

COLLABORATIVE LEARNING IN THE 21ST CENTURY: CONSIDERATIONS

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Rezumat: Învățarea prin colaborare a dobândit o amploare mai mare în educație și este cu adevărat considerată una dintre strategiile de instruire cheie ale secolului XXI. În zilele noastre, învățarea prin colaborare ar putea fi ușor considerată drept una dintre cele mai eficiente modalități de predare și învățare a limbilor străine la toate nivelurile, deoarece stimulează și încurajează interacțiunea socială atât în timpul, cât și după orele de curs.

Cuvinte cheie: învățarea prin colaborare, cooperare, metodă de învățare centrată pe elev, lucru în grup, învățare activă.

Over the last decades, collaboration has become an essential concept in the field of education. It has proven to be rather effective as it requires learners to join their efforts while performing an assignment through discussion, experimentation, decision-making, problem-solving and drawing common conclusions. It also reinforces learners' social, cognitive

and interpersonal skills and transforms the whole educational process into a learner-centered one. Smith and MacGregor claim in their work *Collaborative Learning: A Sourcebook for Higher Education*: “collaborative learning is an educational approach to teaching and learning that involves groups of learners working together to solve a problem, complete a task, or create a product” (Smith, MacGregor, 1992, p.11).

Collaborative learning, referred to as a “coordinated, synchronous activity” by Roschelle & Teasley (1995, p.70) seems to have a multifaceted character as it deals with a variety of learners’ expectations, worldviews and educational backgrounds, which have to be synchronized, considered, adjusted and directed to reach the same goals in solving a problem or fulfilling a task. Saddiqui (2008) argues that collaborative learning includes two important characteristics: “intentional design and collaborating” (Saddiqui, 2008, p. 192). As a result, collaboration means to work jointly together to devise something new and generate multiple creative ideas. According to Smith and MacGregor (1992):

“Collaborative learning produces intellectual synergy of many minds coming to bear on a problem, and the social stimulation of mutual engagement in a common endeavour. This mutual exploration, meaning-making, and feedback often leads to better understanding on the part of students, and to the creation of new understandings for all of us” (Smith, MacGregor, 1992, p.10).

Though collaborative learning has earned its place in the educational paradigm of the 21st century, it might still be confused with such terms as cooperative learning, team learning, group learning and peer-assisted learning. Though it still remains a controversial issue, it is worth noting that collaboration differs from cooperation. Saddiqui (2008) explains the difference by placing collaboration and cooperation “on a continuum from most structured (cooperative) to least structured (collaborative)” instruction (Saddiqui, 2008, p.193). Obviously, both terms entail the idea that learners join their efforts to interact and fulfill classroom assignments or projects as a group.

However, cooperative learning is focused on designing content and producing knowledge and is a teacher-centered and teacher-oriented pedagogy:

“In cooperative learning, the teacher retains the traditional dual

role of subject matter expert and authority in the classroom. The teacher designs and assigns group learning tasks, manages time and resources, and monitors students' learning, checking to see that students are on the task and that the group process is working well" (ibidem, p. 193).

As for collaborative learning, it involves a different approach: it is a learner-centered and it places learners' collaborative activities in focus. R. S. Matthews (1996) believes: "collaborative learning occurs when students and faculty work together to create knowledge [...]. It is a pedagogy that has at its center the assumption that people make meaning together and that the process enriches and enlarges them" (apud. Saddiqui, 2008, p.194).

In this type of learning, knowledge is not taken for granted, but it is build and negotiated together. Teachers go beyond the traditional role of supervisors who keep everything under control, instead, they actively participate in the process of knowledge acquisition. As Oxford (1997) argues: "collaborative learning has a "social constructivist" philosophical base, which views learning as construction of knowledge within a social context and which therefore encourages acculturation of individuals into a learning community" (Oxford, 1997, p. 443). It is an efficient way to teach mindfulness, accountability, tolerance and respect for other learners' opinions, ideas, contribution and engagement in performing the given task. Additionally, mixing up collaborative groups enhances learners' development of important life skills. It is vital for educators to recognise the differences between these two approaches to take proper decisions and make appropriate choices for their learners. On the other hand, integrating both learning approaches may lead to excellent results in teaching, such as better and more innovative ideas, more engagement, proficiency and quality in the process of learning.

