RESEARCH ARTICLE

COLLABORATIVE LEARNING IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

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ABSTRACT

Learning takes place throughout the lives of humans. It is a constant process and everyone has to learn in order to acquire new knowledge or modify the existing one. Whether it is a course, a subject, a skill (professional or life skills) or a language, learning happens in all the fields and all the time. While learning languages also, people put a lot of practice and willpower. In language classrooms, teachers implement several strategies, approaches and techniques whereas learners learn these with proper attention to make their learning a fruitful one. In this learning process, the learners tend to adopt various techniques like pair work, group work, cooperative learning, collaborative learning and so on. Now-a-days, most of the learners follow the technique of collaborative learning where they learn new knowledge and new things. The learners also follow the same techniques while learning new languages, especially, in learning the English language and they learn the English language in groups by sharing their knowledge among the group members within a short period of time. So collaborative learning is a very useful technique for the learners to learn the English language systematically in the modern English classrooms.

This paper sheds a light on the importance collaborative learning approach where the learners learn through activities based on group work or team work. First of all, this paper discusses the importance of learning, particularly,in the ELL environment. Then this paper gives an introduction to collaborative learning and it also explains the best practices for collaborative leaning. After that, it also illustrates the salient features of collaborative learning. Later, it exemplifies comprehensively how collaborative learning is useful in ELL environment. Finally, useful tips are given for both teachers and learners for developing their teaching and learning skills.

Key words:classrooms; collaborative learning;ELL environment; ELLs; ELT; teachers; groupwork; tasks; team work.

Introduction

In the twenty-first century, humans' knowledge has been increased by leaps and bounds and it is possible only because of theirattitude towards leaning. Continuous leaning is the key for the right success of human beings' development and they achieve great success in almost all the fields that they work in. Continuous learning also keep humans to fit well both physically and psychologically. Through learning only humans update their knowledge from time to time and apply the same knowledge to get fruitful results in their sincere attempts. Humans are benefitted a lot through continuous learning such as learning new skills, getting new ideas, sharing knowledge, time

management, better organization, maintaining good relationships, keeping well with the latest developments and trends and gaining insight from the practical knowledge. Moreover, humans also identify the potential problems quickly and try to generate solutions innovatively by stimulating their minds and keep themselves inspired and passionate about what they perform. To develop and refine the humans' knowledge and skills that they need throughout their life, they can make it possible only through constant leaning. Since learning has that much importance, we have to thrive for it in order to get more and more knowledge which leads people to get success throughout their lives.

In classrooms, teachers use various teaching strategies to motivate their learners towards learning. The teachers adopt novel techniques, methods and approaches in order to make their teaching-learning process more effective. As aresult, the learners' concentration increases on the subject taught and learning also takes place in a more pleasant atmosphere. When teachers understand various backgrounds, learning levels and need of their learners, the teaching-learning process becomes more fruitful and meaningful. The teachers should try to make use of the available technologies in their classrooms to involve their learners more on their subjects. The learners also should try to adopt new techniques of learning their subjects so that the learning process becomes quite easier and faster.

In English language learning (ELL) environment, effective learning takes place when the learning process is done in a learner-centered way. It is possible when the English language teachers apply various approaches and strategies that are suitable for their English language learners (ELLs). The ELT teachers have to say good bye to the old-fashioned methods and should adopt the latest methods and approaches of their teaching in ELL environment. The main concern of the teachers must be on the needs and interests of their students and they have to involve their learners in doing work in pairs or groups as it enhances their knowledge as well as their learning skills. When the learners perform various activities in their classrooms in the form of tasks or projects, each learner of the group contributes something to the given task and fruitful

results will be the product of the task. Since the concept of collaborative learning is to attain successful results by doing the tasks in groups or teams, the ELT teachers should adopt this approach in their regular classrooms.

