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Post-Pandemic Blues: Collaborative Learning (CL) and Communicative Competence in The English As A Second Language (ESL) Classroom

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Abstract

Due to the pandemic, many students are experiencing problems in face-to-face classes. In this post-pandemic phase, it is observed that students are unable to deal with communicating with their lecturers and peers, feeling awkward in their social interactions. Many were found to be shy, passive, inarticulate, mispronouncing words, and unable to present during class presentations. They also found it difficult to write in formal English and instead write using Internet jargon. Due to this, it is imperative that a solution be found. It is crucial that this serious issue be addressed to ensure that the next generation grows to be more self-confident and have excellent communication skills as these are the foundations of success in life. Therefore, it is proposed that Collaborative Learning (CL) be incorporated in the classroom to resolve the problem of a lack of communicative competence particularly in the post-pandemic era. This study utilizes the qualitative method which encompasses library research to compile the necessary data. To produce the research findings, the compiled data will then be analyzed according to content. The findings show that CL has numerous advantages in helping students overcome their lack of communicative competence. With CL, students will be able to reach their potential while learning in a conducive environment.

Keywords: Language Proficiency, Communicative Competence, Young Adult Learners, Collaborative Learning (CL), Learning Problems.

Introduction

The world has indeed undergone a tremendous change due to the deadly Covid-19 virus. Moreover, the way learners all around the world learn or acquire knowledge has

changed due to this global pandemic which began in 2019. Prior to this pandemic, the teaching and learning (T&L) process was generally within the classroom and communication was easier as everything was face-to-face (F2F). Students just had to approach the teacher either during the lesson or after the lesson ended if they had any doubts about a particular subject they were learning. In addition, teachers also found it easier to gauge the level of comprehension of their students by the latter's facial expression and body language such as having a blank or doubtful expression and the hunched way of sitting which may reflect a lack of confidence or interest in the lesson being taught. Homework or assignments were also submitted via hardcopies which did lead to a lot of carbon footprint due to the excessive use of paper and ink. Tests and exams were also conducted in the exam halls, and it made it easier to monitor the behavior of students and to prevent copying.

However, when the pandemic hit the globe, everyone was severely affected. Not only did the global community have to contend with the deadly virus but they also had to make sure life went on as usual. This also meant that all forms of business and the education sector, particularly schools and tertiary institutions, were affected. Nobody was the exception to the rule, unfortunately. Suddenly, everyone was forced to conduct their business online through numerous types of applications such as Zoom, Webex, Google Meet and so forth. Many schools and universities had to conduct their classes online which did have its advantages and disadvantages. Online classes did save time and effort as well as considered the safest and convenient method as everyone was required to keep a distance or 'social distancing' to avoid contracting the deadly virus. However, there were several issues such as absenteeism, lack of interest in learning as learners were isolated and are prevented from communicating with their classmates through F2F, and ultimately affected the mental health of all those involved: teachers and learners. Generally, everyone was adversely affected by this worldwide pandemic. Online classes, although were rather successful on a certain level, had their repercussions as well. The main aim of any classroom such as the ESL classroom is to produce proficient users of the English language who are equipped with communicative competence. Therefore, this paper aims to propose the use of Collaborative Learning (CL) in the English as a Second Language (ESL) classroom to improve communicative competence of the learners.

Problem Statement

Young adults are naturally socially awkward and are still trying to find themselves, to reach their full potential. This is the reason many of them are still shy and insecure. Generally, they need a lot of guidance from the adults around them, especially their parents. Young adults are at that stage in their life where they are just beginning to learn more about themselves and the world around them. It is not an easy stage of life as many teenagers can attest to. Some young people who were lucky enough to live in a happy and stable environment will usually grow to become confident and well-adjusted adults later in life. However, this is not the case for other young adults who may not have been so lucky to grow up in such a conducive environment. The latter generally did not receive the encouragement and motivation to become the best that they can be, nor did they grow up in a loving and kind environment. Instead, they were surrounded by adults who were highly critical of them and never had a kind or encouraging word to say to them. Consequently, this group of unfortunate youngsters will grow up to become socially awkward adults with low self-esteem who may not be able to fulfill their fullest potential.

