The Case for Cooperative Learning and Interaction in CBI Classrooms

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The case for using cooperative learning in content-based classrooms is one that is made in close connection with the case for employing a similar teaching style in all second language classrooms. A fact easily corroborated by many classroom teachers is that, interaction between language learners utilizing oral and written discourse greatly enhances their communicative capabilities (Brown, 2007, pp. 53). When students are engaged in an activity that utilizes a partner or a group, the component of interaction has immediately synthesized that which seems so elusive in the language classroom: genuine communication.

Especially when involved with not just the learning of a language, but the learning of subject material through a second language, students need as much support as possible from all sources. As Snow and Brinton note:

> Peer group interactions encourage student interaction and provide further scaffolding. Students see how they can use the target language to unlock the meaning of content lessons. Students often benefit from the affective climate of a group; freed from the direct presence of a teacher, some students will risk asking questions with they would never venture in a whole group activity; most students will work hard to clarify the meaning of their own ideas and opinions. (1997, pp. 43)

The argument made of course is, learners feel more comfortable experimenting with a new language in the soft safety of their peers. Without the pressure of speaking to an expert in the language, emotional barriers begin to fall, and output begins to increase. Also, with the removal of a language expert to serve as the super interlocutor, responsibility for successful communication begins to lie completely with the students. It is through this inter-language that a large part of their authentic learning will take place.

It is not just speculation that students achieve higher communicative competence through interaction. In a study done by Slavin (1995) involving over 100 participants cooperative learning was found to produce consistent gains for

students across a range of groups and grade levels (Snow & Brinton, 1997, pp. 8). These were groups consisting of students in language arts, math, geography, history, ESL and reading comprehension. This is a clear testament to the power of using cooperative learning in content-based instructional settings. Like the old adage that something is best learned when learned on ones' own. Could it be that with the ejection of the teacher as the pillar and disperser of information that students, regardless of subject or content, become more responsible for their own learning, consequently achieving more than if the teacher had been more involved? As noted by Snow and Brinton, "Cooperative learning is consistent with the goals of CBI and is readily incorporated into CBI (see also Crandall, 1993; Fatham & Kessler, 1993)" (1997, pp. 8-9).

Range of Activities

As any classroom teacher can tell you, the number of activities that do not require interaction between learners is much smaller than the number of activities that do. Activities that do not incorporate peer interaction leave only two choices: solitary activities or teacher led activities. The former will possibly lead to student boredom with or indifference of the material. In the language classroom, a solitary approach would be comparative to the English education encountered in most Japanese high schools today, with obviously poor results. The latter of the two requires a great deal of effort on the part of the teacher. This is not also incredibly exhausting, but severely limits the teacher's ability to monitor learners.

The best role for a teacher in most language classrooms is that of a manager or facilitator. With this role, the teacher is free to spend more time assisting, guiding and assessing learners and the activities they are involved in. As Brown states "The key to interactive teaching is to strive toward the upper, nondirective end of the continuum, gradually enabling your students to move from their roles of total dependence··· to relatively total independence" (2007, pp. 216). Working towards learner autonomy should be the goal of all teachers. This is particularly hard to achieve if students are isolated from one another and not allowed the fundamentally proven practice of interactive learning activities. Especially in a language classroom where communication is the ultimate goal, it makes sense to have students communicate.

Brinton, Snow & Wesche describe language teachers as having 3 roles: 1) to

ensure the material is comprehensible for learners, 2) create a comfortable affective atmosphere that encourages students, 3) aid in the development of speaking and writing skills. They argue that:

> To accomplish all this, the language teacher must function as a facilitator, consultant, to the professor, tutor, and friend - a shift from the traditional second language classroom in which the teacher controls the situation, is viewed as an expert, and has the task of presenting a predetermined body of information (2003, pp. 52-53).

If language teachers want their students to succeed using cooperative learning, they must give them the tools they need for communication. Especially when dealing with weaker learners, scaffolding should be introduced in order to give students an understandable framework to work off of. Teachers may also find it useful, if not necessary, to introduce help phrases for students to check understanding, ask for repetition, ask for clarification or ask for intervention (Brinton, Snow & Wesche, 2003, pp. 151).

Equally important for teachers in the CBI classroom is the amount of input offered to students. It is important for teachers to make sure students are exposed to sufficient amounts of understandable aural and written input. There should be an emphasis placed on "providing sufficient and diverse enough information that students can select, organize, and express something of substance" (Brinton, Snow & Wesche, 2003, pp. 200). It is not enough just to give learners the basic tools of communication. They must also be given information of substance in enough quantity in order to generate opinions and synthesize information.

It really is true that two heads are better than one. Nowhere is this truer than in brainstorming or mapping activities. By having students pool their information, understanding they are able to find connections and interconnections among material that might have previously been inaccessible to them while developing analytical skills (Snow & Brinton, 1997, pp. 114 & 299).

In the discussion of learner development through peer cooperation, it is impossible not to include Vygotsky and his Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). ZPD is described by Vygotsky as "···· the distance between actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers" (Vygotsky, 1978, pp. 33). The idea being of

course that interaction causes learners to reach higher educational goals than if they had been working alone. In this situation we can look at the idea of good learning as being that which is an advance in development on the part of language learners. With cooperative learning, we are not dividing up responsibility into smaller pieces, but rather are creating a more effective mechanism with which to deliver information ensuring that it will be attained at its highest possible level at that given time.