Introduction to Collaborative Learning

When the learners have the capacity to learn something, it is really their gift and if they have the ability to learn something, it is their skill. But, when the learners have the willingness to learn, it is their choice. Collaborative learning involves groups of learners who work for completing a task or finding a solution to the problem or creating a product and it is an educational approach to teaching and learning. When the learners learn in groups, they are more comfortable and share their knowledge with each another and learn many new things from the group members. Even the learners who are backward in their studies can perform well when they do the tasks in groups.While working together in groups in collaborative learning, they naturally take part in the work according to their choices and it motivates them to do the task with more willingness. Hence, there are plenty of chances to get very good results of the given tasks to them and these successful results lead them to have more fruitful collaborative learning. Moreover, the learners in collaborative learning do the things easier and quicker by saving their time, stress and energy while they perform these tasks in groups. When the learners participate in groups in collaborative learning, the motivation of the learners will be heightened and the learners feel more comfortable and independent while doing the tasks. The learners also find self-satisfaction as they do the tasks by discussing with the other group members. Moreover, the learners' confidence levels are increased and the progress towards learner autonomy is also remarkably increased.

In collaborative learning, a group or team of learnersworks together to achieve a common objective that is generally to assist one another in order to learn their teaching material.Collaborative learning teams not only have higher level of thinking but also store information for longer times than that of the learners who work individually. It is true that

groups naturally learn through 'discussions, clarification of ideas and evaluation of other's ideas'. The information that they converse in their discussions retain in their memory for a long time. Vygotsky, the father of social learning, is in favour of assessing the ability of the learners in solving problems rather than in just acquiring knowledge. Hence, the concept of collaborative learning is some way concerned with Vygotsky's notion of "zone of proximal development". It contemplates what a learner can do if he/she is helped by peers or adults. By considering this model for learning, we may consider collaboration to increase learners' awareness of other concepts. Now, we shall discuss the ways to include the best practices for collaborative learning in the classrooms.

Best Practices for Collaborative Learning

Mostly, effective collaborative learning embroils the formation of goals for the group and also accountability for individuals. This launches a clear-cut or definite purpose and also retains the group on task. Before giving any assignment, the teachers should define clear goals and objectives to save their precious classroom time. While grouping the learners also, the teachers should think of an ideal and moderate size. The group should be neither very small which does not allow divergent thinking nor very big where all the members may not involve in the task given for the group. So, the ideal group size should be with a minimum of 4 to 5 learners to make the learning environment a successful one. Then the group standards should be more flexible. Negotiation and interactivity play a vital role in group learning. Some findings in research also suggest that the quality of interactions influence collaborative learning. Jacob and Campbell, in their studies in 1960s suggest, "Norms

are pervasive, even deviant norms are handed down and not questioned". That is the reason that the group norms should be not be very rigid, they should be flexible. According to situations, there should be changes in the norms. As a result, the groups become neither intolerant nor rigid and do not develop any sub-groups. The teachers should make the learners to develop successful interpersonal communication and build trust among the group members. Usually, assignments give some kind of encouragement to the learners of the group which results in explaining the concepts comprehensively to each other. Even it is also established from studies that learners those who deliver and get complex elucidations benefitted a lot from collaborative learning. Hence, open communication is the key for the real success of collaborative learning. When the tasks are larger, the teachers should make certain roles to the group by making the challenging tasks into smaller parts in order to save time and energy. Once the tasks are divided into parts, then different roles are assigned. The learners get a chance to select the roles that they like and change their roles by the division of the task or sessions. The teachers have to conduct a pre-test and post-test to make sure whether the learning takes place together by the group or not. In fact, this method is used by many researches to check whether the groups are learning. As a part of their duty, the teachers should study the learners' learning process. Furthermore, the learners not only develop social interactions in learning but also support diversity. The collaboration of this type permits learners to become "experts" in the topic assigned to them. The University of Iowa discusses some other strategies such as learning cells, buzz groups, using clusters, fish bowl debates or round robin.

