

Collaborative Learning –An Effective Method for Teaching Native Arabic Speakers

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Abstract

Native Arabic speaking students of the Gulf Middle East region are descendants of tribes and nomadic families which may be a possible reason why they are social constructivists when it comes to learning. Most prefer a learning environment in which they are actively engaged learners within a group. Native Arabic speaking students are social so best benefit from collaborative learning methods in particular from cooperative learning. Collaborative learning is an educational approach that involves groups of learners working together to solve a problem, complete a task, or create a product. (Lejeune, 1999). Cooperative Learning is a teaching arrangement that refers to small, heterogeneous groups of students working together to achieve a common goal (Kagan, 1994). According to Vygotsky's *Social Development Theory*; social interaction plays a fundamental role in the process of cognitive development. The purpose of this paper is to illustrate why collaborative learning is an effective teaching method in language education with non-native English speakers (with focus on native Arabic speakers). Collaborative and cooperative learning styles are effective in the ESL classroom with native Arabic speakers because it helps students to share ideas, stimulates critical thinking, helps students to take control and invest in their learning with structural guidance from their teachers, teachers take the role of learners, students can become teachers, and every student gets to be an equal participant in the given task. Collaborative learning is also an effective teaching style that promotes social skills amongst students that can be used both in the classroom and outside in natural situations. It helps introverted students feel more confident about socializing with their peers. When I divide my students into groups or pairs using collaborative or cooperative learning styles; work is done with deeper concentration along with higher critical thinking skills.

Keywords: Native Arab students, language learning, collaborative learning, cooperative learning

Introduction

The purpose of this study is to examine the effectiveness of the collaborative learning method in particular the use of cooperative learning in the English as a Second Language (ESL) classroom among native Arabic speaking students in the Intensive English Program at the American University of Kuwait. Arabic students are strong oral communicators and work well when placed in groups in the classroom. Cooperative learning is particularly helpful for students learning a second language. Cooperative/collaborative learning activities encourage peer interaction, which aids the development of language, sharing ideas, gender equality, equal participation from all students, positive classroom environment, higher critical thinking skills, peer support, and increased participation. Other benefits of collaborative learning in the ESL classroom among native Arabic speaking students include students taking control and investing in their education, improved social skills, building of confidence, getting classwork done with better focus and results. Local populations in present day UAE, Kuwait, Bahrain etc. are tribal in origin. The students in my study mainly come from a country in the Gulf region of the Middle East called Kuwait. Gulf Arabs came from a tribally structured highly organized culture and have managed to retain their tribal structures and their community. To me this tribal structure can be observed when native Arabic speaking students are placed into cooperative learning groups in the ESL classroom.

Purpose of the study

This study examined the effectiveness of the collaborative learning method in particular the use of cooperative learning style in the ESL classroom with native Arabic speaking students in the Intensive English Program at the American University of Kuwait, in Kuwait.

Research Questions

The research questions examined in this study were:

1. Is cooperative learning as a part of collaborative learning an effective method to use in an ESL classroom with Native Arabic Speakers who are part of a foundational pre -university English program?
2. Does collaborative learning produce better results, critical thinking, and more focus among native Arabic speakers in the ESL classroom?
3. Does collaborative learning promote a positive learning environment among native Arabic speakers where students develop better socialization skills with their peers?

Literature Review

Research relevant to the study has been divided into four sections. The first section describes what cooperative/collaborative learning means to different theorists. The second section describes how collaborative learning is an effective method in the ESL classroom. The third section describes how collaborative learning produces better results, critical thinking, motivation, and more focus. The fourth section explains how collaborative learning is an effective instructional method that can be used to support social development.

Section 1 - What is Cooperative/Collaborative Learning?

What is collaborative or cooperative learning? These terms have different meanings to various theorists and educators. Cooperative learning is referred to as collaborative learning or small groups of students working together. “Vygotsky viewed collaborative learning as part of a process leading to the social construction of knowledge” (as cited in Mueller & Fleming, 2001, p. 259). Some theorists perceive it as “a strategy to help students improve intellectual and social skills” (Burton, James & Ambroing as cited in Mueller & Fleming, p. 259). According to Johnson and Johnson, cooperative learning “involves students working together in small groups to complete shared academic tasks and is characterized by division of labor, interdependence to reach a mutual goal and group rewards for goal attainment” (Siegel, 2005, p. 220).

