

Emphasize The Social Nature of Learning

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Annotation: This article outlines and discusses the Social Nature of Learning as it applies to an overall approach to CLT within second language education and suggests that second language teachers can actively implement more student–student collaboration in their classes so that the students can further develop their second language skills and abilities.

Keywords: Cooperative learning, cooperative skills, Investigation, Planning, Implementing, Snowball, Building community;

One of the basic tenets of the social nature of all learning is that we can learn from each other rather than trying to learn by ourselves. This idea can be carried over into our second language classrooms when we realize that our students can also learn from and with their peers. Whereas in the traditional approach or paradigm, the rules often were, “Eyes on your own paper,” and “No talking to your neighbor,” the goal in the Social Nature of Learning essential is to encourage our students to share with their peers and their teachers. Indeed, research suggests that second language students learn from and teach others all the time, especially when they are not in formal teaching settings, [1] and more specifically within a CLT approach, as Richards and Rodgers (2001) have noted, it is actually expected that second language students will interact with their classmates in speech and writing during class activities as well as outside of class. In order for this to happen though, both second language teachers and their students need to be aware of cooperative learning skills. Cooperative learning (also known as collaborative learning) is one of the most researched methods in all of education, with thousands of studies having been done involving a wide range of students, as to age, ethnicity, and nationality, and a wide range of subject areas, including second language. These studies suggest that cooperative learning can lead to gains of cognitive and affective variables. What should be emphasized is that it is seldom useful for teachers to just ask students to form groups and work together. Instead, preparation must take place. The literature on cooperative learning offers principles and techniques to aid in this preparation.

Many students need some preparation for group activities as they may not be accustomed to working with classmates on academic tasks. Instead, they may have mostly experienced teacher-fronted instruction. To prepare students to cooperate, second language teachers often include explicit instruction in cooperative skills. The teaching of cooperative skills is a cooperative learning principle. Examples of these cooperative skills include praising others, asking for help, and giving and receiving suggestions. [2] These cooperative skills are also vital second language skills; skills that will serve our second language students well in their future academic careers and in other aspects of their lives where they collaborate with others.

Johnson and Johnson (1999) explain a useful six-step procedure for facilitating students’ regular use of cooperative skills that can be used in second language classrooms:

- ❖ Students understand why a particular skill is important.
- ❖ Students know the words, phrases, gestures, etc. typical of use of that one skill.
- ❖ Students practice the skill in isolation, e.g., they do a game or role play that features the skill.
- ❖ Students use the skill during a cooperative learning activity involving regular course content.
- ❖ Students monitor their use of the skills and discuss their findings.
- ❖ The skill is emphasized in an ongoing way, rather than just once.

Another means second language teachers have of promoting collaboration in their classrooms is to foster an overall atmosphere in which cooperation acts not just as a methodology for second language learning, but also a topic in itself for learning, and as a value embraced in all learning activities. [3] Examples of cooperation as a topic

for learning would be second language students writing compositions about the times that they (or people whom they interview if this can be incorporated into the course) have collaborated with others. To establish cooperation as a value, the class as a group can look at what processes in the school, such as norm-referenced evaluation and in society, such as contests with only one winner, promote competition as a value. It should be noted that the aim is not to eliminate competition or individual work; the aim is to achieve a better balance.

One way to encourage students to think in terms of cooperating with others, in particular others outside the class involves service learning projects. [4] Service learning is the combination of service to others with learning related to students' course curriculum. Learning could be added to the same experience in several ways:

- Investigation. Students could, work in pairs to study the eating habits of other students. Pairs, where possible would be formed by people with different first language backgrounds (or different L1s); if the entire class has a common L1, students could decide to devote a percentage of the time to speaking the second language (or L2) and could study vocabulary they would need in that discussion.
- Planning. Before beginning their service learning actions, students could discuss what would be a good project to do toward improving people's eating habits.
- Implementing. Students could prepare talks, posters, flyers to encourage others to eat more wisely and then could arrange to do the talks and disseminate the materials they had prepared.

