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Cooperative learning and its motivational impact on ESL learners

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ABSTRACT
The present students at the tertiary level need a learning environment in which they seek more involvement. The challenge for the English language teacher is to create such a situation and enhance the morale of the students. Cooperative learning certainly does augment the motivational levels of the students and provides a platform for better learning. The present paper explores the cooperative learning as a learning strategy and includes the findings of a questionnaire on English language learning at the tertiary level in VIT University. As competition is valued over cooperation, a student should be made aware of the need for healthy and positive interaction.

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Introduction

Professional development around the world is geared around student-centered instruction. Few teachers operate solely on traditional methodologies. Many incorporate a variety of teaching strategies including the student-centered technique of cooperative learning. Teacher refresher courses focus studies on such techniques. Cooperative learning (CL) exists in some form in almost every classroom. The present paper explores cooperative learning and its impact on motivation.

Cooperative learning is more than just group work. In a traditional group work, students are asked to work in groups with no attention paid to group functioning. In cooperative learning, group work is carefully prepared, planned and monitored [1]. Instructional models and structures have been designed, which teachers can adopt and adapt, to help the group work operate more effectively by creating an environment for interactive learning [2].

CL And Motivation

Cooperative learning is organized and managed group work in which students work cooperatively in small groups to achieve academic as well as social goals. A cooperative learning lesson often begins with clear instructions by the teacher on the various roles that students take in order to help them feel responsible for participating and learning. “Team spirit” is stressed with students “learning how to learn” by participation with their peers [3].

Motivational theorists, such as Skinner [4] and Bandura [5] highlight the importance of the consequences of students’ actions for whether or not the actions are learned. In a teacher-centered classroom, reinforcements for positive learning behaviors usually come only from the teacher. In a typical teacher-centered classroom, students often feel negatively interdependent with one another. In contrast, when learners feel positively interdependent toward their peers, they become an alternative source of positive reinforcements for learning. It encourages students to work hard to succeed and help their group mates succeed at learning tasks.

As a motivational strategy, cooperative learning includes all situations where students work in groups to accomplish particular learning objectives. Forsyth and McMillan [6] emphasize intrinsic motivation as the core element in teaching and learning. They add that successful intrinsic motivation develops attitude, establishes inclusion, engenders competence and enhances meaning within diverse students.

CL enhances student self-esteem which in turn motivates students to participate in the learning process [7]. It enhances student satisfaction with the learning experience by making students proactive in completing course content. Students help each other and in doing so build a supportive community which raises the performance level of each member [8].

CL techniques in the Indian context

The present student at the tertiary level encounters unfamiliar situations in a new environment. In such a scenario, cooperative learning reduces anxiety created by new students [9]. In a class of sixty, in the Indian context, seldom do we find students who freely express their opinions in a classroom. In a cooperative learning situation, when students work in a group, the focus of attention is diffused among the group.

In a traditional classroom when a teacher calls upon a student, he/she becomes the focus of attention of the entire class. Any mistakes or incorrect answers become subject to scrutiny by the whole class. In contrast, in a CL situation, when students work in a group, the focus of attention is diffused among the group. In addition, the group produces a product which its members can review prior to presenting it to the whole class, thus diminishing prospects that mistakes will occur at all [10]. When a mistake is made, it becomes a teaching tool instead of a public criticism of an individual student.

CL creates a strong social support system [11]. CL techniques use students' social experiences such as warm-up exercises and group building activities to encourage their involvement in the learning process. The teacher plays a very active role in facilitating the process and interacting with each student while moving around the class and observing students interacting [12]. Teachers may raise questions with individuals or small groups to help advise students or explain concepts. In addition, a natural tendency to socialize with the students on a professional level is created by CL. Students often mention offhandedly that they are having difficulties outside of class related to work, family, friends, etc. Openings like this can lead to a discussion of those problems by the teacher and student in a non-threatening way due to the informality of the situation, and

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additional support from other student services units in such areas can be a beneficial by-product [13].

Methodology

The present day English language teacher has realized that the need of the hour is a task based approach. A case in point is the outcome of a questionnaire that is given to nearly 500 first year engineering students of VIT University. The findings presented here are based on the analysis of 100 student responses. A list of ten questions (Annexure) pertaining to their motivation in learning English, group activities in a class room and LSRW skills were included. There are mostly closed ended questions with one open ended question on motivation. The findings are significant for there is a sea change in the class room teaching strategy.