Section 2 - Effectiveness of Collaborative/Cooperative Learning in the ESL Classroom

Collaborative learning has been an effective method to use with native Arabic speaking students in the ESL classroom of the intensive English Program at the American University of Kuwait. Small groups are used so that students work collectively to achieve individual and common goals. During cooperative activities, students seek results that are beneficial to themselves and to all the group members. The results of most studies reveal the following; academic gains, enhanced positive relationships among students, and improved social and affective development (Johnson et al., 1998 & Kagan, 1994). According to ColorinColorado (2007) cooperative learning is effective for students learning a second language because this method encourages peer interaction which helps with language development, allows ELLs to pick up vocabulary and observe how their peers learn and solve problems.

Section 3 - Collaborative learning promotes better results, critical thinking, higher motivation and student focus

When students are placed into cooperative learning groups they share more ideas, learn from each other, teach each other and are more actively engaged in their learning.

When students work in pairs one person is listening while the other is discussing the question under investigation. Both are developing valuable problem solving skills by formulating their ideas, discussing them, receiving instant feedback and replying to questions and comments (Johnson, D.W. 1971; Peterson & Swing 1985). Collaborative learning promotes learner autonomy and less dependence on the instructor. They are not simply sitting in their classroom seats passively absorbing whatever the teacher says and it helps them to not depend on the teacher as their only source of knowledge and understanding (Felder 1997). Through collaboration or cooperation with their peers they are building independence, critical thinking skills, have more motivation to learn and focus more on the content being learned. Cooperative learning adopts higher levels of performance (Bligh 1972). Critical thinking skills grow and retention of information and interest in the subject matter improves (Kulik & Kulick 1979). Felder (1997) believes that cooperative learning leads to the generation of more and better questions. Cooperative learning creates a positive cycle of good performance building higher self-esteem which in turn leads to more interest in the subject and better performance (Keller, 1983). Students are less likely to be bored and are more likely to complete their assignments with greater enthusiasm. Cooperative learning increases students' perseverance in the completion of assignments and the possibility of successful assignments (Felder 1997).

Section 4 - Collaborative Learning and Development of Social Skills and Creation of a Positive Learning Environment

Cooperative learning is an effective instructional strategy that can be used to support the social development of ESL students. Social skills developed in class through collaborative learning can be used in authentic settings. For example, these social skills can be applied when they join the work force, during social gatherings, and while traveling. Collaborative learning has helped my students to learn about being patient, waiting turns to speak, to interrupt politely, not to cut a person when he/she is speaking, to respect each person's thoughts, to help guide each other, and to work as a team. Students help each other and in doing so build a supportive community which raises the performance level of each member (Kagan 1986). There is less competition and all students have the chance to participate in class. Collaborative efforts among students result in a higher degree of accomplishment by all participants as contrasting to individual, competitive arrangements in which many students are left behind (Slavin 2010).

Methodology

For this study 40 of my spring 2014 students participated. The students participated by answering survey questions, having pictures taken during cooperative group work,

informal teacher observations, and general feedback from questions I asked them about group work. The students were awarded classroom participation points for completing the survey. All participants are native Arabic speakers from Kuwait with a few students from Syria, Egypt, Lebanon, and Palestine. The participants consisted of 20 males and 20 females with ages ranging from 17-24 years. The students were tested into level 020 section (high-intermediate English proficiency) of the intensive English program at the American University of Kuwait. The results in this study are based on classroom observations of my IEP students and the survey responses. All observations were done during class time throughout the semester and students responded to the survey on their computers in class after completing a grammar quiz.

Activities Used for collaborative learning

- A. Grammar - groups of 3-4 students were given a picture. Students create as many sentences as possible using the present progressive tense in 8 minutes.
- B. Group Presentations- Students are given a topic based on the unit theme and create a group presentation
- C. Vocabulary- students define the word, put it in a sentence, then create a non-linguistic representation of the vocabulary term

Survey Questions and Results

Survey Question	Response A- Number of students and percentage	Response B- Number of students and percentage	Other- Number of students and percentage
1. I like working in groups to complete assignments-true/false/other	• True=34,85%	• False= 5, 10%	• Other= 2, 5%
2. I prefer working alone on classroom assignments-true/false/other	• True=9, 23%	• False= 27, 68%	• Other= 4, 10%
3. I share and get more ideas when I – work	• Work in a group=36, 90%	• Work alone= 4, 10%	• Other=0, 0%

in a group/work alone/other			
4. I participate more and feel less left out of class when I – work in a group/work alone/ other	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Work in a group=27, 71% 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Work alone= 11, 29% 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Other=0, 0%
5. Group work helps shy students build more confidence – true/false/other	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • True=38, 97% 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • False=1, 3% 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Other=0, 0%
6. I have more control over my learning when I –work in a group/work alone/other	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Work in a group= 22, 55% 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Work alone= 18, 45% 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Other=0, 0%
7. I concentrate better when I – work in a group/work alone/other	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Work in a group= 17, 43% 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Work alone= 22, 55% 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Other=1, 3%
8. I think more critically when I –work in a group/work alone/other	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Work in a group=31, 78% 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Work alone=7, 18% 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Other= 2, 5%
9. Which do you prefer in the classroom- group work or working alone	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Group work=35, 92% 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Working alone=3, 8% 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • NA

