RESEARCH ARTICLE

NEED FOR COLLABORATION IN AN ENGLISH LANGUAGE CLASSROOM: A STUDY ON TEACHERS' ATTITUDE

J.JEHOSON JIRESH

Lecturer, Department of English, The American College

jjeng1881@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

The rationale behind teaching English as a second language is to impart English language skills and to enhance the communicative competence of learners. Though the objectives of the curriculum clearly reflect the rationale, the success of the curriculum largely depends on the execution of the syllabus. Undoubtedly, the sole responsibility of making the curriculum effective lies in the hands of the teachers. The mandate given to all English language teachers is to find novel methods and pedagogical tools in converting the curriculum into effective classroom modules. In reality, teachers of English in India are facing lots of challenges mainly due to the untoward significance given to test-based instruction. Hence, there is always a conflict between teaching English as a subject and as a skill. The result based structure supports the former and the latter is miserably neglected. At this juncture, it is essential to revisit English language teaching in schools. If English is taught to hone English language skills, a classroom needs to be interactive to bridge the gap between the objectives of the curriculum and the outcome. Therefore, the researcher proposes to employ collaborative learning approach to complement the acquisition of English speaking skills. This quantitative study aims at analysing the attitude of school teachers in employing collaborative learning strategies for the enhancement of English speaking skills. The study is conducted among school teachers because the researcher believes that it is crucial for the learners to achieve a certain level of competence in English speaking skills before pursuing higher education.

Keywords: Speaking skills, pedagogical tools, collaborative learning, communicative competence, teachers' attitude.

Introduction

English language curriculum in the school level is packed with literary materials and grammar based worksheets. The teachers believe that language skills can be impacted by teaching literature. Even though acquiring language skills through literary reading and reflection is possible, the methods practiced to teach literary texts in the English language classrooms in India do not favour the acquisition of speaking skills. The reason behind this phenomenon is that literary texts are used as subject materials. Adding to the misery, the testing structure supports rote learning. However, the objectives of teaching English as a second language contradict the classroom practices. The objective of teaching English as a second/foreign language is to

enhance communicative competence and honing English language skills. An English classroom needs to be interactive to ensure acquisition of English speaking skills. Therefore, the researcher proposes to employ collaborative learning strategies to induce academic activities pertaining to the curriculum. At this juncture, analysing the teachers' attitude towards using collaborative learning strategies is essential to explore the challenges and prospects in using collaborative learning strategies in English language classrooms.

Objectives of the Study

The main objectives of the research study are as follow:

1. To analyse teachers' competence and their perceptions of teaching speaking skills.

2. To explore teachers' attitude towards employing collaborative learning skills.

Background of the Study

English language classrooms in India focus mainly on test-oriented instruction. The teaching and learning practices are aimed at obtaining high scores in the examinations. Therefore, English is taught to transfer content from the text to the learner. The fact is that most of the English language teachers in India are graduates in English literature and that doesn't support teaching and learning of English language skills. The literature based or biased instruction has ensured mandatory practice in reading and writing. Even literary reading is not used to ensure honing creative and critical thinking skills. On the whole, very less importance is given to interaction in the classroom context where the teacher continues to be the source of knowledge.

However, revisiting the rationale behind teaching English makes it clear that English is taught to ensure the acquisition of language skills and to foster higher order thinking skills. It is essential for a classroom to be interactive at all levels to ensure development in communicative competence of the learners. Even if the classroom supports literature teaching, it can still be interactive to provide ample opportunities for the learners to use the language in meaningful contexts. Therefore, the researcher proposes to employ collaborative learning skills, an offshoot of the communicative approach, to ensure interaction among students and teachers in English as second/foreign language classrooms.

Since the Indian classrooms are predominantly teacher-centric, the teacher plans and pilots the activities of the class, it is crucial to analyse their attitude towards collaborative learning. This study is conducted among school teachers. The reason behind choosing school teachers as the subjects of the study is that the researcher understands the need for implementing an interactive approach in the teaching of English speaking skills before the learners pursue higher education.The researcher understood the need for analysing the teacher attitudes after his interaction with the school teachers of English during a refresher program.

Research Questions

The following questions were framed to focus the study on the issue:

1. What are the different perceptions of teachers in acquiring speaking skills?

2. Are the teachers of English in schools ready to employ collaborative learning strategies?

Hypotheses

The researcher started the study with the following hypotheses in mind:

1. Teachers find it challenging to do away with traditional and conventional approaches to teach speaking skills in the Indian classroom context.

2. Teachers have a lot of reservations against employing collaborative learning strategies, rather they feel that the teacher should continue as the sage on the stage.

