INCORPORATING COLLABORATIVE LEARNING IN EFL INSTRUCTION

Silvia BOGDAN, MA
Alecu Russo Balti State University
Republic of Moldova
silvia.bogdan@usarb.md

Abstract: Collaborative learning, seen as an effective student-centred educational approach, is characterized by group work when learners join their efforts to do an assignment and learn something new. It is an active learning process where learners are motivated and self-directed to study on their own. Thus, the article aims at discussing the impact of incorporating collaborative learning in the 21st-century EFL instruction, focusing on the academic benefits that learners gain from a collaborative learning approach.
Keywords: collaborative learning, group work, creativity, critical thinking skills, problem-solving skills, interpersonal skills, benefits.

Introduction

The 21st-century teaching and learning relies heavily on developing learners' both hard and soft skills that are essential in keeping up with modern educational requirements. Language educators all over the world are trying to include these skills into their curriculum and teaching practices to be able to educate successful students in the 21st century. Surprisingly, the idea of collaborative learning is very old, as people always tried to learn about the world by living, working and studying in groups (Roberts, 2004). However, in the evolutionary process, things have been forgotten and the emphasis was placed on individual learning in education. Therefore, nowadays a challenging issue still remains to change the traditional mindset and to switch to other forms of group work learning, motivating learners to study languages and develop the skills necessary to work effectively with others, exchanging ideas and achieving good results. Thus, collaboration appears to be critical in this context, because most learners do not know and are not used to working in a group. Therefore,

collaborative learning is regarded as a more open-ended approach to teaching and learning that emphasizes creativity, group problem-solving, design thinking, communication, critical thinking and negotiation skills.

Discussion

Obviously, joint efforts to produce creative or innovative ideas in today's society or the ability to make decisions and find solutions, to perform and outscore is so relevant that collaborative learning has become a priority in the 21st century. Collaboration as a pedagogical practice encourages socialisation among learners, which is so necessary in the post-pandemic times, when learners have to readjust to doing things together and work interdependently towards building mutual trust and understanding. Johnson (1984) argues that "collaborative learning is not simply a matter of putting students into groups to learn, but involves positive interdependence, face-to-face interaction, individual accountability, and appropriate use of interpersonal and small group skills" (apud Shonfeld & Gibson, 2019, p. 10). In other words, such a pedagogical approach excludes a competitive and individualistic way of learning and focuses on producing knowledge in a joint effort with many benefits for each individual learner. It also empowers learners to look for answers to a problem, which ultimately leads to a broader understanding of a topic and to more original outcomes.

However, collaborative learning should not only be seen as a means of creating knowledge or content with the help of group work. In the context of language learning, it also refers to developing proficiency in language education and practice. By dealing with a certain topic, content and authentic texts in EFL classes, learners undoubtedly come into contact with new linguistic items that they have to process, learn and apply, using an integrated skills approach to foreign language study.

Language educators should pay more attention to collaborative learning, as it appears to be an essential pedagogical approach to teaching and learning languages. It is especially productive for studying

foreign languages because it helps learners foster their linguistic abilities, enlarge their vocabularies and enrich the learning content in an environment where they communicate and support each other, give and receive feedback from their peers, and become more proficient in English. Overall, collaborative learning encourages a sense of belonging to a community, which is extremely valued by learners who find it difficult to adjust to crowds of new people, and who may feel rejected from the midst of a classroom setting.

It is well-known that collaborative learning can take many different forms, such as group projects, peer editing, role-playing, and language games. It can also be facilitated through the use of technology, such as online discussion forums or collaborative writing platforms. The goal of collaborative learning is to provide students with opportunities to practice using the English language in authentic situations, as well as to develop their communication and critical thinking skills through interaction with their peers. In a similar vein, Ur claims "group work is very useful for some purposes, such as getting students to talk, but some teachers tend to avoid it because of concerns that it might result in an uncontrolled process with little learning going on. In order for group work to go smoothly and work as it should, it needs to be carefully designed and planned" (Ur, 2016, p. 37).