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Collaborative learning allows groups to reduce anxiety. Group learning provides a source of support when different concepts are tackled. As groups use humour and make congenial environment for learning, the learners achieve a very good progress in learning new things. Until the learners stay on their tasks, the groups are allowed to use some stress-reducing strategies. Moreover, the groups involve in more quality discussions which result in successful functioning of the group with shared leadership. The groups' task functions include researching or providing information, summarizing, clarifying points, initiating discussions, challenging assumptions and reaching a consensus. To facilitate project-based learning well, the real world problems are used which often give the right scope for collaborative learning. While giving the assignments to the learners, the most important aspect is its designing. The learners are here advised to follow a step-by-step procedure to solve the given tasks. At the same time, the teachers have to keep in their minds about the diversity of groups as the learners of the groups are from different backgrounds, experiences, talents and different in their ways of learning and their thoughts or ideas. In some studies, it is found that the groups of mixed ability tend to more from the members of the group and the achievement of the low level learners has been increased. Even leaners get a chance to learn from the others when the groups are rotated.To attain good results and make the learners busy in their work, the modern teachers try to implement collaborative learning approach in their classrooms. Moreover, the learners also involve actively in the given tasks and doing them with the collaboration of their group members. Therefore, it is time to study the salient features of collaborative learning.

The Salient Features of Collaborative Learning

The following are the salient features of Collaborative Learning:

➢ Collaborative learning (CL) is involves groups of learners to accomplish the given tasks.

➢ CL promotes knowledge sharing among the group members.

➢ CL supports the learners to develop their critical thinking skills.

➢ CL encourages even the average learners to participate actively in the tasks.

➢ CL develops mutual cooperation among the learners.

➢ CL promotes the learners to work together in groups.

➢ CL develops good relationship among the learners.

➢ CL cultivates the learners to have a positive attitude towards their teachers.

➢ CL stimulates learners' self-management skills.

➢ CL supports learning-centered approach.

➢ CL helps the learners in developing their oral communication skills.

➢ CL cultivates the habit of active participation among the learners.

Fig: Some Salient Features of Collaborative Learning

➢ CLmakes the learners get excited about learning.

➢ CL lessens the anxiety of exams and testing system.

➢ CL yields successful results.

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- CL develops problem-solving techniques among the learners.

- CL promotes learners' self-learning.

- CL encourages learners to develop social relationships.

- CL leads learners towards successful learning.

- CL makes more difficult tasks into simple ones.

- CL promotes cooperation within the groups.

- CL boosts up learners' motivation.

- CLhelps learners moderate their anxiety.

- CL develops learning communities.

- CL supports learning by doing method.

- CL enhances learners' memory power.

- CL lessens the duration of the performance of a task.

- CL promotes leaners to clear their ideas through debates and discussions.

- CL develops learners' leadership qualities.

- CL enriches rational thinking.

- CL prepares the learners doing the activities with a lot of perfection.

- CL develops positive attitude towards the subject that learners learn.

- CL encourages learners to perform tasks with proper encouragement.

- CL develops team approach for problem solving while maintaining individual accountability.

- CL develops self-management skills of the learners.

- CL enhances learners' mental ability and rational thinking.

- CL promotes more classroom attendance.

- CL enhances practical knowledge among the learners.

- CL promotes teachers to have positive attitude towards their learners.

As collaborative learning is beneficial to the ELLs in many ways, the English teachers are advised to implement this approach in their regular English classrooms to make the learners more active in doing their tasks together in groups.

Collaborative Learning in ELL Environment

While learning a foreign or second language, first of all, learners have to learn the structure of the language and its use in appropriate situations. A Spanish native who learns English will be habituated to put adjectives after nouns and when he learns English, he should do in the reversing order. Since the learners come from diverse backgrounds, the first and foremost step that the teachers have to take is to create a congenial learning atmosphere so that the learners feel happy, welcome, ready and empowered to learn the subject that is taught in their classrooms. Even the small things that the teachers do in their classrooms to reach their English language learners (ELLs) make a major variance when they try to learn a new language and often navigating an entirely different culture also. So, an encouraging environment is a needed in the English classrooms for ELLs since the learners are motivated a lot with proper encouragement of the teachers. In order to improve their English, the ELLs have to do two things - devote time for learning and practice what they have learnt. ELLs use English to explain concepts and contribute to their work when activities are structured to support learner-to-learner or group interaction. This provides the English language teachers to gauge what the learners have learned and it also demonstrates the learners' progress in English language development. The growth of the population of ELLs has been increasing year by year. For instance, in the US, the growth of ELLs over the last decade has been enormously increased. According to the National Clearinghouse for English Language Acquisition (2011), "More than one half of states have experienced a growth rate of over 100% in their ELLs numbers". It clearly shows how much increase is there in the total number of ELLs not only in the US but also everywhere in the world.