It is easy to understand that collaborative learning takes place in joint activities where learners try not only to contribute to finding a solution to a given task, but also learn in the process of creation and collaboration. While working together, learners divide responsibilities, they learn to listen to each other; they also become more aware of the differences around them and they learn to find compromises, try out new joint ideas and benefit from this process as a whole.

What is more important, collaborative learning yields wonderful results which are gained through active learning that involves relevant

classroom strategies, just to name a few: brainstorming, reflection, think-pair-share, peer review, hands-on and last, but not least, inquiry learning. This type of instruction provides learners with the opportunity to shift away from the specific and traditional textbook assignments and find alternative and innovative ways to carry out a task, focusing on developing higher order thinking skills. As Cohen and Lotan (2014) put it: “groupwork can help student grow academically” (Cohen, Lotan, 2014, p. 6).

In collaborative learning, the process of peer reviewing, which is very much feared by the majority of learners envisions a new approach. Learners become more flexible in their thinking and they come to take a new learner’s stance. It helps them to accept their peers’ feedback without overreacting, develop critical thinking and analyze one’s own practices objectively.

In order to achieve an active learning environment in the classroom, language educators have to create favorable conditions to encourage collaborative learning by dividing students into smaller or larger groups, which according to Cohen & Lotan, are “a powerful tool for providing simultaneous opportunities for all the class members” (ibidem, p.1). Moreover, this approach emphasizes the idea that besides assisting or supporting each other, learners are empowered to discuss more while working on the same assignment, provide better and more elaborate answers to different challenging questions, listen and try to comprehend every point of view, integrate and handle the studied material as successfully as possible (ibidem, p.2).

The question of working in groups during classes is a vital one in the 21st century. Nowadays collaborative learning has increasingly been applied in different learning contexts as it is assumed that it fosters learners’ performance in many ways (Rutherford (2014); Laal, Ghodsi (2012)). Thus, learners talk more, use explicit language to understand each other, they exchange ideas and share experiences, they work out disagreements, they strengthen teamwork and cooperation skills, they distribute the work load among the members of the group and they try to maintain a healthy and competitive working environment for each member of the group. Cohen & Lotan agree: “groupwork is an effective technique for achieving certain kinds of intellectual and social learning goals. It is a superior technique for conceptual learning, for creative problem-solving,

and for developing academic language proficiency” (Cohen, Lotan, 2014, p.6).

In collaborative learning, groupwork is regarded as a small cluster of learners where each member of the group takes part in completing any teacher’s assignment without overt and explicit control on the part of the teacher. However, many teachers fall victims to a fallacy that is common among those who believe that a teacher does not monitor the learning process. From Cohen and Lotan’s perspective (2014), the teacher does not interfere in the process of learners’ decision-making and the construction of knowledge, leaving room for making mistakes and for fixing them. Nevertheless, this kind of freedom is relative as learners have to accomplish the given task, taking their work seriously and maturely. The process of assigning or entrusting responsibility to each member of the group is known as “delegating authority” and is defined as follows:

“Delegating authority in an instructional task is making students responsible for specific parts of their work; students are free to accomplish their task in the way they decide is best, but are still accountable to the teacher for the final product. Delegating authority does not mean that the learning process is uncontrolled; the teacher maintains control through evaluation of the final group product and of the process by which the students arrived at the final product” (Cohen, Lotan, 2014, p.2).

As is seen, the teacher’s presence in collaborative groupwork is reduced to a minimum, nonetheless, the learners manage to carry out the task, relying on each other’s help and contribution. They effectively decide what and how they should do the assignment so as to achieve the expected result. In such a way, learners feel free to communicate, have fun, discuss, argue, listen, interrupt and critique each other’s designs, come up with various suggestions, accept or reject ideas and display creativity by means of verbal and non-verbal language.

Assigning collaborative groupwork is not an easy task unless the learners are ready to accept the challenge and the teacher is eager to prepare them for such kind of complex interaction. One should bear in mind that not all the participants are equally engaged in doing the task for different reasons. The advantage of collaborative learning is that every group member has their own share of work on a project and it actually excludes free riders by its own definition. What is more, learners are motivated to

participate as the sense of belonging to a group working for a common goal may appeal to their responsibility. They are either afraid not to disappoint their fellow mates or they are afraid of peer reviewing, that is why they help the group with whatever small contribution they can.

