A Study of the Effects of Competitive Team-Based Learning and Structured Academic Controversy on the Language Proficiency of Iranian EFL College Seniors

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents reports on an experimental study which intended to look into and compare the possible effects of this researcher’s instructional innovation, Competitive Team-Based Learning (CTBL), with Structured Academic Controversy (SAC) – the most popular method of Cooperative Learning (CL) – on language proficiency of Iranian EFL college students. This goal, the intention to compare the effects of the select teaching methods on the dependent variable of the study, was addressed with respect to different-level achievers (i.e., low, average, and high achievers) of the target group in the field study, in Iran. Out of a total population of 68, forty EFL senior college students at Bojnord Azad University, in Iran, were selected to serve the study, after conducting a test of English language proficiency. The subjects were randomly put into control and experimental groups. While the control group were taught through SAC, the experimental group experienced learning the English language through CTBL. The results are explored further in the article and the author discusses the probable causes for the results of the study, sheds light on the pedagogical implications, and suggests recommendations for further research.

Keywords: College Seniors, Competitive Team-Based Learning, Language Proficiency, Modern ELT, Education, Structured Academic Controversy

INTRODUCTION

Although the legacy of the past focus on educational pedagogy still persists in many parts of the world, the pendulum in the sphere of EFL/ESL has begun to swing in new directions concurrent with the process of globalisation, at the dawn of the third millennium. ELT has accommodated a paradigm shift from text-based towards context-focused pedagogy and approaches. Interactive
approaches to learning and teaching, rather than teacher-fronted chalk-and-talk modes of presentation, are being needed. Though it may take some more years for some Asian countries like Iran to ensure that interactive and context-based pedagogy becomes a general policy in the field of education at all graded levels, there are signs of hope. Impediments apart because of several factors, new directions in ELT are likely to usher in new wisdom against the old and the familiar. Particularly Asian contexts and the contexts in the Middle East demand so. Change is the essence of time, and changes are inevitable. Some modern approaches like CL are rapidly evolving and gaining momentum and significance. Constructivists’ views on learning like those of John Dewey, Jean Piaget, and Lev Semenovich Vygotsky foreground the significance of such new approaches in ELT sphere. Based on the premise that language use and language learning are interactive activities, constructivists emphasize the importance of ‘social interaction and interdependence’ in learning situations holding the view that what is learnt about language is in actuality a reflection of interactions. That is, language learning best occurs in situations which encourage negotiation and elaboration of meaning.

Cooperative Learning in the sphere of ELT, according to Richards and Rodgers (2001), is perceived as “a way of promoting communicative interaction in the classroom” and “is seen as an extension of the principles of Communicative Language Teaching” (p. 193). Oxford (1997) defines CL as “a set of highly structured, psychologically and sociologically oriented techniques” (p. 444) which mingle the cognitive and the affective aspects of learning and accentuates the active engagement and contribution of the participants in the learning process. However, CL is a common term that represents a number of educational methods. Despite their significant contribution to more comprehensive and real learning, CL methods have their own deficiencies. Neglecting and even belittling the crucial importance of ‘competition’ in learning environments is one of their main problems. Another major drawback of the present methods of CL refers to their inability for bringing individual accountability of all team members. Unsystematic implementation of groupwork is also among the main problems with such methods. (, 2012) In the present study, this researcher has tried to evaluate the effectiveness of CTBL, which has tackled such problems, vis-à-vis SAC method of CL on language proficiency of Iranian college students. This researcher selected SAC to be compared with his method in virtue of the fact that he is under the impression that, in comparison to other methods of CL, this method is the most popular method particularly among language teachers.

PURPOSE OF THE PRESENT STUDY

The purpose of the present study was to find out whether there is a difference between the Iranian college students who have been taught with CTBL and those who have been taught with SAC in regard to their language proficiency (vocabulary, grammar, reading comprehension, and speaking)? This question of the efficacy of the two mentioned methods was likewise addressed to the target groups’ different achievers’ language proficiency.

Based on this question, the null hypotheses were formulated as well.

STRUCTURED ACADEMIC CONTROVERSY (SAC)

Scholars such as Johnson and Johnson (1979) have had significant contribution to the development of Structured Academic Controversy (SAC) or Constructive Controversy. The prominent focus of SAC is on the positive influences planned and structured controversy could have on academic achievement and social relationships of class participants. SAC is, in fact, an extension of another method of CL known as Learning Through Discussion (LTD). LTD is fundamentally based on discussion panels on variety of desired-to-learners topics, which may be posed, for example, by a student, the teacher,
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