

The Effectiveness of Cooperative Learning in Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL)

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Abstract – The article aims to investigate the effectiveness of implementation of cooperative learning approach in EFL classes and describes the use of cooperative learning techniques to enhance learning experience of students, their motivation and confidence in mastering the foreign language.

Keywords – cooperative learning, group work, learning process, interaction between students, EFL

I. Introduction

There is a strong research evidence in favor of effectiveness of cooperative learning as a teaching strategy in raising educational standards. It is proved to produce positive outcomes in the learning process for every student. Hence its' implementation in EFL classroom can significantly accelerate students' progress in mastering a foreign language, and moreover, it contributes to students' personal characteristics and their motivation.

II. A Comparison of Traditional and Cooperative learning approaches

Cooperative learning has become a common practice in EFL classes in Western countries. However, in Ukrainian educational practice traditional learning methods are more frequently used.

One of the main issues of traditional teaching approaches is that they are aimed at the teacher-to-student knowledge and skills transfer. In the process of acquiring knowledge a student is mostly viewed as a passive agent or «consumer of information», whose role in the learning process is not to produce knowledge, but «consume» it.

Traditional education is mostly based on rote learning, memorization and acquiring objective knowledge. Such an approach to educational process neglects the importance of understanding facts, analyzing and development of students' critical thinking.

Traditional teaching-based EFL classes tend to limit student's participation in learning activities. Such classes are rather teacher-centered than student-centered. Full attention, in most cases, is focused on teacher, students solve the vast majority of in-classroom assignments on their own, collaboration and group work is discouraged. Implementation of these traditional teaching approaches into educational process cannot produce positive outcomes of foreign language learning since such isolated teacher-centered learning environments, in which students are discouraged from direct interaction with one another, are not productive.

During traditional teacher-centered classes students are mainly focused on the development of two or three language skills: reading, writing (that are paramount), and listening. However, listening is still not widely used in Ukrainian educational practice. But the main issue of traditional learning-based EFL classes is lack of speaking practice. Students are discouraged from direct interaction with each other, all the educational activities are aimed at development of writing, reading, and translation competence of the student. In the process of learning they may broaden their vocabulary (passive) and practice grammar material but, at the same time, students face a lack of communicative competence when it comes to speaking. Students find themselves

unable to use the acquired knowledge during communication. They face difficulty in expressing their thoughts, in "feeling" the language, since learners are used to writing their thoughts down and translating them from their native language into the foreign language. Therefore, the language progress might not happen in classes based on development of writing and reading skills as long as speaking competence is neglected. Language is a system, lexical, phonological and grammatical, that lies at the base of speaking. Consequently, its acquisition requires constant communication and interaction between individuals.

Thus, there is an increasing need for the development, and, subsequently, for implementation of effective language teaching strategies and techniques in educational process in order to improve the current situation with foreign language teaching in Ukraine.

III. Implementation of Cooperative learning strategy in EFL classes

Cooperative learning strategy can be a very effective instrument for achieving a number of learning outcomes including increase of student's motivation towards English language learning and improvement of their interest in learning activities. The approach is based on the idea that knowledge is socially produced by groups of people and that learning is a natural social act, in the process of which participants speak to each other, that is, learning takes place in the process of communication [1].

People exchange their ideas, feelings, experiences, processing this information into knowledge, and coming to an understanding of what is acceptable and meaningful for other members of the community.

Therefore, cooperative learning can be characterized as a learning process in which students acquire necessary knowledge and skills in the course of active interaction with each other.

Implementation of cooperative learning in EFL class helps to solve the following methodological tasks:

Increasing the effectiveness of learning process. Students learn much better if they are able to communicate and interact with other members of the group;

Increasing speaking and writing proficiency. Students' ability to write competently and logically depends on the ability to communicate with other students.

Unlike the individual approach to the learning process, cooperative learning enables students to achieve separate learning goals working together cooperatively. Every student achieves his/her own educational goals only if the other members of the group achieve their goals. They work together in small groups to ensure that each member of the group has the opportunity to take an active part in the solution of the task.

During the cooperative learning-based classes the impact of the teacher on the educational process is reduced. Teachers are no longer the "sage on the stage" but the "guide on the side". This means that the teacher takes on the role of a facilitator (not the center of the classroom like in the traditional learning-based classes), who guides students towards best achieving educational objectives.