On the other hand, one commonly cited downside of collaborative learning is the fact that it presumes a smooth communication and uncomplicated relationships while working efficiently in a group. It turns out that learners and adults do not always know how to interact successfully in small groups. It often leads to conflicts and misunderstandings. To be able to collaborate genuinely and tackle all the challenges in group work the participants have to learn how to organize the whole process, how to take seriously the functions they have been delegated to do, set up goals and develop research methods, how to listen to each other and spot complementary ideas; they have to reflect and be aware of the time frame and meet the deadlines. Therefore, it is important for every group member to get involved and be assigned a specific role to perform.

Cohen and Lotan (2014) assume that learners achieve better results when they are given a role in a group and they know exactly what they have to do. It means that they embrace their responsibilities; everybody gets the work done in time and together they contribute to creating a collaborative learning environment:

“The use of roles alleviates problems of nonparticipation or domination by one member. Roles, like cooperative norms, contribute to the smooth functioning of groups, thereby allowing the teacher to observe, provide feedback, and push the students’ thinking by posing challenging questions” (Cohen, Lotan, 2014, p.115).

The same researchers suggest the following classification of group roles (ibidem, p. 120-121):

- Facilitator – supervises everyone’s contribution to group work.
- Checker – checks if all the group members understand and fulfil their specific assignments.
- Setup - collects and arranges all the required materials and resources to be used at an appropriate time.

- Materials Manager – helps the group to use effectively all the resources, trying to find out the facts, data, statistics and answers that the members of the group need. Moreover, the material manager writes down the group’s ideas and makes an overview of the main talking points.

- Safety Officer – prevents and copes with possible miscommunication or minor conflicts, promoting goodwill, support, collaboration and compromises.

- Reporter – reports on the group’s main decisions after having interacted with each member separately.

In a similar vein, Bias and Kolk (2022), divide the same roles by assigning them different names: leader, recorder, encourager, checker, timekeeper, runner and questioner.

What are the benefits of this form of learning? They are manifold as long as the learners are prepared for this kind of collaborative work and their roles are clear to them. Moreover, the success of collaborative team does not only rely on the academic achievements of its participants, but it is also determined by the team’s engagement and how well they interrelate when trying to solve a problem. Assigning specific roles in a team empowers group participants to realize who performs closely related tasks, thus boosting the team’s efficiency, productivity and increases enormously the team’s morale.

What is the teacher’s role in collaborative learning? The collaborative approach breaks the traditional and stereotypical way of learning. Teachers are no longer viewed as managers of the whole learning and acquisition process. They are not supposed to stop and correct every mistake. On the contrary, teachers allow learners to make mistakes and learn from them, be in charge of the overall learning process, making certain that the assignment is completed in time and the group members who struggle to do their part well are provided the help they need. Quoting Cohen and Lotan (2014), learners are “empowered to make mistakes, to find out what went wrong, and to explore what might be done about it. “In my classroom, mistakes are expected, respected, and inspected,” say teachers who have become comfortable with delegating authority” (Cohen, Lotan, 2014, p. 130).

One should clearly bear in mind the teacher’s role in collaborative

learning changes from being totally authoritarian to delegating some responsibilities to learners. The teacher still remains the leader or the main authority who evaluates the learners' products and provides appropriate feedback, assigns tasks, duties and responsibilities. In brief, teachers do not interfere directly in the group work, but they check how well learners cope with their responsibilities, keeping groups accountable for the result of their collaborative work.

Conclusion:

Collaborative pedagogy is an effective approach to teaching and learning in the 21st century, which involves a joint effort of both teachers and students to learn something new, devise knowledge and research goals, develop learning strategies and ways of inquiry.

Both collaborative and cooperative learning have common goals despite some obvious differences in their approaches, they are still efficient strategies to collaborate and learn from each other.

Collaborative learning may be regarded and approached differently, but its core principle is that learners take the learning process into their own hands and strive to make proper decisions, think critically, discuss and contribute to the acquisition of knowledge. They become more responsible, reliable and efficient team players. Likewise, collaboration improves and restructures the process of learning and turns learners into active recipients of information, participating jointly in the creation of knowledge.

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