STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS TOWARDS COOPERATIVE LEARNINGIN THE ORAL GROUP LESSONS: THE CASE OF GRADE 7 STUDENTS AT MUKETURI PRIMARY SCHOOL

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Abstract

As Chekering and Gamson(1987) cited in Bonewell's (2000) articulated that learning is not a spectator sport. Students do not learn much just by sitting in class, listening to teachers, memorizing prepackagedassignments and spitting out answers. They must talk about what they are learning, write about it, relate it to past experiences, and apply it to their daily lives. They must make what they learn part of themselves.This study focused on assessing grade seven EFL (English as a foreign language) students'attitudes towards cooperative learning (CL) in learning writing skills at Muketuri Primary School, Ethiopia. The researcher selected 6 research participants (2 high, 2 average and 2 low achievers) out of 43 students based on their first semester results. Moreover, the selection was based on Sidhu's (1984) ideas. Sidhu elucidated that students are similar in many aspects and, therefore, a study on some of them could throw significant light upon all students. The data for the study were gatheredthrough focus group interview. The results of the study showed that the students who were interviewed understood the benefits of using CLduring oral group lessons though they had poor background knowledge of English. The students frequently used their mother tongues rather than English during the focus group interview.The summary of the findings indicated that the oral group lessons in the students' English textbook should be taught through CL though there were some problems mentioned above.

Key terms: Cooperative Learning, Oral Group Lessons, Focus Group Interview, Perceptions, EFL (English as a Foreign Language)

Introduction

It is worth mentioning that numerous current researches and pedagogical instructions in English as a foreign or second language education shift the focus from lecturer-fronted hall to learners-centered performance running after promoting the target language acquisition. Working cooperatively, students can approach the language in a more naturalistic environment and relatively reduce foreign language learning stress. Nonetheless, the ability to employ CLstrategies in lecturing as in creating and introducing ample successful opportunities to raise writing strategies awareness among learners for enhancing linguistic competence implies a skillful ELT lecturer (Gonzales& Torres 2016).

Some writers like Long and Porter (1985), as quoted in Berhanu (2000), argue that one of the main reasons for low achievement by many language learners is simply that they are not given the opportunity to practice the new language. Instead, their teacher sets the same instructional pace and content for everyone by lecturing, explaining a grammatical point, leading drill work, or asking questions of the whole class. Since teacher-fronted lessons favor a highly conventionalized variety of conversation, one rarely found them outside classrooms and they may also limit the quality of talk students engage in.

It has been suggested that knowledge is constructed, discovered, transformed, and extended by students. If so, the main role of teachers is not to be dominant like what has been mentioned above but create conditions within which the students can construct meaning from what they are learning. This may, in turn, enable them to practice and refine their negotiation, organize and communicate skills, define issues and problems, and develop ways of solving them (Hopkins, 2002).

The conditions created by teachers will be realized if, among otherthings, students are put in groups. That is to say, group activities likerole play, discussion, problem-solving, etc. could be used as means tomake the learners actively involved in the learning process and internalizethe language communicatively. In this regard, Murphy (1993: 18) reported in her research findings as,"Students liked working in groups because of the opportunity fordiscussion of the task with their friends."Similarly, Alamirew (1992) stated that not only did students likegroup work but also wanted to learn other subjects through group work.He further noted that most of the students

(Over 80%) were interested inusing group work. As a result, their participation in the class wasincreased.

Thus, through the application of group work, CL seems to be acceptableand helpful for students who are at elementary, secondary and tertiarylevels. As cited in Berhanu (2000), group work is stated with thepurpose of:

1. Helping students succeed in their academic work, and
2. Enabling them to develop their communicative competence.

Furthermore, different researches conducted in different parts of theworld have shown that group work that promotes CL is a usefultechnique to learn language and to cultivate learners' personality (Freeman, 2000).However, in contrast to the above explanations; that is, the participatorynature of group activities, the students whom the researcher wasobserving while his colleagues were teaching oral group lessons did not have properparticipations in their respective groups. Rather, some students did someactivities unrelated to the topic or the objective of the lesson and othersusually sat idle. As the researcher sensed, the students seemed to beconfused probably for not knowing what to do with the oral grouplessons in the textbook.

Having experienced these problems, the researcher tried to assess the students'perceptions towards CL in the oral group lessons through focus group interviews.

Objectives of the Study

The objective of this study was to assess what the students' perceptions look like towards learning oral group lessons via CL and shed some insights about the concepts of CL.

Definition of CL

As to the meaning of CL, Dutschas the following to say: Cooperation is working together to accomplish shared goals and CL is the instructional use of small groups so that students work together to maximize their own and one another's learning. Within CL groups, students are given two responsibilities: to learn the assigned material and to make sure that all other members of their group do likewise. Thus, a student seeks an outcome that is beneficial to him/her and beneficial to all other group members (Dutsc,1962 as quoted in Brubacher, et.al 1990).

