Let's Make our Students Talk While Sharing for Learning

Student collaboration in the ESL / EFL Classroom has been a very successful instruction method since pair and group work immediately increase the amount of student talking time, and it provides the students with the opportunity to communicate with each other to share suggestions, hypothesis, insights, feedback, successes, and concerns.

Research has shown that working with others makes students retain more information than if working individually, and at the same time promotes critical thinking. Students learn best when they are actively involved in the process and this results in a more satisfaction towards the class. To guarantee interesting and fun classes, teachers should prepare activities in which students are responsible for each other's learning as well as their own.

The *Centro de Estudios en Inglés Conversacional* (CEIC) from the Universidad Nacional in Costa Rica promotes collaborative learning in its conversational classes due to its efficiency and success. Classes in this institute focus on students communicating the language through different activities such as role plays, dialogues, games, debates, presentations, information-gap activities and so on. This methodology really helps learning because by having fun, students need to use the language in real-life situations and in a spontaneous way. The following are some of the characteristics of the CEIC program:

Outreach program
Part of School of Literature and Language Sciences
Initiation (beginning 90's)
Levels (Intro A/B 1-10)
Number of students (900)
Number of teachers (30)
Growth (70% last 10 years)
Need for the language (job requirement, personal need)

Building / Language & Computer Lab
Future building with resources

METHODOLOGY

The methodology used at CEIC follows these approaches and principles:

Holistic Education: Collaborative Learning
Cooperative Language Learning (CLL)
Constructivism
Formative Assessment

1. Cooperative language learning (CLL)

> ***"Learning is always discovery of something new;
> otherwise, it's not learning."***
> **Assmann (2002, p. 29).**

Cooperative learning has been a successful teaching strategy used to motivate students work in groups since they find more support, help, correct themselves, work with enthusiasm and improve their understanding of a subject. Each member of a team is responsible not only for learning what is taught but also for helping teammates learn, thus creating an atmosphere of achievement.

Cooperative efforts result in participants striving for mutual benefit so that all group members: (a) gain from each other's efforts: (b) recognize that all group members share a common fate; (c) know that one's performance is mutually caused by oneself and one's team members; and (d) feel proud and jointly celebrate when a group member is recognized for achievement.

(http://edtech.kennesaw.edu/intech/cooperativelearning.htm)

Research has shown that cooperative learning techniques:

- promote student learning and academic achievement
- increase student retention
- enhance student satisfaction with their learning experience
- help students develop skills in oral communication
- develop students' social skills
- promote student self-esteem
- help to promote positive relations

It is only under certain conditions that cooperative efforts may be expected to be more productive than competitive and individualistic efforts. Those conditions are according to Kagan (1994):

➢ Positive Interdependence: Each group member's efforts are required and indispensable for group success.

➢ Face-to-Face Interaction: Students orally explain how to solve problems; they teach one's knowledge to other by checking for understanding and discussing concepts being learned.

➢ Individual and group accountability: Students are giving individual test to each student. Teachers randomly examine students orally by calling on one student to present his or her group's work to the teacher (in the presence of the group) or to the entire class.

➢ Interpersonal and small-group skills: Students develop social skills like leadership, decision-making, trust-building, communication and conflict-management skills.

➢ Group Processing: Group members discuss how well they are achieving their goals and maintaining effective working relationships, describe what member actions are helpful and not helpful and make decisions about what behaviors to continue or change.

According to Rodgers and Richards (2001), cooperative language learning is based on the following principles:

• Learning is dependent on the socially structural exchange of information between learners in groups.
• Students are motivated and, as a result, they increase learning of others.
• The learner is held accountable for his or her own learning.
• There is cooperation, not competition. Learners learn teamwork skills.
• Learners are taught to plan, monitor and evaluate their own learning.
• The learning environment raises the achievement of all students.
• The learning environment builds positive relationships. It enhances learner motivation and reduces stress. It builds group spirit and trust.
• It promotes communicative interaction.
• Learners experience healthy social, physiological and cognitive development.
• I t is a learner-centered approach. Learners feel enthusiastic and encouraged to use their own learning styles to learn how to learn.
• Learners develop learning and communication strategies.
• Learners interact democratically and independently

- Learners develop communicative competence in a language by conversing in socially and pedagogically structured situations. This fosters the development of critical thinking skills.