Unfortunately, the pandemic phase had worsened the situation. Due to social distancing, classes were no longer conducted physically in the classroom. Instead, classes

were conducted online for quite a considerable period. This is mainly since the students had online classes for 2 years during the pandemic which basically required them to merely sit in front of their computers with no social interaction whatsoever. The poor students had only their screens to interact with and did most of their work in seclusion. This had an adverse effect on their mental health. Most of the students became reticent and complacent. Some youngsters tend to be reclusive and introverted and this pandemic phase has further amplified this negative attitude. Most young people are still lacking confidence particularly in speaking in public and dealing with other people. Generally, they lack self-confidence. This is evident among young adults, particularly young adult learners. As a result of the lack of communicative competence, many young people find it difficult to give their full attention to lessons and acquiring knowledge. As a result, they find it challenging to focus on career development, particularly on their communication skills. Various employers complained about the lack of proficiency among fresh graduates. Ultimately, this has caused the latter to lose their jobs as they were deemed unsuitable for the position and are found to lack the ability to perform at their workplace. Thus, not only are they not knowledgeable but their language proficiency has suffered in the process. The generation of the post-pandemic era are not keen on acquiring knowledge nor are they aware of their weaknesses in communication.

Due to the pandemic, many students are experiencing problems in face-to-face classes. In this post-pandemic phase, it is observed that students are unable to deal with communicating with their lecturers and peers, feeling awkward in their social interactions. Many were found to be shy, passive, inarticulate, mispronouncing words, broken grammar, and unable to present during class presentations, find it difficult to express themselves, unable to write in formal English and instead write using Internet jargon. Due to this, it is imperative that a solution be found. It is crucial that this serious issue be addressed to ensure that the next generation grows to be more self-confident and have excellent communication skills as these are the foundations of success in life. When they possess communicative competence, they are fully able to become confident and more capable of fulfilling their true potential and become skilled in their respective careers.

Research Methodology

This study uses qualitative methodology. According to Shaffie (1991) a data compilation method that uses the data or evidence as well as studying the documents and records relevant to the study is referred to as library research. This study focuses on the analysis of the contents and based on the descriptives. The documents must be analyzed thoroughly to discern the contents are pertinent to the study in question (Kamarul Azmi Jazmi, 2012). The research focused on analyzing the available literature which included books, journals, theses, working papers and proceedings. The compiled data is analyzed according to content to gain the necessary information pertinent to the research in question which are the research findings.

Literature Review

Working together or cooperating with each other is defined as collaborative learning. In addition, the positive effects of working as a team or working together with others truly prove to lead to several positive effects although some people prefer to work alone or individually. Panitz (1999); Dillenbourg (1999) have defined collaborative learning as a way to reach a similar target whilst cooperating with one another on a task, a meeting, a project and

so forth. Needless to say, the positive impact of collaborative learning is undoubtedly limitless as the exchange of ideas and cooperation with one another will lead to a fruitful outcome as agreed by (Austin, 2000; Welch, 1998). Some of the important benefits out of the 50 benefits related to collaborative learning listed by Johnson & Johnson (1989); Panitz (1999) are namely: increases self-esteem, reduces anxiety, promotes positive attitudes, develops a social support system, creates a positive atmosphere, encourages critical thinking skills and so forth. According to other studies, other benefits of collaborative learning which leaves a deep impact and play a crucial role in life include instilling critical thinking skills, honing problem-solving skills, developing confidence, encouraging teamwork, promoting leadership skills, alleviating anxiety, and so forth. To accomplish a task alone is no longer preferred as there is an increased awareness about the importance of teamwork in today's competitive world. An integral feature of successful individuals is to possess social interaction skills which is the direct result of collaborative learning (Cohen & Cohen, 1991).

A collaborative (or cooperative) learning approach can be defined as when students work together on learning tasks or activities in small groups to ensure active participation of all those involved. According to Lev Vygotsky (1978) as cited by Yang and Yan (2017) the idea of collaborative learning is when learners are dependent upon each other to accomplish tasks that they otherwise wouldn't be able to complete individually. Moreover, Vygotsky argues that social interactions will lead to cognitive development. He states that because of interactions students engage in with peers that are more knowledgeable or adults (e.g., teacher, family) the learning process will continue more effectively. Based on the sociocultural theory of human learning by Vygotsky, learning is considered a social process and the origination of human intelligence in society or culture. According to Vygotsky, in the development of cognition, social interaction plays a fundamental role. Collaborative learning is always presented as learner-centered in the ESL/EFL classroom. Collaborative learning, as an educational approach, shifts the responsibility to students rather than the teacher, asking them to learn something new together by working with their peers. The Think-Pair-Share technique is probably the most popular and most utilized of the cooperative learning strategies. With this technique, students think about a topic or question, then team up with a classmate and exchange their opinions about the said topic.

