

Research Article

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Co-Operative learning in enhancing the speaking skills of students: A Phenomenological approach

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Abstract

The main thrust of the study was to determine if cooperative learning is an effective approach to develop and enhance the speaking skills of students at Vicente Hizon Sr. Elementary School, Bangoy District, Davao City. Focus group discussions were utilized to get the needed information. Results revealed that through cooperative learning, students interact and express themselves more to their peers or classmates during instructional episodes. The approach served also as a venue for reluctant and fearful students to share and impart their ideas and opinions regarding the concepts discussed in the class. They were able to intensify their self-esteem because they knew that they were accountable to the performance of the group in the class.

1. Introduction

In the era of globalization, the demand for speaking mastery in English is inevitable due to the strengthening scenario of English as a language for international communication. However, learners of English language often express difficulty in speaking because they lack the ability to use the language appropriately in social interactions (Malmir and Shoorcheh, 2012). Social interaction contributes greatly on how students learn yet, in several classrooms, students are often the passive recipients of knowledge rather than being active ones (Webb, 1992; Gillies, 2003; Gillies and Boyle, 2010). In the same way, Bayer and Curto (2012), accentuated that students identify several general oral communication deficits as the primary obstacles to effectively accomplish their oral presentations. These communication deficits have triggered a movement to promote communication across the curriculum, prompting many universities to redesign core requirements to include communication in writing and speaking for all students, regardless of their discipline (Cronin, Grice, and Palmerton, 2000). Nevertheless, speaking in a second or foreign language has often been viewed as the most demanding of the four language skills (Malmir and Shoorcheh, 2012). Hence, Cabaysa and Baetiong (2010), pointed out that a considerable knowledge of learning strategies can further improve students' speaking abilities. Realizing the major importance of speaking skill, Tsay and Brady (2010), confirmed that many educators are using active

learning pedagogies, such as cooperative or team-based learning. Cooperative learning is a pedagogical practice that promotes academic achievement and socialization. A large body of research indicates that students gain both academically and socially when they have opportunities to interact with others to accomplish shared goals (Lou et al., 1996; Slavin, 1996; Johnson and Johnson, 2002; Gillies and Boyle, 2010). Consequently, it is imperative to find and use the best instructional methods, materials, activities, and other requirements to help learners master the art of speaking (Nazara, 2011).

Taking things into the Philippine setting, a non-native speaking country of English has been faced with a challenge to improve the quality of education specifically in the aspect of teaching and learning the English language. As stated by Nakahara (2006) and Ozaki (2011), English language education in the Philippines starts in the first year of elementary level and continues in secondary and tertiary schooling. This means that educational institutions throughout the country consider the learning of English as a major educational priority. However, despite the prioritization of the development of the skills and knowledge related to the said language, still there is a felt deterioration of the quality of the peoples' command of the language. The Philippine Star (2010), reported that results of the National Achievement Test

(NAT) in English in the elementary level showed low mastery and performance in the language. This calls for the enhancement of the students' proficiency and competence in the language. Furthermore, the necessity of having a strong command of English among Filipinos is a comparative advantage as multinational Business Process Outsourcing (BPO) firms are pouring large investments in the Philippines (Keitel, 2009). Truly, better and brighter opportunities await individuals in the workplace, as well as in the local and international community if they speak good English.

Similarly, in Davao City, there is a need to look into an important problem that the majority of students face in learning and particularly speaking in class. Students are aware and generally feel strongly that anxiety is a major hurdle to be overcome when learning to speak. Balili (2001) and Barabas (2013), confirmed that the manifestation of anxiety among Filipino students is a common scenario in any classroom in the Philippines. They emphasized that some learners, if not many try to avoid the situation that appears to be anxiety evoking. Students feel more anxious in highly evaluative situations, particularly in the learning environment where their performance is constantly monitored. This calls for teachers to create learning environment situations where students can feel successful in enhancing their speaking abilities and avoid setting up activities that increase the chances of students to fail. Thus, there is a need to make the classroom environment less formal and friendlier by indulging students in cooperative groups and eventually increasing chances of success.

Putting into consideration the cited significance of enhancing students' speaking skills through cooperative learning, I believe that barriers in communication should be dealt with accordingly vis-a-vis the current scenario of the learning environment to answer the pressing needs of quality in the arena of education; hence, the conduct of this study.

1.1. Research Questions

This study aimed to determine the role of cooperative learning in enhancing the speaking skills of students. Specifically, it sought to answer the following research questions:

1. How cooperative learning is done?
2. How this approach help the learners enhance their speaking skills?
3. What are participants' suggestions to improve the approach?

