



Skill Acquisition through Project Based Learning the Collaborative Way

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Abstract

Teaching and learning is a multifaceted process involving different methods and the pedagogy involved. Different approaches, methods and techniques have evolved to enable acquisition of language but nothing unparalleled the Communicative Language Teaching. Its goal is to promote the development of real-life language skills by engaging the learner in contextualized, meaningful, and communicative-oriented learning tasks. Collaborative learning, one of the principles of Communicative Language Teaching, has been identified as a strong facilitator of group learning that enables mastery of content, develop critical thinking and problem solving skills, and enriches interpersonal skills which otherwise styles learners' eloquence in speaking. This research paper discusses how the students have acquired these skills by working on a task i.e. submission of project in a team through collaborative learning. Through this approach the students were made to interact in the target language thus making them become dynamic conversational members who learnt to cooperate and exchange ideas, fine tune them, resolve conflicts, learn to organise ideas, plan and accomplish the project by acquiring the requisite skills.

Key words: Communicative Language Teaching, Collaborative Learning, Approach

Introduction: Teaching and learning is a multifaceted process involving different methods and the pedagogy involved. History takes the language teaching through audio lingualism in 1970's to the silent way in 1980's, perhaps the years with a niche for the greatest enthusiastic methods. However, during the post – method epoch the focus shifted to pedagogies of languages teaching that were contributed by individual teacher emphasizing more on the teaching and learning processes.

The second language teaching has endured many transferrals and resulted in the evolution of several methods, it was but natural that no single technique or the best method would meet the objectives and requirements of every learner. In addition, the proficiency and standards-based activities with their efforts have influenced the field to offer a general sense of direction in defining proficiency goals. Harper, Lively, and Williams (1998) believed that foreign language teaching has ultimately come of age (Brandl, 2007); while others refer it to as method of the post-method era as mentioned in Richards and Rodgers(2001) ensued in the emergence of a range of methodologies in communicative language teaching (CLT)

In the due course different teaching techniques were formulated as courses of study , better arrays of learning designed to aim at improving learner's needs. Different techniques ranging

from controlled activities like drills, situational dialogues, loud reading, narrations, information gap activities, etc. and a lot of literature in textbook forms, conferences etc. originated (Crookes and Chaudron, 1991 as in Brown, 2002 p.15). With the availability of myriad techniques, it has become the teacher's responsibility to carefully choose and formulate the requisite techniques to outfit the requirements of the students.

The Modern Approaches: The advocates of communicative approach claim that learners learn to communicate effectively by communicating, by interacting with their teachers and peer students when their focus is on how to communicate rather than focussing on language. The communicative syllabus is meant to make language learning independent of teachers. This autonomous language-learning situation enables language acquisition rather than language learning. This approach aims to make the learner confident and attain communicative proficiency i.e. enable the learner to use the language precisely and aptly. Information gap tasks were used in this approach to make the learners to communicate by adopting various techniques like Language playoffs, Mind engaging tasks, Role Play, Retrieving the order of text, Group /pair work.

New insights to 'communicative approach' were proposed by Maley (1984) with relevance to class teacher which includes independent status to the learner, the importance of group supportiveness, importance of a relaxed atmosphere, importance of peripheral and subconscious learning, highlighting the role of play in learning, error correction as part of learning process, realization of the learners responsibility for their own learning and the period of incubation between input and output to be considered.

Therefore the methods that were followed in the process of language learning be it the older- The direct method, natural method, situational method, conversational method, linguistic method or oral method or the newer methods of humanistic approach (silent way, suggestopaedia, total physical response and community language learning) may seem vague and inadequate as they limit themselves to a single aspect. This is where the teacher's competence has to be used to the best potential in identifying and using the right technique to make up for the inadequacy of the learner in language learning.

CLT- The Appropriate Method for Group Learning

CLT has proved out to be a main source of encouragement for enthusiastic language teaching around the world since 1970s. Several issues that were raised by the methodology of communicative teaching hold relevance till date. Communicative language teaching is all about making learners acquire a language, with the kind of activities that best aids learning, with the responsibility of learners and teachers being understood as the principles and the goals of language teaching. (Richards, 2006).

On the other hand, Richards and Rodgers in 2001 believed that CLT is largely considered as an approach and reflects on the tenet that the basic purpose of use of language is for communication. Putting it otherwise, it is to necessitate communication making use of real-life situations thus setting the goal for developing of communicative competence.