Basic Elements of CL

In order for a lesson to be cooperative in an EFL classroom, CL which emphasizes positive interdependence, face-to-face interaction, individual and group accountability, social skills and group processing should be applied at any grade level with any subject (Kessler, 1992). The elements are further discussed below.

Positive Interdependence

It is successfully structured when group members perceivethat they are linked with one other in a way that one cannot succeed unless everyone succeeds. Group goals and tasks, therefore, must be designed and communicated to students in a way that makes them believe they sink or swim together. It is solidly structured to offer highlights that (a) each group member's efforts are required and indispensable for group success and (b) each group member has a unique contribution to make to the joint effort because of his/her resources and/or role and task responsibilities. Doing so creates a commitment to the success of group members as well as one's own, and is the heart of CL. If there is no positive interdependence, there is no cooperation (Johnson, Johnson &Houlubec, 1993).

Face-to-Face Interaction

Face-to-face verbal interaction refers to the physical set up of the group. Students need to be clustered together in a tight group, facing each other in order to have the kind of interchange necessary to accomplish the task. In other words, learners are provided with abundant face-to-face interaction, where they can explain, argue, elaborate and link current or previous material. Thus, it is crucial to let students sit in comfortable places where they can interact face to face easily (Tuan, 2010).

Individual Accountability

A level of accountability must be structured into cooperative lessons. Each member must be accountable for contributing his/her share of the work. Individual accountability exists when the

performance of each individual is assessed and the results are given back to the group and the individual in order to ascertain who needs more assistance, and encouragement in learning (Ames &Ames, 1985). Gillies (2007) also explained that individual accountability involves students' understanding that they will be held accountable for their individual contributions to the group, that free-loading will not be tolerated, and that everyone must contribute.

Social Skills

Social skills refer to interpersonal and small group skills. CL is inherently more complex than competitive or individualistic learning because the students have to engage simultaneously in task work (learning academic subject matter) and teamwork (functioning effectively as a group). Social skills for effective cooperative work do not magically appear when cooperative lessons are employed. Instead, social skills must be taught to students as purposefully and precisely as academic skills. Leadership, decision-making, trust-building, communication, and conflict management skills empower the students to manage both teamwork and task work successfully (Christson, 1994).

Group Processing

Group processing exists when group members discuss how well they are achieving their goals and maintaining effective working relationships. Groups need to describe what member actions are helpful and unhelpful and make decisions about what behaviors to continue or change. Continuous improvement of the process of learning results from the careful analysis of how members are working together and determining how group effectiveness can be enhanced. This may take five minutes or a whole lesson; it can happen immediately after the classroom interaction or on their next meeting. Thus, during the group processing, both teacher and students should be equally involved; students must identify how well they have achieved their goals and maintained effective relationships among members (Williams & Burden, 1997). In general, the success of implementing the elements of CL in EFL classrooms depends on the overall relationships among a teacher, learners and a textbook.

Research Design

This study adopted a descriptive research design. With regard to Kothari (2004), a descriptive researchdesign is appropriate to make investigation with narration ofevents and drawing of conclusions based on the informationobtained from relatively large and representative samples ofthe target population.So, it was considered appropriate because it enabled the researcher to gather information from the respondents onthe students' perceptions towards CL in the oral group lessons at MukeTuri Primary School. This designwas also chosen because it allowed the researcher obtain qualitative data concerning the students' perceptions towards CL in the oral group lessons in English language.

Participants of the Study

Israel (1992) described participants as any set of people or events from which the sample is selected and to which the study results are generalized. Therefore, the target population of this study was grade 7 students of MukeTuri Primary School, Ethiopia. At MukeTuri Primary School, there were 280 students who were being taught in the 5 sections. The researcher used purposive sampling technique to select 6 research participants (2 high, 2 average and 2 low achievers) out of 43 students based on their first semester results. Moreover, the selection was based on Sidhu's (1984) ideas. Sidhu elucidated that students are similar in many aspects and, therefore, a study on some of them could throw significant light upon all students. All the students found in the one section were made to respond to the focus group interview.

DISCUSSION

The researcher interviewed the students in Amharic in order to avoid the shortage of information because of English language difficulties, and their responses were translated into English for analysis purpose. The results are summarized as follows.

"How often do you work in groups in the English language classes? How much emphasis do teachers and students give to oral group activities?" were the first questions raised. As to these questions, two of the interviewees replied that they worked in groups of four or five once a week. The rest respondents said that they frequently exercised oral group lessons. To the question how much emphasis the teachers and the students gave to the oral group lessons, four of the

interviewees agreed that almost all their teachers gave due attention to the oral group activities as they helped and monitored the learners while working in groups. However, five of the students said that there were some problems on the part of the students during the oral group activities. For instance, only a few members of the groups listened to what the teachers said in connection with the lessons being discussed. There were also some other students who sat idle because of their inabilities of making use of the language. In fact, this might emanate from their poor background knowledge ofEnglish.

