COLLABORATIVE LEARNING
AS AN INTERACTIVE LEARNING APPROACH
ETKİLEŞİMLİ ÖĞRENME YAKLAŞIMI OLARAK
KATILIMLI ÖĞRENME

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ABSTRACT

After providing a brief comparison between cooperative and collaborative learning, this study concentrates on collaborative learning. Later, the focus is shifted to the difficulties experienced by teachers and learners during classroom applications. The problems related to collaborative learning on the part of both teachers and students are identified. In order to explore the difficulties and the possible reasons for these difficulties related to collaboration in learning, a small-scale study was carried out and is reported here. Finally, a section on how these problems can be reduced to the minimum level is presented.

ÖZ

Bu çalışmada, ortaklaşa öğrenme (cooperative learning) ile birlikte çalışarak öğrenme (collaborative learning) arasında kısa bir karşılaştırma yapıldıktan sonra, birlikte çalışarak öğrenme üzerinde yoğunlaşılmıştır. Daha sonra, söz konusu metodun sınıf içi uygulamalarında öğretmen ve öğrencilerin karşılaştıkları güçlüklere odaklanılmış, bu güçlükler ile muhtemel nedenlerini daha net açıklayabilmek için küçük ölçekli bir araştırma yapılmıştır. Çalışmanın daha sonraki bölümünde ise bu problemleri en aza indirmek için yapılabilecekler ortaya konmuştur.

Educators often discuss collaborative learning and teaching, but few teachers know how to work in a collaborative learning environment. (Wilhelm, 1997). More often than not, this is due to a lack of experience with collaborative learning processes in the teachers' own education; teachers tend to teach as they have learned (Wilhelm, 1997).

The concepts of cooperative and collaborative learning have often been used in teaching and learning subject areas such as mathematics, science, social studies and many others. The wide-spread use of the concepts of cooperative and collaborative learning has led the community of educators to think that both terms refer to the same concept. In most studies, the two terms have been used interchangeably (Armstrong, 1998). In reality, however, the concepts of cooperative and collaborative learning have developed independently from one another. Recent studies have helped develop two different sets of connotations and classroom practices for each educational concept (Oxford, 1997).

It is essential for educators to develop an understanding of both concepts and the differences between the two concepts in order to use them effectively. Therefore, providing a clear definition for each term is necessary for exploring collaborative learning.

Olsen and Kagan (1992) defined cooperative learning as 'a group learning activity organized so that learning is dependant on the socially structured exchange of information between learners in group and in which each learner is held accountable for his/her own learning and is motivated to increase the learning of others' (p.8). As this definition implies, cooperative learning indicates a set of highly structured learning techniques. A crucial element of cooperative learning is positive interdependence among the participants. According to Johnson and Johnson (1990), having a group goal to which each person must contribute enhances positive interdependence. Slavin, (1992) has added that developing a clear set of rules and clear criteria for assessment will enhance the process of cooperative learning. Wilhelm's (1997) explanation of a classroom application of the cooperative learning process is that the teacher begins by structuring heterogeneous groups of 2 to 6 learners. The teacher then decides on the topic for the groups and establishes guidelines on how groups will function. After explaining the task and desired behavior, the teacher needs to monitor and intervene in groups both for the accomplishment of academic tasks and for the desired collaborative behavior. When the groups have finished their work they can be evaluated on task performance and on the way the groups functioned.

Collaborative learning on the other hand, draws from theoretical, political and philosophical issues (Matthews, Cooper, Davitson & Hawkes, 1995: 35-40). According to Bruffee (1993), collaborative learning is a reculturative process that helps students become members of the knowledge communities whose common property is different from the common property of the knowledge communities they already belong to. As pointed out by Saltiel (1998), one of the important characteristics of collaborative learning is that the relationships among collaborators is as important as the knowledge being sought; the interaction of the collaborators who work together becomes valuable and empowers learning. Wildavsky (1986) points out that individuals in collaboration will often have mixed motives and goals, whereas partners in learning hold the same goal. He adds that cooperation is necessary to get the job done, but is different from collaboration because the purpose of collaboration is for "the participants to make use of each other's talents to do what they either could not have done at all or as well alone"(p. 239).

The importance of the social process related to collaborative learning has led this concept to take on the connotation of social constructivism. That is, the foundation of collaborative learning lies in social constructivism. Well known social constructivist theorists, such John Dewey and Lev Vygotsky have described learning as a social process of constructing knowledge through communication with others. According to Dewey, learners do not learn in isolation; instead, they learn by being a part of the surrounding community and the world as a whole (Richards and Lockhard, 1994). Dewey adds that the ideas are meaningful only if they are "1. A part of an acceptable theory, 2. Instrumentally useful for creating positive action, 3. Constructed by participants in a society, and 4. Related to guide posts or reference points provided by society" (quoted in Richards and Lockhard, 1994: 78).

The ideas of Lev Vygotsky contribute to the theory behind collaborative learning. Lev Vygotsky has pointed out that knowledge is based on social origins and is constructed through communicating with others. According to his view, "an individual's cognitive system is a result of communication in social groups and cannot be separated from social life." (Lev Vygotsky, 1978 quoted in Oxford, 1997: 5).