Results and discussion

The number of English language classes at the tertiary level in India is usually three or four classes per week. The respondents of the questionnaire said that they have four classes per week and it appears to be adequate to cater to the students' needs. In response to the question on the proportion of the teacher talking time to the student talking time in a classroom, the average stands at 60:40. The English as a second language (ESL) classroom appears to be going through a transitional phase for there is greater role for the student in the modern day language classroom. The presence of the teacher invariably makes the child to speak in English in a classroom. In fact, fifty seven percent of the respondents said that they often speak in English in a classroom. Another twenty five percent of them said that they sometimes speak in English.

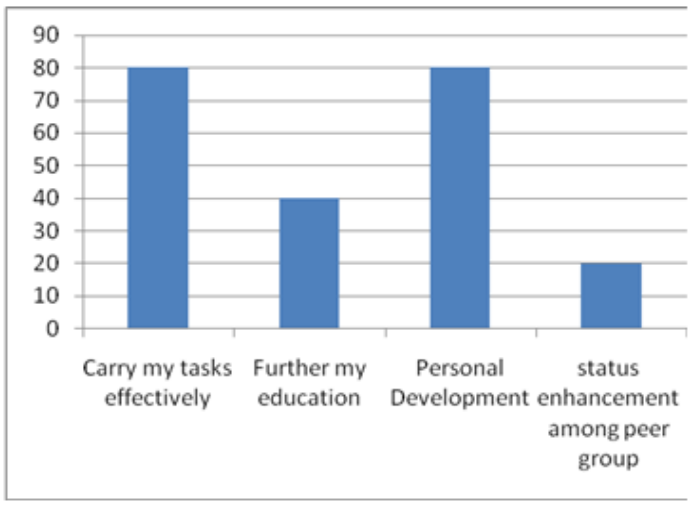

Figure 1. Motivation for learning English

The students' motivation to learn the English language is to carry out his/her tasks effectively and for personal development. As Fig.1 illustrates eighty percent of the students think that this is the primary reason for learning a language. Motivation is commonly thought as an inner state of need or desire that activates an individual to do something to satisfy them. Motivation is typically defined as the forces that account for the arousal, selection, direction, and continuation of behavior. Williams and Burden [14] also give a proposed definition of motivation. In their opinion, motivation maybe constructed as a state of cognitive and emotional arousal, which leads to a conscious decision to act, and which gives rise to a period of sustained intellectual and physical effort in order to attain a previously set goal.

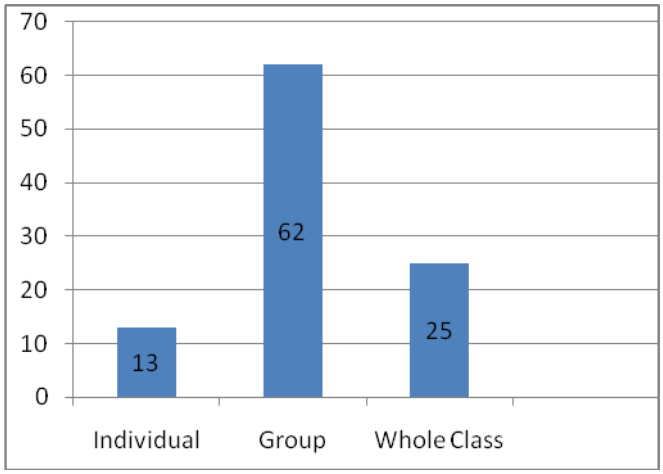

Figure 2. Activities in a classroom

Many teachers of English language have become increasingly aware of the need for group work. The language class room these days is activity centered on motivating the students to be better equipped to face the challenges ahead. As technology is a group activity, for an engineering student it is imperative to learn to adapt to a group work. Figure 2 illustrates that sixty two percent of the student respondents give evidence to the fact that they do work in groups in a language class. Group work certainly enhances the motivational level of the students.

Group interaction assists learners in negotiating for more comprehensible input and in modifying their output to make it more comprehensible to others [15]. While communicating in a group, students need to understand one another, so they learn to adapt quickly to the needs of the group members. Cooperative learning, a proven language learning strategy, calls for proper class room management on the part of the language teacher who acts as a facilitator. The language teacher has a greater task of planning ahead the group activity and the learning outcome that he/she envisages.