"Educating with pleasure means generating enthusiasm:
All the participants in his process feel alive, share creativity,
generate original responses, have fun, play and enjoy learning."
(Gutiérrez y Prieto, 1991, p. 86)

Maturana and Varela (1984) say that it is knowledge of social learning the key stone of human understanding. Learners need to learn to develop social skills to respect different points of view, to express themselves, to develop critical thinking skills about topics related to their reality and the world. They also need to develop empathy to become socially aware individuals who understand what others feel and suffer.

Educators help change or transform learners' world by planning for learning experiences, which awaken the learners' senses and pleasure to feel as active participants of their own learning. Learning must be innovative, dynamic and stimulating for learners. The educator or mediator organizes activities for interrelation, exchanges of knowledge, dialogue and reflection. The purpose is to create learning experiences to transform the learners' reality in order to develop the feeling of achievement, discovery and freedom in their learning style.

2. Holistic education

*"The highest function of education is to bring about
an integrated individual who is
capable of dealing with life as a whole."* Krishnamurti

According to Greene (2005), "we are looking for a future social vision of a community more humanistic, more pluralistic, fairer and happier." (p. 101). Holistic education teaches human development to create integral and global learners whose life expectations will make a better world to live in. They also promote learning for living, for being a holistic individual who views life with enthusiasm, curiosity and love for learning. Students are considered as a whole: needs, interests, motivation, wish to succeed. Also, it sets high expectations for students as able of accomplishing goals and objectives.

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In fact, the purpose of holistic education is to prepare students to meet the challenges of living as well as academics. Holistic education believes it is important for young people to learn:

- About themselves
- About healthy relationships and pro-social behavior
- Social development
- Emotional development
- Resilience
- To see beauty, have awe, experience transcendence, and appreciate some sense of "truths"

3. Constructivism:

Constructivism is the methodology used in the course. Because of this, the activities carried out in class are participative and communicative. Students take active part in the teaching-learning process taking a role that directly involves them as the core of the process. Besides, the teacher has the role of facilitator making the involvement of the students and their access to learning possible.

4. Formative assessment

Learners are constantly assessed in every task they do. Formative assessment helps teachers determine next steps during the learning process; they monitor learners' performance and improvement by supplying feedback and encouraging more efforts. Also, students need to be involved both as assessors of their own learning and as resources to other students. In fact, research shows that the involvement in and ownership of their work increases students' motivation to learn. This does not mean the absence of teacher involvement. To the contrary, teachers are critical in identifying learning goals, setting clear criteria for success, and designing assessment tasks that provide evidence of student learning.

One of the key components of engaging students in the assessment of their own learning is providing them with descriptive feedback which provides students with an understanding of what they are doing well, links to classroom learning, and gives specific input on how to reach the next step in the learning progression. There are

many classroom instructional strategies that are part of the repertoire of good teaching. When teachers use sound instructional practice for the purpose of gathering information on student learning, they are applying this information in a formative way. In this sense, formative assessment is pedagogy and clearly cannot be separated from instruction.

Some of the instructional strategies that can be used formatively include the following according to Garrison and Ehringhaus (2004):

- **Criteria and goal setting** with students engages them in instruction and the learning process by creating clear expectations. In order to be successful, students need to understand and know the learning target/goal and the criteria for reaching it.
- **Observations** go beyond walking around the room to see if students are on task or need clarification.
- **Questioning strategies** should be embedded in lesson/unit planning. Asking better questions allows an opportunity for deeper thinking and provides teachers with significant insight into the degree and depth of understanding..
- **Self and peer assessment** helps to create a learning community within a classroom. Students who can reflect while engaged in metacognitive thinking are involved in their learning.
- **Student record keeping** helps students better understand their own learning as evidenced by their classroom work.

CEIC program:

The approach followed at CEIC is based on the belief that language is used for communication. The theory of learning is that learners develop communicative competence by interaction. The design of the program follows these objectives:
- To develop communicative competence through cooperation in active and meaningful activities
- To promote critical thinking in language learning
- To enjoy the process of learning English

The syllabus includes the following skills: Listening, Speaking (Pronunciation) and Culture.