Language teachers may have the impression that cooperative learning consists of little more than having students talk to a partner while completing a task. As we have discussed, cooperative learning supplies ample opportunity for analytical thinking. Exposing students to a wide variety of activities such as discussion, debate, analysis, and classification are just some of the possibilities for cooperative learning.

Cooperative Writing

The following serves as an example of a successful cooperative assignment that could be incorporated into a CBI classroom as detailed by Mulligan and Garofalo (2011). Cooperative writing assignment used in one of the intensive English classes at Ritsumeikan University. Students were placed into groups of two, given an outline of the writing assignment and a detailed-list of how to proof-check their work. Students took turns as the writer and editor through the process, ensuring that responsibility fell fairly between them. The teachers found that the amount of errors compared to individual essay writing greatly dropped, and that even 70% of first submissions did not need to be re-written (2007, pp. 7). Teachers also noticed an increase in oral interaction in the L2 during class. "The purposefulness of their interaction combined with personal control over the direction of their work seemed to provide motivation to continue speaking" (2007, pp. 7).

The distinct advantages noted by Mulligan and Garofalo were development of social skills, a reduction of stress, conservation of time, higher motivation, improvement in writing content and gains in grammatical structure and proficiency (2011, pp. 8). Clearly in alliance with all previous arguments, social skill development ranked at the top of their list despite the fact that the exercise was essentially a written one. Cooperative learning offers that special comprehensive

package inside the CBI classroom, allowing students to focus on content through communication, which will in turn reinforce basic communication skills creating competent speakers. Mulligan and Garofalo state:

> As for social skills development, student remarks indicated that they developed a greater sense of responsibility through the collaborative effort and that it helped them to get along with others and gave them an opportunity to get to know their classmates better (2011, pp. 8).

The study done by Mulligan and Garofalo is a clear example of one of the benefits of using cooperative learning in a content-based classroom: authentic student interaction in the L2. Given a common topic rich in information and open to opinion, students have the platform necessary with which to interact.

Focus on Speaking

Recently, I introduced a cooperative learning CBI lesson to a group of students I had regularly been teaching at a company in Kyoto. The participants were 5 men all in their 30s with low-intermediate to intermediate English ability. Students were grouped into one group of two and one group of three.

Groups were utilized for almost every activity. During the warm-up time, the first couple of minutes, groups were asked to brainstorm different kinds of businesses. After this initial brainstorming, groups were then asked to classify the different companies they had brainstormed as either goods-producing businesses or service businesses. Learner interaction was very lively with lots of debate about the classification of the companies they had chosen. Because these were companies they had brainstormed, they took more interest in the classification. This type of buy-in is something that seems to be an innate feature of giving students choices as opposed to dictating all the elements.

Groups were also given different lists of vocabulary matching to complete. After completing the vocabulary matching, they were instructed to teach the other group the terms they had completed without using the handout. This forced students to have to circumlocute certain vocabulary terms. Students were then asked to review their vocabulary sheet and give themselves a score based on their previous explanation to the other group. This was to further encourage consciousness-raising on the part of the students, hopefully sharpening their attention even more on the task at hand. Students were particularly hard on themselves, as they really

seemed to feel a need to explain the lexical items perfectly for the other members. This was very encouraging, and showed similarity with the study done by Mulligan and Garofalo. Students will try their best to look competent when they know they are being judged by their peers. The same students that seem to care little for perfection suddenly straighten up when they know their friends are watching them.

A reading from a text was then introduced which had all the previously introduced vocabulary whited-out. Students were asked to work with their partners again to see if they could 1) remember the vocabulary words that had been introduced, and 2) place them into the correct areas. Again, debate waged strong as some students were quite sure of their answers while their partner was quite sure of the opposite. Also evident, was the fact that students seemed to feed off one another. Each student seemed to offer just enough to get the other one moving again. In the end, all the text was completed correctly.

Students were given time to ask questions, which they did so readily. After so much guided practice, they appeared very eager to clarify their understanding of the material. What had previously been planned as a 10 to 15 minute teacher presentation or lecture, turned into student led Q & A session in which the teacher seemed to serve more as a sounding board than anything else.

Students were then encouraged to work in their groups to create a new idea for a business. The only parameter given was that they must recycle the terms that were introduced as they discuss their options, and when they present their idea later to the group. Student discussion was once again very animated and lively. There was a real motivation and interest behind the ideas and opinions presented. In the end, the min-presentations were very successful, and most importantly the students seemed very satisfied and happy with the lesson overall.

While this was usually a very motivated group of learners that require very little in terms of teacher management, this lesson was particularly successful. The level and depth of genuine interaction was unlike the usual class. Most importantly, the students all remarked that they wished every class were the same style. They felt that they really had a chance to explore their ideas, but also to test the limits of their language ability and really enjoyed the opportunity to push their limit.

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Conclusion

Cooperative learning in content-based classrooms offers clear advantages: increased student interaction, genuine communication, depth of processing and higher motivation. Especially in the language classroom, where teachers always seem to desperately encourage genuine interaction, cooperative learning really finds its place. It is imperative for those teachers that are hesitant to release control for fear of losing their students to incorrectly spoken forms or errors, to let go of the ropes and let their students find the wings that cooperative learning offers.

References

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Abstract

When students are engaged in an activity that utilizes a partner or a group, the component of interaction has immediately synthesized that which seems so elusive in the language classroom: genuine communication. This is the main premise of this paper, supported through teacher observation and empirical evidence.

The paper argues for the use of more content based learning geared towards the specific learning goals of university students. It would be much more beneficial for English to be learned through the medium of the topics students learn in their core classes.

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