CLT is not considered a method where content, teaching routines and a syllabus are visibly identified as said by Richards and Rodgers (2001). CLT paves way for inordinate and diverse methods and techniques using resources and methods that are apt according to the circumstance of learning. CLT does not confine to one specific theory or process when it

comes to the concepts of learning and effective strategies in instruction. In 2002 Wesche and Skehan arrived at a consensus about the qualities that are essential to justify the label “CLT,” CLT Teachers’ and Learners’ - Roles

Roles of teachers’ and learners’ have to change to suit classroom activities proposed in CLT. Learners have to involve in classroom activities that revolve around cooperative learning instead of engaging in individualistic approach to learning. Learners have to be trained to feel at ease observing the peer group instead of counting on the instructor for a ready to use model. It is anticipated to make the learner accountable for his individual erudition, there by transforming the role of teacher to facilitator.

Richards (2006) core assumptions on Communicative Language Teaching are:

- Language acquisition is a continuing practice that encompasses creative use of language through trial and error. Although errors are a customary product of learning, the ultimate goal is to be able to use the new language precisely and effortlessly.
- Learners establish their own ways of language learning, progress at their respective pace, have different requirements and motivations for learning the language.
- Language is successfully learnt through practice of effective learning and communication approaches.
- The teacher, in the class plays the role of a facilitator by creating conducive learning environment for learning and provides chances for students to understand to use, practice and emulate language learning.

Through collaboration and sharing in classroom learner’s have a lot to learn. Task-based instruction emphasises on performance so this model in syllabus design would enable learners learn. Success is measured on the magnitude the learners can effectively execute the pedagogic and everyday tasks. Nevertheless, this syllabus design also has challenges. Challenges like the duration to implement the task in the long run, the choice of task, its difficulty level and sequencing the task all these make a difference in the performance. Besides based on the difficulty level of structures of TL, designing tasks require careful adaptation of linguistic structures that learners’ be able to really apply. Careful pedagogical considerations have to be followed in a task-based approach specifically in the execution of task. This calls for adroit knowledge, the know- how to integrate and apply pedagogical tasks to real-life tasks.

- **Promoting Learning by Doing:** Communicative language teaching methodologies, though not new are considered as underlying fundamental principles for learning. Learning through task-based practical approach involves the concept - learning by doing on a positive note that it enhances a learner’s rational commitment.

Doughty and Long in 2003 reminded,

“New knowledge is better integrated into long- term memory, and easier retrieved, if tied to real-world events and activities”. (p. 58)

The belief of “Learning by doing” is strongly supported in second language acquisition by an active approach (Nunan, 2004). The learner becomes self-directed and responsible for his or her own learning by setting tasks and standards of acceptable performance. Only if the learners use the language actively, they would be able to attempt new rules and revise them accordingly. Learners should be cheered to express at the earliest once productive skills have been familiarized (Ellis 1997).

- **Promote learning through cooperation and collaboration**

Kagan(1989) identified Cooperative learning to enable students to work in small teams cooperatively in groups or pairs in completing activities. Through communicative use of the target language, by working collaboratively and designing learning tasks that enforces dynamic interaction among learners. Through communication learners not only listen to contribution relatively, they learn to become dynamic conversational members who learn to cooperate and exchange any kind of input, which is received. Speakers, to avoid conversational trouble make necessary changes to their language as they interact with each other. This is how, the interaction acts as a catalytic agent to promote language attainment later claimed to be known as Long's 'Interaction Hypothesis' (1983). Latest analysis that investigated the pragmatic link amid task-based interaction and acquisition indicated constructive evidence for those tasks specifically the ones which drive learner's output, i.e. tasks which need information to be exchanged communicatively and the breakthrough of providing corrective feedback for the errors made. By categorizing the feedback on the parameters assigned for that activity the accuracy of the students' response is confirmed.

Teachers often give the feedback with a positive note by praising, agreeing or showing and making students understand through the negative feedback, often known as error correction, a corrective function where the students are shown practically their areas to be improved from the activity performed. According to Doughty and Williams (1998) "acquisition is a process that is not usually instantaneous" (p.208) so, language learning needs perseverance and sustained efforts to overcome the errors made and to speak error free language.