The teacher divides the class into small groups and gives each group an assignment. Students work on it until all the members of the group have completed the task. Such teamwork creates the necessary condition for striving for mutually beneficial cooperation, so that every student benefits from the success of the others.

Working in a small groups or in pairs, students actively cooperate with one another and that helps them not only to practice and improve their communication skills but during such an interaction they have a mutual impact on each other's knowledge and skills by learning from each other.

During cooperative learning-based classes students interact "face-to-face" with their classmates contributing to each other's' learning experience, providing help, sharing ideas, encouraging to study. They explain material to one another, discuss it, teaching each other what they know.

In the course of cooperative learning-based classes students are encouraged to not only use regular course books but other sources of information such as the Internet, social networks, magazines, etc. that contribute to the development of students' cognitive activity, information culture, research and analysis skills, and, most importantly, to strengthening language skills.

IV. Use of Cooperative learning in development of student's speaking skills

Implementation of cooperative learning in EFL classes can be very beneficial for the development of student's speaking competence. During cooperative learning-based classes students are motivated to work together in order to find the solution for given tasks, which encourages them to discuss and share their opinions on the issue with other members. Such an interaction positively affects on student's confidence and willingness to speak in the foreign language with their peers.

A significant contribution to the student's speaking skills development can be achieved through various techniques such as:

Role play is used to create specific situation in which students have an opportunity to take on different roles while solving the given task. It is an effective technique that contributes to the development of student's speaking skills providing them with opportunity for spontaneous communication.

Discussion enables development of student's speech fluency as well as their motivation and interest in the learning process through conversation, sharing their opinions and experience on given issue. Discussion can be applied through various activities such as comparison of two connected pictures that provide a visual hint for questions needed to be discussed.

Work shop allows students to prepare an academic activity on given (chosen) topic and present it during regular classes. In the course of workshop all students are actively involved in the learning process and discussion.

Brainstorming activities are aimed to encourage students to find a creative solution to the complex issue through the group discussion.

Peer teaching or learning through teaching creates appropriate conditions for student's active cooperation with one another and that helps them not only to practice and improve their communication skills but also during such an interaction students have a mutual impact on each other's' knowledge and skills by learning from each other. In short, the technique occurs when one student (the tutor) teaches another (the tutee) under the guidance of the teacher and at the same time both tutor and tutee benefit from it.

V. Advantages of Cooperative learning

First of all, cooperative learning helps students to be directly involved in the learning process. During regular classes students can be distracted from the task or stop listening to the lecturer; however, during cooperative learning-based classes a student (within a group or pair) is

faced with the task and has to cope with it. Therefore, students listen to their classmates much more attentively, taking an active part in discussions and solution of the task and understanding their responsibility for it.

Another strong point in favor of the cooperative learning strategy is that, since students spend more time with each other than with the teacher, they are aware of personal characteristics (strengths and weakness, positive and negative sides, temper, attitude, etc.) of their classmates. It helps them to find an effective individual approach to one another much easier in their academic activities while the teacher, mostly, does not possess sufficient information.

With proper application cooperative learning has a number of benefits for all students:

Students' social competence, motivation, confidence, and self-esteem are developed;

Provides students with an effective and supportive atmosphere that helps to reduce their anxiety in speaking the foreign language;

Promotes student's greater productivity and higher achievements;

This technique encourages the development of students' communication skills. Greater understanding is fostered in the process of discussion between students. Finally, active learning is promoted in the process of students' interaction.

The approach also provides students with the ability to acquire a number of team building skills such as:

Communication;

Establishment of trust between students;

Problem solving;

Teamwork;

Leadership.

Conclusion

The cooperative learning has proven to be a very effective approach in mastering a foreign language, especially in developing student's oral proficiency in English. It promotes friendly and supportive atmosphere that contributes to the reduction of student's anxiety and low self confidence, as well as to development of their social skills and motivation towards English learning.

Thus, systematic students' cooperative work allows to significantly improve communication skills, develop social skills, leadership qualities, strengthen the relationship between students, and increase their motivation.

The prospects for further research lie in developing practical ways of implementing cooperative learning in the language study process at higher schools.

References:

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