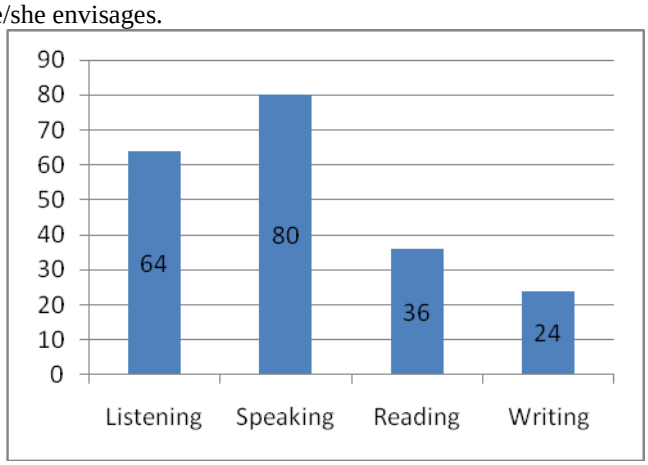

Figure 3. Skills these activities helped the students develop

CL activities certainly equip the students with better LSRW skills which are essential for their work place effectiveness. As Fig. 3 illustrates, eighty percent of the respondents said that group activities helped them develop their speaking skills. Listening is the primary skill required for better inter-personal relationship. Nearly sixty four percent of the respondents said group activities improved their listening skill. Reading and writing do not score probably due to the type of activities that are given.

Cooperative learning fosters student interaction at all levels [16]. Research has shown that when students of high ability work with students of lower ability, the former benefit by

explaining or demonstrating and the latter benefit by seeing an approach to problem solving modeled by a peer [17]. Warm-up and group building activities help students to understand their differences and to learn how to capitalize on them rather than use them as a basis for antagonism.

CL activities help students improve their LSRW skills. Students are actively engaged in the learning process. Pairs of students (followed by threesomes and larger groups) working together represent the most effective form of interaction [18]. When students work in pairs one person is listening while the other partner is discussing the question under investigation. Both are developing valuable problem solving skills by formulating their ideas, discussing them, receiving immediate feedback and responding to questions and comments [19].

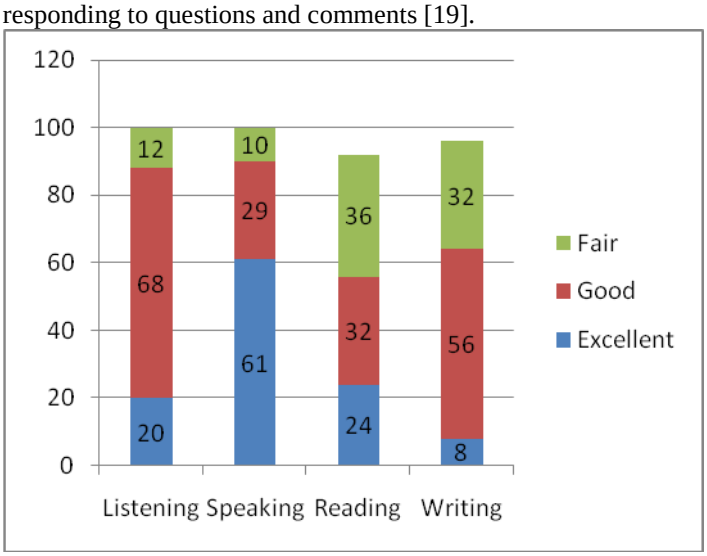

Figure 4. Activities improved their skills

As Fig. 4 illustrates, sixty eight percent of the respondents said that the group activities enabled them to be good at listening while sixty one percent of them said that their speaking improved excellently. It is interesting to note that fifty six percent of the respondents said that these activities improved their writing in a positive way. As students of engineering and technology need good writing skills, this area needs to be explored further. In this highly competitive world, students appear to realize the need to update their knowledge. Fig 4 shows that twenty four percent improved their reading skills excellently whereas thirty two percent said they have certainly improved.

CL helps majority and minority populations in a class learn to work with each other [20]. Because students are actively involved in exploring issues and interacting with each other on a regular basis in a guided fashion, they are able to understand their differences and learn how to resolve social problems which may arise [21]. Training students in conflict resolution is a major component of learning training [22].

One of the questions in the questionnaire is on the factors which contribute to the effectiveness of language learning. Figure 5 shows that fifty six percent strongly agree that IQ is a major factor whereas thirty six percent said that teaching methods strongly affect the language learning process. Another factor they agree on is the social and university language learning environment which certainly has a bearing on the students' motivation to learn a language. As Fig. 5 illustrates, thirty six strongly agree and forty agree with the idea that family support also contributes to the effectiveness of language learning.