Collaborative learning improves communicative competence by improving engagement, building interdependence and trust, and by sharing. By improving the engagement of the learners, there tends to be cohesion among them whereas by building interdependence and trust; the learners get to build interdependence between them by identifying their strengths in communication. In addition, by sharing the learners will get to learn how best to share for them to integrate their knowledge. According to Johnsons (2009) as cited by Brown and Lara (2011), one's actions normally have three effects such as the following: may hinder the success of others, may promote the success of others or not have any impact at all on the failure or success of others. The survey by Johnsons demonstrated the benefits of co-operation which ultimately leads to greater psychological health, social competence and self-esteem; more caring, committed, and supportive relationships; as well as greater productivity and higher achievement.

Collaborative learning will promote a sense of accountability, kinship, interdependence, and deeper understanding of concepts. When there is someone, especially a peer, to study or learn with, the pressure of coming up with an answer in the classroom is greatly reduced. The burden of getting the answer is shifted from the individual to the team or group when there is this type of shared responsibility. In addition, young people who tend to feel

embarrassed over the slightest thing and cannot bear criticism, particularly, will experience less feelings of anxiety as a result. Consequently, these students who are in dire need of help and guidance will greatly benefit when an appropriate learning strategy such as Collaborative Learning (CL) is implemented in the classroom.

According to Hymes (1962/1968, 1971) as cited by Lillis (2005) the term communicative competence, established by Dell Hymes in 1966, refers to grammatical knowledge of syntax, morphology, phonology and social knowledge about how and when to use utterances appropriately. In sociolinguistics particularly, communicative competence is one of the main approaches in the study of language. This idea by Hymes is contrary to Noam Chomsky whereby the former opines that a speech community also includes non – native speakers or second language learners and not an exclusively homogeneous one as the latter suggests. Grammatical competence, sociolinguistic competence, discourse competence and strategic competence are the 4 components of communicative competence. The manner in which we communicate is dependent upon the context and the speaking framework created by Hymes is a reflection of the concept in which language is used. With this speaking model by Hymes, our ability to speak up in any social situation is being facilitated as it helps us navigate cross-cultural communications and thus improve our communicative competence in a specific language.

There are several issues or problems faced by learners that hinder communicative competence which comprise the following: weaknesses in spoken English; weaknesses in strategic and sociolinguistic competence in English; shortage of training in Collaborative Learning (CL); very limited opportunities for retraining in CL; and little time and expertise for developing communicative materials. There are several studies about collaborative learning and its effectiveness on improving communicative competence of ESL learners. However, there was a dearth of literature on post-pandemic effects on learning, particularly communicative competence regarding the use of collaborative learning in the ESL classroom. This paper seeks to propose that Collaborative Learning (CL) be incorporated in the classroom to resolve the problem of the lack of communicative competence among learners in the post-pandemic era. Therefore, it is imperative that collaborative learning be used in the ESL classroom to address the issues of the lack of communicative competence among learners as this will provide them with the opportunity to be equipped with necessary skills and to be in the lead in this highly competitive world.

The Proposal to adapt Collaborative Learning (CL) in Improving Communicative Competence in the ESL Classroom

There are several proposals on the use of CL in improving the communicative competence of learners in an ESL classroom to ensure that learners will be adept in communicating with others particularly in keeping abreast with the current competitive fast-paced society. It is hoped that with the use of CL in the ESL classroom, the communicative competence of learners will be further enhanced, and they will be on par with the other proficient users of the English language.

The following proposal are as follows

The Teacher or Instructor

The teacher is no longer dominant in the classroom, instead she is the facilitator for her students. A certain level of control will be relinquished by the teacher as students will be given the freedom to generate solutions and recommendations. The students will be provided with

constructive feedback by the teacher on their progress. This is done after meeting each group and conducting observations on their group discussions. Only when a group has been sidetracked or deviated from the given task, will the teacher step in to provide further instruction. The students will be actively encouraged to construct their own knowledge as they will not be provided with too much information. Generally, with the collaborative learning approach the students will be responsible for their learning process as the teacher only serves as a facilitator. Collaborative learning promotes a student-centered approach, develops positive attitudes towards teachers as well as encourages students to be actively involved in the learning process as stated by (Panitz, 1999; Johnsons, 1989).