Review of Literatures

The study on existing research on collaborative learning proves that collaborative learning is the core basis behind many educational approaches involving joint intellectual effort. (Smith & MacGregor, 1992). A

supportive report on collaborative learning was found in an article titled "Learner-centered Psychological Principles" released by the American Psychological Association in 1977. It discussed the significance of collaboration in the process of constructing knowledge. Since then, collaborative learning as a main pedagogy has been prominent in every discipline at every level of education (Smith & MacGregor. 1992). Moreover, (Belanich, Wisher. & Orvis, 2004) also validated the increased attention towards collaborative learning in educational research.

The following research findings portray the significance of a facilitator in a learning community. Rovai (2001) observed twenty graduate students with previous experience in a five-week course investigate how the instructor could create a virtual learning ambience. The results of the quantitative and qualitative data analysis proved that the instructors or the facilitators can create such a community through instructional strategies. Wang, Sierra, and Folge (2003) examined the learning community composed of twenty-one graduate level international students from diverse cultural settings. The outcome suggested that instructor's facilitation and appropriate guidance were responsible for the community formation. The interaction between the learner and the instructor is essential in enhancing learning. It is apparent that the facilitators' role in effective English learning is vital during instructor-students interaction.

The following study provides evidence for the effect of teachers' effect on learning. With a mixed research method, Stein and Wanstreet (2005) compared the effectiveness of face-to-face groups on satisfaction with the three types of presence: social presence, cognitive presence, and teaching presence. Twenty-five undergraduate and graduate learners enrolled in the course had the option to conduct group work using a room. The researchers identified that among the three types of presence, there are significant differences in satisfaction with the level of personal, meaningful discourse with the instructor, between the face-to-face groups, and the online groups. Groups which had continuous instructor's presence were more content with working in their groups. These research studies emphases on the importance of a good facilitator in a classroom employing collaborative learning strategies. However, this research study aims at analysing the teachers' attitude in adapting collaborative learning strategies.

Research Design

The study was conducted among high school and higher secondary teachers of English in and around Madurai. This study was conducted employing a questionnaire method. The questionnaire administered included 20 statements with three-point liker-type responses with Agree, Disagree and No Idea as responses. The questionnaire also collected data pertaining to the academic background of the teachers, teaching experience, boards of study in which they teach, and the domicile of their institutions. The questionnaire had 10 statements demanding yes/no response to analyse teachers' exposure to English language teaching and learning. The researchers' interaction with a few school teachers was also used to infer teacher attitude towards collaboration. The questionnaire was given to 143 teachers.

The researcher employed the snowball sampling method and responses were received from 108 teacher respondents. The distribution of the respondents is presented as follows: 26 teachers from government high school, 17 teachers from government higher secondary schools, 28 teachers from private high schools following the state board curriculum, 14 teachers from private higher secondary schools following the state board curriculum, 13 high school teachers from CBSE schools, 5 higher secondary schools from CBSE schools, 3 and 2 teachers each from ICSE and ISC boards respectively. The overall urban and rural representation is 57 and 51 respectively. The total number of respondents with an undergraduate degree was 51, respondents with a postgraduate degree was 37. There were totally 13 and 1 teacher respondents with M.Phil and Ph.D respectively. The number of teachers who had their education in regional medium schools were 61 and respondents studied in English medium schools were 47.

Discussion

The analysis based on the data collected is divided into two parts. First is the communicative competence of teachers which would throw light upon their perceptions on the acquisition of speaking skills.

This part also analyses the teacher's interest in continuous professional development. The second part analyses the attitude of teachers in employing collaborative learning strategies. Further, makes an attempt to discuss the challenges faced by teachers in making the class interactive.

The study on the analysis of the communicative competence of teachers depicts the following inferences. Majority of the teachers claim that they can speak English fluently but when it comes to texting/chatting they prefer using their mother tongue/regional language. Texting and chatting are not different from speaking in the modern sense and this phenomenon that teachers prefer texting in regional languages contradict their claim that they can speak English fluently. Moreover, general inference is that most of the teachers interact only in Tamil (regional language) with their peers. It shows that either they are comfortable with Tamil or not comfortable with English. Only one-third of the teacher respondents claim that they communicate with their fellow teachers in English.

Teachers working in private English schools talk in English with their peers and students due to the compulsion from the part of the management. Almost half of the teacher respondents do not read English dailies or magazines and a similar number of respondents do not listen or watch English programmes on TV. Almost 60 % of the respondent's record that they can write flawless English and the remaining accept that they are not competent enough to write flawless English.