on an assignment?			
10. Group work creates a “friendly” classroom environment-true/false/other	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • True=38, 95% 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • False=2, 5% 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Other=0, 0%
11. I discuss more ideas when I – work in a group/work alone/other	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Work in a group=38, 95% 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Work alone= 2, 5% 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Other=0, 0%
12. Group work allows me the chance to be the teacher and teach other members in my group-true/false/other	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • True= 34, 87% 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • False=3, 8% 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Other=2, 5%
13. I feel that I learn more when I –work in a group/work alone/other	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Work in a group=35,88 % 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Work alone=5, 13% 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Other=0, 0%
14. I have better results on assignments when I- work in a group/work alone/other	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Work in a group= 32, 80% 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Work alone=6, 15 % 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Other=2, 5%
15. Do you prefer mixed group of males and females or unmixed groups of males or females only?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mixed groups= 25, 63% 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Unmixed groups=5, 13 % 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Either=9, 23%

16. Does group work help you feel more comfortable when working with the opposite gender?- yes/no/other	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Yes=25, 63% 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No=9, 23% 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Other=6, 15%
17. Has group work helped you build better communication skills in the English language?- Yes/No/Other	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Yes=38, 95% 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No=1, 3% 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Other=1, 3%
18. I have improved my use of the English language and sharing ideas in English through- group work/ working alone/other	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Group work=37, 93% 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Working alone=3, 8% 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Other=0, 0%
19. Rate: I like working in groups in class – 12345 1= it's ok, 5= I love it	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 1->3, 8% • 2->0,0% 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 3->2, 5% • 4->15, 38% 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 5->20, 50%
20. Rate: I like working alone in class -12345, 1= it's ok, 5= I love it	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 1->14, 37% • 2->9,24% 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 3->9, 24% • 4->3, 8% 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 5->3, 8%
21. What is the main reason you like group	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Friends help each other=11,28% 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Discuss and share new 	

work?- friends help each other, learn from other group members, discuss and share new ideas, assignment is easier	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Learn from other group members=6, 15% 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ideas=22, 55% • Assignment is easier=1, 3% 	
22. From your experience this semester what is the best part of working in groups?-open answer	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sharing ideas • Discussing 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Speaking in English • Learning from each other 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fixing mistakes • Helping each other
23. List one activity you do outside of the university that involves you being in a group.- open answer	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Go to the gym • Study group • Playing soccer 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Diwaniya • Soccer • Sharing ideas on Whatsapp 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Family gatherings

Conclusion

Collaborative learning is a widely used method that has been extensively researched and due to positive results it is a method that I believe should be used with ESL students. From my classroom observations, survey responses, and collected classwork assignments I can conclude that for my native Arabic speaking ESL students in the IEP program collaborative learning is an effective teaching method that helps them to be active learners in the classroom. From the survey responses 85% of the students prefer group work, and 78% agree that working collaboratively promotes critical thinking through discussion, explanation and evaluation of ideas, better results and social skills, and a positive learning environment. Based on the survey, 55% of the students enjoy working in groups because they have the opportunity to discuss and share ideas which in turn leads to higher critical thinking, better understanding and

results. Using collaborative learning in the ESL classroom is also beneficial because students have the chance to practice and think in the English language. One negative aspect of collaborative learning according to the survey is less concentration. 55% of the students feel that they focus better when working alone. When asked why, students said that sometimes group work wastes time because they go off topic, certain students are hesitant to participate, or the group gets noisy. I find it useful to shuffle students between groups and mix male and female students so that they are comfortable with the opposite gender. It is important to walk around, monitor students, and provide guidance and support. Along with creating a friendly classroom environment my students always seem happier after working in a group because they had the chance to socialize through learning. Collaborative learning is also helpful in developing social skills among ESL students. It helps shy and introverted students build confidence, and it creates a sense of security among my native Arabic speaking students; especially my female students who are shy to communicate with their male counterparts. It decreases gender segregation in the classroom which is common in the Arab culture and increases gender tolerance. My students feel a sense of security through collaborative learning which increases their class participation as well. I highly recommend ESL teachers to incorporate collaborative learning as an effective method for teaching nonnative Englishspeakers into their daily teaching so that we move further away from the traditional and give way for the transformative classroom.

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