

HONING COMMUNICATION SKILLS THROUGH PAIR WORK STRATEGIES

NIRAJA SARASWAT

Reader, Department of English, SKIT, Jaipur, Rajasthan, India

ABSTRACT

India is a land of diversity. It is a multilingual, multi cultural, multi religious abode for a heterogeneous mix of people. This plurality and diversity calls for the need of a language that can be understood by all. The education of language promotes the aesthetic sense and human values. It becomes means of liberation and social change and leads to enlightenment. It promotes self reliance in the socio political, economic and cultural fields and enables the learners not only to exchange knowledge, ideas and needs at the local, national and international levels but also empowers them to critically evaluate the experiences and the opportunities of life and take decisions with discretion.

KEYWORDS: Honing Communication Skills through Pair Work Strategies

INTRODUCTION

Effective communication has become the essence of one's personal and professional life. With companies going global, outsourcing jobs, working in international and geographically dispersed teams the ability to communicate in English has become the need of the hour. Effective language learning takes place through interacting with peers in communicative contexts. This situation allows the students to use the target language in a natural context and it gradually helps them to become better learners. Classroom dynamics remains one of the most critical areas in the field of English language teaching and methodology. Pairwork and group strategies have been the focus of this study in regard with increasing language production. The present paper contributes to the existing literature by identifying Pair and group strategies which pave the way for language learning.

In the modern neo-liberal scenario of India, the necessity of competence in English has become increasingly vital. The globalization has necessitated the learning of English Language in an international perspective. Moreover the text materials on the subjects of technical education, science and medicine are available in English. The advance of multinational companies in all sectors of economy such as production, distribution and service sectors require personnel with a fair degree of language competence. In this backdrop, the necessity of acquisition of not only spoken English but also written English has become the need of the hour. Salman Rushdie, the renowned novelist says that the English language ceased to be the sole possession of the English some time ago. And it grows from many roots. No one community can claim sole ownership over the English language, which has gone genuinely global. In this precept it is high time to have a holistic approach to learn and teach English as second language.

English language learners who are academically proficient in their first or native language represent differing levels of academic experiences, abilities and interests in addition to their language proficiency. Some students read above their grade levels; others struggle with daily instruction. Some have highly supportive home environments for language and literary development; others live without access to books or literary rich environments. Many English language learners spend most of their academic life with teachers who speak only English and who are not prepared to fully understand their

varying needs as English language learners. In order for today's teachers to meet the challenge of educating a richly diverse generation of children, they need to learn a great deal about second language acquisition and effective pedagogy for English language learners through pre service teacher education programmes and in service professional development opportunities

It is an acclaimed fact that teaching and learning a foreign language can't be reduced to the direct teaching of linguistic skills like phonology, morphology, vocabulary and syntax. The contemporary models of communicative competence show that there is much more to learn in a language. Teaching requires creativity, there are lots of different methods, strategies and techniques that can be applied and brought into classroom. Any teaching technique or method including portfolio based instruction will not be successful if students are not engaged in the process. Techniques are closely related to methods and approaches. *Longman Dictionary of Language Teaching & Applied Linguistic* defines:

Different theories about the nature of language and how languages are learnt (the approach) imply different ways of teaching English and different methods make use of different kind of activity. (56)

With the advent of new millennium, trends have been changed and consequently new challenges have to be addressed with new language teaching which can conveniently be used in English language teaching with the most suitable, reliable and homely examples of real life situations. This new spirit has generated a new point of view to adopt whatever is available round us and make use of familiar materials for the English classroom where by the learners have a sigh of relief after having readily involved themselves in the subject with genuine interest and commitment.

The needs of the students must be addressed in a better and easier way to make sure of themselves about their learning the language. The traditional methods which most concentrated on vocabulary structures undoubtedly helped many a generation which strove to learn that way. In order to meet the demands of the learners to their fuller satisfaction and teach the language, one has to adopt the new approaches, strategies, methodologies and techniques and adapt them to learn to the new changed scenario of the need based soft skill. Teaching and learning may be considered as two mutually defining aspects of the same process for the teacher is not just a giver but also a receiver and the learner is not just passive recipient of made to measure packages of knowledge but also an active participant. Looking at this teachers and learners are both participants in an interaction activity which has been traditionally called teaching learning. Teaching and learning take place all the time, everywhere. For human beings' interaction with objects, animate and inanimate goes on. What we find going on in educational set up is an attempt to capture, finalize and recycle in capsule forms an ongoing, natural, interactional process. What we call transmitting or pumping information or knowledge from a full vessel into an empty vessel; the human vessels are never full and never empty. So every teacher in his own way must create an atmosphere which should help learners learn how to learn. What is needed is exposure to language by many ways and means. As S. K. Verma would rightly put it, "language is created a new by each learner by putting together bits and pieces of environment raw material" (79).

