

Collaborative Language Learning (CLL) in Indian ESL Classrooms: A Study of Regional Medium ESL Learners

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, I will attempt to explore the impact of collaborative learning and the use of the concept of Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) in Indian regional medium ESL classrooms to improve the speaking proficiency of socially disadvantaged learners. I will use the socio-constructivist framework of Vygotsky (1978) along with collaborative learning principles to examine ZPD in Indian secondary and tertiary ESL classrooms. Collaborative learning focuses on learners' cooperation within the team in order to achieve the team goal while at the same time holding individual members accountable (Slavin, 1983; Nunan, 1992). ZPD supports learners with beginner proficiency in getting along with competitive peers for better learning (Mahn, 2015). Explorative interpretive methodology has been used in this study to understand how the concept of ZPD can be employed to improve the speaking proficiency of learners. This study was carried out in a regional medium school and a college in Tamil Nadu. The findings of the study show that ZPD and collaborative learning could be a viable solution for improving the speaking proficiency of socially disadvantaged students in larger sized Indian regional medium ESL classrooms.

Key words: ESL classroom, collaborative learning, ZPD, mediated action, and corrective feedback.

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this study is to explore the possibilities for improving the speaking

proficiency of learners from regional medium¹ and socially disadvantaged² backgrounds in Indian ESL (English as Second Language) classrooms, using a collaborative language learning approach. Collaborative language learning entails learners working together to achieve common learning goals (Slavin 1985). It necessitates co-operation and continuous involvement from learners, peers and teachers throughout the entire learning process (Slavin, 1983; Nunan, 1992). The important aspect of collaborative language learning is that it develops language proficiency by encouraging learners to engage in group and peer work. In other words, learners are responsible for their learning as well as that of their team or group.

Indian ESL classrooms are heterogeneous in nature as they have multi-lingual and multi-cultural learners. To add to this diversity, in regional medium classrooms, learners' profiles also vary in terms of their social, economic, political, linguistic and cultural background. These factors can however be used as resources rather than being perceived as obstacles in the language learning process. For this, sociolinguist and sociopsychologist Vygotsky's model of "Zone of Proximal Development", "Scaffolding" and "Mediation" can be used to improve the speaking proficiency of regional medium and socially disadvantaged ESL learners. This eclectic method facilitates a learner-centred approach which in turn promotes: 1) group activities, 2) interactive sessions to inculcate linguistic resources, 3) social and cultural competencies in learners. It can also help to bridge the gap between curriculum expectation, learners' language proficiency and limited classroom resources.

In this paper, I will primarily address the following questions:

- How can collaborative language learning be implemented in Indian regional medium and socially disadvantaged ESL classrooms?
- What type of classroom tasks can facilitate speaking skills in Indian regional medium and socially disadvantaged ESL classrooms?

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND AND LITERATURE REVIEW

In this section, I will explore and define the key concepts used in this study: 1) ZPD, 2) Mediated action and Scaffolding, 3) Task, 4) Collaborative learning and 5) Corrective feedback. I will also explore in detail the interconnection between these concepts.

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- 1 Regional medium: Learners for who the medium of instruction is their mother tongue (Tamil language).
 - 2 Socially disadvantaged learners: Learners from economic, social, and culturally disadvantaged communities.

ZONE OF PROXIMAL DEVELOPMENT (ZPD)

Zone of proximal development supports learners with beginner proficiency to work with competitive peers to improve their learning with the help of a scaffolding provided by the teachers or peers, when needed. This process also helps learners to make note of the marked linguistic features used by the teacher or peers in the learning process (Mahn, 2015). Vygotsky proves that language is not always a developmental activity; rather we have to place learners alongside their competitive peers as they strive to perform better based on the shared knowledge. This theory also helps them to be independent by means of the group activity (Vygotsky, 1987). In this model of learning, teacher and learner share an apprentice relationship (Mahn, 2015). The role of a teacher is to provide a mediated action by choosing a competitive task, which is proximal to the learners' abilities (Vygotsky, 1978), and to challenge them to perform better in the group. The teacher or the competitive peer provides a scaffolding for the task when it is required by the learner.