The activities that students enjoy are communicative, motivating, creative, interesting, varied, meaningful, and fun.   They like activities that challenge their intellect since they enjoy creating, discovering and doing. At the same time, they want to surpass their fears, anxieties and worries about learning a new language

Some of these activities include:

Role plays, prepared and spontaneous speeches, debates, impromptu discussions, presentations, interviews, dialogues, problem-solving activities, information-gap activities, round tables, panels, cultural encounters among others.

The learners' role: Work and peer work help develop intersocial, communicative skills, involvement, motivation, fun support, from each other and good relationships.

Survey results:

Students consider that the necessary aspects for successful peer and group work are the following: Cooperation, tolerance, respect, patience, responsibility, shared participation, good relationship with peers, and teacher's help.

The teacher's role: Great teachers form strong relationships with their students and show that they care about them as people: Students describe them as,

- Caring and warm
- Affectionate
- Friendly (smile frequently)
- Soft-spoken
- Calm
- Relaxed
- Humorous
- Analytical of behavior and motives
- Able to predict how another will act
- Able to sympathize
- Not easily incited to express anger
- Not easily depressed under difficult circumstances
- Able to subordinate their own needs and feelings for another's benefit
- Spontaneous
- Balanced in feelings of self-worth and self-regard
- Encouraging
- Inspiring
- Motivating
- Adaptable to the needs of others
- Altruistic (desire to make a personal contribution)
- Able to give positive verbal and nonverbal feedback
- Conscientious in attending to students' needs

- Do not need to be the center of attention
- Make others centrally involved
- Independent and creative
- Totally accepting of individual differences, but do not focus on deviance
- Highly intuitive and feeling
- Do not feel a great need to control all people and events

Behaviors teachers exhibit that contribute to successful classroom management include: (a) having materials organized, (b) using a pleasant tone of voice, (c) being aware of multiple elements of group functioning simultaneously, (d) being able to anticipate possible problems and react quickly to avoid them.

How can we achieve good rapport with our students? Asks Crookes (2003). He states that teachers can promote teacher-student rapport by showing personal interest in the students, by asking for comments on the classes, by having the right manner in order to increase the level of interpersonal social relationships. Also, they should ensure that students know each other, use activities that students enjoy to ensure student retention, social and personal growth and academic success.

According to Jones and Jones (1990) in Crookes (2003, p 164), teachers go on to advocate use of three techniques to secure the following:

1. Monitoring the quality of our relationships with students, with a focus on maintaining a high rate of positive statements
2. Creating opportunities for personal discussions with them, and
3. Demonstrating our interest in activities that are important to them.
   Consider resistance to learning
   Learner's poor self-image as learners
   Their fear of the unknown
   Lack of clarity in teachers' instructions
   Students' personal dislike of teachers
   Possible response to the teachers:
   Create situations in which students succeed
   Encourage peer learning and peer teaching
   Make sure your words and actions are congruent
   Treat them with respect and understanding
   Care about students as human beings

Show personal interest in students take a variety of simple actions to foster student-student rapport such as conducting "icebreaking" activities and ensuring students know each other.

Give feedback

Communication skills:

Communication is the first step in cooperating with others. There are two basic categories of skills -- sending and receiving. According to Oliva (2000), some essential skills are the ability to:

- Clearly and unambiguously communicate ideas and feelings
- Make messages complete and specific
- Make verbal and nonverbal messages congruent with each other
- Ask for feedback concerning the way in which your messages are received
- Display openness, and maintain eye contact
- Listen without response until the other person has sent a full message
- Paraphrase accurately and nonevaluatively the essence of the sender's message
- Listen beyond words -- that is to be aware of nonverbal messages and behavior
- Listen for requests and intentions in others' messages, particularly in complaints
- Give clear instructions

Resources:

At CEIC the resources used are textbooks, handouts, videos, songs, multimedia, realia, sitcoms and movies, games (*puzzles, word searches, board games*), magazines, articles, newspapers, postcards, pictures, brochures, posters, recordings, and materials designed by teachers and learners.

Conclusion

Students learn best when they are actively involved in the process. Cooperative learning is a great success at CEIC levels since students really feel motivated in participating in all kind of learning experiences designed for the purpose of enhancing learning styles and language acquisition.

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