Other contributions have been made to the concept of collaborative learning by recent social Constructivists. They point out that the emphasis should be on the learning process rather than just the completion of projects in activity-based situations with meaningful purposes (Bruffee, 1993). To achieve an emphasis on process, elements highlighting communication and interaction are favored. For example, according to Wilhelm (1997) there are a number of Collaborative Learning Elements necessary for course planning and design; these elements include:

1. A classroom context that encourages cooperative learning;

2. Individualized instructional planning and feedback;

3. Student involvement in grade decision making;

4. Teacher functioning both as learning facilitator and expert reviewer;

5. Collaborative projects in authentic settings;

6. Encouragement for both learner and teacher reflection for developmental change (Wilhelm, 1997).

As these elements suggest, unlike in cooperative learning, the process of collaborative learning allows learners to make decisions regarding the nature of the work to be carried out. The teacher functions as a facilitator, instead of the holder of knowledge, and the learners can also participate in the process of assessment.

The process of collaborative learning allows the learners to manage interpersonal communication, take on self responsibility, participate in decision making, planning and sharing, and develop reflection and self-critique (Wilhelm, 1997). When compared to cooperative learning, in collaborative learning the process is seen to be more important than the learning outcomes (Saltiel, 1998). Collaborative learning encourages active student participation while letting them control their own learning process. In cooperative learning, the assignments, which can be completed by individual students, are adapted to include group work. In collaborative learning however, the end product is seen to be more than its parts; in addition to academic knowledge, students' background, personal preferences, learning styles etc. contribute to the process of learning in groups.

Despite the strong theoretical basis for the concept of collaboration in the classroom, actual classroom practices have caused a degree of frustration on the part of instructors as well as students. Wilhelm (1997), indicates that one important reason for the frustration experienced by the teacher is that very few teachers experienced collaboration in their own learning experiences and few

teaching methods courses prepare new teachers for this prospect.

According to other studies, frustration with collaborative learning among students is caused by the following:

1. Different learning styles: Some students pointed out that they learn better when they work individually (Oxford, 1997).

2. Different cultural backgrounds: International students tend to remain silent as the native speakers do most of the talking, and, according to Wilhelm, (1997), some cultures promote competition among students, and this is not allowed in collaborative learning.

3. Unequal distribution of work among collaborators: Some students complained that they had to do most of the work while others didn't work as much (Armstrong, 1998).

4. Being graded as a group: Students felt that assigning the same grade to the whole group was not fair, because the amount and quality of work had differed from individual to individual (Wilhelm, 1997; Armstrong, 1998).

Despite the problems, collaborative learning environments have a lot to offer learners. These difficulties can be overcome or reduced to the minimum level by involving teacher trainees in collaborative learning environments and helping them realize how important collaboration is. Meanwhile, learners should realize the advantages of collaboration and be encouraged to participate in collaborative learning environments.

Using Collaboration in Language Learning

Different content areas such as science, math, social studies, etc. have often used the concept of collaborative learning. However, this concept has a particular importance in foreign language classrooms. This importance is primarily due to the fact that in most foreign language learning situations, the classroom is the main environment for the students to participate in communication activities, which are essential for language learning to take place. For example, for students who are learning French in the United States their classroom serves as the "immediate close-at hand learning community" (Oxford, 1997, p 143).

According to Scarcella and Oxford (1992), in a community of second language learners, cultural and linguistic ideas are best shaped through reflective inquiry and negotiation with other people who help the learner realize his or her own degree of potential under the best conditions. In the ideal language learning environment, this process of communication between the learner and his/her teacher, peers, native speakers, etc. provides the scaffolding which consists of forms of assistance that can be removed little by little as the proficiency of the learner advances.

In order to explore the difficulties and the possible reasons for these difficulties related with collaboration in learning, a small-scale study was carried out.

METHOD
Research Questions

The main question of this study was: What kind of problems do teachers face when they use collaboration in their classrooms. In order to answer this question, there were other issues that needed to be explored: First, teachers' experience with collaboration as students would provide more insight into how they have come to perceive collaboration as they do. Second, their feelings about using collaboration in their classrooms as teachers and the nature of their practice would be helpful in identifying the problems they face related to collaborative teaching/learning.

Participants

The five participants in this study were EFL teachers. Two of the participants were native speakers of English; one was from Europe and the other two were Asian. Three of the participants are currently enrolled as graduate students at Indiana University. One of the American participants is currently teaching English as a foreign language in the Far East. All of the participants have taught English as a foreign language for at least three years. The researchers met each of the participants separately and conducted an interview with each of them.

Procedures

An interview was conducted with each of the participants. There were two open-ended questions (See Appendix). The first question addressed the participants' experience with collaborative learning during their education. The second question addressed their experience with collaborative learning in their classrooms as teachers.

Analysis

After the written interviews, the data was divided into three sections. The first section included information about the participants' experience with collaboration during their own education. The second section contained information about their experience with collaboration in their classrooms as teachers. Finally, a third section in-

dicated the problems they had faced while using collaborative teaching.