The other question the students were asked was if the oral group lessons in the textbook made them learn from one another while working together in groups. They were also asked how these oral group activities enabled them to learn from one another. The responses of all the students were similar. They totally agreed that the oral group lessons in their textbook helped them learn from one another by sharing their thoughts.

The researcher asked the interviewees whether the oral group lessons in the text helped them practice social skills, and the kind of social skills that could be practiced through CL. In response to these questions, all the interviewees confirmed that the oral group lessons in the text made them practice social skills listed below.

- Offering help one another.
- Persuading one another while discussing the activities
- Expressing thoughts freely without fear during CL
- Exercising leadership
- Solving problems through discussions
- Practice trust building
- Exercising decision making

In contrast to what has been said above, one of the respondents suggested that the oral group lessons in the textbook were not that much helpful for clever students to practice social skills. Because it might be monotonous for them to repeat what they had alreadyunderstood to each member while discussing in groups, nor did it make them create new thoughts that could be used for the discussion.

"After you have done the oral group lessons in the student's textbook, do you identify the causes of your failure or success, and discuss which behaviors continue or change? Why?" were the next questions raised. As a response to these questions, three of the respondents said that they sometimes evaluated what they had done so far in groups towards the end of their classes. By doing so, they were to practice being cooperative and correcting their mistake(s) which might cause them not to be effective in their oral group activities. However, three of the interviewees said that they were rarely ordered to evaluate what they haddone towards the end of their classes, and they did not pay much attention to it.

The other question the researcher raised was if the students had encountered with any problems while working together in groups, and if their answer is 'yes', they were asked to suggest some solutions that they thought in relation to the problems. In response to these questions, twelve of the interviewees said that there were some problems while working in groups. Some of the problems that they raised are listed as follows.

- During the oral group lessons, all members of each group didn'tparticipate equally;
- Some students were demotivated to participate actively when theylearned in groups because of their poor background knowledge ofEnglish;
- There was time in which all members of the group could not arriveat an agreement while discussing in groups. And this might, inturn, bring about conflict among themselves;
- Some members of the groups became dependent on cleverstudent(s) for their success. As a result, they might ignore toparticipate actively in their respective groups, and
- Some students who consider themselves the most knowledgeabledisturbed other learners not to focus properly on what they wereworking in groups.

As solutions to the problems mentioned above, the interviewees suggested that their teachers should:

- Monitor each member of the groups during discussion;
- Arrange tutorial classes and teach them in order to improve their English language;
- Express clearly what the students would do with the oral group lessons;
- Advise them to try to do their own rather than become dependenton others during oral group activities, and

- Advise pompous students to stop disturbing others while workingoral group lessons together and follow up whether or not theybring behavioral changes.

Finally, the researcher asked the students if they had additional remarks concerning the oral group lessons that may promote CL. As to this question, all of them suggested that they wanted to use CL in learning oral group lessons because of the reasons given as follows:

- They shared experiences while working together;

- Help from partners increased both for the learners being helped aswell as for those giving the help, i.e. for the students being helped,the assistance from their partners enabled them to move awayfrom dependence on teachers and gain more chances to enhancetheir learning. For the students offering help, the oral grouplessons used as opportunities to increase their own performance,and

- They were afraid of raising hands and expressed their thoughtsbefore the class. However, when they were in groups, they werefree to talk out what they had felt before their partners.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are proposed:

- If CL is to be successful, teachers need to be properly in servicedon CL theories and methods. They also need practicalknowledge with examples. It is not enough to simply giveteachers a textbook. Teachers should know that CL works insimilar situations to their own. Otherwise, they will continue touse what they see as reasonably successful in their ownclassroom without understanding what CL can do for theirstudents.

- The Ministry of Education and other concerned bodies should prepare workshops inwhich teachers are trained to make use of English language forcommunicative purposes. And this may, in turn, create capacityfor them to teach their learners English properly.

- Teachers should give grades (marks) on the basis of theindividual learning of all group members; that is, the averagescores on quizzes which the student shares without

teammateshelp. In order for the team to succeed, all the team membersmust have learned so that one or two students do not do all thework.

- As English is the medium of instructions, teachers should urgetheir students to discuss the oral group lessons in Englishrather than in other languages during CL. Teachers shouldserve as facilitators and encourage their students to beinterdependent during CL. They should also observe andmonitor what is going on, and if necessary, intervene duringdiscussions.

- After CL, teachers should motivate group members on the basisof the fact that group incentives induce students to encouragegoal-directed behaviors within the group. Furthermore, teachersand students had better use an effective way of evaluating theoral group lessons to ameliorate future CL situations.

- Textbook writers should put rules, techniques and proceduresalong with those oral group lessons to promote CL.

- Further research should be done on the impact of large classSize.

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