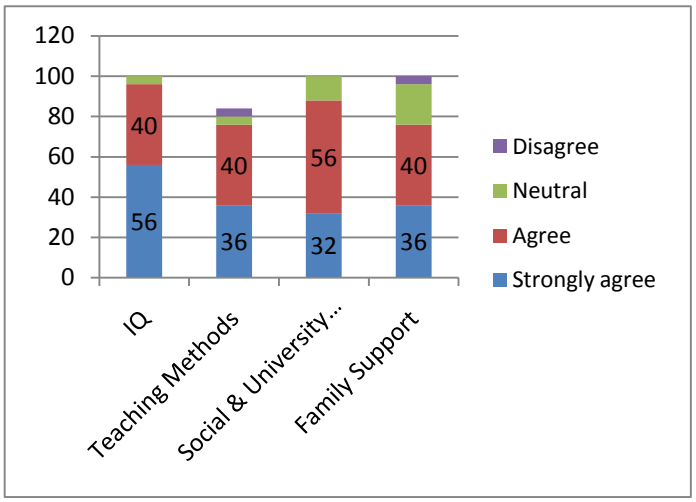

Figure 5.Items contributing to the effectiveness of Language Learning

Success: Individual or Group

Motivational perspectives on cooperative learning presume that task motivation is the most important part of the process and hold that the other processes are driven by motivation. Therefore, scholars with this perspective focus primarily on the reward or goal structures under which students operate. From a motivationalist perspective, cooperative incentive structures create a situation in which the only way group members can attain their own personal goals is if the group is successful. Therefore, to meet their personal goals, group members must both help their group mates to do whatever enables the group to succeed, and, perhaps even more important, to encourage their group mates to exert maximum efforts. In other words, rewarding groups based on group performance (or the sum of individual performances) creates an interpersonal reward structure in which group members will give or withhold social reinforces (e.g., praise, encouragement) in response to group mates' task-related efforts. One intervention that uses cooperative goal structures is group contingencies, in which group rewards are given based on group members' behaviors.

The theory underlying group contingencies does not require that group members actually be able to help one another or work together. That their outcomes are dependent on one another's behavior is expected to be sufficient to motivate students to engage in behaviors that help the group to be rewarded, because the group incentive induces students to encourage goal-directed behaviors among their group mates. A substantial literature in the behavior modification tradition has found that group contingencies can be very effective at improving students' appropriate behaviors and achievement. According to Kessler and McCleod [23], CL promotes positive societal responses, reduces violence in any setting, eliminates fear and blame, and increases honor, friendliness, and consensus. Process is as important as content and goal. CL takes time to master, and facilitators who have done the personal work that allows sharing of power, service to the learners, and natural learning, find CL a joy.

Social Skills: Need of The Hour

A major component of learning elaborated by Johnson, Johnson and Holubec [24], includes training students in the social skills needed to work cooperatively. In our society and current educational framework, competition is valued over cooperation. By asking group members to identify what behaviors help them work together and by asking individuals to reflect on their contribution to the group's success or failure,

students are made aware of the need for healthy, positive, helping interactions [25].

Cooperative learning fosters student interaction at all levels. Research has shown that when students of high ability work with students of lower ability, the former benefit by explaining or demonstrating and the latter benefit by seeing an approach to problem solving modeled by a peer. Warm-up and group building activities help students to understand their differences and to learn how to capitalize on them rather than use them as a basis for antagonism.

CL helps majority and minority populations in a class learn to work with each other. Because students are actively involved in exploring issues and interacting with each other on a regular basis in a guided fashion, they are able to understand their differences and learn how to resolve social problems which may arise. Training students in conflict resolution is a major component of learning training.

Conclusion

CL increases students' persistence and the likelihood of successful completion of assignments. When individuals get stuck they are more likely to give up, but groups are much more likely to find ways to keep going. This concept is reinforced by the Johnsons [26] who state, "In a learning situation, student goal achievements are positively correlated; students perceive that they can reach learning goals if and only if the other students in the learning group also reach their goals. Thus, students seek outcomes that are beneficial to all those with whom they are cooperatively linked. CL provides many advantages to teachers and learners. It fosters student interest, behavioral and attitudinal change, and provides opportunities for success.

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