MEDIATED ACTION AND SCAFFOLDING

In a regional medium Indian ESL classroom, most learners are at a disadvantage because of their economic, social, or political situations. For such learners, it is a prerequisite for the language teacher to use mediated action which facilitates their learning. Mediated action is extended by the teacher to their learners through a task (Bell, 2011). The instructor has to first understand the existing language capabilities of the learners, and then develop a mediating task which encourages them to critically perform the task as a team (Vygotsky, 1978; Wertsch, 1993). Generally, there are two types of mediated actions that can help the learners to develop their critical ability—actions that provide technical support and actions that provide psychological (language) support (Wertsch, 1993). Both mediated activity and language support are equally important in the learning process of an individual. Wertsch (1993), views mediated activity and language support as interrelated processes.

Scaffolding is a part of mediated action, in which an expert bridges the gap or facilitates learning by providing tailored support to the novice to enable learning through the shared experiences in the team or from the expert (Vygotsky, 1978; Belland, Glazewski, & Richardson, 2008). This pedagogical strategy was developed and used by cognitive and developmental psychologist John Bruner (1966) to aid the language learners.

Task

The Indian ESL classroom is dynamic and complex; in order to make it effective and goal-driven, the teacher should use appropriate tasks, which facilitate the learners' language needs. In an ESL classroom, task provides a background setting which is carefully structured and organized to cater to the needs of the learner (Van den Branden, 2006). In addition, it directs the teachers and also stimulates and motivates the learners towards a specific language learning goal(s). Bygate, Skehan, & Swain, (2001), Ellis, (2003) Van den Branden, (2006) Mackey, (2007), Candlin, (1987) and Robinson (2011) have identified certain key components that constitutes an effective task. These are: input (medium in which the task is presented, this could be written, spoken, auditory, etc.); role (role of learners and teachers); setting (how the class needs to be organized), action (steps to be followed to achieve the goal), outcome (expected outcome in writing as well as orally); and evaluation and feedback (what kind of evaluation and feedback has to be carried out) (Kim, 2015). While it is important to have a well-designed and well-tailored task, it is the teachers' role and effective mediation that can exploit and generate active discussion in the classroom resulting in better language proficiency.

COLLABORATIVE LEARNING

Indian ESL classrooms are multilingual and multicultural. These differences can however be seen as a resource rather than an obstacle. Though students' interests are diverse, yet they are connected in their language learning goal. Collaborative pedagogy bridges the gap between the heterogeneous classroom needs and varied learner goals. Collaborative language learning stems from a socio-constructivist approach (Vygotsky, 1978), in which the cognitive structure of a learner gets further activated when he/she works with a team in order to achieve the collective language learning goals of the team. The primary objective of this method is to encourage cooperation among the team members so that they support each other rather than compare and compete with one another. This method can be effective only when there are group goals accompanied by individual accountability (Slavin, 1983). Collaborative language learning is grounded on two philosophies: humanistic education and experiential learning (Nunan, 1992). Humanistic education relies on learning through lively interaction with the team members and the teacher. Experiential learning believes "learning is a social act" and is based on the experience of the learner from socio-cultural contexts. This method is important for the heterogeneous Indian ESL classroom because its diversity promotes a learner-centric environment in which learners can learn at their own pace.

CORRECTIVE FEEDBACK

Corrective feedback is one of the defining features in an ESL classroom but it is given least preference in most classes with higher priority given to covering the syllabus, evaluating performance, writing lesson plans, etc. The significance of this feature has been highlighted in various studies (Russell & Spada, 2006; Mackey et al., 2007; Li, 2010). Also, there are studies which have proved the negative impact of not giving feedback to learners (Lyster, 2015). Corrective feedback forms part of scaffolding in a classroom, and has to be used productively, without intimidating or hindering the morale or confidence level of the learners. There are two types of feedback: 1) reformulation, which is an explicit way of correcting by using the correct usage, 2) prompt, in this type of feedback, learners try to correct their mistakes on their own using the language support provided by the teacher or competitive peers (Ranta & Lyster, 2007). There are different ways of giving feedback effectively, through eliciting, clarification request, repeating learner's errors, meta-linguistic awareness and para-linguistic awareness (Lyster, 2015). The feedback provided to the learners can be both positive and negative; both have a purpose and more importantly any teaching without feedback is not complete. Overall, feedback should be used based on the context and situation.

METHODOLOGY

In this study, the basic tenets of collaborative learning have been combined with Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development to formulate a theoretical framework which can be used to build the speaking proficiency of regional medium Indian ESL learners. This has been represented in figure 1.