1.2. Theoretical Framework

Li and Lam (2013) stipulated that the main theory that underpins cooperative learning refers to social constructivism advanced by Lev Semyonovich Vygotsky (1896-1934). He considered that the roles of culture, society, language, and interaction are important in understanding how humans learn. Vygotsky assumed that knowledge is cultural; he took a socio-cultural approach in his study with children. This approach can be briefly described as cooperative and cultural. Vygotsky asserted that the development of individuals, including their

thoughts, languages, and reasoning processes is a result of culture. These abilities are developed through social interactions with others especially parents and teachers. Therefore, they represent the shared knowledge of a given culture. Further, Vygotsky studied the growth of children from their environment and through their interaction with others and found out that what are given and what happens in the social environment help children learn, develop, and grow.

2. Method

This section presents the methods, participants and procedures used in this study. The presentation includes the research design, research participants, research instruments used, and gathering of information.

2.1. Research Design

Due to the nature of issues that will be explored in this study, a qualitative – phenomenological approach is considered an appropriate strategy. Christensen, Johnson, and Turner (2010), stated that the primary objective of a phenomenological study is to explicate the meaning, structure, and essence of the lived experiences of a person or a group of people around a specific phenomenon. Thus, the study attempts to understand human behavior through the eyes of the participants. Moreover, Pereira (2012), investigated thoroughness in phenomenological research and concluded that the approach takes into consideration methodological congruence and experiential concerns that provide insight in terms of plausibility and illumination about a specific phenomenon.

2.2. Research Participants

My participants of this qualitative inquiry employing phenomenological approach will be the grade five students of Vicente Hizon Sr. Elementary School, School Year 2014-2015. Purposive sampling will be utilized for the selection of participants since the main interest of this study is to work with small samples to achieve an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon and to create rapport with the participants in order to obtain authentic in-depth information (Hesse-Biber and Leavy, 2011). Likewise, Creswell (2013) and Lichtman (2012), pointed out that purposive sampling gives the researcher an opportunity to choose the most effective informant available for the study.

2.3. Research Instruments

For this study, students' performance, interaction, and discussion in the classroom discourse utilizing cooperative learning will be observed.

Focus group discussion (FGD) was employed in the study. Krueger and Casey (2009), defined a focus group as a carefully planned series of discussions designed to obtain perceptions on a defined area of interest in a permissive, non-threatening environment. Multiple perspectives evolve during a discussion, uncovering layers of perceptions and feelings that would normally be too uncomfortable for students to

express initially or individually. Thus, focus group setting can reduce the anxiety especially around controversial or threatening circumstances. In this study, there will be four groups with three members comprising each group. The discussion will be tape-recorded with the permission of the participants.

2.4.Trustworthiness

Qualitative studies use validity and reliability procedures to test the strength of instrument that measure the phenomena under study and qualify findings as accurately representing the data in discernible and meaningful ways. Qualitative research relies on reliability and validity instrument measures. Creswell (2013) accentuated that validity answers the question of whether or not a given instrument consistently yields the same results under like circumstances.

Qualitative research aspires to achieve trustworthiness during evaluation. Validity and reliability in qualitative research is more a matter of consistency in pattern development that statistical validation of an instrument (Creswell, 2013). Procedures, participants, and readers ultimately decide the degree of validity and reliability of the study. Terms often used to convey a sense of believability in a qualitative research design project are credibility, dependability, confirmability, transferability, and authenticity.

Credibility refers to the truth of the data or the participant views and the interpretation and representation of them by the researcher (Cope, 2014). Credibility is enhanced by the researcher describing his or her experiences as a researcher and verifying the research findings with the participants.

Dependability refers to the constancy of the data over similar conditions (Cope, 2014). This can be achieved when

another researcher concurs with the decision trails at each stage of the research process.

Confirmability refers to the researcher’s ability to demonstrate that the data represent the participants’ responses and not the researcher’s biases or viewpoints (Cope, 2014). The researcher can demonstrate confirmability by describing how conclusions and interpretations were established, and exemplifying that the findings were derived directly from the data.

Transferability refers to findings that can be applied to other settings or groups (Cope, 2014). A qualitative study has met this criterion if the results have meaning to individuals not involved in the study and readers can associate the results with their own experiences.

Authenticity refers to the ability and extent to which the researcher expresses the feelings and emotions of the participants’ experiences in a faithful manner (Cope, 2014). By reporting in this descriptive approach, readers grasp the essence of the experience through the participant quotes.

Ethical Consideration

The manner of this study was within the bounds of seven key principles of ethical research, as spelled out by McLeod (2009) which includes the following: informed and voluntary consent, respect for rights of privacy and confidentiality, minimization of risk, truthfulness, social and cultural responsibility, research adequacy, and avoidance of conflict of interest in the conduct and practice of the study. The Treaty Principle of Participation as cited by McLeod (2009), is reflected in the invitation to participate which ensured that any participation is completely voluntary in nature, and based on an understanding of adequate information.

