SOCIO-CULTURAL INFLUENCE ON COOPERATIVE FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNING

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Abstract

Cooperative learning focuses on the interaction with peers in a learning environment. So, most important factor that affects learning is socio-cultural situation of learners that plays a role in learning. Some students are timid due to their piety while others are too extravert. Some students are not willing to interact because of their ideological differences while others behave more pragmatic. Socio-cultural differences are therefore quite important in the application of cooperative learning theory in the class. Sociocultural approaches emphasize the interdependence of social and individual processes in the construction of knowledge. Socio-cultural approach, theorized by Vygotsky, which is the fact that all learning takes place as a result of social interaction, giving rise to the concept of “social constructivism”, is actually a new concept in cooperative learning strategy. Socio-cultural approach supports collaboration as the means that would prove to be the catalyst to help the meta-conceptions mature into learned concepts. The aim of this study is to contribute to the research on cooperative learning in foreign language classes by investigating the social relations of Turkish students in the foreign language classroom. We examined the socio-cultural influence on cooperative learning in foreign language learning process from socio-culturalist perspective and tried to find out if there was any cultural and gender effect on cooperative language learning in the classroom at the university.

Introduction

Foreign language learning has been of great interest to most language learners and teachers alike. Different methods and strategies are used in the classroom for a more effective learning of languages. One of the learning strategies becoming increasingly popular is cooperative learning which may be characterized as a learning approach in which students build small
mixed groups in classroom and other environments to assist each other in learning a certain academic subject according to a common objective in which the individuals' self-confidence is encouraged and their communication and interaction are developed in which problem-solving and thinking capacity are enhanced and in which students participate in learning process actively and teach something each other (Bolling, 1994; Bowen, 2000; Carol, 1988; Coppola & Lawton, 1995; Eilks, 2005; Gardener & Korth, 1996; Gillies, 2006; Hennessy & Evans, 2006; Slavin, 1991).

Cooperative learning (CL) facilitates this process by assigning students to small groups in which they work together to increase their own and one another's learning. Cooperative learning is viewed as a tool for preparing students to work in teams as required in various employment settings, in the home, and in the community when there is a need to combine energies and work towards a common goal (Bolling, 1994; Bowen 2000; Eilks, 2005; Gardener & Korth, 1996; Gillies, 2006; Hennessy & Evans, 2006). It was found out that cooperative learning was a successful teaching strategy at all levels from pre-school to post-secondary. Cooperative learning is a peer-centered pedagogy that can promote academic achievement and build positive social relationships (Sapon-Shevin, 1994). The research done by Johnson, Johnson and Stanne showed that cooperative learning is essential for maximizing learning and ensuring healthy cognitive and social development as well as many other important instructional outcomes (Johnson, Johnson & Stanne, 2000).

An important body of research has found that cooperative learning--students working in mixed-ability groups on clearly defined tasks with the expectation that they will be rewarded on the basis of group success--can be an effective instructional method (Slavin, 1990). Researchers discovered an array of personality variables (e.g., peer orientation, shyness, anxiety, introversion, and persistence) that often mollify the positive effects of cooperative learning (Kagan, 1994). It is interesting to note that the approach I have taken in this paper bears a close resemblance to a framework recently set up by Slavin (1990) who identified three major theoretical perspectives to explain the achievement effects of CL: motivational, social cohesion, and cognitive. Of these perspectives, social cohesion is an important factor that effects learning in a cooperative foreign language learning classroom. There exist cultural obstacles to social cohesion, which include religious, traditional and educational features. Knowing about other students’ religious background and their cultural properties may sometimes become effective factors in the prevention of social cohesion. In cooperative learning, groups are organized heterogeneously or in some cases homogeneously. When heterogeneous, the students may not be able to adapt to working together due to cultural
differences. Students are divided into small groups and learning takes place in these basic social units through peer teaching, joint problem solving, brainstorming, and varied interpersonal communication, as well as through individual study monitored by peers (Dörnyei, 1997). It is evident that their socio-cultural background does not enable them to cooperate in language course. Johnson and Johnson (1995) state three conditions for effective cooperative learning: individual accountability, mastery of social skills and regular group processing. For composition of group dynamics in cooperative learning, individual differences must be taken into consideration during foreign language learning. Cooperative learning promotes positive interdependence, where individuals encouraging and facilitating each other’s efforts to achieve and complete tasks, and produce in order to reach the group’s goals. It occurs when one understands that everybody is linked with one another in a way so that no one can succeed unless they do coordinate their own efforts to complete a task.

Cooperative learning helps students gain more input in a place where there is less opportunity to practise the second language. For example, in Turkey where there is not much possibility of receiving second language input, cooperative foreign language learning is a sort of solution to increase the amount of comprehensible input. That is, the second language instructor is the only source for getting input in the class. If the students are not able to receive more input in their daily lives, in our case, Turkish students not having occasion to practise their English except in the school, cooperative learning techniques help them reach more input in English as well as receiving some more of it from the instructor in the classroom (Apple, 2006).

Group dynamics emerges in cooperative foreign language learning through social interaction. Therefore, the students in cooperative learning improve their social skills, respect for others and learn the importance of diversity in a group. Democratic understanding of other people is also learned and automatically encouraged. Enhancement of social skills increases their motivation to learn. Dörnyei (1997) for example states that motivation is made possible by a classroom goal structure, group cohesiveness, goal-orientedness and norm and reward system as well as teacher-specific motives and course specific motives. When the students see their level of language use among the group, they may be able to overcome the problem of foreign language anxiety, which is either peer-oriented or teacher-oriented.