Experiences as students:

The first participant was an American. She recalled that she had had no experience of working with others until her graduate studies. She explained that during the earlier years of her education, helping others or receiving help from others was considered cheating. She remembered feeling uncomfortable when she was asked to participate in group work for the first time.

The second participant in this study was another American who is currently teaching English as a foreign language overseas. Unlike the first participant, she reported having been exposed to "group work" early on in her education she added that she had had a great deal of experience with collaborative learning during her higher education.

The third participant was an Asian student. She stated that she had not had any experience with collaborative learning until she came to the US as a graduate student. According to her, Asian students usually don't talk much in class, especially when sitting among native speakers. But in groups they are forced to interact with their partner(s). She thought that the process of collaboration was beneficial to her learning the content as well as the language.

Another Asian participant recalled her earlier experience with collaborative learning in her country. She stated that her first experience with collaborative learning was during her high school education. In a music class the teacher had divided the students into three groups and assigned them with different roles. Their task was to come up with a scenario and to perform it in a month. Each group had a leader who was responsible for integrating the group members' idea and opinions in order to make sure that everyone contributed to the outcome. She expressed that this was a very pleasant way of learning for her.

The fifth participant was from Europe. She also stated that she didn't have any experience in collaborative learning as a student, aside from the pair work they had done for a reading class.

As it can be seen, only two of the participants had been exposed to collaboration during their educational process. Others had not worked in a collaborative learning environment until they took graduate courses. It is interesting to note that only two of the participants referred to their experience with collaborative learning as a useful one in response to the first question.

Experience as teachers:

All of the participants stated that they had used collaboration in their classroom. As was stated earlier, the participants seemed not to know the difference between collaborative learning and cooperative learning. They simply referred to any kind of group work as collaborative learning during the interviews.

The participants have made the following observations during their experience with group work:

1. There are students who are leaders

2. There are students who are followers

3. There are students who do not feel comfortable in groups

4. There are students who have such strong opinions they strike out on their own and form a "one-person group."

Problems

One of the most common problems that they had faced was during forming the groups. They all stated that when students were asked to form groups, they chose to work with their friends. This usually caused the groups to be homogeneous, resulting in groups that were either very motivated or not motivated at all. They observed that random groups were also difficult because intellectual ability and motivation greatly influenced the achievement of the group.

Another problem that was mentioned was the importance of cultural background. One of the participants described her attempts at using collaborative learning with her Marshalese students as "frustrating". She added: "They seem to almost moan and groan about having to do group work. They move slowly to their groups and are slow about getting to the task at hand. Once they get started it is okay, but this takes a while."

Another problem that was pointed out by the participants was that the proficiency level of the students caused a lack of equal participation among the group members. Those who were more fluent in the target language tended to do most of the talking during the collaboration. One of the participants tried to solve this problem by allowing the students to use their native language.

The fourth problem that was mentioned by two of the participants was related to assessment. They felt that assigning the same grade to each student was not fair. In order to remedy this problem, they assigned grades for each group member and another grade for the group.

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Another point that the participants concentrated on was the importance of controlling the pace at which the groups worked and assigning different roles to the students. Without this, they complained, the quality of the outcome would not be as good. They failed to focus on collaboration as a process; instead, they were more concerned with the end product.

IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The problems pointed out by the participants matched those that were stated by other studies. The only difference was that the participants believed that the source of these problems had to do with the formation of groups.

Despite this perception, the study showed that most teachers do not have sufficient experience with collaboration during their schooling process. Parallel to the literature review, the participants demonstrated a lack of knowledge for distinguishing between cooperative learning and collaborative learning. Therefore, it is important for teachers to develop an understanding of the concept of collaboration in the classroom as well as how the use of this concept would improve the quality of teaching/learning as a process.

Suggestions for making collaboration work

There are some ways in which the teachers can make collaboration more productive.

1. Students should be introduced to collaboration as early as possible.

2. Students can reflect on the process of collaboration and may discuss how it was helpful to their learning.

3. Guidelines set by the students on how interactions will be organized may help reduce the problems related to unequal participation of group members.

4. The teacher can guide students through functioning as facilitators without interfering with the process of collaboration.

5. As the course progresses, student can be asked to summarize their learning process and discuss how it can be improved (Armstrong, 1998).

CONCLUSION

This paper has attempted to outline collaborative learning as a process and provide reflections on how it is used in language classrooms. The interviews with the participants showed that the problems related to collaborative learning were mostly a result of little knowl-

edge about what collaborative learning is and how it should be used. There were also problems that had to do with the background and the attitude of the students.

However, due to the number of participants and the variety of the interview questions further study is needed in order to form better conclusions about collaboration in the language classroom.

The importance of collaboration as a process of constructing knowledge is clear. However, further study is needed in order for researchers to come to conclusions on how this process should be carried to language learning situations.

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Appendix:

Interview Questions:

1. Have you experienced collaborative learning during your education? If you have, how would you describe your experience?

2. Do you use the concepts of collaborative learning in your classroom as a teacher? What are some of the problems you face while using collaborative teaching/ learning?