

COLLABORATIVE LEARNING AND ENHANCING COMMUNICATION SKILLS IN ELT

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ABSTRACT:

Teaching English to non-native speakers of English is an intricate process. There are many methods through which it can be taught in a foreign context. Much research has been carried out in the field of ELT. Different approaches have been tried to make the students learn English with less strain. Now there is shift from teacher-centric to student centric-teaching.

Listening is the most important skill among the four LSRW skills. It is through only listening a baby slowly acquires ability to speak in that language. As such, native English speakers (of any language) can learn English (of any language) with much ease and comfort. But unfortunately we don't have such atmosphere in our country where a student acquires needed skills in English by listening to others. The situation is much worse in rural areas. Now to make the students learn English they must be pushed or forced into a situation where they have to speak in English. At this juncture, collaborative learning may be a good option for the teachers to teach and the learners to learn. It indirectly creates an atmosphere where one is rather forced to open his mouth and say something as per the context. According to Wikipedia 'collaborative learning is a particular situation in which two or more students learn or try to learn something together'. As against individual learning, students engaged in collaborative learning capitalized one another's resources and skills.

According to Barbara Leigh Smith and Jean T Michael collaborative learning is an umbrella term for a variety of educational approaches involving joint intellectual efforts by students or students and teachers together. It is a group activity where individuals or group work together to find out situations or meanings or to understand a new concept. It may result in a creative activity to produce a new product.

This collaborative learning brings a significant shift from the age old lecture-centric approach in class room situations. Here the student-centric approach plays a vital role. In the process of this learning situation students play an active role in taking up discussions or to work with course material. Here the teacher plays a mid-wife role to create an emergent learning process. This collaborative learning process proved to be an active and constructive learning process.

Here students are not simply gathering new information or ideas but making an attempt to create something new with the information or ideas.

Teachers have to think in a novel way to create contexts and activities which attracts and immerse students in a challenging situations. These challenge situations make the students to process their ideas or solve the particular problems with good communication skills. In the process of collaborative learning the students learn various things relating to good communication. They learn much about good pronunciation, accent, rhythm, use of opt words and conversational skills. Thus we can say collaborative learning is the need of the hour.

Keywords: *Student-centric approach, Group activities, Challenging situations, Constructive learning, Collaborative learning.*

Introduction:

Teaching of English to non-native speakers of English is an intricate process. There are many methods through which it can be taught in a foreign context. Much research has been carried out in the field of ELT. Different approaches have been tried to make the students learn English with less strain. Now there is a shift from teacher-centric to student centric-teaching. “In modern professional organizations a great deal of importance is attached to devising and maintaining an efficient system of communication. It enables the gathering and marshalling of data which is necessary for decision making. Researches in this area have shown that 70 percent to 80 percent of total working time of a professional is spent on communication. The role of English in the professional world is still dominant and therefore we have to focus our attention on the conventions of communication in English followed in India.” (Krishna Mohan)

Listening is the most important skill among the four LSRW skills. It is through listening only a child slowly acquires ability to speak in that language. As such, native English speakers (of any language) can learn English (of any language) with much ease and comfort. But unfortunately we don't have such atmosphere in our country where a student acquires needed skills in English by listening to others. The situation is much worse in rural areas. Now to make the students learn English they must be pushed or forced into a situation where they have to speak in English. According to Francis Bacon ‘Reading maketh a full man; conference a ready man; and writing an exact man’. Here conference refers to exchange of information or to discussion. Through active participation in discussions one can learn much and gain experience and it makes him ‘a ready man’. At this juncture, collaborative learning may be a good option for the teachers to teach and the learners to learn. It indirectly creates an atmosphere where one is rather forced to open his mouth and say something as per the context. According to Wikipedia ‘collaborative learning is a particular situation in which two or more students learn or try to learn something together’. As against individual learning, students engaged in collaborative learning capitalize one another's resources and skills.

According to Barbara Leigh Smith and Jean T Michael collaborative learning is an umbrella term for a variety of educational approaches involving joint intellectual efforts by students or students and teachers together. It is a group activity where individuals or group work together to find out situations or meanings or to understand a new concept. It may result in a creative activity to produce a new product.

This collaborative learning brings a significant shift from the age old lecture-centric approach to student-centric approach in class room situations. Here the student-centric approach plays a vital role. In the process of this learning situation students play an active role in taking up discussions or to work with course material. As C L supports learner-centered approach, it helps the learner to develop his/her oral communication skills. Collaborative learning occurs through dialogue, social interaction and joint decision making with peers and these shared process contribute largely to individual and collective growth as well as to co-constructed understanding and knowledge (Vygotsky – 1978).

Here the teacher plays a mid-wife role to create an emergent learning process. This collaborative learning process proved to be an active and constructive learning process. Here students are not simply gathering new information or ideas but making an attempt to create something new with the information or ideas.

In enhancing communication skills in ENT through collaborative learning, teachers have to think in a novel way to create contexts and activities which attracts and immerse students in a challenging situations. These challenge situations make the students to process their ideas or solve the particular problems with good communication skills. In the process of collaborative learning the students learn various things relating to good communication. They learn much about good pronunciation, accent, rhythm, use of opt words and conversational skills. Thus we can say collaborative learning is the need of the hour.

