

An Investigation Into the Impact of Collaborative Practices on the Opportunities for Learning and Participation in an EFL Classroom

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This study explored the extent that a redesign of classroom practices that develop collaboration in the classroom could contribute to an increase in participation and learning opportunities in an EFL classroom. Collaboration refers to mutual cooperation both amongst students and between students and the teacher in order to collectively construct meaning, complete tasks and achieve goals through interaction. On this basis, the main objective of this redesign was to facilitate a greater scope for interaction and productivity through collaboration that could boost the development of knowledge and skills which the students required to both successfully complete their programme and use the target language more effectively in their lives outside the classroom. In order to accomplish this goal, collaborative tasks that involved the participation of all students within a range of participant structures including open class, pair and group structures were conducted. This enabled spoken production and meaning making to be stimulated through various interaction patterns.

The tasks which were observed comprised two collaborative group work tasks and three open class feedback sessions. The latter followed pair and group work activities in which speaking had been integrated with other skills. During these sessions, interactional practices were applied to generate more extensive contributions from students and dialogue between them than could be afforded by the conventional IRE and IRF patterns of interaction. Initially, a member of each group (or pair) was invited to give a brief account of what they had discussed or produced while conducting their previous tasks. Other students were then prompted to respond with prolonged speech utterances such as expressions of opinion, explanations, clarification or advice. This extended discourse, which often included student initiated episodes of dialogue, was designed to provide students space for agency and thus greater opportunities for participation, with the potential to stimulate collaborative support amongst them. The two collaborative group work tasks, similar to the feedback sessions, were designed to generate more prolonged and intellectually challenging interaction amongst students. They both entailed students working in small groups whereby achieving the goal of the task depended on the contributions of each member. As far as possible, the groups were set up so that they included members with diverse skills and profiles to allow the scope for scaffolding and mutual peer support.

The observation data revealed evidence of engagement in episodes of cognitively stimulating interaction, often student initiated and contingent, which involved collective thinking and peer support with students constructively building on each other's contributions and using language for various functions. Furthermore, the perception data obtained from students through questionnaires and interviews indicated that a significantly high number of participants perceived collaborative work as beneficial in vocabulary building, grammar development and speaking.

Potential for impact on ELT

This investigation demonstrates the potential that the establishment of collaborative practices has in generating higher levels of interaction and mutual support and meeting both the cognitive and affective needs of learners in an EFL classroom. Many teachers in EFL settings experience difficulties in implementing pedagogical approaches that focus on learner production and interaction and can even encounter resistance from students. Hindrances commonly cited include curriculum restraints, local educational conditions and cultural values. This study provides an informative insight into how fostering a culture of collaboration in a classroom can enable a teacher to adapt to these difficulties and facilitate student interaction and production. Rather than adhering to a particular method or approach, it illustrates strategies to increase opportunities for learning and participation that can be applied flexibly without the need for any significant adjustment to a set curriculum, even one bound by a rigid exam focus. In this respect, this study may be of relevance to both policy makers and practitioners in EFL settings. The key benefits of collaborative practices in the classroom for learning and development which emerged from this investigation can be identified as follows:

*They provide an invaluable opportunity for students in a monolingual EFL environment with little exposure to L2 in their everyday lives to develop their speaking skills. By establishing a classroom culture in which student to student interaction and responses to contributions of peers in L2 become the norms, more extended exchanges including student initiated contingent interaction may be facilitated.

*Collaborative group work which involves participation in intellectually challenging tasks such as problem solving allows the scope for deeper of cognitive engagement. In this way, through raising the levels of thinking involved, collaborative tasks can stimulate higher levels of meaning making in the interaction of students. Participation in these tasks is also likely to be useful in preparing them for the contexts of language use and interaction they will experience in the future, especially those who will study at a tertiary level in English.

*A collaborative classroom also creates opportunities for peer scaffolding whereby participation in tasks with their peers can enable students to become better equipped to participate in similar activities in the future. Through the process of mutual cooperation, particularly in tasks that value the contribution of each participant, students can use their diverse range of knowledge and skills to support each other.

*Participation in collaborative tasks can help raise awareness of more interactive and productive approaches to learning than the traditional practices which many learners are familiar with. In this way, it has the potential to extend their identities beyond that of just students preparing for an exam to language users preparing to engage in interaction using the target language in the outside World.