Cooperative Techniques for Learning

This research is firmly based on the principle of promoting cooperative/collaborative learning and emphasizes on group work. Cooperative Learning may be defined as a learner-centered instructional process where small, intentionally selected groups of 3-5 students work interdependently on a definite learning task; students will be held accountable for their own performance and the instructor serves as a facilitator/consultant in the group-learning process. (Cuseo, 1992)

When students work together collaborative learning takes place to "achieve shared learning goals" (Barkley, Cross & Major, 2005, p. 4). This active strategy of teaching and learning has been employed across various disciplines. Learning the Collaborative way enables mastery of content, develop critical thinking and problem solving skills, and enriched interpersonal skills which otherwise makes learners eloquent speakers (Johnson, Johnson, & Smith, 1998; Johnson & Johnson, 1999). Team learning, and "team based learning" (Michaelsen & Richards, 2005) are methods widely utilized for collaborative learning. However, this form requires adequate planning and preparation of austere procedures and materials.

Collaborative learning according to Jolliffe (2007) involves "pupils to work together in small groups to support each other to improve their own learning and that of others". (p. 3) Johnson, Johnson, and Smith (1998) comparison of collaborative learning with traditional, competitive and individual approaches unravelled three major benefits for college students: academic achievement, improved quality of interpersonal relationships with peers, and improved "psychological adjustment" to college life. Collaborative learning is rooted in three

theoretical frameworks: social interdependence theory, behavioural learning theory, and cognitive learning theory.

Social interdependence theory suggests that by sharing the goal, effective teams learn to work together for the overall success of the group. Learning is assisted when group members strive to motivate and support each other. These cooperative efforts, known as promotive interaction, are an essential element of the collaborative learning process (Johnson & Johnson, 1999). Behavioural learning theory suggests that if individuals perceive a benefit or reward, they will actively engage in the task (Bandura, Skinner, as cited in Johnson & Johnson, 1999). Cognitive theory states that learning occurs when students make connections to existing knowledge through the cognitive exercises of rehearsing, restructuring and “scaffolding,” or building mental models of the material (Witrock, as cited in Johnson & Johnson, 1999). Thus working with others to solve a common problem, explaining one’s viewpoint to others and coaching fellow group members build strong cognitive connections highlighting the need for such learning where improving the learner’s performance in the given tasks is feasible by modulating different techniques to suit the needs of the learners i.e. vide cooperative learning techniques.

Project Based Learning: For the undergraduate students of engineering in Telangana, the curriculum for English subject offers a lab course besides having a theoretical subject where the focus is on language acquisition through content based learning on topics like grammar, vocabulary, comprehending content and writing skills. The lab gives practical exposure through software and practice to improve pronunciation, participate in activities individually and in a group through various activities. As part of the lab syllabus the students should also submit a project which can be an individual or a group activity. The students here were made to work on a subject of their choice related to any contemporary issue, their subject of interest or on a topic that is related to English language learning.

This paper discusses how the students were made to work on a project the collaborative way and present their ideas. This learning prepared them to stick to deadlines, bring the best of their cognitive skills based on the topics chosen and the content presented. The grouping had its own advantages as the students had to streamline their project and presentation based on their team members’ strengths and weaknesses. This activity was conducted for 3 batches of 32 students each and was given a week’s time for presentation. The first batch of students had the project on the LSRW skills and the Grammar and Vocabulary component of English language, second batch on LSRW skills of Business English and the third batch was given the choice to choose their topics.

Each batch of 32 students was divided into six teams with four teams having five students and two teams having six students respectively. The actual work division starts after the topic was decided, the students brainstormed to finalize the design and layout of the presentation and the role/ subject/ topic of the title that each individual would present. Equal weightage was given while evaluating the performance individually and as a team. Each team was given 15 minutes time for the presentation and was evaluated on - Good start and Conclusion, Verbal communication, Non- verbal communication, organization of ideas and content Justification individually. This Project based language learning through presentation made the students to think critically and creatively while finalising the topic, learn to

coordinate, cooperate with the team and independently prepare on their respective topic while being a part of the team.

The first team presented their project on the LSRW Skills, Grammar and Vocabulary part of English Language.