Effective learning takes place in the English language learning classrooms when the teachers do some

environmental modifications. These modifications may include changing the seating arrangements, using the latest technology, involving the students more in learning, applying various techniques and methods of teaching English, allowing mobile devices while learning and so on. Furthermore, effective learning in ELL environment is possible where the English teachers implement different strategies and techniques to motivate their learners in their regular classrooms. When the teachers present information using various activities in the classrooms, the learners actively learn the subject and get a successful transition towards the process of English language development. Hence the English language teachers have to present the topics in an easier way for their ELLs to understand so that the language development process becomes smoother. When the learners feel more successful in their unique challenges, they will become more confident in their learning. When the learners feel that the tasks are more difficult, then the teachers have to chunk these tasks to make the learners more adaptable. The numbers of ELLs has increased drastically in US public schools. According to Center for American Progress, the number of ELLs increased by 51% in US public schools between 1997-1998 and 2008-2009. TESOL International Association states that six million ELLs currently enrolled which is the fastest-growing student population in the US public schools. Therefore, equitable practices are to be implemented both in and out of the classroom environment to ensure ELLs get a fair chance of both learning and excelling in learning.

The twenty-first generation teachers are more exposed to the latest trends in education and many of them are vexed with the traditional teaching methods. The same scenario reflects on the English language classrooms also. The English language teachers try to implement novel techniques in their classrooms in order to involve the learners into their learning process. They also find that group work or team work promotes the learners' learning in a learner-friendly atmosphere where the learners gain more knowledge and develop critical thinking. Hence the teachers try to adopt such innovative and useful approaches to their classroom teaching and create better learning environment for the learners. As the main principle of collaborative learning is to engageELLs in groups to perform the given tasks, the English language teachers have to assign certain tasks to get better results. While giving the tasks in ELL environment, the English teachers have to consider the levels of the learners and more often, they have to give proper instructions before the tasks are given to the learners. The English teachers should select the topics according to the needs and interests of their learners so that the learners participate actively in their groups and try to accomplish the given tasks easily. The learners feel more comfortable with each other when the learning takes place in groups. Hence, the English language teachers should encourage collaborative learning in ELL environment where the learners are highly motivated and given the responsibility of learning. The activities done by the learners in groups or pairs create critical thinking skills, learn knowledge gaining techniques and also helps in active learning among the learners. The learners also learn how to manipulate classroom information into the working knowledge of their own. When the teachers aim at their learners' acquiring knowledge and the required skills for using the knowledge appropriately in the outer world, then collaborative learning is the best solution.

While implementing collaborative learning in ELT and ELL environment, the English teachers have to adopt various activities such as role plays, think-pair-share, group projects, debates, activities, group and pair activities, Phillips 66, case-based learning, classroom problems, and so on. While doing collaborative activities in the ELL environment,

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the main concern that the teachers have to take care is formation of groups.

In collaborative learning, the learners are with mixed learning styles. Some of them are quiet and some are outspoken. There are various factors that keep the learners so quiet and some among them are their level of difficulty, shyness, introspectiveness, tediousness, nervousness, tiredness or any other disturbances that cause effective learning. The English teachers have to take care that each and every learner from the groups should contribute something to the given in the task. At the same time, the language teachers have to create small activities for the groups where the learners have speaking difficulty. In this case, the teachers have to encourage the learners and show more attention on them. Learners get a lot of benefit from a variety of collaborative activities such as doing projects, tasks and inductive approaches in the ELL environment.