3. Results

Table 1.Themes and Core Ideas on How Cooperative Learning is Done

Major Themes	Core Ideas	Frequency of Responses
Structured team learning	Explained the approach on its simplest manner	General
	Elaborated the process of cooperative learning	General
	Enumerated the things to be done in group activity	Typical
Team effort/performance	Learning is fun when activities are done with the team/group	General
	Seeing to it that learning target is achieved	Variant

Table 1 bears the themes and core ideas on how cooperative learning is exhibited in class. The first major theme revolved around the idea of structured team learning with core ideas that the teacher explained the approach on its simplest manner, elaborated the process of cooperative learning, and enumerated the things to be done in group

activity. The second major theme highlighted the students’ team effort and performance with core ideas that learning is fun when activities are done with the team or group and seeing to it that learning target is achieved. This suggests that students are more comfortable when instructional approaches are structured and geared towards team learning

and performance. Furthermore, Li and Lam (2013), reveal that team members set group goals, describe what member actions are helpful or not, periodically assess what they are

doing well as a team, and identify changes they will make to function more effectively in the future.

Table 2. Themes and Core Ideas on How Cooperative Approach Help the Learners Enhance their Speaking Skills

Major Themes	Core Ideas	Frequency of Responses
Greater productivity	Through communication, get them to express their concerns with the lessons	General
	Gained self-confidence to one's abilities	Variant
Higher achievement	Placed importance to the value of listening in order to gain understanding	General
	Developed critical thinking skills through raising queries and questions about the lessons/activity	Typical

Table 2 presents the themes and core ideas on how the approach helps the learners enhance their speaking skills. The first major theme denoted greater productivity with core ideas that through communication, students expressed their concerns with the lesson and they gained self-confidence to one's abilities. The second major theme emphasized higher achievement on the part of the students with core ideas that the approach placed importance to the value of listening in order to gain understanding and developed critical thinking skills through raising queries and questions about the lesson or activity. This means that

learners involved in cooperative learning activities developed skills for interpersonal communications more readily than learners who were in other classroom scenarios (Li and Lam, 2013). I definitely agree to this statement because as a teacher, I have to constantly indulge my students into critical thinking and through cooperative learning they are continuously discussing, debating, and clarifying their understanding of the concepts and materials being considered during the class. This leads to a sense of content mastery and higher achievement on the part of students thus, gaining greater productivity.

Table 3. Themes and Core Ideas on Participants' Suggestions to Improve the Approach

Major Themes	Core Ideas	Frequency of Responses
Individual accountability	Felt responsible to the group's performance and output	General
	Built trust and confidence towards others	Typical
	Became part in making decisions for the group/team	Variant
Call of the profession	Value the essence of being strict but with compassion and love for students	Variant
	Keep the students inspired and motivated throughout the learning process	Typical
	Indulge into further research to better instruction	General

Table 3 shows the themes and core ideas on the participants' suggestions to improve the approach. The first major theme pointed out individual accountability with core ideas that students felt responsible to the group's performance and output, built trust and confidence towards others, and became part in making decisions for the group or team. The second major theme underscored on the call of the profession with core ideas that the teacher should value the essence of being strict but with compassion and love for students, keep the students inspired and motivated throughout the learning process, and indulge into further research to better instruction. This indicates that in order for a team to move forward, all students in a group must be

accountable (Li and Lam, 2013) for contributing their own share of the work and mastering all of the material to be learned for the group's success. Consequently, the ideas presented reveal a large truth that as much as students are accountable to their group, the teacher himself/herself must see to it that his/her role in the academic setting is not jeopardize by using the approach. That being said, I must see to it that the interest and enthusiasm of the students especially those who are reluctant and fearful speakers will progress when they are being immersed in cooperative teams. Moreover, I should constantly update and refresh myself to the latest trends in education to improve delivery of instruction.

4. Conclusion

Learners bring with them their own negative attitudes and prejudices. Population diversity is becoming more the norm in many places. When there is a mix of learners in the same class there is the potential to diminish negative attitudes and to develop positive ones depending how interaction is structured. Cooperative learning structures can be used to develop constructive and supportive peer relationships.

Learning environment in the 21st century must be ones in which students should be actively engaged in learning activities and with each other. Students nowadays should be well-rounded in order to increase their competitiveness. Cooperative learning offers a proven and practical means of creating exciting social and engaging classroom environment to help students to master traditional skills and knowledge as well as develop the creative and interactive skills in today's society.

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