To make the teaching-learning process more effective, teachers have to adopt novel techniques, methods and approaches which increase learners' contribution on the language taught. C L creates an atmosphere which is more conducive and pleasant to learn a language. In this context teachers should have knowledge of the back grounds, learning levels and the needs of the learners. Then the teaching-learning process becomes more meaningful and fruitful. The students must be involved more in the class room activities like JAM, GD, and Presentational Skill setc. If the learners adopt new techniques of learning, then their process of learning became quite easier and faster. To enhance communication skills through collaborative learning the teacher must focus on the needs and the interest of the students. The students have to be involved in doing work in pairs or groups as it encourages and enhances their spirit of learning. When they perform various activities in the classroom situation in the form of JAM, GD, tasks or projects, each learner of the pair or group contribute something to the given task and it yields fruitful results.

Collaborative learning is a concept of cooperative learning to attain successful results by doing tasks in pairs, groups or teams. The present day teachers of English should adapt to this approach in their regular classes also. A readiness to understand others positions, interest and views, as well as to question their own deeply held beliefs, interest engrained views and practices can help the teachers engage in the critical reflection necessary for changing and improving their own practices. (Kelchterman's – 2006)

The process of collaborative learning is more comfortable as the learners share their knowledge with one another and learn many new things from various members of the group. Even the backward student can perform well if they are trained to take up tasks and solve them in groups. It motivates them to do the task with more willingness. When a student succeeds in a task, it indirectly propel his interest to take up new tasks. 'Nothing succeeds like success. This makes the students to participate in collaborative learning where it is easier and quicker to do things. It also saves their time, stress and energy while they perform the given language task in groups. As the motivation of the learner is at high pitch, the learner feels more comfortable and independent while performing the task. It results in self-satisfaction as they do the work by discussing it with peers. As it keeps learners confidence level high, their progress towards learning will be rapid. In this process each one assists the other in order to learn the techniques of communication skills. It not only enhances the level of thinking but also the capacity of storing information for longer times than that of the learners who work or learn individually. The information they learn through conversation or discussion will be green in their memory for a long time. Vygotsky, the father of social learning, is in favour of assessing the ability of the learner in solving problems rather than in just acquiring knowledge. In this context the concept of collaborative learning is somewhat concerned with Vygotsky's notion of 'Zone of proximal development'. It contemplates what a learner can do if she / he is helped by peers or adults. If we take into consideration this model of learning, collaborative learning increases learner's awareness of other concepts.

The best practices of collaborative learning are to be adopted by the teachers to teach communication skills. By setting goals for the groups and making individuals accountable may be one of the best practices. It gives a clear cut or definite purpose and also retains the group on the given task. While giving assignment the teacher should set clear goals and objectives to the students. While grouping the learners maximum care should be taken. A small group may not allow divergent thinking nor may a very big group involve all in the given task. The ideal group should be with a minimum of four to six learners to make the learning environment a congenial one.

As negotiation and interactivity play a very important role in group learning, the group norms should not be rigid and they should be flexible. This leads a successful development of interpersonal communication and trust among the group members. As open communication is the key for real success of collaborative learning, the teachers have to divide the tasks into small parts. Then the learners get a chance to select their roles that they like and change the roles by

the division of the task or sessions. Before assigning the task to the students, the teacher has to conduct a pre-test and post-test to make sure whether the learning takes place together by the group or not. Compromise articulation of diverse perceptive and negotiations of different interests are also become part and parcel of developing collaborative practices together. (Achinstein – 2002)

The teacher in a collaborative learning class should study and observe the learners learning process. While giving the assignments to the learners, the most important aspect the teacher has to bear in mind is its designing. The learners are to be guided to follow step by step procedure to solve the given task. The teachers have to keep in mind about the diversity of the group, as learners of the group are from different backgrounds, experiences and talents. Their way of learning and their thought process with novel ideas may be different.

It is found that the groups of mixed ability tend to learn more from the other members of the group. There is an improvement in the achievement of low level learners. Sometimes rotation of groups may lead good results. To keep the learners busy in their work and to achieve required results, a modern teacher has to implement collaborative learning approach in their class rooms.

Now let us have a look at the salient features of collaborative learning to enhance Communication Skills.

- Collaborative learning promotes group activity to accomplish given tasks and shared knowledge.
- C L enhances the critical thinking skills of the learners.
- In the process of C L even an average learner gets encouragement to participate in the activity enthusiastically. It develops mutual cooperation and coordination among the learners. It boosts up the spirit of team work.
- It brings about a positive attitude among the learners towards their teachers.
- As it cultivates the habit of active participation among the learners, it enhances their self-management skills

Conclusion

Learning is a continuous process. In this perpetual process of learning, students update their knowledge from time to time and apply the same knowledge to get fruitful results in their endeavors. Students are benefited a lot through continues collaborative learning process as they learn new skills, new ideas, ways of sharing knowledge; know the techniques of time management, better organizational skills, maintaining good human relationships and gaining insight from practical knowledge. Thus we can assert collaborative learning enhances students' communication skills.

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