Shockingly only 20 % of the respondents accept that their classroom learning has helped them to enhance their spoken skills. This shows that the remaining 80 % of respondents are not serious about using the classroom as the centre for language learning and this raised doubts about how they would treat their classroom for enhancing English speaking skills? The study also advocates the need for continuous professional development by pursuing certificate programs, attending workshops, training programmes, conferences, seminars and webinars to keep them updated in methods and new tools employed in honing learners' English speaking skills. Most of the students have not taken any training programmes and courses other than the mandatory orientation and refresher programs at the start of their teaching career. Moreover, even these training programmes and courses are mandatory only for the teachers of state-run schools.

The section of the questionnaire used to analyse the attitude of teachers towards employing collaborative learning skills presents the following inferences. Almost 80 % of the teacher respondents accept that enhancing student's communicative competence is the main objective of teaching English. Though a majority of the respondents accept the importance of using real-life situations in the classroom to ensure developing speaking skills, an equal number of respondents believe that grammar teaching is more important than teaching any other skills. This contradiction is because of the lack of exposure of teachers towards teaching the English language communicatively. A few teachers have also expressed their ignorance on the objectives of teaching English and use of real-life situations in English language classrooms.

Nearly 50 % of the respondents disagree to the use of major tenets of collaborative learning such as the importance of positive interdependence, group and pair work and acknowledging learners as the main communicators in the classroom. This shows teachers' quest for authority in the classroom affairs and they visualise themselves as the knowledge providers and are not ready to get down from the pedestal. While many accept the use of these tenets a considerable amount of respondents are not aware of the basic concepts of Collaborative learning. While a majority of the teacher respondents agree that language acquisition happens mostly outside the classroom, they fail to accept that language acquisition is possible in the absence of teachers. Almost 50% of the respondents were not ready to accept that they should play multiple roles in facilitating learners. Most of the respondents are not ready to collaborate with fellow teachers in devising methods and techniques to improve students' oral competency. A significant number of respondents feel that accuracy is important than fluency.

More than 50 % of the teacher respondents feel that testing oral skills are difficult. This is reflected in their responses toward employing testing and assessment during the process of learning. A considerable number of respondents are ignorant of testing methods nearly 50 % disagree to conduct assessments during the process of learning. Most of the respondents are skeptical about employing peer correction or self-

correction. Almost 50 % of the respondents are not ready to tolerate an error of forms even if they do not cause communication failure. However, almost 80 % of the respondents accept that teachers need more orientation and training to teach English communicatively. Further, they also feel that the present curriculum, classroom strength, infrastructure do not support pair/group interaction in the classroom.

The most deplorable part of the result is the consistency found in responding 'No idea' to most of the statements. The average percentage of responses in favour of no idea is close to 12. Though the number put together seems negligible, it is a source and cause of concern. It is quite ironical or farcical that teacher-respondents either do not understand the statements nor serious at all. It is a serious cause of worry if the teachers do not understand the statements and it is equally serious if the teachers are not serious about this exercise, when the former reflects the teachers' competence the latter shows the teachers negligence in undertaking an academic task.

Findings of the research

- The findings of the present study are listed as follows:
- Many teachers of English lack language proficiency.
- Most of the teachers of English lack exposure to English in daily life.
- Teachers of English give less importance to continuous professional development.
- Teachers of English do not have a clear idea about the objectives of teaching English.
- Majority of the teachers of English lack knowledge about collaborative learning strategies.
- Teachers are not ready to employ collaborative learning strategies.
- Most of the teachers are not ready to collaborate with their fellow teachers.
- Teachers fail to understand their role as a facilitator in an English language classroom.
- Teachers do not have conceptual clarity on various modes of testing and assessment.
- Infrastructure and classroom strength do not support employing collaborative learning strategies.

Recommendations and Conclusions

It is evident that teachers are not ready to employ collaborative learning strategies in their classroom to teach English language skills. Their attitude towards such a strategy involving a communicative approach is obvious because Indian classrooms fail to accept teachers as facilitators. The teachers do not have conceptual clarity on the ways in which language is acquired and they need to understand the importance of 'interaction' in an English language classroom. Since most of the teachers are driven by test-based instruction they fail to hone English language skills. English is taught as a subject and in turn, students believe that English is one among the other subjects ought to be studied and reproduced in the final examination to boost the total percentage.

The effect of poor exposure to the English language during learners' school education is often evident in the learners' performance in higher education. It is widely believed that learners' school plays a vital role in his/her language acquisition. College and university teachers complain about the school curriculum and teaching practices for students' poor acquisition of language skills. Instead of making mere complaints the researcher proposes for collaboration between school and college teachers. College teachers who are mostly exposed to novel methods and pedagogical tools of teaching English language skills should act as teacher trainers, they should work in tandem with school teachers in enhancing the learners' progress. School teachers who are deprived of attending conferences and workshops yet interested in learning new methods, tools and testing methods can be benefited because of such collaborations.