The teacher will also document their progress by either providing a verbal or written assessment. Normally, the former is given for speaking-related tasks while the latter is given for writing tasks. With verbal assessment, both teacher and student can engage in an active discussion while with a written assessment, the teacher will have more time to be able to provide a detailed explanation on the strengths and weaknesses of the students. Thus, when students are provided with feedback, they will be fully aware of their mistakes and will be motivated to improve themselves. According to Johnsons (1989); Panitz (1989) when the teacher provides guidance and allows the students to actively engage in discussions this develops positive attitudes towards teachers.

The Students

Prior to the group discussion, the teacher will provide a detailed description of the task. This will ensure that all the students comprehend the task and will be able to accomplish the class activities. The students will also be discussing with each other the most appropriate way to achieve a specific outcome. The objectives of the task will also become clearer after the group discussion. The task will be completed in a collective manner as each group member will be able to provide input and feedback on each other's ideas. This social support system for learners will also lead to establishing a conducive learning environment for modelling and practicing co-operation as agreed by (Johnsons, 1989; Panitz, 1999).

In addition, during the group discussion, the students will learn to actively participate in reaching the goals of the classroom activities. By doing so, they will also learn to exchange their opinions and ideas and be encouraged to be democratic and objective in arriving at a decision. The students will also experience a reduced feeling of anxiety and inhibition as well as be more receptive to the feedback of other students as they are mostly in the same age group. Moreover, they will feel less judged for their responses as opposed to if the teacher was involved in the group discussion. Any feelings of embarrassment to any mistakes being made will be reduced as the responsibility of completing a task is a shared responsibility of each group. According to Johnsons (1994) as cited by Woods and Chen (2010), this positive interdependence is important as collaborative learning also promotes the frequent use of relevant interpersonal and small-group skills.

The Utilization of Technology

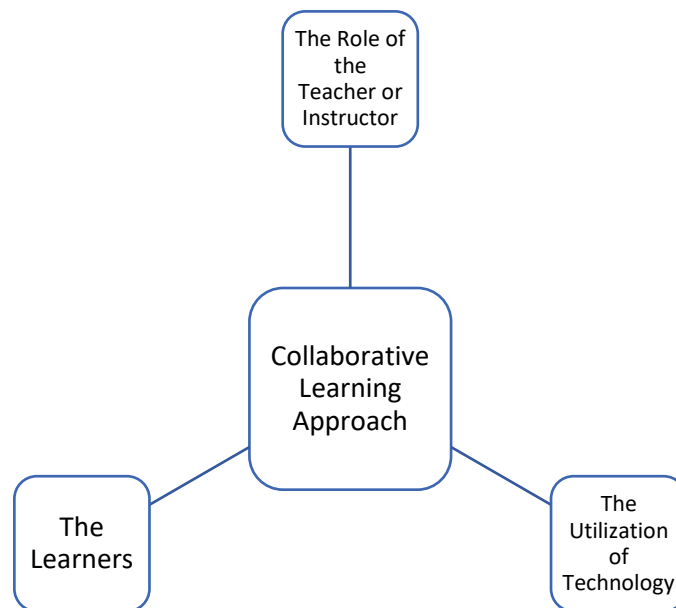
The Internet has been widely used to disseminate knowledge these days due to the advancement of technology. Talks, lectures, discussions and so forth can be downloaded by students. This development in technology is vital as it allows almost everyone to share and receive knowledge. As a result of technological advancements, everyone can learn as knowledge is spread far and wide particularly to those segments of society that are curious or have the need to gain more knowledge. Hismanoglu (2012) cited Block and Cameron (2002)