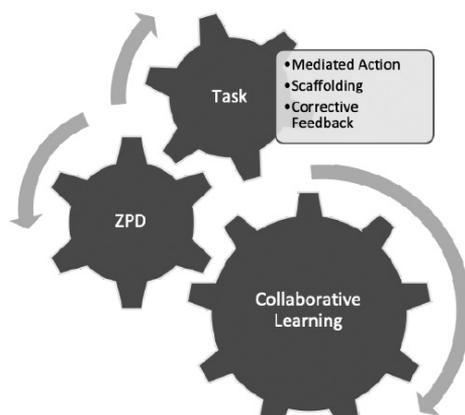


Figure 1. Theoretical framework and learning processes of collaborative learning.

I will now attempt to look at how collaborative learning and ZPD have been implemented to develop speaking proficiency in two Indian regional medium ESL classrooms. Both classrooms comprise of a socially disadvantaged group of learners. Two education institutions have been chosen for this study; the researcher was part of the teaching community in both institutions.

PARTICIPANTS

Most of the participants from the two classrooms are first generation learners and their English proficiency is that of the beginner level. They had developed a negative attitude towards English language learning because of their socio-cultural context and lack of exposure to English language.

Classroom 1.

Forty-two learners studying in twelfth grade participated in this study. This ESL classroom is located in a school in northern Chennai, Tamil Nadu; most of its students belong to the local fishing community. Learners in this classroom came from socially, economically and culturally disadvantaged sections of the Chennai society. The medium of instruction for all subjects was Tamil, and their English proficiency was at the beginner level.

Classroom 2.

This ESL classroom is in a college in Madurai, Tamil Nadu. In this college, most of the students come from the agrarian communities living in the southern districts of Tamil Nadu. These adult learners were from socially, economically and culturally disadvantaged communities. The participants of the study were learners from the Tamil and Economics streams. Most of these learners had done their schooling in a Tamil medium school.

RESEARCH DESIGN

In this study, I employed an exploratory interpretative methodological framework. Using this framework, I analysed the effectiveness of implementing collaborative learning and ZPD in the regional language medium ESL classrooms. This study has a non-experimental design and qualitative data; interpretive analysis has been used to study the implementation of collaborative learning and ZPD.

TOOLS

Five types of tasks were carried out during the study. These included:

- 1) Note-taking 2) Roleplay 3) Production description 4) Simple persuasive

- communication and 5) Simple presentation (Ellis, 2003).
- Researcher's field notes: The researchers took field notes during the class and also documented few more details after each class.

ANALYSIS

This study was conducted over a period of four weeks at both sites. The researcher followed a protocol (steps and strategies) before carrying out the study. In this section, the protocol involved in the study will be discussed in detail.

Step 01: The researcher, being the teacher as well in these classes, had the liberty to group the learners into teams based on their proficiency level. Each team had a total of 5 learners with 1 self-motivated, 2 moderately motivated and 2 dependent/beginner level learners. This classification was carried out implicitly; it was not based on their scores but on their previous performance in the classroom.

Step 02: Tasks were designed based on the proficiency level of the learners and taking into account their socio-cultural context; learners could therefore connect their everyday knowledge to academic knowledge. The initial tasks were designed to build their proficiency as well as improve their motivation levels. Gradually, the tasks got more and more complex as they were designed to make the learners work in teams, to build proficiency, and to develop conceptual understanding. Along with the tasks, language prompts were also developed in order to support the learners.

Step 03: Mediated action or scaffolding was provided to the learners for each task, whenever required. The scaffolding was in the form of language help, audio and video lessons, printed materials and peer interactions.

Step 04: Evaluation for these tasks was not uniform; rather it was based on the proficiency level of the learner, his/her contribution to the team's performance and individual growth.

Step 05: Corrective feedback was given both inductively and deductively, based on the learners' motivation level and learning style.

ANALYSIS OF CLASSROOMS

Analysis of classroom happenings have been categorized under three different stages.

Preparation stage.

There were eight teams of five members each in both ESL classrooms. In each team, roles were assigned to each individual: two moderately motivated

learners had to take down notes of what had been discussed in the class and more importantly points discussed in their respective teams, two dependent level learners had to speak in the class, and they had to be supported by one self-motivated learner (Nunan, 1992). The self-motivated learner also had to contribute to the note-making team (Slavin, 1983). Although the individual roles remained the same, they all supported their peers when the need arose. Before the implementation of the tasks, not only were the learners informed about the significance of speaking skills, but the teacher also discussed the importance of listening skills (receptive skill) and its impact on speaking performance (productive skill).