Though collaborative learning implies groups of learners working together on a certain task, it is of paramount importance for teachers to get involved in these activities as well, providing the necessary support and guidance in case learners ask for it. Sawyer argues that „in contrast to the transmission and acquisition style of learning associated with lecture and explicit instruction, collaborative learning is more *improvisational*; the flow of the class is unpredictable and emerges from the actions of all the participants, both teachers and students" (Sawyer, 2013, p. 126). Thus, the teacher's role, on the one hand, is to monitor the whole process and devise the necessary collaborative premises, linking the value of the collaborative work with the learning goals and, on the other hand, to provide collaborative scripts for learners to use in a more efficient way.

Material and method

Due to a lot of different research on collaborative learning, it was interesting to examine how it is currently incorporated and applied in the EFL teaching activities at the Faculty of Philology, USARB and how students understand what collaboration is. Therefore, a group of first-year students (21students: 5 males and 16 females, age range 19-21), majoring in English with a minor in German, French or Spanish, took part in an experimental teaching activity, where we intended to examine the degree to which learners understand the concept of collaborative learning and what the benefits of collaborative learning are when learners are involved in academic project activities. Yet, our primary goal was to research and test the assumption that collaborative learning in language education is an efficient teaching approach that emphasizes interdependent group work and interaction among learners and facilitates language learning.

These learners were given the assignment to prepare a project by designing and describing the most efficient, economical and comfortable house of the 2080, displaying all its advantages. This assignment was part of the topic "Citizens of the Future (2080)", where learners had to focus not only on the content and the creative and innovative aspect of the project, but they also had to keep in mind the correct usage of the grammatical forms and tenses expressing future (the future, simple, the future continuous and the future perfect tenses). Moreover, they had to use these tenses in their presentation with a focus on activating topical vocabulary; they also had to learn new words, word combinations, idioms and the so-called core and fringe vocabulary. Learners had to relate their own ideas, paying attention primarily to fluency and then to accuracy in their speech.

Four groups of four people (consisting only of female students) and one group of 5 male students embarked on a two-week group project. Learners were given the freedom of choice and there was no interference from the teacher's part, unless help was required. They had to decide how and when to work, how to divide the roles and how to contribute to the overall house design of the future on their own.

Though the main idea was to upgrade their speaking skills and grammar in English, however the emphasis of the study lay in development of learners' interpersonal skills or soft skills and namely, collaboration, which involved creativity, critical thinking, communication, emotional intelligence and conflict resolution.

Results

What started as a small group discussion in the classroom turned into a huge project work later on. Four distinct perspectives could be singled out in learners' projects: eco-friendly house (1 group), houses resistant to natural disasters (1 group), houses on Mars (1 group) and futuristic houses (2 groups). Learners divided the work they had to do among themselves based on what they could contribute with to the success of the whole group. They met almost every day to discuss and analyse what they had done and what aspects required improvement. Thus, learners interacted more than usual, they listened to each other and could go through the content of what they wanted to produce together repeatedly. This type of peer reviewing assisted them to keep focused on the task and to find out more additional information.

At the same time, learners compiled long lists of semantically related words and word combinations, they did their best to integrate these words into the new content created by them, accurately using the required grammatical structures in their presentations. If one learner made a mistake, the rest of the team would point to it and patiently explain it. Thus, collaborative learning shaped a constructive and friendly learning environment and motivated the majority of the learners to share their part and perform well in the end. It also stimulated the feeling of good-will and solidarity, which had a positive impact on the project as a whole.

The final products were presented in time and all the five teams did their best. The project products were quite original, interesting and absolutely different. Drawing a conclusion from this collaborative experiment, all the learners highlighted several important ideas:

1. They felt equal in contributing to this project work and the failure of one group member, meant the failure of all. Therefore, they

prepared thoroughly for the presentation. They were excited, however, they helped and were supportive of each other, especially when some of the team members struggled to render new concepts in English.

2. They were extremely happy that their ideas were heard and implemented, though sometimes it took a long time to persuade the other team members to do so. In such a way, everybody had the chance to contribute to this project.