The concept of collaborative learning mainly based on two key principles, namely, 'learning by doing' and 'working in groups'. Here the ELLs learn by doing the activities and they also learn many more things when they work together in groups. The ELLs follow peer-instruction which allows them to check each other's points and report if there are any misconceptions. This technique is the main aspect for ELLs to acquire good language skills. This happens not only because language is a fundamentally social act but also because misunderstandings always realize or make themselves known in actual use of language. English language teachers generally follow the techniques of group and pair work activities while they follow

collaborative learning approach in ELL environment and the learners most commonly practice the activities based on vocabulary and grammar that they have been learning in their classrooms. The ELLs are also incorporated some wider range of activities like project works and collaborative tasks. Each and every learner is a resource in collaborative learning who contributes a lot to complete the task successfully. The role of the English teachers is not only to act as a resource person but also to participate in groups to resolve the problems of the ELLs. When the teachers involve in these activities, then the tasks or projects will become more effective to involve the ELLs in groups or pairs to conduct some questionnaires or interviews with the other teachers. The topics for their tasks or projects may include: the reasons for living and working in a specific country, how people spend their weekends or free time, why do you learn English, which are your favourite subjects and why, who the most popular football player in the world and why and the list goes on. Such activities provide the ELLs an opportunity of hearing a wide range of voices in the natural setup and also interacting with a wide range of speakers in the ELL environment.

Collaborative learning also heightens a wide range of skills that are not limited just only to language skills but also to group management and self-management skills, effective planning and decision making skills, higher-level thinking skills, leadership skills, presentation skills, organizational skills, communication skills and coordination and cooperation skills and rational thinking skills. These are the most essential skills to attain certain goals in the contemporary and modern world. When Collaborative learning is done with Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL), it permits the ELLs to explore various subject areas through English. This gives the ELLs an opportunity of developing their language skills as well as gaining the knowledge of various subjects. The language teachers have to involve the ELLs actively in learning the language skills and provide them opportunities for ELLs not only to listen, speak, read and write in English but also to reflect on the issues, ideas, subject, tasks and interests of English. Learning has been considered as just a passive skill in the past

where knowledge is acquired and kept in mind for future use. Whereas, the modern ELLs immediately apply their knowledge learned in the classroom to their real life situations when they participate in groups to accomplish certain tasks or projects using collaborativeapproach.

Since the concept of teaching and learning of English has been changing from time to time, the teachers of ELT have to implement the latest strategies, techniques, methods and approaches in teaching the ELLs where they learn English by doing activities in the classrooms. Therefore, the English language teachers have to implement collaborative learning approach that fosters the ELLs' learning skills enormously.

Conclusion

This paper has given an emphasis on collaborative learning based on group activitiesthat are more appropriate for the modern ELL environment. First of all, the importance of learning, especially, in the ELL environment has been discussed. Later, an introduction to collaborative learning and its best practices have been thoroughly examined. Moreover, the salient features of collaborative learning have been expounded in detail. Furthermore, the usefulness of collaborative learning in the ELL environment has been profoundly exemplified. At the end, some important suggestion have been given for ELT and ELL teachers, researchers, curriculum developers and learners for enhancing their teaching-leaning skills in ELL environment.

Collaborative learning elevates ELLs' language learning skills as it gives them an opportunity to share their ideas with the members of their group and paves the way to learn anything in depth that restores in their mind for a long period of time. As the learners have been habituated to work in groups since their schooling days, they will certainly implement the same methods while they have to learn any difficult task even in their higher studies in ELL environment. It is the responsibility of the teachers to implement various strategies and approaches of ELT and ELL in order to involve the ELLs in learning the language skills thoroughly. When teachers find that there is no progress in their

leaners, then they have to understand the group dynamics of the ELLs and integrate them with collaborative approaches to form learners' teams so that they will pass on to the subsequent level of learning through collaborative leaning approach. It is sure that real collaboration happens when the ELLs participate in their work with a lot of determination, dedication and devotion towards the work that they do in groups. Furthermore, each member of the group has to contribute his part to accomplish the given task for the group and cooperate with each other in a learner-friendly environment so that the main aspect of collaborative learning in ELL environment will be a great success.

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