These service learning activities provide opportunities for students to learn together for a purpose other than to get a high score on an exam, although the learning that takes place might lead to higher exam scores. An example of a service learning project done by second language students is documented by Wilhelm (2006), whose university ESL students in Illinois did presentations on U. S. culture for preschool students.

Classroom implications: Group work - The most common way that teachers can implement this view of learning as a social activity is by the use of cooperative learning activities in their second language classes. As noted above, cooperative learning offers second language teachers many ideas for how they can go beyond merely asking students to work together in pairs or groups. Different techniques will be appropriate with different learning goals and will match with different views of teaching; furthermore, techniques can be adapted to fit particular learning situations.

We now outline and discuss two group techniques: *Snowball* and *Building Community*.

Snowball is actually two techniques in one: *Forward Snowball* and *Reverse Snowball*. *Forward Snowball* involves students in working together to *generate* ideas, and in *Reverse Snowball*, students choose from among the ideas their group has *generated*. *Forward Snowball* is used for brainstorming and highlights the benefit of heterogeneity because it is good for gathering as many ideas or as much information as possible.

- ✓ Step 1 – Each group member works alone to list ideas or information.
- ✓ Step 2 – Pairs explain their lists to each other and then make a combined list. Duplications are eliminated.
- ✓ Step 3 – Pair One and Pair Two get together and make a combined list. Duplications are eliminated.

Forward Snowball is also useful for teambuilding (creating bonds among group members) because it provides dramatic proof that two (or more) heads really are better than one. Within second language teaching such as English as a second language (ESL) class, *Forward Snowball* can be used as follows: The teacher writes a word on the board, such as “important.” Students do *Forward Snowball* to see how many words they can generate using the letters of “important.” Perhaps they can use various aids, such as electronic dictionaries and websites, to find more words.

In *Forward Snowball*, the group's list gets bigger and bigger, however, in *Reverse Snowball*, it gets smaller. Thus, this technique builds analysis and evaluation skills as in the following steps:

- ✓ Step 1 – Each group member works alone to list ideas or information.
- ✓ Step 2 – Pairs explain their lists to each other and then make a list of only those items that appear on both lists or only those that they think are the best.
- ✓ Step 3 – Two pairs repeat the same process.

Reverse Snowball could work as follows: Each group member lists four examples of good writing in a particular text. By Step 3 of *Reverse Snowball*, they try to agree on the best example of good writing in the text and prepare to explain their choice.

Snowball is a useful cooperative learning technique because each member works alone first and then presents to the group, thus students are discouraged from either doing nothing or, the opposite, attempting to dominate the group. The group has a common goal, e.g., in *Forward Snowball*, their goal is to make a long list, and each group member contributes to that goal. Also, the group has a single product and this encourages them to work together. [5]

Building community Important factors in successful collaboration are feelings of caring, trust, and safety. Students are more likely to ask for help, take risks, and share with others in an atmosphere in which people care about, respect, and protect one another.

At the same time that we are part of a community, we also maintain our individual identities. Creating such an atmosphere takes time and skilled effort. We present the following ideas for promoting this community spirit in second language classrooms.

- ❖ *Discussing group functioning.* One way to foster collaborative skills (one of the cooperative learning principles mentioned above) is for individual groups and the class as a whole to discuss how groups are functioning. [6] For instance, a group that has been working together fairly well can share with the rest of the class their ideas about what helped them work well together. Other topics for group and class discussion are what groups can do to work better in the future and how students can apply what they have learned about groups in the classroom to groups they are in outside the classroom.
- ❖ *Electronic cooperation.* Information technology offers a wide and growing array of opportunities for students to work together. For instance, chat software provides for synchronous (at the same time) interaction among students. E-groups involve asynchronous (at different times) interaction. These electronic forums can be open only to course members. Blogs are yet another form of electronic communication. Then, of course, there is old-fashioned email. For example, students can mail their work to each other, give each other feedback, using such features as Track Changes and Comments in MS Word, and then send the work back to the original author. Yet another software, Etherpad allows two people on different computers to simultaneously type on the same document.
- ❖ *Groups helping other groups.* When cooperative learning is used successfully, groups believe that their task is not completed until, a) everyone in the *group* understands the concepts being taught and has improved their skills. For instance, if a group has finished answering the problems in a grammar textbook, they are not finished until everyone in the group, working alone, could do all the problems and explain how they arrived at their answers; b) everyone in the *class* understands the concepts being taught and has improved their skills. Thus, a group is not done just because it has finished their task. Instead, all the group members look around the room to see if other groups might be able to benefit from their assistance. In this way, the feeling of positive interdependence, i.e., “all for one, one for all,” extends beyond the small classroom group to encompass the entire class.