that globalization and technological advancements have certainly left a deep impact on the way English is being learnt and taught. Crystal (2003) as cited by Hismanoglu (2012) stated that globalization has kickstarted the age of information technology requiring the use of the Internet with English as the medium. Initiatives taken such as the live streaming of lectures, talks or forums on Facebook while recorded ones are being uploaded into YouTube and Whatsapp are also rather common and popular among the masses. Indeed, these are all positive steps in the right direction in ensuring that knowledge with the English language as the medium is widely spread and shared with the global community. All these efforts are commendable as learners using the collaborative learning approach can use the available technology to acquire knowledge as they realize that they need to be more independent in seeking knowledge and not merely rely on the teacher as the source of knowledge. However, the teacher needs to monitor and guide the students in using the appropriate social media sites in their search for knowledge as this will prevent them from using sources which do not provide valid information. As we all know, misinformation is rampant in cyberspace. According to World Health Organization (2022) misinformation is defined as false or inaccurate information with the deliberate intention to deceive, while disinformation also includes misleading or biased information, manipulated narratives or facts, and propaganda. Vosloo (2021) agrees that educating youngsters to determine the veracity of information by equipping them with the critical reading and thinking skills is crucial. Indeed, it is imperative that learners develop critical thinking skills even in non-digital contexts as mis/disinformation moves easily between online and offline contexts. Hence, it is crucial that teachers do explain the dos and don'ts of using the Internet and provide guidance whenever necessary, particularly in evaluating appropriate material to be used in the classroom.

The findings are found in the table below.

The Teacher or Instructor	The Students	The Utilization of Technology
<ul style="list-style-type: none">•The teacher is no longer dominant in the classroom, instead she is the facilitator for her students.•Generally, with the collaborative learning approach the students will be responsible for their learning process as the teacher only serves as a facilitator.•Collaborative learning promotes a student-centered approach, develops positive attitudes towards teachers as well as encourages students to be actively involved in the learning process.•The teacher will also document their progress by either providing a verbal or written assessment.•Thus, when students are provided with feedback, they will be fully aware of their mistakes and will be motivated to improve themselves.•When the teacher provides guidance and allows the students to actively engage in discussions this develops positive attitudes towards teachers.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">•Prior to the group discussion, the teacher will provide a detailed description of the task. This will ensure that all the students comprehend the task and will be able to accomplish the class activities.•The objectives of the task will also become clearer after the group discussion.•The task will be completed in a collective manner as each group member will be able to provide input and feedback on each other's ideas.•This social support system for learners will also lead to establishing a conducive learning environment for modelling and practicing co-operation. This social support system for learners will also lead to establishing a conducive learning environment for modelling and practicing co-operation.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">•As a result of technological advancements, everyone can learn as knowledge is spread far and wide particularly to those segments of society that are curious or have the need to gain more knowledge.•Initiatives taken such as the live streaming of lectures, talks or forums on Facebook while recorded ones are being uploaded into YouTube and Whatsapp are also rather common and popular among the masses.•Indeed, these are all positive steps in the right direction in ensuring that knowledge with the English language as the medium is widely spread and shared with the global community.•All these efforts are commendable as learners using the collaborative learning approach can use the available technology to acquire knowledge as they realize that they need to be more independent in seeking knowledge and not merely rely on the teacher as the source of knowledge.•However, the teacher needs to monitor and guide the students in using the appropriate social media sites in their search for knowledge as this will prevent them from using sources which do not provide valid information.

Diagram of the Proposed Collaborative Learning Framework in Improving Communicative Competence in the ESL Classroom



Conclusion

The traditional classroom whereby the teacher or instructor plays the dominant role and had provided knowledge to the students is no longer appropriate as the present generation of learners need a different teaching and learning approach. Although in the past, the traditional chalk and talk method was suitable it has to undergo certain changes to adapt with the present challenges. The students or learners of the present generation are required to possess a variety of skills and particularly, communicative competence to meet the numerous challenges of this globalised era. When an individual possesses communicative competence, it is easier to communicate more effectively and efficiently. Unfortunately, there are many graduates who pass with flying colors but do not possess this skill. In order to keep abreast with the current times, it is necessary that a process of transformation or paradigm shift has to involve numerous aspects especially in the ESL classroom. In order to ensure the students are provided with the necessary know-how to meet the demands of the modern world, certain changes or updates that are relevant and appropriate must be adopted and implemented. Therefore, the importance and significance of this study proposes the collaborative learning approach be implemented to promote communicative competence as it is necessary in ensuring that the learners or students of today be prepared to meet the challenges of tomorrow, particularly in this post-pandemic era. The contribution of this research is to promote collaborative learning approach as an effective tool which leads to the development of higher-order thinking skills (HOTS), communicative competence, leadership as well as self-management skills.

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