For the five tasks mentioned earlier, the teacher provided detailed instructions as well as the necessary inputs to carry out the tasks. In addition, the teacher provided a handout which consisted of language help for the learners to develop their speaking skills (Guk & Kellogg, 2007). The inputs were provided by brainstorming and elicitation techniques. In the brainstorming sessions, the teacher used every day concepts to explain the task. This motivated the dependent and moderately motivated learners to take an active part in the brainstorming session, which in turn activated their schemata and they started responding in the target language using fragmented sentences. Self-motivated learners provided more interest, necessary concept and language support to the team to comprehend the concepts.

Task implementation.

All five tasks were implemented in phases and were designed to cater to the needs of different proficiency groups.

In the first phase, after the brainstorming session, learners were made to listen to the audio/video input. Irrespective of their proficiency level, all learners were required to take notes following which they had to discuss what they had noted down. During this process, the teacher provided the necessary scaffolding to each team to provide better understanding of the task (Ellis, 2009). Finally, the moderately motivated learners collated all the notes and produced them in a written format with the help of the language support provided by the self-motivated and other members in team.

In the second phase, the self-motivated learners took the lead role and after discussing various options with their team, came out with a plan to carry out the task. The self-motivated and moderately motivated learners also had to help dependent learners, who had to present the task in front of the class. During this phase, the teacher had to check whether the teams had understood their tasks and

whether they maintained a harmonious relationship within the team (Robinson, 2011). Apart from this, the teacher also provided a scaffolding to each team and checked their progress cyclically.

In the final phase, aided by the inputs and language support provided by the team, one dependent student from each team was picked by the teacher to perform the task in front of the class. The teacher provided instant language support to those dependent learners who found it a struggle to present their task to the class. All the tasks mentioned here were implemented in the same phase by phase manner in both classes. The teacher took the necessary steps to make sure that the self-motivated and moderately motivated learners did not feel ignored by slightly modifying each phase and task (Van den Branden, 2006; Kim, 2015).

Corrective feedback

Feedback for the task was given both inductively and deductively, based on the learners' motivation and learning style (Sheen & Ellis, 2011). Feedback for dependent, moderately motivated and self-motivated learners was given separately. The teacher also provided corrective feedback during the brainstorming, preparation and task implementation stages. The nature of feedback during each of these stages varied. For example: during the elicitation stage, most of the feedback was on the subject matter of the task; on the other hand during presentation stage, the feedback mostly pertained to language use and organization of the presentation (Li, 2010).

While giving corrective feedback to dependent learners, the teacher focused on their basic language structure and usage. This feedback was given in a way that it would have a positive impact on the motivation and confidence of the learner. For moderately motivated learners, the feedback was geared towards note-taking skills and enhancing their writing and speaking proficiency (Li, 2010; Sheen & Ellis, 2011; Lyster, 2015). In addition, moderately motivated level learners were also made aware of the cohesive and coherence devices that they could employ in their language. For self-motivated level learners, the teacher had to include feedback on how to organize their presentation, language style and discourse markers in their speaking. The teacher also used different evaluation criteria for each group, which helped the learners to improve their speaking proficiency, and also helped the teacher to understand the learners' zonal proximal development from their early proficiency (Lyster, 2015). The teacher implemented these learnings in the ESL classrooms and observed that collaborative learning strategies helped learners to improve their speaking skills in both classrooms.

DISCUSSION

I have demonstrated through this study how Vygotsky's concept of ZPD is useful in developing language proficiency in socially disadvantaged learners. Moreover, by systematically implementing ZPD and collaborative learning approach, the teacher can overcome the disadvantages that come with teaching a larger group of learners. In the Indian context, access to school education is itself a major challenge for a lot of children. Lack of resources force Indian government schools across the country to opt for large classroom sizes. In this context, if group work and peer work were to be implemented meticulously, it would make the learners share some responsibility in their language learning. It is clear that by using collaborative approach in regional language medium ESL classrooms, the speaking proficiency of the learners can gradually be improved. This study has also shown that group listening comprehension tasks and individual speaking tasks can be used as effective tools to improving the speaking proficiency of socially disadvantaged learners. Such tasks not only help to increase the learners' self-esteem, but also motivates them to perform better with a positive attitude during class interaction. In addition, the use of ZPD has also resulted in an improvement in the critical thinking and problem-solving ability in groups rather than evaluating them with isolated scores. I would therefore like to recommend that the teacher should use collaborative learning and ZPD as part of their regular classroom interaction.

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