**Socio-cultural theory in cooperative learning**

Socio-cultural aspect of language learning has been widely studied and is still of great interest to most researchers. Socio-cultural theory is originally the theory of Soviet-era psychologist Lev Vygotsky who theorized that all learning takes place as a result of social interaction,
which gave rise to the concept of “social constructivism”. His concept of Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) is the limit to which an individual can learn new information with the assistance of someone else (Apple, 2006). The zone of proximal development includes all the functions and activities that a child or a learner can perform only with the assistance of someone else. The person in this scaffolding process, providing non-intrusive intervention, could be an adult (parent, teacher, caretaker, language instructor) or another peer who has already mastered that particular function. This someone else is an expert at the same level in cooperative language learning. He acts as a mediator between the learner and the knowledge being acquired. Thus, ZPD defines those functions that have not yet matured but are in the process of maturation, functions that will mature tomorrow but are currently in an embryonic state (Vygotsky, 1978). In cooperative learning, peer evaluation and peer learning are two most important factors that effect adversely or positively learning the language. The peers could be experts in this learning strategy but it is questionable whether all peers are in harmony or if they are willing to cooperate during learning the language. The present study aims to reveal the effect of the students’ socio-cultural background on cooperative foreign language learning in classroom environment.

In cooperative foreign language learning, social theory is based on the relations of expert students and peers. For a healthy group cohesion, the teacher acts as a mediator knowing the differences between the students and their background. For the instructor to mediate the course through cooperative learning, he/she should be aware of and determine or perform instructional objectives, the size of groups varying from 2-6 in a classroom which is generally 4 to 20, the way for grouping the students, reorganizing the classroom, encouraging the use of technology, the roles of students participating in role-plays, explanation of academic work and the criteria of achievement to be realized, creation of positive interdependence, individual evaluation, cooperation between the groups, helping students cooperate and teaching how to cooperate and ending the lesson at the right time (Açıkgöz, 2011). The students on the other hand are to be motivated to cooperate in foreign language learning and equally treated and evaluated. They are to be given assignments to get prepared for the lesson the night before the course so that they can overcome their foreign language anxiety.

**Socio-cultural influence on Turkish students’ cooperative foreign language learning**

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1 http://www.sk.com.br/sk-vygot.html
According to socio-culturalist theory of learning, peers interact in a classroom and learn from one another. In cooperative learning peers are the most important actors that lead learning and teaching. They become experts and teach the groups. They frequently get in touch and cooperate even if they are not so willing to do so with the peers they do not know well, who are of culturally different regions, socio-culturally diverse origins. Some students are not even willing to cooperate with females while others want to work in male groups due to the lack of interaction with females at high schools. Turkish students especially those studying in the rural areas of Turkey and coming from the eastern part of Turkey are generally timid and reluctant to cooperate in the classroom. In grouping the students, the instructor has difficulty as the action depends on the skills, gender, socio-economic and socio-cultural background besides being industrious (Açıkgöz, 2011). Their ideological or religious background or affiliation to religious or political group hinders the peers to become a group. The religious affiliation prevents them from talking to their female peers and from interaction with each other. Some fundamental groups do not even talk or cooperate with those out of their affiliation. The political affiliation of the students generally observed in small universities assembles a group of students while casting aside the others. Other students having no affiliation to either a religious denomination or political ideology are not in cooperation just because of psychological factors such as being timid or not motivated. Due to these factors, it is indefinite whether the cooperative foreign language learning is effective strategy to use in the classroom. Therefore, it is highly suggested that a large research on religious and political factors influencing cooperative learning should be realized through some surveys. The instructor should get to know closely each student in the classroom by background questionnaire, create a comfortable learning environment and facilitate learning among the groups. The peers should understand the importance of cooperative learning and be encouraged to do so. Before the strategy is used, the instructor should explain the details of this kind of learning. The peers are to be motivated by the instructor through rewards to the group and positive interdependence is strongly created in the classroom, which is also one of the criteria of cooperative learning. The differences among the peers should be eliminated and the instructional goal should be concentrated.

In cooperative learning, evaluation is another aspect. Dependent evaluation of exams in Turkish university system has become popular and this system requires students’ motivation of each other in a class and their cooperation in order to be evaluated at the same level. The system is that the students are subject to an evaluation of bell-curve, which is if one student
gets high score, he/she increases the pass score therefore those who remain under the pass score automatically fail. If his or her score is lower and everybody else’s score is low as well then the pass score is low. For instance, if student A gets 60 in a mathematics exam and supposing that this is the highest score in the class then there is the pass score which, let’s say 50. Then the pass score depending on the score 60 rises to/about 60. What could be regarded as a shortcoming of the system is the question what if the students in a class agree to not study for the exam and decrease the pass score. Let’s take it for granted that everybody gets 30 in a class and the pass score is 50. So, the pass score decreases to 30. Cooperative learning sometimes does not become effective when all the students are lazy and do not want to increase the bell-curve. One should take into consideration that the evaluation system is to be reconsidered and revised in accordance with the cooperative foreign language learning strategy.

References


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