The curriculum should be revisited and reframed to support the enhancement of language skills complemented by dynamic assessment methods. The teachers need to be oriented that their jobs do not end with covering the syllabus. It is to be taken into account that 'covering' the syllabus leads to 'covering up.' Covering up is an act of cheating. Ironically, teaching and cheating share the same set of letters of the alphabet. Therefore, the sole aim of teaching should be focused to 'uncover' the curriculum.

References

Belanich, J., Wisher, R.A., & Orvis, K.L. (2004). *A question- collaboration to web-based learning.* American Journal of Distance Education, 18 (3), 169-186.

Rovai, A.P (2001). Building sense of community at a distance. International Review of Research in Open and Distance Learning, 3(1). 1-16

Smith, B.L., & MacGregor, J.T (1992). *What is collaborative learning?* in A. Goodshell,M. Mahler, V. Tinto, B.L. Smith, and J. MacGregor (EDS.)*, Collaborative learning : A sourcebook for higher education* (pp 9-22). University Park, PA : National   Centre on Postsecondary Teaching, Learning and Assessment.

Stein, D.S., & Wanstreet, C.E. (2005, Aug., 3-5). *Presence in a blended course: Implications for communities of inquiry*. Paper presented at the 21st Annual Conference on Distance teaching and Learning, Madison, Wisconsin.

Wang, M., Sierra, C., & Folger, T. (2003). Building a dynamic online learning community among adult learners. Educational Media International, 40(1-2), 49-61

Appendix

       This section presents the data collected through questionnaire.

Note : All numbers in Table 1 & 2 are presented in percentage

Personal Profile

Designation	: PG Asst - 35	BT Asst - 65		
Board	: State - 79	CBSE -17	ISCE/ISC - 4	
Experience in Teaching (in years)	: < 5 = 26	5 - 10 = 29	10 - 20 = 20	> 20 = 25
Location of the school	: Urban = 53	Rural = 47		
Qualification	: UG = 47 PG = 34	M.Phil = 18	Ph.D= 1	
Medium of Instruction in School	: English = 44	Regional = 56		

Table 1 : Communication Profile

S.NO	Statement	Yes(%)	NO (%)
1	I can speak English fluently	82	18
2	I listen to English Programmes on TV	47	53
3	I read English dailies, journals and Magazines	58	42
4	I communicate with fellow English teachers only in English	31	69
5	I text/Chat only in English	17	83
6	I can write flawless English	58	42
7	I used classroom learning to improve my spoken English	20	80
8	I have completed certificate/diploma course(s) in English language teaching	12	88
9	I have attended workshops and training programmes in teaching English	84	16
10	I attend conferences and seminars on English Language teaching	13	87

Table 2 : Questionnaire

S.NO	Statements	A (%)	DA (%)	NI (%)
1	Developing students' communicative competence is the main objective of teaching English	75	19	6
2	Activities that involve real situations promote communication skills.	68	25	7
3	Teaching grammar is more important than teaching other skills.	69	29	2
4	Language learning requires positive inter-dependence among students and teachers.	54	30	16

5	Students improve their communicative skills by working in pairs and groups	63	32	5
6	Learners are the main communicators (speaking most of the time) in classroom.	44	48	8
7	Language acquisition can happen outside the classroom using mobile phones and social media.	71	25	4
8	Teachers assume multiple roles according to purposes of activities/tasks.	45	42	13
9	The teacher role should be minimal though indispensable.	33	62	5
10	Language acquisition is possible in the absence of the teacher.	36	62	2
11	More than one teacher should device techniques for improving students oral competency.	49	44	7
12	Individual teachers should device techniques for improving students oral competency.	44	49	7
13	Fluency (language use) is emphasized over accuracy (language rule).	54	40	6
14	Testing of oral skills is seldom possible.	56	28	16
15	Testing and assessment can be carried out during the process of learning.	35	44	21
16	Peer-correction or Self-correction should be encouraged.	42	46	12
17	Error of forms might be tolerated if they do not cause communication failure	47	36	17
18	The present curriculum supports the enhancement of communicative competence	26	68	6
19	Teachers need more orientation and training in teaching communication skills	72	20	8
20	The classroom strength, ambience and infrastructure support pair/group activity based learning.	24	70	6

Author biography

J. Jehoson Jiresh is a lecturer in English at the American College, Madurai. He is pursuing Ph.D in English Language teaching. He has published 8 papers and has presented 15 papers in National and International conferences in India, UAE, Hong Kong, Singapore, and Malaysia. He has also delivered 15 invited talks and lectures in various schools and colleges. His areas of interest in teaching and research are English Language Teaching, Literary theories, and English for Mass Media.