Topic Name	No of students in Team	Good Start and Conclusion in %	Verbal Communication in %	Non Verbal Communication in %	Organization of Ideas in %	Content Justification in %	Average in %
Improving Speaking skills	5	100	90	80	90	60	84
Improving Writing skills	5	100	90	80	90	80	88
Improving Reading skills	5	90	70	60	80	100	80
Improving Listening skills	5	100	60	60	80	100	80
Improving Vocabulary skills	6	100	91	83	90	91	91
Improving Grammar in English	6	100	75	75	80	91	84.2
Average	32	98.3	79.3	73	85	87	84.53 84.52

Table 1: English Language

Analysis: The statistics of the Table 1 is the analysis of the project submitted and presented by the students on the topics related to English language- LSRW, Vocabulary and Grammar. The analysis of the parameters for measuring is quantified in percentage. The average scores of the respective parameter were taken for interpretation of data for the analysis of the team's overall performance. Statistics show that all the groups have done extremely well with a good start and gave proper conclusion of the topic chosen by the individual. Next in line were Content justification and the Organization of ideas. The students have through this learnt to present their ideas logically within the time frame and with equal distribution of their roles and responsibilities thereby focusing on their language skills verbal and non- verbal. The students are yet to master their language skills as this is the first time for most of them to work on a project and present.

Topic Name	No of students in Team	Good Start and Conclusion	Verbal Communication	Non Verbal Communication	Organization of Ideas	Content Justification	Avg
BE Speaking skills	5	100	60	80	100	100	88
BE Writing skills	5	90	60	60	80	90	76
BE Reading skills	5	90	50	60	100	100	80
BE Listening skills	5	100	83	75	100	100	91.6
BE Vocabulary skills	6	100	83	83	100	91	91.4
BE Grammar	6	100	100	100	100	100	100
Average		96.6	72.6	76.3	96.6	96.8	87.83 87.78

Table 2: Business English

The students have almost fared equally well in three parameters-starting and Conclusion, organization of ideas and content Justification. When it came to the usage of language and non-verbal communication, the students have shown quite good improvement. Thus this approach through project had actually made the students to become dynamic, improve their inter personal skills, way of presentation and justifying their content.

Topic Name	No. of Students in Team	Good Start and Conclusion	Verbal Communication	Non Verbal Communication	Organization of Ideas	Content Justification	Average
Natural Calamities	5	100	80	70	100	100	90
Electric Car	5	100	80	70	100	90	88
Artificial Intelligence	5	100	90	80	100	90	92
Newspaper	5	100	80	90	100	90	92
Qualities of a successful person	6	100	90	90	60	70	82

Solar Energy	6	75	100	66	83	100	84.8
Average	32	95.8	86.6	77.6	90.5	90	88.1

Table 3: General Topics

The performance of the students has been decent enough in all the parameters as compared to the above two tables. Significant change observed from this set of students when they tried to speak on general topics of their interest the students fared well in all the parameters. One keen observation that is noticed was the improvement of their verbal communication skills as against topics on context based topics. The students were able to express their thoughts with a decent flow of words and appropriate tense during their presentation. However, though their non-verbal communication is acceptable, it happened to be the least scorer with 77.6% for appropriate use of body language. The students need to practice and make a conscious effort in improving their body language.

Topic Name	No of students in Team	Good Start and Conclusion	Verbal Communication	Non Verbal Communication	Organization of Ideas	Content Justification
English Language	32	98.3	79.3	73	85	87
BE Grammar	32	96.6	72.6	76.3	96.6	96.8
General Topics	32	95.8	86.6	77.6	90.5	90
Average	96	96.9	79.5	75.63	90.7	91.2

Table 4: Average of all three projects

Conclusion: Acquisition of language skills is not a cake walk for many. Infact most of the students fail to convey the message properly for lack of communication skills. Collaborative learning, one of the principles of Communicative Language Teaching, has been identified and used as a strong facilitator of group learning that enables mastery of content, develop critical thinking and problem solving skills, and enriches interpersonal skills thereby improving the speaking eloquence of the learners. Many approaches and strategies have been tried and used by the facilitators to improve the skills of the students especially as for most of the engineering students speaking in front of an audience is the first time. Though the students are from schools with English as the medium of instruction, still they lack the requisite skills to interact with their peer group and need a platform to work on.

Students were made to learn these skills through project learning the collaborative way. students were already exposed to individual activities through the lab curriculum, however exposure to group learning through Project made them to improve their skills in group. Through this learning the students fairly displayed their interpersonal skills, presentation skills, justified their content and were able to successfully convey the content using appropriate language skills and body language.

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