate and get a chance to express

their opinion. Cooperative learning helps learners feel comfortable and friendly by promoting cooperation instead of competition.

Cooperation is working together to accomplish shared goals. Within cooperative situations, individuals seek outcomes beneficial to themselves and all other group members. Cooperative learning is the instructional use of small groups through which students work together to maximize their own and each other's learning. It may be contrasted with competitive learning in which students work against each other to achieve an academic goal such as a grade of "A" (Johnson et al., 1994: 4).

Thus, the main benefit of working in a group is that with combined input the difficulties of a particular task could be reduced. Johnson et al., (1994) classifies cooperative groups into following three types:

Formal Cooperative Learning Groups

This group aims to complete tasks that last for short duration ranging from one class period to several weeks. The aim of such groups is to complete the shared goal through working in groups.

Informal Cooperative Learning Groups

Informal cooperative learning groups are ad-hoc groups lasting for a few minutes to a class period that tries to facilitate direct teaching.

Cooperative Base Groups

The aim of Cooperative Base group is to foster support, encourage and assist all group members for the successful completion of the shared goals. Such groups last for long term and involve heterogeneous learning groups.

Working in groups is a better way to deal with problems in classrooms and in real-life situations. When working in such groups, we get a chance to experience a variety of ideas and information which we could implement. This experience allows us to overcome our problems and difficulties by depending on each other.

THE IMPACT

Communication does not end with speech alone. It is the fusion of all the skills. When we speak of communication, it includes verbal and non-verbal skills. We have not yet completely gotten rid of the teacher-centered learning approach. In institutions across the world, learners are still victims of the traditional teacher-dominated approach. Just recently, we have realised the importance of student-centered teaching methodologies. There was a need for a bit of communication, a little

liveliness, and an interactional environment where students could communicate comfortably. Eventually, the communicative principles brought a significant transformation in learning and teaching.

Through the introduction of the communicative approach, the entire language learning and teaching model experienced a tremendous change. Learners have opportunities to interact and work out exercises independently with less teacher intervention. Teachers allowed their learners to be independent and creative in their learning ways. Integration of real-life situations into the classrooms has made learning something extraordinary. Above all, the cooperative strategy has proved successful among learners of all levels making team communication a most remarkable thing in the history of language teaching.

Cooperative language learning allows learners to be academically collaborative, avoiding competitiveness. Students interact in groups in a positive way and motivate their teammates to contribute their best. The ultimate aim of the cooperative learning strategy is to train the learners to operate in small groups and to communicate in teams helping each other achieve a common goal. This group learning mechanism paves the way to improve the weak learners' performance when grouped with higher achieving learners and enriches individual participation. Cooperative learning creates an environment for active, participatory, and exploratory learning.

Cooperative learning has been suggested as the solution for an astonishing array of educational problems; it is often cited as a means of emphasizing thinking skills and increasing higher-order learning; as an alternative to ability grouping, remediation, or special education; as a means of improving race relations and acceptance of mainstreamed students; and as a way to prepare students for an increasingly collaborative work force (Slavin, 1991).

Working in cooperative groups has been highly recommended by many great theorists and language teaching experts. One could achieve a better result within a short time working in a cooperative environment. It all started when language experts like Turner in England and Triplett in the United States began researching the area of cooperation and competition in the late 1800s. But, the real credit for relating cooperative learning to college classrooms is associated with Deutsch's work that focused on the power of cooperative learning in a psychology class at MIT in the late 1940s.

In the 1970s, several research works were available on cooperative learning focussing on education. During this time, many experiments were conducted on the effects of cooperative strategies by using college students as participants. In the 1990s, cooperative language learning was

so popular that it was one of the most well-received and widely implemented learning methodologies.

Irrespective of its popularity, there still exists practical difficulties in implementation and disadvantages mainly due to lack of teacher education or development. Many college teachers are unaware of the latest developments in the field and have failed to understand the theoretical frameworks. In order to create a successful cooperative group, a teacher has to master the dynamics of putting the students into structured cooperative teams. They could achieve this only when they have adequate knowledge of the theory and the differences between regular and cooperative groups.

Five Basic Elements of Cooperative Learning

In order to comprehend clearly what makes cooperative learning distinctive, it is essential to understand these elements: positive interdependence, individual accountability, face-to-face promotive interaction, social skills and group processing (Johnson & Johnson, 1999).

1. Positive Interdependence

Positive interdependence is one of the most vital elements of cooperative learning because it acts as an adhesive holding the group together. The underlying code of positive interdependence is that every member of the cooperative group must depend on one another to achieve success.

2. Individual Accountability

Individual accountability is essential for the group's success. Each group member has roles and responsibilities assigned to them and is expected to contribute and perform well.

3. Face-to-face Promotive Interaction

Face-to-face promotive interaction is vital for the cooperative group to run smoothly. Promotive interaction helps the group members to link with each other, understand their needs, and support and encourage one another in a positive way, contributing to the group's success.

4. Social Skills

Social skills include leadership, decision-making, trust-building, conflict management, and communication. The members of the group need to master these skills.

5. Group Processing

Group processing refers to the skill of being able to observe the progress of the group and being able to monitor and modify things whenever required for the proper functioning of the group.

CONCLUSION

When implemented perfectly, Cooperative language learning allows learners to successfully fulfil their tasks and enjoy working in groups, cooperating, generating ideas, sharing their opinions constructively, maintaining positive interactions, and finally expressing their suggestions and ideas in a clear and comprehensible manner. By introducing the learners to cooperative techniques and making them work in cooperative groups, the learning process can be delightful, exciting, and beneficial compared to the traditional way of teaching. If teachers are able to assign cooperative learning tasks to smaller groups at the initial level and then slowly progress to larger groups, the learners would by then have a good understanding of the group dynamics and the teachers on the other hand will be able to master the techniques. Thus, the scope of its implementation can be extended to any level and include any skills as long as the guidelines for the group tasks are appropriately framed and tested beforehand.

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