3. It improved their relationship with each other, boosting their interpersonal skills.

Academic Benefits

There were obvious gains for learners engaged in such a collaborative learning activity as they had much learner autonomy and could create their own learning content. It was student-centered learning and all these learners actively participated in the learning process. Moreover, it enabled learners to take good decisions concerning their learning experience, and grow academically, facilitating the learning process.

Collaborative learning fostered and redesigned the learners' approach to doing various assignments. Students took the responsibility for what they had to accomplish, searching for unconventional solutions, making independent choices and decisions. In such a way, learners actively processed the available information, participated together in the design of some new content, teaching others and, at the same time, learning for themselves. Thus, collaborative learning indeed developed higher-order thinking skills.

Another advantage of collaborative learning was that learners developed their abilities to effectively express ideas and thoughts in oral and written forms, listened actively to each other and provided feedback to their peers.

Furthermore, the pressure of not letting down the whole team made learners more accountable and alert to mistakes. Very often they attempted the self-correction technique, which was a positive feature in their learning process. That was why there were no free riders, as everybody got their little share to do.

Collective thinking designs wonderful projects. Thus, learners studied how to interact with each other at a different level. They became aware that each voice and contribution matter to create something new. They listened to each other and tried to solve misunderstandings.

Learners created interesting personalized content in English on the topic *House of 2080*, displaying critical thinking skills in selecting the appropriate materials and vocabulary. They developed creativity by designing pictures of the houses of the future. They communicated a lot in order to come to a definite consensus.

Another positive aspect of collaborative learning is that it goes hand in hand with innovation. Sharing thoughts encourages novelty and divergent thinking. When learners were engaged in collaborative learning activities, they activated their knowledge and used their abilities to come up with fresh perspectives and ideas.

The competition spirit that persisted among the teams was an excellent booster for other teams to do their projects better. Learners enjoyed this collaborative experience as they asked for more projects of this kind.

Limitations

Collaborative learning is not altogether a flawless teaching approach. The experiment demonstrated that some learners were more collaborative, creative and more diligent than others. Their products displayed more ingenuity and group work. Lack of proper communication and adaptability to work together was felt when learners did not know what to do next or what to say.

Collaborative learning requires much time for implementation and a two-week period was maybe not enough to fully disclose the learners' creativity, critical thinking and problem-solving skills, though the majority of the teams coped very well with the given task.

Some misunderstanding might occur if everyone takes the position of the leader in a group and they are not open-minded about the existing alternatives and are not flexible enough to come to a certain compromise.

Collaborative learning cannot be applied every time during an EFL lesson unless there is a well-defined purpose of the project activities and the basic learning objectives of the lesson are set and the activities explained.

Collaborative learning does not bring the desired learning outcomes if learners are not willing to contribute and share their work with others.

Conclusion

As is seen from this experiment, positive outcomes outweighed the negative ones. Surely, the results highlighted the beneficial aspects of collaborative learning in EFL instruction, which proved the assumption of the experiment to be true. Collaborative learning brought diversity in the daily routine of the lesson, it revealed the learners' abilities for divergent and critical thinking, it consolidated their relationship with each other and, last but not least, it reinforced the learners' understanding of the given grammar topic. During this fixed time period, the majority of learners came across many unknown English words and combinations and some of them discovered the joy of learning and using new vocabulary.

All in all, the achieved results proved to be better than initially expected and all the learners benefited from these learning outcomes. Additionally, this collaborative experience provided learners with much autonomy and freedom. They were the designers of their own ideas; they managed to give a personal touch to the final products; they chose their own content to process, study and present and, above all, they built stronger bridges of relationships with their peers.

References

Roberts, T.S (2004). *Online Collaborative Learning: Theory and Practice*. Information Science Publishing.

Sawyer R. K. (2013). Qualitative Methodologies for Studying Small Groups. In Hmelo-Silver, C. et al. (Eds.), *The International Handbook of Collaborative Learning*. Routledge: New-York.

Shonfeld, M. & Gibson, D. (2019). *Collaborative Learning in a Global World*. Information Age Publishing Inc.

Ur, P. (2016). *Teaching Tips*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.