Cooperative learning is generally defined as a teaching arrangement in which small, heterogeneous groups of students work together to achieve a common goal. Students encourage and support each other, assume responsibility for their own and each other's learning, employ group related social skills, and evaluate the group's progress. The basic elements are positive interdependence, equal opportunities, and individual accountability. Human beings are social creatures by nature and cooperation has been used throughout history in all aspects of our lives. Therefore, it follows that cooperative learning groups in colleges would be used as a logical teaching method. For decades cooperative learning has

been implemented in classrooms with diverse populations primarily as a means of fostering positive student interactions. During the 1960s specific cooperative learning methods began to be developed and evaluated in a wide variety of teaching contexts.

A synthesis of research about cooperative learning finds that cooperative learning strategies improve the achievement of students and their interpersonal relationships. In 67 studies of the achievement effects of cooperative learning 61% found significantly greater achievement in cooperative than in traditionally taught control groups. Johnson, Johnson, & Stanne (2000) summarize that cooperative learning strategies are widely used because they are based on theory, validated by research, and almost any teacher can find a way to use cooperative learning methods that are consistent with personal philosophies.

Grouping is essential to cooperative learning. The most widely used team formation is that of heterogeneous teams, containing a high, two middle, and a low achieving student and having a mix of gender and ethnic diversity that reflect the classroom population. The rationale for heterogeneous groups argues that this produces the greatest opportunities for peer tutoring and support as well as improving cross-race and cross-sex relations and integration. Occasionally, random or special interest teams could be formed to maximize student talents or meet a specific student need (Kagan, 1994).

While many cooperative learning training packages exist, one study found that most teachers who use these methods have been self-taught (Sparapani, Abel, Easton, Edwards, & Herbster, 1997) and that teachers are likely to use a combination of methods. This resulted in very few activities that involved higher-level thinking skills and most of the observations were of drill and review or routine activities. The reason for lack of teacher training is given as lack of funding and/or administrative support. Another study (Nath & Ross 1996) of teachers using Student Teams-Achievement Divisions (STAD) found that if teachers did not strictly adhere to the framework of cooperative learning, the method was unsuccessful and students spent more time on disagreements or conflict management than they did on academic tasks. Sapon-Shevin and Schniedewind (1989/1990) assert that teacher buy-in is an essential factor for success and that cooperative learning needs to be embraced as a teaching philosophy and a set of principles rather than as a teaching gimmick if it is to reach its full potential.

Factors contributing to achievement effects of cooperative learning are group goals and individual accountability. Providing students with an incentive to help each other and encourage each other to put forth maximum efforts increases the likelihood that all group members will learn. As well as individual grades and evaluations there is strong evidence that group grades and team rewards are most successful for motivation (Slavin, 1995). Others argue that the group grades and team rewards allow for the free rider effect of students who do not participate to the fullest extent of their abilities (Joyce, 1999 and Cohen, 1998). Also, it is argued that group grading de-emphasizes the importance of hard-work, personal ability, and perseverance (Kagan, 1995).

Cooperative learning enhances social interaction, which is essential to meet the needs of at-risk students (Slavin, Karweit, & Madden, 1989; Johnson, 1998). Within the framework of cooperative learning groups, students learn how to interact with their peers and increase involvement with the community. Positive interactions do not always occur naturally and social skills instruction must precede and concur with the cooperative learning strategies. Social skills encompass communicating, building and maintaining trust, providing leadership, and managing conflicts (Goodwin 1999).

Cooperative learning has been found to be a successful teaching strategy at all levels. The developmental characteristics of students make cooperative learning a good fit of teaching strategy for the needs of the students. Young adolescents need to socialize, be a part of a group, share feelings, receive emotional support, and learn to see things from other perspectives. Cooperative learning groups do not separate students on the basis of class, race, or gender. It is a peer-centered pedagogy that promotes academic achievement and builds positive social relationships (Sapon-Shevin, 1994).

The current literature of psychology and business is filled with the term "stakeholder". The idea that a person will buy into the idea of becoming an active participant in an organization if his or her voice is heard by those in authority is a powerful one and one that has implications for the classroom. I have attempted to incorporate this idea of empowering students to see themselves as active and necessary participants in their own learning.

Activities performed in the classroom together offer instructors a rich avenue for empowering students as stakeholders. The "guide on the side" role for the instructor as facilitator can lead to very innovative classroom work. I had a great deal of success using language learning games that involve teams of students working together in good-natured competition with other student teams. Students must work in competing teams to match as many phrasal verbs to their non-phrasal counterparts as possible. The teams overall success depends upon the input of every member of the team. This type of atmosphere in the classroom often leads to students thinking of themselves as stakeholders.

