



AN CHOMHAIRLE MHÚINTEOIREACHTA

The Teaching Council

Cooperative Learning in the Language Classroom – Can it improve the oral competency of the students?

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Overview of Research

This research focussed on the effects of Cooperative Learning (CL) on the oral language acquisition of students in a modern language classroom. A parallel goal was the improvement of the classroom practice of the teacher / researcher. An action research approach was taken. The research specifically focussed on the use of the target language (TL) by the students. It sought to investigate claims that CL could give students more opportunities to practise the target language and increase their acquisition and oral competence.

Rationale and Aims

The researcher, teaching in an all boys' rural secondary school had found that the majority of boys were unwilling to speak in the target language in front of their classmates. This meant that a significant amount of teacher time was being spent working individually with the students. This research sought to investigate if CL could increase interaction and conversation in French, enable students to make the transition from dependent to more independent learning and improve their oral competence in the target language. The research was conducted in Transition Year and was in line with the aims of TY for modern language development – “to increase the pupil's ability to express himself/herself in the target language”

It also sought to introduce a teaching methodology that was more congruent with the requirements of the oral Leaving Certificate Examination. The oral examination was introduced in the 1980's but teaching methodologies, in the opinion of the researcher, have continued in the traditional style, with classroom practice tending to emphasise the competitive learning mode. The research aimed to integrate CL with some theories of, and approaches to, second language acquisition. The communicative approach, for example, has emphasised language learning for the purposes of communication and involves a shift in pedagogical stance from the learning of a language for academic purposes.

Design and Methodology

The teacher acted as teacher/researcher. As she implemented CL in the classroom she used a number of research instruments to evaluate its effects. She used observation (structured and unstructured), video footage, oral examinations and interviews. The students' interactions and conversations were observed. Interpersonal skills were taught so as to enable the students to engage effectively in conversation. Students worked in pairs and triads. Both academic ability and personality were taken into account by the teacher when allocating students to mixed ability pairs (initially) or triads (as they became more highly skilled).

The 'Learning Together Model' of CL was used. Social skills were taught and leadership roles were assigned to each student in the group. Positive Interdependence was structured by giving one set of materials to each group. Time was allowed for group processing to enable students to reflect on their interaction each day. During the early part of the research, the teacher observed for the existence of all five basic elements of CL, including individual accountability and promotive interaction. Later the use of the TL became the focus of the observation. Triangulation was ensured by the use of multiple methodologies. Reliability, validity and ethical considerations were all taken into account.

Findings

The findings of this study were in line with international research:

Benefits to students

Cooperative Learning is a practice that can put the communicative approach into action. The small group interactions allowed students to demonstrate their improved linguistic competence. The reasons were:

- a) the increase of student talk through comprehensible input, instruction and output
- b) the incentive structures of positive reinforcement
- c) the supportive and communicative learning context. The interactive tasks stimulated the students' cognitive, linguistic and social abilities.

A less threatening learning environment was created whereby the students willingly engaged in increased oral classroom participation. Students became more at ease and found it easier to ask questions when in difficulty. Improvements were found in pronunciation, structure and communication. The interview results demonstrated students' understanding of the differences between CL and traditional group work and their liking for the CL classroom.

Benefits to the teacher

A wide variety of active learning methodologies was examined and implemented. Engaging in this research broadened the teacher's repertoire of teaching methodologies. It also renewed the researcher's enthusiasm for teaching.

Recommendations

The research finds that comprehensive in-service training of teachers is essential if CL is to be used more in classrooms. The researcher found significant pressure to return to old ways and to teach "like everyone else". Mentoring and support groups are recommended for teachers interested in implementing the method. Time needs to be set aside for this.