

English through Literature in Collaborative Classroom

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Abstract

Teaching language with the help of literature is a Classical Paradigm. In India and other Asian countries, teaching literature remains at the centre to learn the English language. This paper focuses on how literature works to improve language competence in Collaborative Classroom. Collaborative learning is combination of educational, linguistic, philosophical, social and psychological approaches to learning. In Collaborative learning, the teacher can train students to activities that involve memory, thinking, and understanding of how and when to use their knowledge. Through collaborative teaching, teachers can lead students to complete their given task by working together in groups. Working collaboratively can improve both language and communicative competence. Collaborative learning teacher teaches skills, rather than just data. As a result, active learning and self-learning are nurtured in English classroom. Students eventually learn the craft of interdependence and independence. Collaborative learning can be a major solution for problems relating to mixed ability classroom or to the classroom with different proximal development. It helps the learners acquire both foundational and non-foundational skills. The paper concludes with a few literary evidence, collaborative classroom experiment and experience.

Keywords: Collaborative Learning, skills, active learning, cognitive entity and social skills, foundational, non foundational etc.

Teaching literature to learn a language is a classical paradigm in teaching a foreign or second language. European Classical languages, mainly Greek and Italy, used its literature to improve competence in language. Classicists also believed that studying the culture and thought expressed in writing could bring competence to use the second language. In fact, teaching literature to learn English language still occupies the centre in most Indian classrooms. It is because of the demand in large range of English users and usages. At the same time, there are language teachers who pay attention to the needs of learners. As a result, there are a few changes in the structure of language teaching in educational institutions that bring debates and values in ancient mode of teaching literature to learn a language. Billows, Carter and Long, McRae, Duff and many more linguists added that literary texts are efficient material as they involve readers emotionally into the text, provide multiple interpretations ready for discussion, and enable them understand cultural code and language patterns.

Collaborative learning is an educational approach where two or more learners work together on a specific knowledge of task. Collaborative learning (CL) is more social as it involves learners to work, converse, share learning and learning experience with their peers. CL is philosophical in approach as students learn better by understanding and helping their peers learn. Collaborative learning can also be defined as a psychological approach as it involves how learning together shape and effect theirs attitude of learning and living in life both professionally and personally. Harvard Medical School is the first institution that introduced a collaborative program named “New Pathways Program” for the first year medical students. The programme teamed students of 6 to 8 in number as a group, to come with solution for diagnostic program clinically. They are allowed to get help from Harvard Medical School professionals and resources. Students should identify the problem and diagnose patience by collaborating with peers. The program concluded:

Diagnostic judgement and collaborative skills are the capacities that the New Pathways Program tries to develop in young physician. Indeed, the larger educational importance of collaborative learning is that it makes capable intellectual interdependence- that is, social maturity integrated with intellectual maturity – may be most important lesson students should be attend to learn. (Bruffee 2)

The same kind of practice still remains in practice all over the world over several decades. Thus, it holds a fixed place over the test of time. Even though CL entered with field of Medicine and Sciences, it was flourished in the USA in the field of language studies in colleges and universities. Therefore, Collaborative learning is an educational, linguistic, philosophical, social and psychological approach to learning. There are many definitions

available to define CL, but they are all based on some of the basic assumptions about learning and learners. It includes, learning is active process rather than staying passive in the classroom, learning relay on rich context involving activities with an opportunity to apply one's idea and learners are diverse, that is, with different educational background, culture, experience, proximal development and so on. .

Collaborative Learning promotes activities such as memory, thinking, understanding, using the knowledge – where, when and how. It is more important to know how to use the information than just to know the information. As Alvin Tofler points out,

Early computers consisted of a “memory” or bank of data, plus a “program” or a set of information that told the machine how to manipulate the data. New generation computers now not only store greater masses of data, but multiple programs, so that the operator can apply a variety of programs to the same database. Such systems also requires a “master program” that, in effect, tells the machine which program to apply and when. The multiplication and addition of a master program vastly increased the power of the computer. (Future Shock, 414)

A Similar strategy can be used to enhance human adaptability. It helps students to move from passive listeners to active participants. In CL, advanced students can help their peers to learn. The primary aim of CL classroom is competency (language and communication) than just knowledge. Language competency can mean grammatical competency, the ability to use language error free and recognise correct sentences. Communicative competency is the ability to use language appropriately that concentrates on communicating the message and not on errors. As they practice to use language when they converse with their peers, it can bring communicative competence in them. It gives teacher an opportunity to monitor groups and students individually where teacher can engage remedial teaching, As a result, both language and communicative competence can be focused in CL.

Students in group depend on each other to complete the given task. At the same time, they can contribute individually to the team. Students own and share responsibility in CL. Bruffee advocates that how one owns one's own authority on other and accepting other's authority on them. Initially, there can be hesitations to show one's authority and accepting the same. In fact, collaborative teacher too initially may question themselves whether they are working for what they are paid for and the same may rise from their peers, institutions, students and parents. But once students learn the art of conversation (consensus and negotiation), they develop the craft of independence and interdependence.

One of the major challenges faced by the teacher all over the world is a classroom with diverse students. They possess different proximal development, cultural code, educational background, beliefs and learning style. For example, the average and above

average students understand and learn, whereas below average students are challenged in classroom all the time. Thus, they lose self motivation and self interest in learning language. Collaborative classroom provides attention to all students. It helps to improve the cognitive entity and social skills. In other words, Collaborative class provides both foundational (what teacher gives them) and non-foundational knowledge (what they learn by themselves).

Bruffee's Collaborative Classroom involves four stages.

1. The teacher has to divide students into small groups.
2. Students are provided with open ended tasks, so they can arrive at consensus and negotiate among them. (The collaborative task can sometimes involve close ended questions in situation where it involves reader to study the text deeply for accurate details and also based on student's proximal development. Students can make use of books, access dictionary and discuss with their friends in the group).