An often discussed and much used method of vocabulary enrichment, the use of vocabulary notebooks is widespread in ESL classrooms. One way of empowering students to actively participate in their construction is to allow them the option of choosing their own words to study and practice with the group or pair. This does not imply that the instructor must give students complete freedom to choose any word they come across (although this approach has its merits). It can be equally effective to allow students to choose from a certain universe of words, for example words from a particular chapter in a textbook or words from a particular reading. I have the students in my classes build their own dictionaries of words over the course of the semester. They base their word entries upon the following scheme that we discuss together at the beginning of class: the word in English, the word in their native language, the part of speech, derivational endings (common suffixes that change a word from one part of speech to another), use of the word in a sentence (to illustrate at least a basic level of context), collocations (words that commonly appear together in phrases with this particular word). I have had great success with this approach and have used it as a basis for quizzes in class. The two advantages of using student-chosen words for quiz material are that every word is different (there is no possibility of cheating) and the students have more of an affinity towards learning the meaning and use of words that they have chosen themselves instead of having had them forced upon them unwillingly.

Most students, if given support and a minimal amount of suggestions and directions, will often produce very good papers and oral reports on topics of their own choosing. In addition to self selection, all the students have an opportunity to help their fellow students in this area by offering peer review and constructive comments towards each other. This seems to build a sense of positive goodwill in the classroom, that we are "all in this together" and that honest effort is both recognized and rewarded.

Activities performed in the classroom together offer instructors a rich avenue for empowering students as stakeholders. The "guide on the side" role for the instructor as facilitator can lead to very innovative classroom work. There is a great deal of success using language learning games that involve teams of students working together in good-natured

competition with other student teams. Students must work in competing teams to match as many phrasal verbs to their non-phrasal counterparts as possible. The teams overall success depends upon the input of every member of the team. This type of atmosphere in the classroom often leads to students thinking of themselves as stakeholders.

Another area where ESL students can take responsibility for their own learning and put it to great productive use is the area of leading a discussion. In speaking classes, strategies can be discussed that participants can use to generate a discussion and to keep it going and involve everyone in participation. Two days a week, an assistant instructor can be asked to work with a group of students to model appropriate conversational strategies, but the students themselves can take up the leadership position. A new leader can be chosen each week. This allows all the students to not only hone their own leadership skills but to actively participate in building those skills among their peers.

REFERENCES

1. Cohen, E. G. (1998). Making cooperative learning equitable. *Educational Leadership*, 56, 18-22.
2. Goodwin, M. W. (1999). Cooperative learning and social skills: What skills to teach and how to teach them. *Interventions in School & Clinic*, 35, 29-34.
3. Johnson, D. W. & Johnson R. T. (1999). *Learning Together and Alone: Cooperative, Competitive, and Individualistic Learning* (5th ed.). Boston: Allyn and Bacon.
4. Johnson, D. W., Johnson, R. T., & Stanne, M. B. (2000). Cooperative learning methods: A meta-analysis. Retrieved July, 2000 from the World Wide Web: <http://www.clcrc.com/pages/cl-methods.html>
5. Johnson, G. M. (1998). Principles of instruction for at-risk learners. *Preventing School Failure*, 42, 167-181.
6. Joyce, W. B. (1999). On the free-rider problem in cooperative learning. *Journal of Education for Business*, 74, 271-274.
7. Kagan, S. (1994). *Cooperative Learning*. San Clemente, California: [Kagan Publishing](#).
8. Kagan, S. (1995). Group grades miss the mark. *Educational Leadership*, 52, 68-72.
9. Karnes, M. & Collins, D. (1997). Using cooperative learning strategies to improve literacy skills in social studies. *Reading & Writing Quarterly*, 13, 37-52.
10. Maheady, L., Mallette, B., Harper, G. F., & Sacca, K (1991). Heads together" A peer-mediated option for improving the academic achievement of heterogeneous learning groups. *Remedial and Special Education*, 12, 25-33.
11. Nath, L. R. & Ross, S. (1996). A case study of implementing a cooperative learning program in an inner-city school. *Journal of Experimental Education*, 64, 117-137.
12. Nelson, J. R. & Johnson, A. (1996). Effects of direct instruction, cooperative learning, and independent learning practices on the classroom behavior of students with behavioral disorders: A comparative analysis. *Journal of Emotional & Behavioral Disorders*, 4, 53-63.
13. Prater, M. A., Bruhl, S. & Serna, L. A. (1998). Acquiring social skills through cooperative learning and teacher-directed instruction. *Remedial and Special Education*, 19, 160-172.

14. Sapon-Shevin, M. (1994). Cooperative learning and middle schools: What would it take to really do it right? *Theory Into Practice*, 33, 183-190.
15. Sapon-Shevin, M. & Schniedewind, N. (1989/1990). Selling cooperative learning without selling it short. *Educational Leadership*, 47, 63-65.
16. Slavin, R. E. (1995). *Cooperative Learning*. Boston: Allyn and Bacon.
17. Slavin, R. E., Karweit, N. L. & Madden, N. A. (1989). *Effective Programs for Students At Risk*. Boston: Allyn and Bacon.
18. Slavin, R. E. (1991). Synthesis of research on cooperative learning. *Educational Leadership*, 48, 71-82.