Cooperative learning can take place in many different places and with many different types of people. Here are some examples:

- ✓ *Cross-age tutoring* In cross-age tutoring, older second language students work with younger students. For instance, upper elementary school Spanish as a second language students can read aloud to lower elementary school students and help the younger Spanish as a Second Language students with their writing. The older students provide positive models to the younger ones, and the older ones build confidence and skills in the process. Ideally, such tutoring programs involve even lower-proficiency older students, as the experience can provide these lower-proficiency students a boost to their motivation and self-esteem. [7]
- ✓ *Out-of-class academic collaboration.* Bloom (1984) states that peer interaction outside the classroom – not just inside the classroom – can also be crucial to academic success. Such out-of-class academic collaboration (OCAC) can be organized in at least three ways.
- ✓ Teacher-initiated OCAC, e.g., a teacher assigns students to work together on an ESL homework assignment. Project work is another area in which teachers often organize students to work together outside of class.

- ✓ Student-initiated OCAC, e.g., a group of students meet together on their own to study for an examination or to complete an ESL assignment;

Role of teachers: When teachers use a Social Nature of Learning focus within a CLT approach to second language education they will usually,

- ✓ Be observers, noticing such phenomena as how well students are working together, their understanding of the material, and the process by which they are going about their work.
- ✓ Participate in work similar to what students are doing, either alone or as a group member. For instance, if students are doing science projects, they can join a group or be doing a project of their own, perhaps with people outside a school, e.g., a local environmental organization.
- ✓ Give students space to try to learn on their own. The way that most teachers use group activities is to first give some teacher input and then have a group activity in which students use in some way what the teacher has taught. But what if, instead, students had reached the point of group autonomy in which they could reduce the time needed for teacher input or move it to a later part of the lesson? In other words, students would be reaching a stage in which they don't always need the teacher to predigest everything for them – even materials written especially for students.

Role of students: Students play a wide range of roles as they interact with peers and others. Within a group, possible roles include the following:

- ✓ *Facilitator* (also called Coach) – keeps the group on task and checks that everyone knows what the instructions are;
- ✓ *Time Keeper* – keeps track of the time limits;
- ✓ *Checker* – checks to see that all group members have understood;
- ✓ *Encourager* (also called Cheerleader) – encourages everyone to participate and leads the celebration of success;
- ✓ *Recorder* – keeps notes on what the group has discussed – these can be in normal note form or in the shape of a graphic organizer, such as word webs or mind maps;
- ✓ *Reporter* – reports the group's work to other groups or the whole class;
- ✓ *Summarizer* – highlights the main things the group has discussed, keeps track of the group's progress;
- ✓ *Observer* – notes how the group is working together and reports this back to the group. [8]

These roles rotate so that students have opportunities to try on different responsibilities for group success.

Conclusion.

To understand and promote learning, we look not only at individuals but also at the people who make up their world and the connections among them. These people include not only teachers, but also peers, and others in the community. This article has suggested that cooperation is valued over competing or working alone, although there is still a place for competition and individual work. When students collaborate they all play leadership roles. The chapter suggests that we focus greater attention on the Social Nature of Learning in our second language classes rather than on students as separate, decontextualized individuals because ultimately this will make second language learning more accessible and more enjoyable for our students.

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