3. To hear and check the reports from all the groups and negotiates among them.

4. The teacher must study the quality of task the students have done collaboratively.

Based on Henry S. Kienner collaborative task, a task can be initiated with a brief lecture on how to collaborate and work together. A copy of literary text can be the focus of learning that includes questions and tasks based on students' proximal development, resulting the group to move to consensus in group as the work together to give answer as a whole. One member from each group represents the answers/writing by presenting/writing on board or in form of presentation and with conversation to other groups. Even, a teacher or student can do it. At any time, the teacher has authority to add their points to the students. Wiener stressed the role of collaborative teacher during activities (task):

Most teachers I have observed travel from group to group answering questions from students, participating in discussion, probing with further questions, guiding response and focusing students' attention on the task. Although some of steps may be necessary from time to time, the teacher's presence as a group member challenges one of the basic tents of collaboration in the classroom.
(57)

Here is a sample of task from collaborative classroom conducted in a class of II year UG students. The text taken for collaborative task is "A Day's Wait" by Ernest Hemingway, a short story published in 1933. The story is about a nine year old boy named Schatz who is sick during a cold winter. As the boy suffers from flu, a doctor is called in. The doctor informs the boy's father that his temperature is 102 degrees Fahrenheit and recommends three different medicines. The boy is depressed and finally he inquires his father that when he will die. He thinks that a 102 degree temperature is lethal as he heard from his friends (from France where Celsius is used) that one cannot live beyond 44 degrees temperature. He feels

relaxed after his father's explanation about the differences in two scales, Fahrenheit and Celsius. The story focuses the boy's misunderstanding leading to many changes in his own mind and the problems due to communication gap.

There were 40 students and grouped into seven teams. Initially, they listened to a general instruction on how to collaborate to complete the task such as how to share work, to ask for help and to provide help to their peers in the group. Then, the task sheets were provided that was designed in two levels based on student's proximal zone. Level A was the set of question for below average and average level students, which was designed in order to help them to read, understand, and interpret the text collaboratively. Level B was a set of questions for average and above average, which was designed to make them learn beyond the text that included critical thinking, parallel reading, and creative writing. In fact, it is important how they learn language when they collaborate with the help of text and task. Finally, the entire class shared their questions and answers orally or in writing (on the blackboard).

After general instruction, the students were encouraged to read the text individually for 20 to 25 minutes without any help from their friends in the group, and later they were encouraged to discuss with each other if there was any difficulty in interpretation or understanding the text. Individual reading was promoted in order to make the students feel independent in their work. Discussion on the text was allowed for 5 Minutes in order to make the students discuss their learning, clarification and doubts regarding the interpretation of the text. The above shift from reading individually to collaboratively provides them an opportunity to be an independent reader and interdependent peer.

Though students were hesitant initially, they became more and more interested in reading the text though hesitated initially. Among eight teams, three were given Level B task sheets based on at least one advantaged student in the group. The remaining four groups were given Level A task sheets as there were no advantaged students in the group. Their interest to complete the task is also visible. They were provided the task sheets and instructed that one member in each team could read the task to their peers in the group. Because listening to others is important thing to collaborate. For the first few questions, they clarified their answers before writing the answers in their task sheet. A few groups wrote using pencils or wrote in their rough notes and copied it in sheets after clarification. It showed that they were felt hesitated to go with their answers by their own reading with their peers. In fact, it conveyed that there was definite hesitation to writing whether it was task sheets or exams. It is the duty of the collaborative teacher to make the students feel confident to write their own answers after discussion with their friends in the group. Collaborative learning can achieve it full success when the authority of learning is shifted from the teacher to the learner. So, it

was given to the students to decide the answer by negotiating among their friends. The role of collaborative teacher is to monitor each group, clarify, and help the teams if necessary.

On monitoring their collaborative writing, it was identified that students had read the text. But the problem lay when they transformed their understanding of text into writing. For example, to a question in level A, “What is Epidemic?” one of the groups answered “Epidemic is a kind of flu disease. And there was no dangerous if you avoided pneumonia.” As they were encouraged to use books and dictionary if needed, they copied the line “This was a light epidemic of flu and there was no danger if you avoided pneumonia.” from the text for the answer. It shows that they had no practice to write by themselves. They were asked to rewrite by their own language. Grammatical, punctuation errors were pointed out to make them conscious in their writing. At the same time, pointing out too many mistakes may disappoint student to write further. In collaborative learning, how students collaborate better in order to learn competency in English is important and every answer out of their collaboration is a welcome sign.

Of the seven groups, two groups completed the task sheets in time. Other five groups left few unanswered question due to delay to copy from their notebooks. Even though they were encouraged to write answers, they waited for teacher’s approval for their answers. Of two groups who had completed their task sheets, one group had advantaged student; but the other group had no advantaged student in the group. It is evident that it is not important to have an advantaged student in the group to collaborate better. It is all about positivity, self motivation and less hesitation that helped teams to work better collaboratively. Finally, they shared their few tasks on the board and few orally. There was some kind of consensus within collaborative group and classroom regarding a question from the task - “Keeping the pain and suffering within you is brave! Add your points relating to the boy in ‘A Day’s Wait’.” The Students shared different opinion (agreement and agree to disagreement with various viewpoint) regarding the above question. They finally added all the possible points to the answer.

Therefore, students learned the craft of independence and interdependence along with language through reading text individually, collaboratively, sharing the ideas orally within the group, writing collaboratively for the task and sharing their writing with their friends. Thus, the whole class collaborates by sharing their learning and sharing by teaching to their peers in the group and to the whole class.

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